

EDITORIAL

## Ortega, Again

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Nicaragua's top Sandinista is back — and with him international anxiety. Daniel Ortega won the presidency of Nicaragua on Sunday, raising fears that Hugo Chávez and Fidel Castro now have another faithful acolyte.

But while Mr. Ortega's election is bad news, it is not because he is still a Marxist revolutionary. He is an old-style Latin American strongman who, we fear, will further weaken Nicaragua's democratic institutions and retard economic progress. Washington's challenge will be to figure out how to help curb Mr. Ortega's authoritarian impulses without pushing him into Mr. Chávez's arms.

Mr. Ortega, who was voted out of power in 1990, won this time because his opponents could not agree on a single candidate. The 39 percent of the country that voted for him was yearning for any change that could dig the country out of its deep poverty. He still had to use a series of political maneuvers and dirty tricks to ensure his victory.

As leader of the Sandinistas in the late 1990s, he made Nicaragua ungovernable by sending protesters into the streets. In return for peace, Arnaldo Alemán, the president then, allowed Mr. Ortega to pack the Supreme Court and the election commission, and arranged for both Mr. Ortega and himself to be granted lifetime legal immunity. That allowed Mr. Ortega to escape prosecution after his stepdaughter accused him of sexual abuse, beginning when she was 11. (Since stripped of his immunity, Mr. Alemán is serving 20 years for embezzlement.)

Mr. Alemán also agreed to lower the threshold of votes required to win a first-round election — upping the chances of an Ortega victory.

In his last pre-election act of cynicism, Mr. Ortega neutralized the powerful Catholic Church's opposition by backing passage of a bill that criminalizes all abortion. Mr. Ortega was once pro-Marxist, but now he's pro-Ortega. And that's the problem.