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Will democracy be strengthened?

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Nicaragua is on the cusp of a political realignment. Even if Sandinista Daniel Ortega wins, the voting blocks of the past 16 years have already been shaken by dissensions. Beginning in 1990 when Violeta Chamorro soundly defeated Ortega, Liberals commanded the allegiance of 60 percent of the electorate and Sandinistas of 40 percent. On Nov. 5, Ortega -- who is leading in the polls -- could pass the finish line with 35 percent if he bests his nearest rival by five points. In an unprecedented multiparty field, a first-round win is entirely possible. If there is a runoff, his hopes of regaining the presidency will be forever banished.

Having Ortega at the helm again is a nightmare. He admires Hugo Chávez and Fidel Castro unabashedly. His victory would give them a boost after setbacks in Peru, Ecuador and, especially, the United Nations where Venezuela has failed to win an alternate seat on the Security Council. Yet, even if he hasn't changed his stripes, Ortega would not have a free rein.

No more confiscated properties

To begin with, he'd be serving a five-year term without reelection. His supporters -- old and new -- might constrain him on the economic front. Jaime Morales Carazo, his would-be vice president, had his properties confiscated during the 1980s, including his home, where Ortega lives. Would he and other Contras who are now Danielistas allow a renewed assault on the economy? Would the former Comandantes -- many thriving in the private sector -- stand idly by? Only if the economy continued on today's sound macroeconomic track would Ortega be able to deliver to his base.

More worrisome are the politics of a possible Ortega victory. Would he resort to fraud to secure a first-round victory? Ortega knows better than anyone that polls in Nicaragua are famously unreliable. If he won cleanly, he'd have to thank the pacto forged in 2000 between him and Arnoldo Alemán -- then president, now convicted embezzler -- to rein in all major institutions, which included establishing a lower threshold for a first-round win. His FSLN machinery of clientelism, widespread corruption and strong-arm tactics would be reinforced.

A modern president may emerge

An Ortega victory would still carry a realignment of sorts. Hard-core Sandinistas, Contras and Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo have locked arms on his behalf which -- if they don't run afoul in power -- may signal the arrival of a new movement of retrograde forces.

If, on the other hand, there is a second round and either the dissident Liberal Eduardo Montealegre or the reformist Sandinista Edmundo Jarquín becomes president, Nicaragua would have a modern president committed to democracy and the opportunity to free the political system from the pacto's stranglehold. The latter, of course, would depend on who gains, or can form, a majority in the National Assembly.

Alemán's Liberals may yet hold the balance of power.

Though efforts to call a primary between José Rizo -- the caudillo's man -- and Montealegre failed, Rizo may yet do a turnabout and endorse Montealegre. In the past few days, more than 400 Liberal activists have left the Rizo campaign for Montealegre's. With Alemán's legal troubles, the Liberals lost the upper hand in the pacto. If victorious, Ortega may not need them at all and could even turn on Alemán in a bid to curry favor with dissident Liberals and reformist Sandinistas. A Rizo withdrawal would surely force a second round.

Hoping for a clean outcome

Edmundo Jarquín -- who became the dissident Sandinistas' candidate upon Herty Lewites' passing in July -- could well be the best man running. He's a respected international economist, an experienced diplomat and a good communicator. Jarquín even has a sense of humor. His campaign slogan reads: El feo que quiere una Nicaragua linda (The ugly guy who wants a beautiful Nicaragua). Unfortunately, after hovering around 18 percent, his poll numbers are declining. Even if not this time, a modern Sandinista like Jarquín may be the best way for Nicaragua to exorcise its polarizing Sandinista past.

A clean outcome on Nov. 5 should be accepted in Nicaragua and abroad. If fraudulent, democratic forces -- national and foreign -- must marshal all peaceful means of protest. Once settled, Nicaragua will walk on new political terrain, whether led by retrograde forces or a forward-looking coalition.