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FEATURED Q&A

Can Nicaragua's Opposition Unseat Daniel Ortega?



Two main opposition groups are joining forces in an effort to defeat President Daniel Ortega, who has been the country's president since 2007. // File Photo: Nicaraguan Government.

Q Nicaragua's two main opposition groups—the Civic Alliance for Justice and Democracy and Blue and White National Unity—announced Jan. 17 that they were forming an alliance ahead of next year's presidential and legislative elections.

How unified is Nicaragua's opposition? How much of a chance does the coalition have at defeating President Daniel Ortega and taking seats away from the ruling party in the National Assembly, which Ortega's Sandinista party overwhelmingly controls? To what extent will the election be free and fair?

A Carlos Fernando Chamorro, journalist and director of confidencial.com.ni and *Esta Semana*: "The creation of a national coalition to dislodge Ortega from power via elections and subsequently govern the country is the great political challenge facing the April rebellion in Nicaragua today in order to promote political change and dismantle the dictatorship. It is a great historical opportunity, as there is a new majority from the forces arising from the civic protests in 2018, grouped now around the Civic Alliance and National Unity. These two groupings represent the country's political, social and ideological plurality—university students, settlers, businessmen, peasants, civil society—and they share the strategic vision of forming a coalition with noncollaborative political parties, to add to the new forces of the Blue and White movement. The political deadline to form the coalition is Feb. 25. The power of civic pressure and mobilization to achieve electoral reform and the suspension of the police state will depend on

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TODAY'S NEWS

POLITICAL

Maduro Eyes Consular Services With Colombia

Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro said he is willing to work on restoring consular services with Colombia, an announcement that followed Venezuelan authorities' arrest of a Colombian fugitive ex-lawmaker.

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BUSINESS

Pemex Has Been Saved From Bankruptcy: López Obrador

Mexico has been able to stop the decline in the state oil company's production, said President Andrés Manuel López Obrador.

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ECONOMIC

Trump Signs Trade Deal With Mexico, Canada

U.S. President Donald Trump signed the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement, or USMCA, the trade accord that is to replace the North American Free Trade Agreement.

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Trump signed the USMCA on Wednesday. // Photo: White House.

ECONOMIC NEWS

Trump Signs USMCA Trade Deal With Mexico & Canada

U.S. President Donald Trump on Wednesday signed the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement, or USMCA, the revised trade treaty that is to replace the 26-year old North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA. The USMCA establishes new labor and environmental standards for the three countries and has other provisions including greater access for U.S. farmers to Canadian markets and requiring auto manufacturers to use higher portions of North American-made parts, The Washington Post reported. "Today we are finally ending the NAFTA nightmare and signing into law the brand-new U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement," Trump said in the signing ceremony at the White House," The New York Times reported. "For the first time in American history, we have replaced a disastrous trade deal that rewarded outsourcing with a truly fair and reciprocal trade deal that will keep jobs, wealth and growth right here in America." Trump said the USMCA will increase the U.S. gross domestic

product by 1.2 percent, a much higher number than most other estimates, The Washington Post reported. Last April, the U.S. International Trade Commission said in a report that the deal would expand the U.S. economy by 0.35 percent when it fully takes effect in six years. Mexico has already approved the trade accord, and Canada is expected to approve it soon. The first action of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's government on Monday following an extended recess was to introduce legislation to carry out the accord, which it calls the Canada-United States-Mexico Agreement.

POLITICAL NEWS

Maduro Eyes Consular Services With Colombia

Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro on Wednesday said he is willing to work with Colombia by restoring consular services amid a diplomatic standoff following the capture of a fugitive former Colombian lawmaker, the Associated Press reported. Venezuelan authorities this week detained Aída Merlano, an ex-leg-

is a bad example that Nicaragua must avoid. With repression, Ortega can only prolong his political agony; but if he manages to prevent a united opposition, he could even continue to 'rule from below.' "

A Christine Wade, professor of political science and international studies at Washington College in Chestertown, Md.:

"Nicaragua's opposition is unified in terms of a single goal: removing Ortega from power. Beyond that, the opposition is quite diverse. It must tap into this diversity in order to mount a successful campaign, energizing broad sectors of society beyond the middle class such as unions, students, peasant organizations and land rights groups. But

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NEWS BRIEFS

U.S. Sanctions Salvadoran Military Officials Over 1989 Massacre

The administration of U.S. President Donald Trump has banned from entering the country 13 current and former Salvadoran military officials for their part in the high-profile extrajudicial killings of eight people, including six Jesuit priests, more than 30 years ago, the State Department said Wednesday, United Press International reported. The six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter were killed on Nov. 16, 1989, as part of a major leftist rebel offensive during the Central American nation's civil war, during which the United States backed the rightist government with military and financial aid.

Chilean Congress OKs Tax Hikes for Rich, Lower Taxes for Elderly

Chilean lawmakers on Wednesday approved legislation that hikes taxes on the rich while reducing the burden on the elderly and small businesses, Reuters reported. The package is expected to raise Chile's total tax haul, which will help pay for costly measures demanded by protesters since demonstrations over inequality began in October, including a guaranteed minimum wage, a reform to the pension system and changes to the public-private health system.

More Policy Certainty Could Benefit Growth in Argentina: IMF Official

More certainty over public policies in Argentina could help boost growth and investment in the South American country, the International Monetary Fund's Western Hemisphere director said Wednesday, Reuters reported. "As new public policies are announced it will decrease uncertainty, which is very high in the Argentine economy," said Alejandro Werner.

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the organizational proposal and the fighting strategy on which they reach a consensus. Without credible electoral reform, with the participation of the OAS, it is inconceivable that Nicaragua will have free and competitive elections under the current regime. Ortega will never give in to electoral reform, if he is not subjected to the maximum political pressure—national and international—that puts him on the brink of crisis. The next step, if a coalition and the electoral reform are successful, will be the selection of candidates for public positions through participative and transparent mechanisms in order to define the leadership of a plebiscitarian democracy, rather than a dictatorship. The dispersion of the opposition in Bolivia, with four forces against Evo Morales' MAS,

islator who escaped prison last year during a visit to a dentist. She had been sentenced to 15 years in prison for buying votes during her run for Colombia's Senate in 2018. After the arrest, Colombian President Iván Duque asked Venezuela to extradite her to Colombia, but he asked opposition leader Juan Guaidó, whom Colombia and dozens of other countries recognize as the legitimate president of Venezuela. "Enough of such senselessness," Maduro said in a nationwide television broadcast, referring to Duque's move. "Put your feet on the ground, and let's be pragmatic. Iván Duque, you are making a serious mistake," he added. Maduro cut diplomatic ties with Colombia early last year after Duque backed Guaidó's bid to oust the Venezuelan president. While Guaidó holds significant international support, he does not have practical control over government institutions such as the police, which remain loyal to Maduro. Meanwhile, Duque's administration said Wednesday that it will allow hundreds of thousands of Venezuelan migrants to legalize their presence in Colombia through work permits in a bid to bring them into the legal economy, Reuters reported. Nearly 1.6 million Venezuelans now live in Colombia, a figure that the United Nations has said could reach 2.4 million by the end of this year.

BUSINESS NEWS

Mexico's Pemex Has Been Saved From Bankruptcy: AMLO

Mexican state oil company Pemex has been "saved from total bankruptcy," Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador said Wednesday during his morning news conference, El Universal reported. "It is important that the people know how we are lifting Pemex from bankruptcy, of how we are afloat after the neoliberal period bet on destroying a company that is all of ours," the president said. "It's good news that we have been able to stop the decline in production and that important increases have been made, and this is reflected in the financial sector's confidence, because bonds'

THE DIALOGUE CONTINUES

Is the United Nations Still Needed to Keep Peace in Colombia?

Q **Colombian President Iván Duque on Jan. 8 asked the United Nations to extend its peace verification mission in the country until the end of his term in 2022. The tasks of the mission include monitoring compliance with the government's 2016 peace accord with the FARC rebels. Also this month, the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights expressed alarm at the "staggering number" of social activists killed in Colombia in recent years. How well has the peace accord been implemented, and how important has the U.N. mission been to ensuring compliance? What has led to the high number of killings of social activists, and what should be done to stop the attacks? How well are Duque's government and the FARC adhering to the accord?**

A **Cynthia Arnson, director of the Latin American Program at the Woodrow Wilson Center:** "Colombia's peace agreement offered a roadmap for achieving, for the first time in Colombian history, a linkage between rural Colombia and urban areas where the majority of the population lives, achieving legal and administrative control of the country's entire territory and combating the illegal economies that developed and thrived in the absence of state presence. The main question is whether the basic achievement of legitimate territorial control—a precondition for both development and security—is advancing or losing ground. Practitioners as well as scholars have struggled to understand why the Colombian government was

interest rates are falling," he added. Octavio Romero, who heads Pemex and accompanied López Obrador in the news conference, said the company had reversed a decline in output, saying that it is expected to produce 1.75 million barrels per day by the end of January. He also

so slow to occupy the spaces vacated by a demobilizing FARC. Explanations range from the difficulty of Colombia's terrain to the hatred of the FARC among the country's armed forces. However, and beginning with the government of Juan Manuel Santos, the vacuum of power gave rise to violent competition among multiple illegal armed groups for control of territory, populations and the illegal economies that flourished in areas of FARC presence. This violence, particularly in border areas that are key trafficking corridors, has resulted in ongoing forced displacement, the relentless killing of social and community leaders and former combatants, and has sapped credibility from the process. The U.N. verification mission, responsible for the FARC's demobilization and transformation into a political actor, has weathered blistering government attacks on the transitional justice court, known as the JEP, critical to the FARC's transition to legality. Amid all of this, High Commissioner for Stabilization Emilio Archila has worked relentlessly to implement development projects in 170 targeted municipalities. He and Colombian and international partners say that 10 to 15 years are needed for projects to take hold, a time frame that may be too long, given the rapid pace of deterioration in many rural areas."

EDITOR'S NOTE: The comment above is a continuation of the Q&A published in the Jan. 24 issue of the Advisor.

said Pemex's debt went from 2.82 billion pesos (around \$150 million) in 2018 to 1.95 billion pesos last year, Economía Hoy reported. "We still don't know what ratings agencies will say," said López Obrador said, who last year disregarded Fitch's downgrade of Pemex's rating.

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if the opposition has any hopes of gaining seats, it must remain unified. The threshold in presidential elections in Nicaragua is low, and Ortega benefits from even the most minor fracturing. While unity is important, simply being anti-Ortega is not enough. This was certainly true in 2011. The opposition must run for something, offering a vision for the future and specific policy recommendations. This is where the opposition has failed in recent years, and it will be essential to overcome both voter apathy and skepticism about the electoral process. The opposition must also remember that Nicaraguans have needs beyond the current political crisis. How will they address those? The FSLN's dominance of the country's institutions and the regime's willingness to use violence against dissenters makes it difficult to guarantee conditions for free and fair elections. There are still restrictions on press freedom and freedom of assembly, as well as attacks against the opposition—all serious challenges to a successful opposition campaign. It's unlikely there will be substantive electoral reform before the elections, so the opposition will have to play the hand they're dealt. I do see opportunities, but the opposition has to be smart."

A **Mario Arana, president of Am-Cham Nicaragua and member of the negotiating team of the Civic Alliance:** "Nicaragua's opposition has initiated a process of forming a grand national coalition. The two organizations that have worked together most closely in the spirit of the rebellion of April 2018 agreed to invite an all-inclusive coalition in a gesture that departs from traditional politics. Even political parties with a discredited history because of their dealings with the Ortega regime can be part of the coalition if they decide to do so

and agree on a few simple proposals to be discussed. A proposal on a common view and a commitment beyond electoral politics, which emphasizes transformational reforms, is part of the agenda to be discussed. It includes an agreement to commit to restore freedoms, democracy, institutionality and respect for human rights. To agree on a code of ethics and to support a consensual electoral reform, in which all relevant political parties have in fact been working on for a

“The possibilities of a unified opposition are very good.”

— Mario Arana

while, along with the Civic Alliance and Blue and White National Unity, would also be part of the basic understanding. The regime's strategy will be to divide the opposition and to have a low voter turnout when elections are held. The opposition needs to do the opposite. All political parties or allies that have in one way or another joined forces with the Sandinista regime in the past will have to balance their long-term interests. They will have to decide whether to continue gravitating toward the meager concessions, limited power, twisted institutions and biases that the discredited Sandinistas (now in deep political crisis) could offer. Or they could bet on a future that promises the restoration of democracy, justice, freedom and equal access of opportunity to all. The contrast is so obvious that I have to conclude that the possibilities of a unified opposition are very good."

The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta at gkuleta@thedialogue.org.

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