

# Ortega on the road of Chavismo

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Daniel Ortega will soon find out how difficult it is to have and to hold a populist government these days in one of the poorest countries in Latin America. When the news came that he had won the election, I phoned a Nicaraguan-American friend and asked her what she planned to do. Her answer was swift and to the point: "First, I'm going to cry; next, I'm going to take my money out of the bank and transfer it to Miami."

It's a natural reaction. Spaniards have a saying that explains that attitude: "Being distrustful is a sign you've been plucked." Of course, they don't say "plucked," but I think most newspapers would reject the verb commonly used in Madrid. My friend and her family were severely "plucked" during the Sandinista decade and are not willing to relive that experience.

Between now and Jan. 10, 2007, the date set for the transfer of power, thousands of Nicaraguans -- first discreetly, later nervously -- will withdraw their money from the banks, exchange them into dollars and transfer them to other, less dangerous storage sites. Hundreds of other Nicaraguans will put their planned investments on hold, while foreign investors will wait for a long time before they take their capital into the country -- if they even consider doing so.

Let us not forget that in the 1980s Ortega obliterated the farm crops, wiped out cattle ranches and set off the most crushing hyperinflation in the history of world finance. That crash, similar to the one suffered by the Weimar republic in Germany, set Nicaraguan society back 40 years in terms of production and consumption standards.

What will Ortega do after January? He can take one of two roads:

- **One road** is to behave and mind his p's and q's, following the sensible economic policy of the three previous democratic governments, which means limited public expenditures, acceptable taxes, a free exchange of currency and controlled inflation. That is, the opposite of the neopopulist prescription.
- **The other road** is to join the "21st century socialism" advocated by Hugo Chávez, that continental troublemaker, in an effort revindicate the revolutionary flag and the worldwide struggle against hated Yankee imperialism, as the Sandinista anthem said before it was modified. But, how can Ortega march into that dangerous jungle with 60 percent of the nation against him, parliament included, without resources and with a society whose infinite majority rejects his tired, Cold War language?

*Chavismo* even has a road map with five precise markers: The party wins the election, calls for a new Constitution, dismantles the republican institutions, concentrates all power in its leader and turns administrative and business control over to army and government cronies. That's what Hugo did, what Evo intends to do, and what Caracas hopes Daniel will do. All this happens amid alarms that a landing of U.S. Marines is imminent and that the CIA is plotting assassinations.

But how is Ortega going to carry out this collection of misdeeds in 2007, when -- despite his pyrrhic victory -- he is the most detested of all Nicaraguan politicians? He cannot call for a new Constitution and he won't be allowed to dismantle the already badly battered republican institutions. What can he do, then, to join *Chavismo*? Will he stage a military coup? Will he again organize mobs and militias?

The outlook is very grim. Ortega comes to power with his revolutionary hands tightly tied. There's no way he can join *Chavismo* without triggering a huge conflict. The country's vital classes -- the professionals, the productive apparatus -- are wary of him because of his infamous past and will act with extreme caution. The radical extremists cannot seize the nation's wheel without plunging Nicaragua into chaos.

If Ortega takes Chávez's road, what might occur is that his baneful experiment will end Ecuadorean-style: The president will be ousted by Congress. It could happen.