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Presidential Candidate Herty Lewites Dies In Nicaragua; Who Benefits?

by Mike Leffert

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The death of Nicaraguan presidential candidate Herty Lewites has upset the early calculus on the November election. Lewites died suddenly, but not entirely unexpectedly, on July 2 of a heart attack. He had a history of heart problems and had suffered a heart attack several years ago. He was the candidate of the Movimiento Renovador Sandinista (MRS), which had split off from the Frente Sandinista para la Liberacion Nacional (FSLN).

Although running far behind leaders in recent polls, he was capturing 15% of the vote, enough to cause a worrisome split on the left and enough to cost FSLN candidate and former President Daniel Ortega (1979-1990) a sufficient percentage of the vote to fall short of a projected first-round victory, even if Ortega won on Nov. 5. Lewites co-founded the MRS after being kicked out of the FSLN, under whose banner he served as tourism minister in the 1980s and later as mayor of Managua. He challenged Ortega for party leadership, representing a social-democrat tendency that sought to moderate Ortega's hard-left orientation.

The preponderance of pundits analyzed the situation immediately following Lewites' death as being favorable to Ortega. But Lewites' support came from near the center of Nicaragua's political spectrum, territory disputed by the conservative Eduardo Montealegre, who split from the official Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC) and its putative leader ex-President Arnaldo Aleman (1997-2002) in much the same way as Lewites split from the FSLN. Both Lewites and Montealegre have received the blessings of the US State Department, panicked at the prospect of an Ortega presidency (see NotiCen, 2006-04-06).

Some observers have taken this set of facts to suggest that it could be Montealegre, not Ortega, who benefits from Lewites' demise. Substitutions; Jarquin in for Herty The MRS, although organized as an electoral vehicle for Lewites, has placed running mate Edmundo Jarquin in the top spot. Jarquin has the reputation of being an intelligent technocrat who lacks the charisma and vote-getting experience of Lewites.

Jarquin is the son-in-law of former President Violeta Chamorro (1990-1996). During the Sandinista government of the 1980s, he was Nicaragua's ambassador to Spain and Mexico. After the defeat of the FSLN in the 1990 election that brought his US-backed mother-in-law to power, he served as a deputy in the congress. Jarquin then left Nicaragua for over a decade, working in the US as director of public policy for the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). When his close friend Enrique Iglesias was appointed secretary-general of the Inter-American Summit, Jarquin was appointed chef de cabinet. Jarquin was chosen for the vice-presidential spot behind Lewites to complement the ticket internationally and to deal with the complexities of financial policy.

He has established relations within both the US government and the European Union (EU). His appeal is to the middle, business, and diplomatic classes, while Herty Lewites' natural constituency was the poor, particularly those disaffected with the highly disciplined FSLN machine and with Ortega. Jarquin has said, by way of elucidating his position, "We are convinced we want to live with a free market, but we don't want a market society. We want everyone to benefit from the [economic] growth." After ascending to the top spot on the ticket he told reporters that he would work relentlessly to fulfill Lewites' dreams for a just and equal Nicaragua.

Many doubt that Jarquin's advantages as sidekick to the popular Lewites will translate into pluses in the role of main man. His ten-year absence from the country is seen as a problem. So is his closeness to the US. Ortega has used US interference in Nicaraguan affairs and in the electoral process effectively in his campaigning.

Mejia Godoy in for Jarquin

To inject some charisma back into the MRS lineup, party leaders have called upon Carlos Mejia Godoy (see NotiCen, 2004-03-18) to fill the vice-presidential vacancy. Mejia Godoy is a very popular singer-songwriter who provided the country with inspiration and patriotic musical background for the war against the US proxies, the contras. He now has a popular television show and is very much in the public eye. It is not clear, however, how seriously he is taking his new candidacy and how much he believes in his political future. He has said he would continue with his musical career even if elected and not make the same mistake as other musicians who put aside their careers for public office. "That was the mistake of Palito Ortega in Argentina, and that was the error of Ruben Blades in Panama; give up everything to get involved in politics. No way. The people know you for your own craft. What is it I've been doing these last 40 years? Singing, it's the only thing I've learned and the only thing I'm known for doing." Mejia is known for having written the Sandinista anthem, which contained the words, "We fight against the yankee, enemy of humanity."

Mejia Godoy was adamant about continuing his career. "When I accepted, I told them, condition sine qua non, as the lawyers say, give me time to continue composing and continue singing. If you take that from me, you take away my oxygen, my reason for being. It's as if you prohibit a bird from flying and singing," he said. But even with a reluctant artist playing second fiddle, the MRS leadership continues to declare the relevance of their campaign.

Sergio Ramirez, who was vice president during Ortega's 1984-1990 term, wrote that the importance of the party lies in the possibility of breaking the stranglehold in which the two major parties, the FSLN and the PLC, have held the country. "Now that Lewites has gone," he wrote, "the chance of Nicaraguans returning to a default polarization will be increased if those supporting his renovated Sandinistas especially the poorest who want no more of Ortega, felt comfortable with Lewites, but could not back Montealegre are put in the fatal position of feeling obliged to vote for Ortega, while the pro-Lewites independents turn to Montealegre." The evidence is that Nicaraguans have so far been unaffected by these arguments.

The momentum had been swinging Ortega's way at the time of Lewites' death. A poll published in El Nuevo Diario on July 6 put Ortega in the lead with 30.1% of the intended vote, his best showing

yet. The poll was conducted between June 20 and the day of Lewites' death, July 2. With four months to go in the campaign, the FSLN candidate is creeping up on the 35% mark. If he wins with that percentage, and does so with a five-point advantage over the next candidate, he will not have to stand for a runoff. Without the spread, he would need 40%.

Most analysts have said that a runoff would work against Ortega, on the assumption that the other candidate would attract most of the votes given others in the first round. Montealegre got 24.4% in the poll, followed by the PLC's Jose Rizo at 21.6% and Lewites with 17.2%, two points better than in the previous sounding (see NotiCen, 2006-06-08).

The day Lewites died, Ortega predicted, "With the help of God and the vote of the people, there will be no second round." Just a couple days before, Ortega had cemented an alliance with the Partido Liberal Nacionalista (PLN), a small party now, but it was founded by Anastasio Somoza, who ruled the country for most of the years between 1937 and 1979, and who, in 1934, had Augusto Cesar Sandino assassinated.

The worm has taken a long time to turn, but the PLN has announced it has "held talks with FSLN authorities, with whom we have agreed on the main aspects of the program of a government of national reconciliation." Rosario Murillo, Ortega's campaign manager and wife, confirmed the talks, calling the outcome not an alliance but rather an agreement whereby the PLN will support the Sandinistas in the elections. At the moment of Lewites' death, his electoral prospects were improving slightly, but the trend was with Ortega.

The MRS is casting its lot with new players, and the game is at least arguably up in the air again. It was left to MRS president Dora Maria Tellez to reframe the situation. "We will be a formula of three, it is the only presidential slate with three candidates," she said. "Herty Lewites, who is the spirit, Edmundo Jarquin, our presidential candidate, and Carlos Mejia Godoy, our vice-presidential candidate." Mejia took the spiritual angle further. "They are right," he said. "Without Herty we are going to lose, but people don't know that we still have Herty, that's the difference, the people believe that with Herty dead, it's over. But Sandino died and Sandinismo lived. Carlos Fonseca died and there continue to be worthy, able, and honest people. So it is that Herty accompanies us, Herty will be president." Stranger things have happened.

In El Salvador the spirit of Shafik Handel lived on to thwart the electoral hopes of the ARENA party in recent congressional elections there (see NotiCen, 2006-02-02 and 2006-03-16). In Managua, Herty's funeral seemed designed to kick off another legend. He was well and widely loved, and a huge crowd followed his casket in a procession starting at Hertylandia, an amusement park he built, to the church of Santiago, where the church bells rang for the man known also as the Jewish Tiger. The great crowd applauded and cried, "Herty, Herty." The coffin was draped with the flag of Nicaragua and the black and red flag of the FSLN.

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