

Eleventh-Hour Election Meddling in Nicaragua

By Ben Beachy | November 1, 2006

Nicaragua is gearing up for its national elections on Sunday, November 5. For the last year, Nicaragua's complicated electoral panorama has been further convoluted by a string of U.S. representatives seeking to ward off an electoral victory by Sandinista (FSLN) leader and former president Daniel Ortega. U.S. officials have publicly censured Ortega, attempted to unify his opposition, and threatened that an Ortega win would endanger U.S. financial support.

This U.S. intervention, however, has failed to unite Nicaragua's divided right wing or to detract significantly from Ortega's base. Now U.S. meddlers are flustered and desperate in the face of recent polls revealing that Ortega is within a few percentage points of clinching the presidential office.

In a last-ditch effort to undermine Ortega, Cong. Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA), chairman of the House's International Relations Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigation, sent a letter on October 27 to Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff. Rohrabacher enjoined Chertoff "to prepare in accordance with U.S. law, contingency plans to block any further money remittances from being sent to Nicaragua in the event that the FSLN enters government."

The nearly half million Nicaraguans currently living in the United States send around \$500 million each year to their family members in Nicaragua.

Nicaraguans have reason to believe Rohrabacher may not be bluffing. In the build-up to Nicaragua's 1990 elections, the United States warned Nicaraguan voters that it would continue fueling the contra war and maintain its economic embargo on Nicaragua—both of which were wreaking havoc on Nicaragua's economy—if Daniel Ortega were re-elected president.

Beleaguered by a crippling war, food rationing, and empty supermarket shelves, many Nicaraguans opted for U.S.-backed Violeta Chamorro over Ortega. Satisfied, the United States then released its stranglehold on the Nicaraguan economy.

Seeing that the FSLN now has a chance to return to power, Rohrabacher once again proposes that the U.S.

government target Nicaraguans—this time by cutting the nation off from much-needed family funds. Thousands of Nicaraguan families depend on remittances to augment the meager wages paid for picking coffee, sewing jeans in assembly factories, or selling water at intersections.

In an economy sacked with underemployment, stagnant salaries, and rising costs, remittances keep Nicaragua afloat by generating an income equivalent to 70% of the country's total annual exports. Economist Nestor Avendaño projects that a U.S. embargo on remittances would prove as disastrous for Nicaraguans as was the U.S.-imposed trade embargo of the 1980s. The hardest hit of a remittance ban would be the impoverished majority.

Nicaraguans' dependence on remittances is what makes his threat so potent—and so grossly unfair. In the face of a potential Ortega victory, Rohrabacher is striving to make longstanding U.S. interference more personal by pushing Nicaraguans to see a vote for Ortega as a vote against their own pocketbooks.

Rohrabacher's letter is but one voice in a cacophony of recent U.S. meddling. Over the last week newspapers in Managua have been laden with unsolicited U.S. opinions about Daniel Ortega and about the sort of president Nicaraguans should want.

The day after the news about the Rohrabacher letter, Florida governor Jeb Bush penned a letter that appeared in a paid political ad in *La Prensa*. Bush's letter declared that Nicaraguans must choose between a "tragic step toward the past" (which he identified as Sandinista "totalitarianism") and "a vision toward the future." The ad was sponsored by the Alianza Liberal Nicaraguense party,



whose leader, Eduardo Montealegre, is the U.S.-preferred presidential candidate.

On the same day Adolfo Franco, assistant administrator for Latin America and the Caribbean of the U.S. Agency for International Development, warned that an FSLN victory could limit USAID support for Nicaragua, citing worries that Daniel Ortega might significantly alter Nicaragua's current economic model.

USAID's admonition piggybacks on U.S. Secretary of Commerce Carlos Gutierrez's more explicit pressure in an interview publicized one week earlier. Gutierrez threatened that an Ortega win could preclude a \$230 million combined investment from three foreign companies that would generate 123,000 jobs, a \$220 million aid package promised through the Millennium Challenge Account, and implementation of CAFTA in Nicaragua.

On October 29, the day after printing Jeb Bush's letter, *La Prensa* published an editorial by Otto Reich, former assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere Affairs, in which he accuses the FSLN of maintaining ties with terrorist groups, a claim that Reich does not attempt to substantiate. Though Reich does not currently hold a position in the U.S. government, he writes as if he does, stating, "If the Sandinistas control the government of Nicaragua, there will be strong pressure in Washington to review all aspects of the bilateral relationship, including remittances."

Reich equates a Sandinista victory with "a return to a past of poverty and international isolation." Such a dismal outcome indeed seems likely if the United States, as the party responsible for the isolation of the past, would implement Reich's thinly cloaked threat of aid and remittance cut-offs.

Ironically, Reich precedes all the above statements with the disclaimer, "No one can tell [Nicaraguans] who to vote for." Jeb Bush, Adolfo Franco, and other outspoken U.S. figures have similarly acknowledged Nicaraguans' sovereign right to pick their own leaders.

As Nicaraguans make their way to the polls on Sunday, they must again consider not only "What will this candidate do for my country if elected?" but also "What will the United States do to my country if this candidate is elected?" The product of relentless outside interference, this sad reality is profoundly undemocratic.

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