

Nicaraguan elections: why combatting poverty is a decisive factor

On 6 November, Nicaraguans will go to the polls in elections for the President, Vice President, 90 National Assembly deputies, and 20 Nicaraguan members of the Central American parliament.

In line with the new electoral law, 50% of candidates for all posts must be women. The President is elected using a two-round system; a second round is held if no candidate receives more than 40% of the vote, or if no candidate receives over 35% of the vote and has a 5% lead over their nearest challenger.



When were the last elections and what was the result? The 2011 elections were won by the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN)-led “United Nicaragua Will Triumph” Alliance. Daniel Ortega with 62.46% of the vote was elected President, followed by Fabio Gadea, PLI (Independent Liberal Party Alliance), 31%; and Arnoldo Alemán, PLC (Constitutionalist Liberal Party) 5.91%. The National Assembly election results reflected those for the presidency: FSLN Alliance 62 seats, the PLI Alliance 26, and the PLC two. This gave the FSLN an overall majority.

Which parties are standing this year? There are 16 parties participating organised into two electoral alliances, four national parties and one regional party. The main parties standing presidential candidates are the FSLN with candidate Daniel Ortega, the PLC with candidate Maximino Rodríguez, and the PLI with Pedro Reyes Vallejos.

What is the likely outcome according to the opinion polls? The polling organisation *M&R consultores* carried out a poll of 2,000 people between 27 July and 1 August. 62.8% of respondents indicated their intention to vote for the FSLN, 26.8% are undecided, and 10.4% support opposition parties. These figures are very similar to all polls conducted over the past year. Approval ratings for Daniel Ortega and Vice Presidential candidate Rosario Murillo were 79.3% and 72.7% respectively.

Why is there a low level of support for the opposition? This can be partly attributed to the strength and popularity of the FSLN, but also to the fragmentation of opposition parties and their lack of a coherent political and economic programme. Less than 10% of respondents in the M&R poll recognised the names of their presidential candidates.

In an Interpress Service interview on 23 June, head of the *M&R consultores*, Raúl Obregon, stated: “They [opposition parties] are out of touch with the problems and needs of the people. They talk politics while the population wants to hear proposals to solve their main problems, namely unemployment and lack of access to basic necessities.”

In past elections the opposition has played on fears of an FSLN victory leading to another war. However, 26 years on, memories of the *contra* war are fading and this message has become less and less credible.

Will there be international observers? On 6 May, the Supreme Electoral Council announced the electoral calendar and introduced prominent electoral specialists from Latin America and the Caribbean, most of whom have supervised national elections in their own countries. These specialists, from Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, Peru and Uruguay, will act as advisors to provide accompaniment for the electoral process.

Government policy is to prioritise the role of international accompaniment rather than observation. This decision has been taken in the context of scepticism about international electoral observation fuelled by such factors as the US failure to recognise the democratic election of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, and the validation by US and EU observers of Honduran elections in 2013 which were widely regarded as severely flawed.

Opposition parties, NGOs, and church and business leaders within Nicaragua have called for international observation as have the US government and NGOs such as the National Democratic Institute. In May, State Department spokesperson, John Kirby, stated: "Credible international election monitors will only strengthen Nicaragua." The Carter Center, who observed four Nicaraguan elections between 1990 and 2006, described the government's decision to exclude international observers as "an attack on the international community."

Why is it, despite the many criticisms of the FSLN nationally and internationally, that over 60% of Nicaraguans indicate their intention of voting for the FSLN?

Peace and stability: Given Nicaragua's turbulent history, the last 26 years have been a period of unprecedented peace. However, peace is not just the absence of war. The FSLN returned to power in 2007 committed to addressing the violence of poverty through a comprehensive, integrated strategy for improving the lives of the nearly 50% of the population suffering chronic and persistent levels of poverty in the second poorest country in the region.

Mindful of the disastrous consequences of hyper-inflation and economic collapse in the 1980s caused by the US backed *contra* war and trade embargo, the government embarked on a programme that combines macroeconomic stability with extensive social programmes to combat poverty.

In what the World Bank has described as a 'remarkable economic turnaround' GDP has increased by an average of four to five per cent annually, inflation has dropped to low single figures, exports have doubled, and Foreign Direct Investment has quadrupled. Nicaragua has one of the highest growth rates in the region at 4.9% for 2015 and a forecast of 4.2% for 2016.

According to the 2014 Standard of Living Survey of the National Development Information Institute, between 2009 and 2014, general poverty dropped 13 per cent, from 42.5 per cent to 29.6 per cent, while in the same period extreme poverty dropped from 14.6 to 8.3 per cent. This represents improvements in the lives of tens of thousands of people, particularly women, whose suffering had been ignored by previous governments.

Safety and security: In comparison with its neighbours to the North – Honduras, El Salvador, Belize and Guatemala that are among the world's seven most violent countries – Nicaragua has a relatively low crime rate, an absence of transnational gangs, and a generally trusted police force that focuses on proactive community policing and crime prevention. According to an article in the Honduran newspaper *El Herald* in August, 2016, Nicaragua has a homicide rate of 8 per 100,000 population compared with 57 per 100,000 in Honduras.

Further evidence of the relative safety and security in Nicaragua is that between 1 October 2013 and 30 June, 2014, the US Border Patrol apprehended 16,546 Honduran children attempting to cross the Mexican border compared with only 178 Nicaraguan children.

Commitment to small and medium businesses and producers: The fundamental core of the government's social and economic policy is to support small and medium-sized producers and businesses, described as the associative, family-based and co-operative sector. Sixty-three per cent of the population work in this sector producing 70% of the country's wealth. This includes most of the country's food, and control of most of the country's transport. For example, credit and training in the production of basic grains have been provided for 100,000 small farmers, as part of the reactivation of the agricultural sector to improve food security.

Renewable energy and commitment to action nationally and internationally on climate change: Ending the country's dependence on oil is another fundamental commitment. In 2007, only 25% of Nicaragua's electricity and transport came from renewable sources. By 2014 this had reached 52% due to harnessing Nicaragua's abundant potential sources of renewable energy as part of the government's commitment to a 'green revolution'. The government's target is 90% by 2020.

This 'revolution' has been praised by Inter-American Development Bank president, Luis Alberto Moreno, as 'a model for the world on the shift to green energy.'

Nicaragua has also played a leading role internationally in the fight against climate change. Nicaragua's Minister for Public Policy Paul Oquist explains: "If Nicaragua, the second poorest in Latin America and the Caribbean, can make these advances surely the West and the rest of the large emitters can begin increasing their levels of ambition now, in order to save us from a three degree world average temperature rise.'

In line with an integrated, holistic approach to combating poverty, the government has implemented a major expansion of the national grid: in 2006 54% of the population had access to electricity, by 2014 this had increased to 87%. In July, 2014, UN General Secretary, Ban Ki-moon praised this expansion, pointing out how critical electricity is to 'eradicating extreme poverty, promoting education and health programmes, and human dignity.'

Combatting poverty: The FSLN government's commitment to combatting poverty is all encompassing and includes health care, education, transport, access to credit, support for rural families, security of land titles, and infrastructure improvements. Government policy also prioritised food assistance to the most vulnerable, support for very young children, house building and repair programmes, mass health campaigns against mosquito- borne diseases, and nationwide support for sport and cultural activities.



27,000 volunteer health promoters (brigadistas) are part of community networks. They are trained to prevent common conditions and are key to mobilising communities during vaccination campaigns and programmes to eradicate diseases such as dengue and the zika virus.

Free basic health care for all: Seventeen years of neoliberal government had left a semi- privatised, fragmented and severely underfunded health and education service. Large numbers of people, especially in rural areas, had little or no access to health care. One of the first actions of the government was to reverse privatisation in order to ensure free access to education and health care for all.

The government is committed to guaranteeing the right to free health care through expanding and improving the coverage and quality of its services. This holistic, integrated approach is a fundamental to the wellbeing of society and an essential element in combatting poverty through a family and community health model.

Spending on health care since 2007 has tripled and now represents 17 per cent of the national budget: 350 hospitals, health centres and clinics have been repaired or built.

In 2010, Mirte Roses, Panamerican Health Organisation stated: "Nicaragua is one of the countries with the highest vaccination cover...The level of social organisation and participation has been a fundamental factor because health workers collaborate very closely with community leaders and with society in organising health responses."

According to the World Health Organisation, maternal mortality has dropped from 92.8 per 100,000 live births in 2006 to 38.9 per 100,000 in 2014. The network of 174 maternity centres, mostly in rural areas, has played a significant role in achieving these reductions.

In addition, 145,000 Nicaraguans have benefited from free eye operations as a part of a Cuban/Venezuelan initiative called 'Operacion Milagro.'

According to a study by the Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation, University of Washington, average global life expectancy has increased by 6.2 years since 1990. However, Nicaraguans now live to an average age of 74.8 years, a huge increase of 14.7 years.

Education: Spending on education has doubled with policies to improve access to good quality education but with a particular focus on ensuring that all children complete primary education. Pre-school education has expanded dramatically: in 2007 there were 22,000 places, by 2013 this had increased to 236,000. In areas where food security is

a major issue, there is a free school meals programme for over one million children. The school garden programme provides an additional incentive for families to keep their children in class.

According to education expert Mario Quintana, half of young people of secondary school age are not in school, especially in rural areas. The government has begun a major technical education programme with the goal of incorporating 100,000 young people into these programmes by the end of 2016.

Food security: The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has praised Nicaragua's social programmes that address food security and malnutrition, particularly in rural areas, and Nicaragua is one of only 38 countries to reach the UN Millennium Development Goal of cutting malnutrition by half. The Zero Hunger programme has supported over 100,000 women by providing them with pregnant cows and sows, sheep, goats and hens, as well as materials to house these animals and free technical support and training. The Healthy Backyard programme provides training and seeds to urban families to improve nutrition and generate a family income.

Other government programmes include Zero Usury which provides low interest loans and training for 130,000 urban women to set up micro businesses, solidarity bonuses for 15,000 low paid public sector workers, transport subsidies, and an affordable housing programme and home repair support.

Empowering women: Considerable advances have been made regarding the position of women. Constitutional reforms of May 2014 established a minimum quota of 50 per cent women candidates for party political and public office and women's participation in the social and economic life of the country has risen. The social programmes described above are also designed to give women greater control of resources and increased economic autonomy. Ranked 12th out of 145 countries (as opposed to 90th position in 2007), Nicaragua remains the best performer in the region for the fourth consecutive year according to the World Economic Forum's 2015 Gender Gap report.

Strengthening trade union rights: The neo-liberal governments from 1990-2007 saw massive redundancies in the public sector and, as a consequence, the trade unions were dramatically weakened. Since 2007, the unions have seen their rights restored and they enjoy increased political clout as a result of a tripartite agreement involving the Government, the unions and the private sector. Particularly notable is the strength of the public sector unions, and the 60,000 strong Self-Employed Workers' Confederation (CTCP), representing street sellers and all those who eke out a living outside formal employment structures. In addition, public sector workers have enjoyed year on year increases in salary and the minimum wage, and are now valued for the contribution they make to society.

Conclusion

Nicaragua remains the second poorest country in the Americas after Haiti with all the entrenched problems that this implies. Sixty-three per cent of respondents in the August M&R *consultores* poll indicated that unemployment was the biggest problem facing the country, and 43 per cent were concerned about the high cost of goods and services.

However, given its history of wars, persistently high levels of poverty, natural and climate change provoked disasters, and its location in a region fraught with instability, huge progress has been made since 2007 in addressing the problems of the most marginalised and impoverished in a far more coherent way than at any time in the past.

A survey by *Latinbarometro* 2016 based on interviews conducted between 15 May and 15 June, 2016 indicates an approval rating of 69% for the government, the second highest rating in the Latin American region.

The Nicaraguan electorate will make their choice on 6 November. The M&R poll indicates that they will re-elect a FSLN government which they believe will continue to address the real problems the country faces in a volatile world.