

Has Ortega really, truly changed?

Opinion
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It's official: Daniel Ortega is Nicaragua's president-elect. In a five-man field, the Sandinista's 38 percent took him past the finish mark. His nearest rival -- dissident Liberal, Eduardo Montealegre -- trailed by nine percentage points. On Monday, a young Nicaraguan woman -- a supporter of Edmundo Jarquín's reformist Sandinistas -- told me: "I'm in shock over the people's choice." That, indeed, is the only starting point for taking stock and moving forward.

Ortega won fairly. Neither fraud nor scattered irregularities -- e.g., polls opening late or citizens turned away due to registration problems -- decided the outcome. Since 1990, the Sandinistas have garnered 38-42 percent of the vote in presidential elections and, thus, the Nov. 5 outcome turned on their base. Jointly, Montealegre (29 percent) and José Rizo (26 percent) -- former president Arnoldo Alemán's candidate -- pulled a stomping 55 percent, also the usual Liberal range. Only this time, Nicaraguans had to choose one of the two.

The notorious *pacto* also bolstered the Sandinistas. Since the late 1990s, Ortega and Alemán have controlled most major political institutions. While initially the dominant partner, Alemán slowly lost the upper hand as his legal troubles mounted. He is under house arrest -- really, he roams all of Managua, where he is sometimes spotted having a fine meal -- for embezzling \$100 million from the public treasury.

Ortega-Alemán 'pacto'

Avoiding jail or, better yet, being pardoned has been the primary objective of Alemán and his Liberals. Ortega lobbied successfully to lower the threshold for averting a second round from 45 percent to 40 percent, or 35 percent with at least five points over his closest competitor.

The *pacto* provoked the breakup of the long-standing voting blocks. Most analysts (myself included) perceived a political realignment in progress. Dissension split the Liberals more evenly, which Montealegre's and Rizo's vote shares indicate. At first, the late Herty Lewites was drawing up to 30 percent among Sandinistas. By early July, his numbers had declined, and Jarquín's never picked up. While the last round of polls placed him at 10-15 percent, the reformist Sandinista tallied less than seven percent last Sunday. In the end, the electorate apparently aligned along the historic fault lines.

We don't yet know the profiles of voters in each camp. I wouldn't be surprised if Jarquín's losses translated into Montealegre's gains nor if disgruntled Sandinistas were a significant sector of the undecided electorate, which broke for Ortega at the last minute. In the past, undecided voters overwhelmingly sided with the Liberal candidate. Young voters -- 400,000 new ones in a 3.6 million electorate -- may also have cushioned the Sandinista. Though a Liberal-Sandinista split marked the electorate on Nov. 5, the camps may well have drawn on new types of voters which could still harbor a potential realignment.

Voting with dignity

On Jan. 10, 2007, Ortega and the new National Assembly will be inaugurated. Sandinistas will have 37 deputies, a plurality in the 92-member chamber. Montealegre's Liberals total 27 and Rizo's 22. Jarquín's Sandinistas have six seats. Forty-seven votes are needed to pass legislation. Will the *pacto* survive? Could the Liberals band together against the Sandinistas? Would Ortega succeed in cajoling or bribing enough Alemán Liberals and Jarquín Sandinistas to form a comfortable majority? The next two months will surely see horse trading galore.

Last Sunday, I spent from 6:30 a.m. to 11:30 p.m. in Tipitapa -- a 30-minute ride from Managua -- as an electoral observer with the Organization of American States. What I saw during that long, scorchingly hot day deeply moved me. Ordinary *Nicas* conducted themselves with great dignity and civility: voters in long lines, board members at the polling station, soldiers safekeeping the process, even the children playing outside as their parents slowly voted. In spite of widespread poverty and only a 16-year history of free elections, Nicaraguans manifest a strong commitment to democracy.

We'll soon learn if Daniel Ortega has changed as much as he claims. Count me among the skeptics, though we all must wait and see. He is, after all, the people's choice. For the sake of the Nicaraguan people, we should not act to confirm our worst fears before anything other than the election has happened.