

Political Developments

Atlantic Coast Elections

On March 5, Nicaraguans in the Northern (RAAN) and Southern (RAAS) Atlantic Autonomous Regions went to the polls to elect 45 councils in each region. The results were published on March 18 once the Supreme Electoral Council (*Consejo Supremo Electoral*, CSE) resolved questions about the allocation of council seats in the RAAN claimed by the indigenous political party YATAMA.¹ According to some Nicaraguan analysts and election observers, the Atlantic Coast elections served to: 1) boost the image of the CSE as a technically capable institution; 2) re-affirm the political strengths of the PLC and FSLN; 3) organize pollwatching efforts for the alliances supporting Eduardo Montealegre and Herty Lewites; and 4) verify the need for the application of Election Law Article 41, which allowed approximately 15 percent of registered voters to cast their ballots who otherwise would have been shut out of the election process.² Additionally, the Atlantic Coast elections re-confirmed the need to: “help facilitate the national identification process as the Movement for Nicaragua (*Movimiento por Nicaragua*, MpN) is doing; expand the verification of the national voter registry being conducted by Ethics and Transparency (*Ética y Transparencia*, ET) and the Institute for Development and Democracy (*Instituto para el Desarrollo y la Democracia*, IPADE); and reinforce observation and advocacy efforts.”³

Public Opinion Polls

Over the past few weeks, three public opinion surveys have provided different readings about political party candidate preferences for the presidential elections scheduled to take place in November 2006. Two polls have PLC dissident Eduardo Montealegre, a banker who held several posts under Presidents Arnoldo Alemán and Enrique Bolaños, in the lead with Daniel Ortega overtaking expelled *Sandinista* dissident and former Managua mayor Herty Lewites. Another poll has Lewites continuing in the lead and Ortega in third place. For most of last year, former Managua mayor Lewites led in all the polls. One poll shows Montealegre ahead with 31.8% of voter preferences, compared to 25.4% for Ortega and 23.7% for Lewites.⁴ Another poll shows Montealegre in the lead with 26.6% of voter preferences, followed by Ortega with 23% and Lewites with 22.3%.⁵ A third survey shows Lewites attracting 27.3% of voter preferences with an advantage over Montealegre at 21.7%.⁶ This poll shows Daniel Ortega’s support at 18.3%.

1 In the RAAN, the PLC and the FSLN each garnered 16 seats and Yatama 13 seats. In the RAAS, the PLC won 22 seats, the FSLN 11, and the ALN-PC and Yatama both 6 seats.

2 Under heavy public pressure, the CSE reversed its ruling and applied Articles 41 and 116 for the Atlantic Coast elections. These Articles establish the right to vote of citizens whose names do not appear on the voters’ list but who have a valid voter ID card. According to the election observer groups ET and IPADE, Article 41 procedures and other measures helped minimize problems with the voter registry.

3 “Mis lecturas de la Costa Caribe,” by Cristiana Chamoro Barrios, *La Prensa*, March 14, 2006.

4 International Republican Institute, *La Prensa*, March 20, 2006

5 M&R, *La Prensa*, March 27, 2006

6 Borge & Asociados, *El Nuevo Diario*, March 14, 2006

Political Party Primaries

In February, Montealegre had announced he would not participate in primary elections with PLC so long as former president Alemán continues to control the party despite conviction on corruption charges. Given Montealegre's decision, some political observers believe that there would be four political groupings in the country's November presidential elections: FSLN with Daniel Ortega as the candidate; the Liberal Nicaraguan Alliance – Conservative Party (*Alianza Liberal Nicaragüense - Partido Conservador*; ALN-PC) with Montealegre as candidate; the 2006 Herty Alliance (*Alianza Herty 2006*), which recently suffered a setback with the separation of the Christian Alternative Party (*Alternativa Cristiana*, AC) from the alliance, with Lewites as candidate; and the PLC which has not yet chosen a candidate. The PLC's party convention is scheduled for April 2. The leading candidate for the PLC nomination is former Vice President José Rizo.⁷

NDI Program Activities

A central aspect of the CSE's work is to oversee the creation of the voter registration list, which is based on the national identification card system that is also administered by the CSE. Surveys implemented by the National Democratic Institute's (NDI) local partners show that more than a third of Nicaraguans are at risk of being disenfranchised in the November 2006 elections, a percentage that could influence the outcome of closely-contested presidential and legislative races. To address this problem, the CSE needs to take effective steps to ensure that eligible Nicaraguans have the opportunity to vote. Delays in issuing identification cards could preclude otherwise eligible voters from being included on the final voter registration list. This lack of access to the electoral process would not only undermine conditions for credible and fair elections but could have an effect on electoral outcomes.

The following NDI programs in support of Nicaraguan efforts to ensure a fair democratic process are funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development, the National Endowment for Democracy and the Royal Embassy of Denmark.

Two-Way Voter Registry Audits

NDI is supporting efforts by the national observer groups IPADE and ET to ascertain the reliability of the voter registration lists through two-way audits. This entails: 1) selecting a national random sample of names and addresses of persons on the voter registration list and contacting those people; and 2) contacting a random sample of eligible voters (Nicaraguan citizens 16 years and older) on the street, and determining what proportion of these people are on the final voter registration list.

IPADE completed the first stage of the voter registry audit which involved an audit of the Atlantic Coast voter registry list. NDI technical advisors are providing IPADE with recommendations on the publication of their final report, expected to be released in mid-April. Preliminary results of the IPADE audit show that one in five eligible voters was not on the Atlantic

⁷ Jose Rizo was selected as PLC's presidential candidate after winning 478 out of 750 party convention member votes. Rizo's nomination was ratified at the April 2 party convention.

Coast list and 41.9 percent of the registry contained flawed information.⁸ The audit identified two major areas for improvements in order to enhance prospects for participation by eligible voters in the presidential and legislative elections in November 2006: 1) Providing national identification cards to the estimated 20 percent of the voting population now lacking them; and 2) Establishing a mechanism to permit approximately 30 percent of voters to go to the polls closest to where they currently live.

NDI is currently working with ET and the Central American University (*Universidad Centroamericana*, UCA)⁹ to establish a baseline for an audit of the national voter registry using the voter list from the last nation-wide municipal elections in 2004. Combined with the Atlantic Coast audit, the national audit is designed to produce a baseline and to keep pressure on the CSE to improve the voter registration list for the national elections.

On March 17 and 18, ET and UCA organized a workshop to: 1) train ET coordinators and UCA supervisors on the two-way voter registry audit methodology; 2) review and revise survey instruments to be used during the baseline voter registry audit; 3) review the different roles and responsibilities of the volunteer supervisors, coordinators and interviewers; and 4) establish logistical needs and timelines for implementing the voter registry audit. ET coordinators from 15 departments and select municipalities attended the workshop.¹⁰ Field work began on March 25.



ET Two-Way Voter Registry Audit Workshop, March 17, 2006

National Identification Assessment

NDI is also working with ET and UCA to determine problems related to the distribution of national identification cards by recruiting 634 citizens who do not have identification cards and are interested in obtaining one to: a) track how quickly identification cards are obtained; b) identify the reasons for any delays; and c) determine whether there is any partisan and/or regional bias in the issuance of identification cards. Between March 11 and 30, ET's 17 coordinators identified citizens who want to participate in the study. The first assessment will take place on April 10.

8 "*Principales Hallazgos de la Verificación Técnica al Padrón Electoral de la Costa Caribe de Nicaragua*," by the Institute for Development and Democracy with support from the USAID and technical assistance from NDI.

9 Senior researchers at the University of Central America (*Universidad Centro Americana*, UCA) are serving as technical advisors to ET for the national identification assessment and voter registry audit.

10 The Atlantic Coast is not included in this project.

Atlantic Coast Electoral Observation

NDI Resident Director Deborah Ullmer traveled to Bluefields, in the Autonomous Region of the South (*Región Autónoma del Sur*; RAAS) on March 4 to accompany ET and IPADE representatives. While in Bluefields, Ullmer accompanied ET's regional coordinator in collecting missing data on observer forms for the opening of polls; attended election-day press conferences by ET and IPADE; and visited polls where observers reported problems, particularly incidents of poll workers blocking observer access. NDI staff also traveled with ET to the Autonomous Region of the North (*Región Autónoma del Norte*, RAAN) towns of Rosita, Bonanza, Waspán and Puerto Cabezas, and met with CSE officials at Rosita and Waspán to discuss challenges to the national identification card registration processes and local challenges to the electoral process. Municipal CSE Presidents from the Waspán and Rosita CSE offices reiterated the need for Municipal CSE offices to remain open throughout the year, rather than only during immediate pre-electoral periods to enable more citizens to register to vote. NDI also visited the MpN Citizen Attention Center at Waspán to learn about procedures for collecting complaints and orienting citizens on voter registration.



ET and IPADE present election day reports, Bilwi, RAAN, March 5, 2006

Observation for November National Elections

NDI is providing “quick count” assistance to ET for the November presidential race and a handful of key legislative races. A quick count is a well-tested and reliable methodology for systematically evaluating the quality of the administration of the election processes throughout the country on election-day and providing an accurate, timely and independent confirmation of the vote count on election night. On March 18, NDI advisors reviewed ET's plans for the national observation, basic requirements for verifying legislative results in Nicaragua and targets for recruiting additional volunteers. At the strategic planning meeting, the NDI team recommended focusing on a handful of key legislative races, particularly in areas marked by allegations of fraud in the past elections. Another option emerged from the discussion, which is to reinforce observation efforts across the board. Many of the coordinators thought that boosting ET's national observation would allow the organization to better measure how often, where and why voters are turned away, and enhance the accuracy of the quick count.