

The 'not so cordial' church-state relations in Nicaragua

Blake Schmidt | May. 11, 2009



A man cleans a statue of Virgin Mary that was vandalized amid civil unrest late last year following the November 2008 mayoral elections. Church leaders suspect the statues, which appeared at intersections in the capital, were placed by the government in an attempt to calm post-electoral upheaval. The statues were later removed. (Photos by Blake Schmidt)

MANAGUA, NICARAGUA

Facing allegations from top Sandinista officials that they're trying to "destabilize" the Sandinista government, church leaders in Nicaragua have requested a meeting with President Daniel Ortega in an effort to salvage souring church-state relations.

The church's ties to the ruling Sandinista party are "not so cordial" these days, as Granada Bishop Bernard Hombach put it. After clergy called for a recount amid allegations the ruling Sandinista party rigged elections in November 2008, the Sandinista government responded with verbal attacks and by withholding funds for faith-based education.

"They're taking measures against the church so the church doesn't speak out publicly," Hombach said.

The German-born Hombach, 75, who came to Nicaragua at the height of the contra war in 1987, says relations with the Sandinista government aren't great but are still a whole lot better than they were during the '80s, when clergy were persecuted, jailed and expelled under the Sandinista government.

Ortega, who as president during the '80s accused church leaders of conspiring with contra rebels, made overtures to the Catholic church in seeking re-election in 2006. But the Sandinista leader's delicate alliance with the church quickly wore thin. An alarm sounded for church leaders this month when Attorney General Hernan Estrada, in an outburst of anger after he was attacked in the street, lashed out against clergy for allegedly "inciting violence" and "destabilizing" the Sandinista government.

Estrada's televised tirade was passionate but based on little evidence. The attorney general was waylaid by

attackers during his morning jog April 5.

Estrada's harangue was the latest in a series of confrontations between Sandinista officials and church leaders, who have become increasingly vocal against the Ortega government since civil unrest broke out following allegations of electoral fraud in late 2008.

"We can't sit with arms crossed as the country is bleeding," said Fr. Rolando Álvarez, spokesman for the archbishop's curia in Managua. Álvarez has emerged as one of the Sandinista government's most outspoken critics. He has denounced electoral fraud and the government's use of Catholic symbols and its destitute supporters for political ends.

The National Sandinista Liberation Front's relationship with the Catholic church has swung like a pendulum as the party has evolved from its roots as a clandestine guerrilla movement opposed to the despotic Somoza dynasty.

The church at first opposed the Sandinista movement and its guerrilla tactics, but it eventually supported the Marxist rebels on the eve of the 1979 Sandinista revolution that toppled U.S.-backed dictator Anastasio Somoza. Relations turned bitter after the Sandinistas took power and church leaders denounced the persecution of dissidents. The Sandinistas, outraged by the church's refusal to denounce CIA-sponsored contras, even tried starting up their own alternative revolutionary church, *la iglesia popular*, which never gained much support.

After falling from power and losing elections in 1996 and 2001, Ortega made overtures toward the church before launching his fourth presidential campaign in 2006. The former archbishop of Managua, Miguel Obando y Bravo, married Ortega and lifelong partner Rosario Murillo in a Catholic wedding, and Ortega took a position against abortion that led to a ban on therapeutic abortion days before the election.

Less than two years into his return to power, Ortega refused to invite international observers to mayoral elections in November, in which the Sandinistas claimed 105 of 146 mayorships. As fraud allegations surfaced, church and business leaders called for a recount with observers, but the Sandinistas refused.

The church has also decried the government's use of piety for political ends. Ortega, who now quotes the Bible in speeches, has decorated the country with ubiquitous billboards featuring his face next to the slogan "to comply with the people is to comply with God."

As the country exploded in post-electoral violence, Virgin Mary statues were placed at intersections throughout the capital, some festooned with Sandinista flags. Only recently did Sandinista-formed "prayer groups" withdraw from the capital's busiest intersections where they had convened to "pray against hate." Opposition leaders say the groups were using piety as a front to extend Ortega's control of the streets amid growing unrest.

"It's an abuse to use religious symbols in that way and to want to take advantage of people's religious sentiment to create an image for the government," Hombach said.



But Juan Arbaez, a 61-year-old shoe-shiner who participated in the prayer

groups, doesn't understand the church's critique of his public displays of faith. A former Sandinista soldier who slept on a piece of cardboard at an intersection in Managua for months during the campaign, Arbaez says the prayer campaign was apolitical.

"We're here voluntarily praying for peace in Nicaragua," he said. "Some people just close their eyes to good. They don't see the positive things the government is doing."

For Hombach, the Sandinista government's "ridiculous" use of piety for political gain are "visceral" affairs that dominate local media and cloud the real social problems plaguing Nicaragua.

Corruption is rife in the hemisphere's second-poorest country and discontent is on the rise. Under a power-sharing pact between Ortega and liberal party boss Arnoldo Alemán, the two leaders have filled Nicaragua's democratic institutions with party loyalists.

Alemán is an ex-president who was listed among the top 10 most corrupt leaders in history by Transparency International. In 2003 he was sentenced to 20 years in prison for stealing millions from public coffers, but he was released in January. Political opponents suspect Alemán's liberation was the result of a backroom deal with Ortega that will give the former Marxist rebel backing to change the constitution so he can seek re-election.

Analyst Maria Vigil, editor of the *Envio* magazine at the Universidad Centroamericana in Managua, says even large numbers of clergy have been drawn into Nicaragua's warped system. Corruption was rampant among the clergy during the Alemán years and is still around. Church leaders continue to receive "privileges" such as property, tax exemptions, subsidies and donations.

"The Episcopal Conference surprised the government with its denouncement of the serious irregularities in the [November 2008] elections," Vigil said in an e-mail. "But as the fraud is now being forgotten, so is that denouncement."

But even Hombach, who says Nicaragua's Congress is filled with "prostitutes wearing ties," doubts that Nicaragua is so forgetful. He said that justice will eventually be served.

"Nothing is merely forgotten among people. The social memory, the memory of a people is better than that of an individual. And in any moment there could be an explosion," he said.

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