

In Nicaragua, old US foe rises again

Daniel Ortega may further his lead in upcoming vote, after death of opponent.

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MANAGUA, NICARAGUA – The sudden death Sunday of Nicaraguan presidential candidate Herty Lewites could open the door for yet another leftist leader to win election in Latin America. But in this case, the leader is one the US spent millions combating in the 1980s.

Daniel Ortega is a well-known figure in Washington, which funded contra rebels to battle his Sandinista government.

Democracy has since ushered in a number of leaders since Mr. Ortega last held power in 1990, but he has remained a key power-broker and a perennial presidential candidate.

This time around, Ortega is leading in the polls, yet currently without enough support to win outright in the first round. However, if now he can pick up an additional eight or 10 percentage points from Sandinista voters who were supporting Mr. Lewites' reform candidacy, it could be just enough to push Ortega over the top in the Nov. 5 elections.

Analysts say that if returned to power, Ortega, a fiery leader of Latin America's old-guard left, would act in concert with other regional critics of the United States including Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, Bolivia's Evo Morales, and Cuba's Fidel Castro.

"An Ortega win at the ballot box in November would be a humiliating setback for the Bush administration," says Michael Shifter, a Nicaragua expert at the Inter-American Dialogue think tank in Washington. "Unlike in other Latin American elections, where Washington has shown admirable neutrality, in Nicaragua it has not concealed its intense desire to keep Ortega from returning to power."

Until suffering a fatal heart attack this week, Lewites had led a group of disaffected Sandinista intellectuals who left or were thrown out of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) controlled by Ortega. Reform leaders of Nicaragua's political left are urging supporters to not let their dreams of a "new Sandinista" government die with Lewites, who headed the ticket of the Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS).

Fred Denton, director of the CID-Gallup polling firm in Nicaragua, says Lewites had taken about six percentage points from Ortega. Hoping to woo those voters, Ortega this week called Lewites his "brother."

However, other candidates are also jockeying for an advantage. Eduardo Montealegre, candidate for the right-wing Nicaraguan Liberal Alliance, said he and Lewites "shared the same spirit of struggle" against the current bipartisan system. Mr. Montealegre is currently tied with Lewites for second in the polls, about five points behind Ortega.

"Herty Lewites was the most popular candidate in Nicaragua, and now that he is dead many are going to try to move in on his popularity," says MRS campaign manager and former Sandinista guerrilla leader Luis Carrión. "However, the MRS alliance will continue forward."

On Tuesday, a day before Lewites's funeral, the MRS quickly promoted vice-presidential candidate Edmundo Jarquín to presidential candidate, in hopes of channeling the national outpouring of sympathy and support into electoral momentum. Mr. Jarquín, an internationally respected economist and lawyer, will be joined on the MRS ticket by popular revolutionary singer-songwriter Carlos Mejía Godoy.

"We are convinced that the death of Herty does not mean the end to the struggle that he began," reads a party release, which urges supporters to "keep your flags held high."

Lewites, however, will not be easy to replace.

The Catholic-raised son of a Jewish immigrant, Lewites was a curious blend of ideological revolutionary and pragmatic businessman.

His résumé reads like the results of a professional-orientation test gone haywire: candy-maker, jewelry salesman, gunrunner, tourism minister, congressman, amusement park owner - to name a few. During the Sandinista government, Lewites managed a series of "diplomat" dollar stores, which sold items that were impossible to find anywhere else during the US embargo.

Lewites was considered a no-nonsense straight shooter who was not afraid to swear in campaign ads. Yet he was also not afraid to act silly and tell jokes on the stump.

Lewites identified as both a Sandinista and a reformer - a condition that now allows each of the four other candidates to remember him as a brother of the same cause.

His relationship with Ortega was confusing. In early 2005, just before being thrown out of the FSLN for disobedience, Lewites said that there was "no difference" between him and Ortega. A year later, Lewites was referring to Ortega as a "dictator."

Ortega, however, said this week that the two had maintained a "close relationship" since Lewites's ouster.

Some bristle at that suggestion. Ernesto Cardenal, a revolutionary priest, poet, and MRS supporter, said: "There is only one Sandinismo, the Sandinismo that has remained honest and revolutionary. The other is of corrupt millionaires and thieves who have betrayed the revolution, betrayed themselves, and betrayed the people of Nicaragua."



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