

Nicaragua at the Crossroads: The Presidential Candidacy of Herty Lewites

Midge Quandt

During my trip to Nicaragua in March and April 2006, I talked with several political actors about the presidential candidacy of Herty Lewites, a moderate Sandinista who was expelled from the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) in March 2005 for challenging the leadership of Daniel Ortega. This November election is crucial because Ortega and the right wing liberal figure Arnoldo Aleman have shared near dictatorial powers since their political pact in 1999. They have come to dominate all political institutions in the country except for the executive branch. Herty is running on a coalition ticket called The Herty Alliance 2006 with the aim of opening up and democratizing the political process. If he wins, Nicaragua will join the growing number of countries in Latin America that have left or center left governments which are resisting to a greater or lesser degree the dictates of neo-liberalism. The people I interviewed were all Sandinistas, but only one belonged to a political party. To give the reader a flavor of the different perspectives on Herty, I have excerpted four interviews.

For purposes of clarity, I put my own comments in boldface and the interviewee's quoted responses in regular type. Descriptive material about the interviewees is set in italics.

Sofia Montenegro is a leader of the feminist movement and a writer and journalist.

I consider myself a Sandinista without a party, which applies to a lot of people. So far my involvement in the women's movement commits me to preserve the autonomy of the movement. That doesn't mean that I don't have political positions. If anyone comes from a position of commitment to democracy and the best interests of the Nicaraguan people, that person is obviously Herty, because the main democratic task in Nicaragua — there is no other task that is as important — is to destroy the pact between the FSLN and the Liberals by which they divided all political power between them. So as the Women's

Movement and as individuals we have defined ourselves clearly and openly against the Pact and for the Herty Alliance 2006.

I think that Herty is quite conscious that he is not the leader or the founder of a new left. This is a task that is still ahead. His task is to be a battering ram, to open the doors so anyone can go into the political arena. If Herty is only able to do this one thing, then the whole nation should be absolutely grateful. That is his role, and he is conscious that that is the main thing. And he has to do it both before and immediately after the elections. Because if that is done, then it is possible in a parallel strategy to build a new movement coming from Sandinism, to found a new party. Because now there is only an alliance. But this is a struggle, and you have to look at it from now to at least 2010, with a stop in between in 2008 for the municipal elections.

So his main task is to be the battering ram, and be able with his deputies to fight in the next National Assembly to reject the constitutional reforms by which Daniel Ortega has taken away our rights; and then establish new reforms. [The constitutional reforms engineered by the two pacting parties — the FSLN and the Liberals — in the National Assembly stripped the executive branch of much of the power and placed it in the legislative branch. One example: the oversight of public services is no longer under the purview of the President but under a body controlled by the National Assembly. Ed.] So I foresee that probably for the next two years there will be an ongoing struggle to establish a certain institutionality and to keep the authoritarian forces at bay.

But the issue for me is not who gets the presidency. In my opinion the main work that needs to be done is to break the political hegemony in the National Assembly. Because if you win the presidency without having changed the correlation of forces in the National Assembly you are as politically impotent as Bolaños is now. The Liberals and the FSLN have a pact in the National Assembly, which is the dictatorship of the two parties. So it would be very bad business for Eduardo Montealegre or Herty Lewites to become president without having a majority or at least a new balance of forces within the National Assembly, because if the Front and the Liberals maintain their majority or have enough people to make a coalition, the pact will continue, and they will not let anyone govern who becomes president. Because what Daniel Ortega has been doing is concentrating all power in the National Assembly and particularly in his hands. His

agenda is to govern from below. He controls the Supreme Court, he controls the Supreme Electoral Council, he controls the Liberals because he has taken Aleman hostage, and he has stripped the Executive Branch of power. So the locus of power in Nicaragua is Daniel Ortega himself. These elections are absolutely strategic. Because you either open the door to push again the democratization process, or you go back. And you have five more years of waste, corruption, abuse.

Montealegre also needs to fight for the opening of the political system. Because the risk he runs if he wins is the same as with any president: he won't be able to govern. So what Herty is proposing is a political commitment between Montealegre and the Herty to join forces to fight the pact. It doesn't matter who wins because it's in the National Assembly where you have to decide about the constitutional reforms that Ortega got passed last year and which will go into effect in January.

We went on to discuss the relationship of the women's movement to Herty's campaign. (The other social movements are weak and lack focus.)

Last year, we in the National Feminist Committee (CNF) spearheaded the unification of the entire women's movement, now called Autonomous Women's Movement. Through a process of political discussion led by the CNF the movement ended up building a common vision and strategy; making a decision to form its own structure and its own political leadership. So we were able to rebuild a consensus to return to the general political struggle. Because we reached the conclusion that in Nicaragua it is not possible to advance women's specific rights, or the struggle to improve the living conditions in Nicaragua, if we don't have as a precondition the reestablishment of democracy and a government that is politically progressive. Now the CNF is just one member, even though we have been the motor of organizing. Because one of our main strategies was to establish the articulation of the Women's Movement as a precondition to any big fight.

We see a role for the Autonomous Women's Movement in the upcoming effort to use the battering ram against the pact. We are already in talks, private talks with Herty's Alliance to discuss the possibility of participating in the alliance, as an organized, independent body. We have yet to discuss this, it has to be a decision of the women's movement. We do not want to make demands. The main thing is that he gets through.

However, we want to influence how they design the program of the government. And to have just one little thing. What we want is the opportunity to discuss how they design a program to fight poverty. And then we want to put a gender perspective on that economic program. I think we can provide a few persons who have credibility to run for the National Assembly.

So our own strategy in the Women's Movement is for the short run, medium run and long run. So in the short run, let's help anyone who is willing to fight the pact. Then we have to engage in the fight for constitutional reform and the establishment of popular registration of candidates in the electoral law [which allows people with a certain minimum of signatures to run as candidates without a party, something that was in the 1987 constitution]. Because municipal elections are in 2008 and the national elections in 2010. If the conditions are there, we have decided also to create a feminist party in 2010. So we have spoken about this with others who want to build the left, for example Monica Baltodano and Luis Carrion. We can build a political feminist party which is mixed, and has a norm of parity, 50:50 men and women.

My position is that the next future left that exists will either be a feminist left, or there won't be a left. Either the left is feminist or it won't exist.

William Rodriguez is working with the Nicaraguan Social Movement. He also works with the Convergence of the Movements of the Peoples of the Americas, which links grassroots movements on the continent.

With regard to Herty's initiative, he believes it has some advantages and disadvantages:

First, it is a recently created organization, which makes it difficult to organize itself in order to compete with much more stable party institutions. In electoral terms this is a weakness. Secondly, the sympathizers and militants grouped around Herty have different ideologies which makes them very inconsistent. So we are going to see fluctuations in the Herty Alliance. Thirdly, the Alliance is participating in the electoral process with a ballot position which, in order to attract Sandinista supporters, results in their rejection on the part of other people. (The Christian Alternative left the Alliance in

March. It thought that running under the legal standing of the Movement to Renovate Sandinismo (MRS) alienated non-Sandinistas.)

I think that another weakness is that outside of Managua there is almost no organization, and people don't know him. He has a lot of weight in Managua but has not been able to transcend the work of the Mayor's office to reach other places.

I think that the campaign will be concentrated in urban areas. There the political team of Herty will play an important role. I will give you an example: Henry Ruiz, in spite of spending 15 years outside of politics, is a mythic figure the North, and is known as the guerilla fighter Modesto. It's this kind of thing that could get people to identify with the Herty Alliance.

Herty's manager, Victor Hugo Tinoco, is from Matagalpa. So I think that Herty will have to work with the MRS and with the working team of veteran Sandinista guerilla fighters to attract votes, especially in the North where the guerilla forces were concentrated. All of them attract votes because they are well known.

What are the strengths of Herty? According to what I know Herty is designing a program of government which is going to then be taken to the people for their input. This is a good strategy because it will allow him to reach people. He hasn't developed this program yet because his energy at the start went to fight against the pact. This is one of the gaps that still exists. Secondly, he proposes openness in the presence of which you can have a number of different currents. These include those who are against the pact and those who want to transform the Sandinista Front. This openness allows a diversity of people to come together. Among the different groups are some businessmen. They favor Herty because he has not taken a firm stand against business interests. For example, he doesn't condemn CAFTA; he accepts it. What he says is only that it was poorly negotiated. And CAFTA clearly benefits the business sector. That is why I don't support the candidacy of Herty.

I asked him about Herty's posture toward the U.S.

Herty has never said that he wants to oppose the foreign policy of the U. S. That is why the FSLN has taken advantage of this and said that Herty is Bush's candidate. He says there is no need to fight anyone, to confront anyone.

Then I brought up the issue of the collapse of the Washington Consensus in much of Latin America, and the anti-Americanism there and whether the countries of Central America are in a different situation than the countries further South.

Yes, they are in a weaker position because of the U.S. domination of the last 15 years.

On a final note, I told him I was surprised that some acquaintances and friends who are Sandinistas really respect Montealegre; it is because he is well educated and very capable. And I was surprised because he is on the right.

William explained: Herty and Montealegre have the same source, which is the rejection of the political pact. They have been able to create a new source of social pressure that is emerging from within the heart of the Sandinista Front and the PLC [the Liberals]. This social pressure presents itself as a force for transformation, above all to stop the consolidation of the institutional corruption that is this political pact.

Montealegre has been able to synthesize that feeling for change on the right. Herty has been able to synthesize that feeling for change on the left.

Carlos Pacheco is affiliated with the National Consumer Defense Network. He works on the issues of water privatization. While sharing some positions with the MRS, he doesn't agree that corporate-led globalization or CAFTA are inevitable, and that we simply need to adjust.

Once we accept that those processes are inevitable, we not only have lost the battle, we've lost the war. Because you are thinking you cannot reach the goal. Then what is the point of continuing to struggle?

I questioned him on the pros and cons of Herty's candidacy.

On the positive side, Herty has been very courageous in continuing his fight for the presidency. He has been courageous in confronting such as strong leader as Daniel Ortega. Also, Herty is not a confrontational person.

What is it that I don't like about Herty? I think he is a person who reacts very quickly, and his tongue works faster than his brain. Because at times he says things that are so far out of context that he then has to back off later. That is very dangerous for a politician. For example, Herty was on a TV program where Montealegre was present. It

was interesting that when asked what they thought about CAFTA, Herty said he thought it was fine; that in addition it had already been signed, so there was nothing more to do. Once again a fatalistic discourse which says that nothing can be done. And he does this to appease the business sector. That is a shame.

The small and medium business producers do not benefit, and he knows this very well. But what is happening? As a politician he doesn't want to fight with anyone, especially in an election year. The only one he wants to fight with is Daniel Ortega. In fact, Herty no longer criticizes the PLC [Liberals] any more.

I told Carlos about Williams' idea that Herty should exploit the reputation of the ex-guerillas on his team.

My opinion is that the only persons within Herty's coalition who still have some followers are Dora Maria Tellez, who is the coordinator of the MRS, and has only a modest organizational apparatus; the other person is Monica Baltodano who has been doing work at the grass roots level. I think that they should have been more critical about the positions of the candidate of that coalition. For example, I shared a lot of struggles around CAFTA with Monica.

Now what is happening with the other guerillas? They no longer can move anyone. Why? Because they are a bunch of political mummies arising out of their sarcophagi. Because they were no longer involved in political life, they had disappeared. Henry Ruiz was at home; Luis Carrion was out of the country or studying. Victor Hugo was never a grassroots leader. So they don't move and attract people. What has been pointed out, that the big weakness of Herty is the lack of an organizational apparatus, is true. How is his team trying to make up for their organizational weakness? Through the little structure that exists in the MRS.

I asked him about what Victor Hugo Tinoco wrote in the July edition of Envio. He said that the machinery of the Frente is strong, but a lot depends on consciousness. There are conditions now to change social consciousness.

It seems to me that the quote from Victor Hugo is from a political manual. It is true that consciousness is created little by little, but it also comes from carrying out grassroots work, and this hasn't been done by Herty's movement. But you have to recognize that Arnoldo [Aleman] and Daniel have done this. They have built the base.

They are caudillos, but they are caudillos who are concerned about the apparatus which keeps them in power and in control of their parties. Herty's team is not doing this work. Consciousness also comes from the fact that the population sees that political leaders are involved in the daily struggle of the population against the increase in the cost of energy, etc. A construction of consciousness requires ongoing work. And Herty's people are not doing this either.

A caudillo like Daniel says a lot even though he does very little, but at least he is holding babies, visiting neighborhoods, his photo is taken, he is seen in demonstrations. Herty doesn't do this.

Then we turned to Herty's attitude toward the U.S.

Now what Herty does not want to do is fight with the Bush administration. Above all, in an electoral year. Herty is never going to say that Bush is a murderer for having invaded Iraq. Daniel said that yesterday [March 29]. Herty is never going to say that Bush is a terrorist. Daniel said that yesterday. A number of heads of state have said the same thing.

We ended by talking about what I had interviewed him about last year — the social movements. Carlos thought that they were even weaker now.

When they stage a protest, typically the FSLN takes over. For example, there was a march against CAFTA, and people thought that only the social movements were going to participate in the march. Suddenly, the para-party [strongly linked to the party] organizations of the Frente showed up, and then Daniel Ortega appears and is the principal speaker! Daniel said that the Sandinista Front was not going to allow CAFTA to be approved. Two weeks later he cut a deal with the Liberals and the government to approve CAFTA. That really weakened the movement, because a whole campaign had been mounted, and in the end a decision was made in a maneuver between the government and the political parties.

William Grigsby is the Director of the radio station, La Primerisima. He is a member of the FSLN but, while not supporting Daniel, he is not part of the Sandinista Democratic Left which has joined the Herty Alliance 2006.

I don't think Herty's movement is on the left. I think he has some political positions which I share, above all some democratic issues, but I don't think Herty has an anti-imperialistic position. I don't think Herty has a nationalistic position either. For me those are two elements that are enough to keep me from joining that movement. Nevertheless, I believe that what was done to him and particularly to Victor Hugo Tinoco was a political atrocity [the fact that they expelled him from the FSLN], and in that I accompany Herty in his struggle to demand his democratic rights within the Sandinista Front..

Now my position was that we should form a tendency within the Sandinista Front, and repeat the experience of the 1970s, so that we could take on the Sandinista Front name, create our own leadership bodies, instead of throwing ourselves into the electoral market.

In fact, I don't believe in elections. I believe in social movements. To change the political situation people need to be protagonists. Elections are worthless if people do not have an awareness of the need for change.

I asked him if he thought the changes that the left or left center regimes of Chavez, Kirchner, Bachelet of Chile, and Lula's government in Brazil were brought about by grass roots movements?

Chavez has a big problem right now, and that is himself. After him? Kirchner has had to form an alliance with at least part of the social movements to be able to advance. Evo Morales, the president of Bolivia, is the fruit of the social movements. Probably the steps that Evo Morales will take will be much more profound than those of others. And Lula came to power by divorcing himself from the social movements, and he has remained there. He has made alliances with the bankers of São Paulo, with the industrialists, etc.

I asked him if he could tell me what the Democratic Left thinks that it brings to the Herty Alliance, since it is way to the left of Herty. Why did they join?

What prevailed was the interest in recovering democratic spaces in society, first of all, in order to dismantle all the results of the pact, which had taken over all the public institutions; to fight against corruption. So the Democratic Left put a priority on

democratic issues over ideological issues, with the idea that they eventually form a broader movement after the elections.

I think Nicaragua needs a revolution, that is to say all social structures need to be changed. For example, it is unacceptable that the bankers continue to be the privileged ones in the country. In order to be able to change that, a radical transformation of the structure needs to be done. I think that Nicaragua needs an agrarian reform, because the one the revolution did was dismantled by the market. Maybe the adjective I used before was poor, maybe they are not ideological issues, but socialist issues.

I queried him about Herty's failure to stand up to the United States, for example, over CAFTA.

I am in complete disagreement with him. I think that in the medium term CAFTA is going to be disastrous for Nicaragua. And Herty says it is not. But he has charisma, and the people remember what he did as Mayor of Managua and Minister of Tourism. There is a sector of the population that sees him as a good administrator.

I then asked William if the social movements in Nicaragua were as weak and fragmented as when he wrote about them in *Envío* in 2004 and 2005.

For example, since November 14 of last year we have had a doctors' strike going on, it is still going on now and the poor have nowhere to go [for health care]. But no one is mobilizing about this. It seems incredible to me that people are having their rights violated, and they don't organize or mobilize.

I don't think people even believe in themselves. That is the heart of the matter. I think that this apathy is the principal cause. For example, for the last three weeks Managua has been facing a serious shortage of water. People have been calling this radio station, all the radio stations, the TV, complaining about the fact that there is no water. A march was called for last week and from the neighborhoods which haven't had water for months now, which is a third of Managua, only three people showed up.

I think what is going to happen in Nicaragua is not going to be the fruit of consciousness, about the need to change, but rather the fruit of frustration, or something that overfills the water glass of patience. I think there is another factor here which is having a big influence on political apathy. People have sought out the churches. I think there are more churches than storefronts.

Finally, we turned to the topic of the resurgence of the left in Latin America.

I think that more than a left, what Latin America needs at this moment are nationalist projects. Because we are being absorbed by the United States in every sense of the word, not just at the economic level, but at the cultural level, the political level. We are being castrated. So I think we need nationalist projects, like Kirchner's in Argentina, which is not a leftist movement. Kirchner just renationalized the water company. He probably doesn't have his national project written up as such, but he is making progress in strengthening the potential that Argentina has, putting a priority on national production over multinational production. I am not interested in what ideology he might have, but in what way is he defending the country and then within the country how those sectors that receive less defend themselves. I think this is going to be the tendency of [President] Michele [Bachelet] in Chile now. And Michele is going to go much further than [previous president] Lagos did in making more profound social change. Chile has one of the highest rates of injustice in terms of income distribution, and I think Michele is going to go further in this. How I don't know.

I think that in Central America a medium term priority should be to form a federated republic. Recover the Central American identity. The only way we can preserve our identities is by uniting in Central America so as to be able to interact with the rest of the world.

I suggested that we in the North are optimistic and maybe too optimistic about what is happening in Latin America. There is excitement about Morales and Chavez, and so on. And we think there is potential for standing up to the United States.

Except for Bolivia, I don't see an activated social movement, and change doesn't come from above. From above you can improve health and education, as in Venezuela, yes, but after that, what? If you don't get people to organize, raise awareness, fight for their interests, that isn't going to go any further.

I mentioned that we have heard that recently there has been what we call participatory democracy in Venezuela, at the local level there are more movements in neighborhoods to improve things.

Yes, it is true, but only as long as there are resources. Besides Bolivia, there is an activated social movement in Costa Rica. Costa Rica paralyzed the country in the year 2000, and prevented the privatization of public services. There is no left there. Otton Solis, who nearly won the presidency, is not a leftist, he is a social democrat. But he has a sense of nation, and the people of the social movements plugged into him politically, but just for the defense of public services and the renegotiation of CAFTA. But there was a social movement that promoted Otton Solis, not the other way around.

I questioned him about the importance of ideology for social movements.

In the North you are always trying to categorize people, these are Marxist Leninists, those are moderates, and that is a mistake, because that doesn't correspond to the political reality of the people. If you ask those people from the social movements in Costa Rica if they are from the left, they will say no. Nevertheless, on the international level they would be categorized as populists or leftists, but that is not how it is. What I mean to say is that there are phenomena that are happening in Latin America which go beyond the traditional or orthodox categorizations.

Finally, this pithy comment from Alejandro Bendaña's e-mail from last winter:

Herty? For me still contradictory. On the one hand he brings in Monica Baltodano and some left Sandinistas into his coalition, but on the other he is all smiles with the imperial Under Secretary Zoellick during his visit to the country. My question—must Nicaraguans be forced to choose between pactismo and gringismo?

Thanks to Mark Lester for translating.