

The 2008 Municipal Elections According to Nicaraguan Women: Nihilism, Hope, and Pragmatism



Women in line to vote in El Coyolito, photo courtesy of Kelly Williams

Teresa Cheng
University of Southern California
Major: Political Science
Academic Director: Aynn Setright
Project Advisor: Guillermo Pérez Leiva
Managua, Nicaragua
School of International Training
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Introduction

In just 24 hours after the 2008 Nicaraguan municipal elections, national newspapers announced that post-election violence between the two major competing parties had left dozens injured, as well as a 20-year-old election observer and an 8-year-old girl dead.¹ For some, the post-election violence revived haunting memories of the civil war of the 1980s, as the local electoral process was magnified onto a platform of national polarization and discontent.

The Nicaraguan municipal elections of 2008 marked the sixth round of contested elections that Nicaragua has ever witnessed in its brief democratic history. Even more groundbreaking was that the 2008 elections were only the second municipal elections to fall on a separate year from the presidential elections. The first independent municipal elections were held in 2004, the same year sweeping changes were made to the Electoral Law, which mandated that candidates must belong to a political party to be considered for the elections. It also mandated that each party undergo a rigorous examination process to qualify, and as a result, various parties were excluded from the 2004 elections. Four years later, the same consequences provoked national controversy, when two additional parties were excluded from the municipal elections.

According to the Nicaraguan feminist journal, *La Boletina*, this electoral reform law was a consequence of the government Pact, better known in Nicaragua as *el Pacto*, between the two major political forces in the Nicaraguan government: the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), the party responsible for organizing the national movement to overthrow the Somoza dictatorship in 1979; and the Liberal Constitutionalist Party (PLC), the neoliberal party that emerged from the 1990 UNO coalition. The Pacto was negotiated in 1999 between Daniel Ortega, the current president and perpetual FSLN presidential candidate, and Arnoldo Aleman,

¹ Potosme, Ramon. "Guerra en Las Calles." *El Nuevo Diario*, 10 Nov 2008.

the then incumbent president of the PLC, which had controlled the presidency from 1996 until 2006.

Although Ortega justified the Pacto with the rationale that the two parties must jointly confront “North American interventionism” to establish national stability, the agreement also consolidated power between the PLC and FSLN to effectively bolster bipartisanship in the Nicaraguan National Assembly. It also granted immunity to the two leaders for their implication in national scandals– Aleman for robbing the state of millions of dollars and Ortega for the alleged sexual abuse of his stepdaughter.² According to *La Boletina* in 2004, various parties could not “pass the [electoral] test and were thus left out of the game...only those parties that had the ‘good will’ of the two Pacto Parties could participate,” effectively diminishing political pluralism.³

The exclusion of the MRS and Conservative parties from the 2008 elections, along with the Supreme Electoral Council’s refusal to accredit international election observers besides those from Venezuela’s CEELA, significantly colored both the ambiance and results of 2008 municipal elections. These principal factors contributed to preemptive accusations of fraud before the elections had even commenced. Another major factor hovering over the controversial electoral scene was the reality of the municipal elections as a referendum of Ortega’s FSLN dominated national government. Although the municipal elections were intentionally scheduled three years from the next presidential elections, they were the first elections to fall under a FSLN dominated government since 1984, during the Civil War. As a result, they were far from autonomous from national party propaganda, and Daniel Ortega’s presence was visibly amplified on pink billboards throughout the country.

² Baltodano, Monica. “Nicaragua: Hacia Un Nuevo Pacto Aleman-Ortega.” *Rebellion Internacional*, 4 Dec 2003. [Online] <<http://www.rebellion.org/hemeroteca/>>

³ Puntos de Encuentro. “Mujeres y Las Elecciones Municipales.” *La Boletina*, Oct 2000:2.

On November 9, 3.8 millions Nicaraguans - nearly 40% of the population - assembled at the polls to vote for their respective mayors, vice-mayors, and councilors in 146 of 153 municipalities in the country.⁴ The municipal government is distinct from the national government in that it is responsible for regulating and administering projects and services to benefit local constituencies, including cultural and athletic activities, recreation, water, electricity, transportation, the natural environment, and other basic services.⁵ However, the public consciousness of these elections as a national referendum significantly reduced the importance of practical matters concerning infrastructure in the elections. Campaign messaging focused largely on antithetical party politics on the national level, placing national government policies and acts under scrutiny. Nicaraguan women have been placed in perhaps the most conflicted position as far as how they have both directly benefited and suffered from FSLN policies since 2006.

Widely publicized FSLN programs such as *Hambre Cero*, “Zero Hunger” and *Usura Cero*, “Zero Usury,” have primarily benefited urban and rural women by providing them with low interest micro loans and farm animals for self-sustainment. On the other hand, the FSLN-controlled government also penalized therapeutic abortion in a move to align itself with the Catholic and evangelical churches. More recently, in the month before the elections, Ortega accosted various civil society feminist organizations, accusing them of financial corruption in what has been considered by civil society actors a violation of freedom of expression against critics of his government.⁶ These contradictory actions of the government have seemingly fragmented what would constitute the “female voting block.”

⁴ Equipo Nítlápan-Envío. “Elecciones Municipales: Una Crisis Anunciada – Perdio Nicaragua.” *Revista Envío*, Nov. 2008: No. 320.

⁵ *Puntos de Encuentro* p.8

⁶ Guillen, Johnny Cajina. “CINCO: Es Una ‘Peligrosa Escalada de Persecucion’”. *La Prensa*, 5 Sept 2008.

Analysts had alleged that in 1990, Ortega lost to the UNO coalition because of the “women’s vote,” as they voted in favor of UNO candidate Violeta Barrio Chamorro’s campaign promise to end compulsory military service as well as establish national peace and reconciliation to end the civil war.⁷ In light of these conflicting factors, as well as the violent pre and post-election climate, I sought to specifically investigate women’s perspectives toward the municipal elections and to question whether the concept of “the female vote” still exists or is relevant in Nicaraguan society. I did not aim to solely probe women’s views toward the municipal elections as a measure of their current sentiments toward the current FSLN government, but rather their attitudes toward the electoral process in general, its utility and relevance in a political context colored with accusations of irregularities and fraud. In this unique context, I attempted to understand Nicaraguan women’s expectations of the political process and the government, and perhaps most importantly, their attitudes regarding the future of their country.

⁷ Equipo Envio. “Un Debate Aun Pendiente: El de La Mujer.” *Revista Envio*, Mayo 1991: No. 115.

Methodology

My research project centered around two major assignments: 1) Gathering information through official media channels regarding events surrounding the elections, and 2) Interviewing a diversity of women to gauge their responses to current events surrounding the elections. The first task was straightforward; I received the majority of my news from *El Nuevo Diario* and *La Prensa*, which I read daily. I also cross-referenced my information with the official FSLN paper, *19*, as the two major newspapers tend to have an anti-FSLN slant. For a qualitative analysis of the current electoral situation as well as the history of female participation in the electoral process, I consulted the *Revista Envio*, a critical journal of the University of Central America in Nicaragua, as well as the past semester's class notes from Dora Maria Téllez and Maria Teresa Blandón.

I considered the official election results to be those released by the Supreme Electoral Counsel (CSE), understanding the controversy surrounding the legitimacy of the posted results and their questionability. I also used the CSE as a reference to gauge women's official participation in the electoral process, by counting the number of female candidates listed for each participating party as well as the positions for which they were running.

The bulk of the data for the project stemmed from the 29 interviews I conducted throughout the Pacific Coast. To best gauge women's perspectives, I aimed to interview women from different sectors of the society, understanding that no matter how many interviews I conducted, the project still would not comprehensively represent the diversity of Nicaraguan women's perspectives toward the elections. Nonetheless, equipped with a month's time and limited resources, I focused on six groups of women: workers in the Managua Free Trade Zone (FTZ), merchants in Mercado Huembes and Mercado Oriental II, university professors, civil

society activists, *campesinas* from rural areas, and campaign activists from the PLC and FSLN. While conscious that I had omitted significant sectors of women, including those on the Atlantic coast, my time frame allowed me to only conduct interviews with the six aforementioned sectors.

The majority of my interviews were pre-scheduled and the subjects were briefed ahead of time about my project, so that I would receive responses with the maximum confidence, especially in a tense and sporadically violent election climate. Interviews with FTZ workers, merchants, civil society activists, and university professors were organized through both personal acquaintances as well as my advisor, Guillermo Perez Leiva, Coordinator of the Governance Commission of the *Coordinadora Civil*. I sought interviews with campaign activists from the PLC at their central campaign office in Managua, and FSLN campaign activists in La Colonia Maximo Jerez. For my interviews with *campesinas*, I stayed in the community of *Horno 2* in the municipality of San Ramón, since I had previously established contacts there from a previous excursion organized through the School of International Training.

Although I attempted to create a balanced distribution in my number of interviews from different sectors of society, there were time and scheduling constraints that limited my ability to create a balanced survey base. In the end, I obtained 5 interviews from civil society organizations – *La Red de Mujeres Contra La Violencia*, “The Women’s Network Against Violence,” (RMCV) *El Movimiento Autonomo de Mujeres*, “The Autonomous Women’s Movement,” (MAM) and *La Coordinadora Civil*, “The Civil Coordinator” (CC) - 7 campaign activists; 4 merchants; 4 university professors from the Polytechnic University of Nicaragua (UPOLI) and National University of Nicaragua (UNAN)’s campuses in Leon and Managua; 6 *campesinas*; and 2 FTZ workers. My interviews were conducted primarily in Managua and San Ramon, although I also interviewed activists and academics in Chinandega and Leon, two hotly contested municipalities.

All interviews were conducted in Spanish, with a fixed question guide that probed at the interviewee's voting history, their perspectives toward the pre-election and post-election climate, factors influencing their vote, opinions regarding the representation of women in the elections, and their faith in the electoral process for the future. The questions were left relatively open ended so as to not influence the interviewee's response; for example, instead of asking the interviewee to select the major electoral questions that influenced her vote from a predetermined list of options, I asked what the most important electoral questions were to her. I never inquired which political party they voted for, but more often than not, they would disclose that information to me voluntarily.

Afterward interviewing, I created an Excel spread sheet linking all of the interviewees with their primary electoral concerns- housing, employment, price of basic goods, national peace, etc. to visibly examine tendencies and differences between different sectors of women. The bulk of the interviews were conducted post-election, in order to best gauge women's reflections on the process after it had all occurred, although the still-contested election results made the interviews more of an ongoing commentary regarding the prolonged process rather than a reflection of a definite event.

I. Context of the 2008 Municipal Elections

Candidates

There were officially five political parties participating in the municipal elections: the FSLN, PLC-*Vamos Con Eduardo* Alliance, Nicaraguan Resistance Party (PRN), the National Liberal Alliance (ALN), and the Alternative for Change (AC). The elections put to vote the positions for mayor, vice mayor, and seven council members. However, the two frontrunner contenders for the 2008 elections in Managua, the hotly contested capital, were, not surprisingly, of the two *Pacto* parties: Eduardo Montealegre of the PLC Alliance, and Alexis Argüello of the FSLN.

Montealegre had previously run in the 2006 presidential elections as the anti-Pacto candidate with the National Liberal Alliance (ALN), the Liberal, anti-Pacto alternative to the PLC. Montealegre is a Harvard graduate and had an extensive career as a banker. In these elections, he ran on the platform, *Todos Contra Ortega*, “Everyone Against Ortega.” Some analysts attribute Ortega’s 2006 victory to the division of the Liberals between the ALN and PLC. As a campaign strategy, formerly ALN/Montealegre sympathizers joined forces with the PLC in these municipal elections to form the PLC-*Vamos Con Eduardo* Alliance, consolidating votes to defeat Ortega. Like Alemán, Montealegre was also indicted in corruption charges, in what Ortega branded “the theft of the century.”⁸ As treasury minister under n the former Bolaños – PLC government, he was accused of illegally issuing \$400 million in bank bailout bonds, known as CENIs, to banks in which he was a major stockholder.⁹

In contrast to the Western educated Montealegre, the FSLN candidate, Alexis Argüello, is a high school graduate and former national boxing champion. Referred to popularly as *El*

⁸ Envio Team. “The Ceni Conflict Rages On.” *Revista Envio*, May 2008: No. 322.

⁹ “Montealegre se justifica: ‘Cuando los CENIS, yo no estaba en el Gobierno.’” *El Nuevo Diario*, 7 Aug. 2006.

Campeón, “The Champion”, Argüello spent four years as deputy mayor under the previous FSLN mayor, Dionisio Marengo, but did not gain Marengo’s endorsement in his electoral campaign. During the FSLN Revolution, Argüello’s properties had been confiscated by the FSLN because of his links with the Somoza dictatorship. As a former opponent of the FSLN, he served as a testament to the FSLN government’s claim as “The Government of Reconciliation and National Unity.” Argüello’s candidacy gained grassroots popularity, but his capabilities and preparedness were heavily scrutinized, as he was known as the candidate of “few words” with a lack of a substantive plan for the most challenging municipality in Nicaragua.¹⁰

Although there were campaigns with the parties’ respective candidates in all 146 municipalities throughout Nicaragua, all eyes were on Managua, the political and economic stronghold of the country, where 40% of the country lives, and what *La Prensa* Newspaper characterized as the site of the *La Batalla Principal*, “The Principal Battle”.¹¹

Pre-Election Controversies

When the electoral campaigns officially kicked off on September 25, the pre-election climate was already tainted with allegations of fraud and hegemonic FSLN control. One of the primary roots from which various accusations stemmed was the alleged partisanship of the Supreme Electoral Council (CSE), the national and official facilitator of the election process. The CSE is composed of seven magistrates: 3 of the FSLN, 3 of the PLC, and Roberto Rivas, the Council President. Aside from postponing three municipal elections on the Caribbean Coast, one of their most heated decisions was the revocation of the legal status to compete for two anti-Pacto parties, the Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS) and the Conservative Party. While

¹⁰ Cordoba, Matilde. “La batalla por Managua.” *El Nuevo Diario*, 5 Nov 2008.

¹¹ “Managua: La Batalla Principal.” *La Prensa*, 16 Sept. 2008.

the Conservative Party has been long without political force, the MRS was founded in 1996 as the “democratic left,” anti – Pacto, Sandinista alternative to the FSLN, and after the PLC, the most challenging electoral contender to the FSLN. While the CSE cited the MRS’s failure to comply with legal requirements, MRS President Enrique Saenz disregarded the decision of Rivas as a fraudulent mechanism to exclude contesting parties in the elections.¹²

In protest of CSE’s decision, Managua’s ALN mayoral candidate, Efraím Payán, MRS advisor candidate Roger Árias, and former Sandinista commander and MRS directive member Dora María Téllez’s conducted a hunger strike in Managua. Dionisio Marengo, the then incumbent FSLN mayor, responded in solidarity; “The cause Dora María is struggling for is a just one. It is a very large error that they’re not letting the MRS run, one that will have a political cost for all of Nicaragua...They’re taking away freedom of participation and this will jeopardize everyone.”¹³ As an ultimate decision, the MRS made a plea to its base to vote against Ortega, for the first time aligning itself with the PLC. Thus, the pre-election climate had complicated itself with a web of convoluted and unexpected alliances and rivalries.

Furthermore, deputies from the National Assembly also demanded the investigation of propaganda campaigns run by the government’s Council of Citizens’ Power (CPC) to ensure that they were not illegally utilizing public funds for FSLN campaign purposes. Robert Courtney, the director of Ethics and Transparency, a Nicaraguan NGO that was also denied accreditation to observe the Nicaraguan elections, stated that the Ortega government has, more so than any previous government, illegally utilized state funds for FSLN propaganda - not only in the campaign season, but also invoking FSLN symbols in the inauguration of public work projects,

¹² Chavarria, Nicole. “Se Cancela Personeria Juridica del MRS y el PC.” *El Nuevo Diario*, 6 Nov 2008.

¹³ Envio Team. “Nicho Marengo.” *Revista Envio*, July 2008: No. 324.

official acts, and public speeches.¹⁴ Opponents protested the placement of FSLN flags and propaganda in public offices and buildings across the country in violation of the Electoral Law, including in Municipal Computer Centers where votes are processed.¹⁵

Aside from Ethics and Transparency, the CSE also denied the accreditation of international election observers for the first time since 1990, permitting only Venezuela's CEELA as well as partisan party observers in each polling place, the majority from the FSLN. Nonetheless, bishops from the Episcopal Conference of the Catholic Church gave Ethics and Transparency its blessing to participate in the electoral process, and Ethics and Transparency announced that they would still send 30,000 trained election observers, accredited or not accredited by the CSE, to the polling places on November 9.

Three months before the election, the FSLN had also occupied all the nine major traffic circles of Managua with *rezadores*, praying party supporters, in a campaign they coined "Prayer Against Hate;" its primary message: "Love is Stronger than Hate." The campaign was directed at critics of Daniel Ortega, specifically those in the mass media and independent feminist civil society organizations. Civil society organizations claim that the occupation of the capital's rotundas was not only a campaign messaging strategy, but also a mechanism to prevent civil congregations in the rotundas to prevent protest against the government and the questionable nature of the pre-election process.¹⁶

Critical civil society organizations also felt the heat from Ortega in an even more direct manner. Two months before the election, he sent party officials to illegally inspect the offices of the MAM, Oxfam, and CINCO, citing accusations of money laundering. He also targeted feminist organizations including *El Grupo de Mujeres Venancia* and The Network of Municipal

¹⁴ Envio Team. "A New High-Water Mark in State-Party Confusion." *Revista Envio*, Aug 2008: No. 325.

¹⁵ "Sigue Conflicto Por Cedulas." *La Prensa*, 8 Nov 2008.

¹⁶ Galeana, Luis. "Todo va a Secretaria." *El Nuevo Diario*, 29 Oct 2008.

Women of Matagalpa, branding them “agents of imperialism” and “Trojan Horses.” While Ortega maintained that he was not against civil society altogether and later convened a meeting with NGO leaders to express his gratitude to the role of civil society in Nicaragua, targeted organizations asserted that it was an insincere act of electoral strategy.¹⁷

In just weeks just before the elections, widespread tension was augmented as potential voters faced complications in renewing and receiving their official identification cards necessary to cast their vote, from their local CSE offices. Complainants cited irregularities in the distribution of IDs, noting that FSLN sympathizers were receiving their identification in a timely manner whereas those who were identified as PLC or of other parties did not.¹⁸

Campaign Messaging, Platforms, and Propaganda

Even with the omnipresence of national party politics in the campaigns leading up to the municipal elections, Montealegre and Argüello still proposed practical municipal platforms.

Montealegre stressed increased employment and foreign investment above all, especially in the context of closing factories in free trade zones since 2006, which have left millions of workers, predominantly female, unemployed. He also offered reinsertion programs for gang related youth, reconstruction of streets and a reform of the trash collection system with private-public partnerships, an improvement of the water system and maintenance of markets, modernization of the transportation system, the construction of a daycare network for working single mothers, and increased coordination with the National Police.¹⁹

¹⁷ Coordonadora Civil. “Presidente Ortega reconoció trabajo y entrega de las ONGes en beneficio de la ciudadanía, pero...” 31 Oct 2008. [Online] <<http://www.ccer.org.ni/noticias?idnoticia=577>>

¹⁸ Gonzalez, Jose Luis. “Tension Por Cedula.” *El Nuevo Diario*, 11 Apr. 2008.

¹⁹ “Plataforma de Gobierno Municipal: 2009 – 2012”, Alianza PLC.

Montealegre's billboards were decorated with the campaign slogans, *Todos Vamos Con Eduardo*, "We're All With Eduardo," and *Todos Contra Ortega*, "Everyone Against Ortega," next to a photo of Montealegre, a light skinned man, hugging a dark skinned young woman. His website features flashing photos of himself hugging young children and mothers, all female supporters. His campaign slogans were highlighted with omnipotent warnings of "dictatorship," "authoritarianism", and the need for change. The principal campaign message was articulated as "The choice between dictatorship and democracy."²⁰

On the FSLN side, Argüello proposed to decentralize municipal control in the various districts, focus on reforestation and natural environment projects, maintain the lake to prevent flooding, increase regulation and oversight on the transportation system and markets, reform the trash system, construct housing, resolve land title issues, and coordinate with the central government.²¹ On a more visible level, under the directive of first lady Rosario Murillo in 2004, the FSLN transformed its red and black color scheme, reminiscent of its militant revolutionary days, to fluorescent shades of pink, yellow, and blue.

In the FSLN electoral campaign, the feminine colors were plastered on billboards, buses, and buildings, publicizing the FSLN's national accomplishments: *Calles Para el Pueblo! 1062 Cuadras a Nivel Nacional*, "Streets for the People, 1062 blocks nationwide!" in addition to "Housing for the People," "Kitchens for the People," and other government infrastructure projects. There was a clear presence of class and religious rhetoric in FSLN propaganda, with colossal billboards depicting Ortega with his fist in the air next to the message, *Arriba, Los Pobres del Mundo*, "Rise Up, Poor of the World," and other billboards broadcasting the message,

²⁰ Video [Online] <<http://www.vamosconeduardo.org>>

²¹ "Managua: La Batalla Principal."

Cumplir Con el Pueblo es Cumplir Con Dios, “To Comply with the People is to Comply with God.”

Accompanying partisan propaganda and campaign slogans was a proliferation of banners and graffiti dispersed throughout Managua, urging voters to “Vote Null” or “Vote Against the Pacto.” Negating the ideological rhetoric of the PLC and the class rhetoric of the FSLN, independent artists and political organizations erected messages advising, *Voto Castigo Para Ortega & Aleman*, “Vote to Punish Ortega and Aleman,” “Vote Null,” and “No to the Pacto”

Female Participation

Women’s participation in the municipal elections manifested itself in diverse manners- as voters, conscious non-voters, political candidates, campaign activists, poll workers, and outspoken critics of the electoral process. The FSLN’s 2006 campaign platform included a promise to delegate 50% of public posts to women, and in the 2008 elections, the FSLN committed to allocate mayoral and vice-mayoral candidacies in half of the participating 146 municipalities to women.²² Furthermore, 61% of FSLN candidates for councilors were female.²³ In Managua, the candidacy for vice-mayor was Daysi Torres, and her campaign propaganda pandered to the familial interests of women voters, stating, in a sea of bright pink next to her maternal smile, “Daysi, for your family!”

On the sidelines, women also played significant roles in the political campaigns for the PLC and FSLN. In the case of the FSLN, women organized their barrios within and outside of the CPC structure. In La Maximo Jerez, for example, 3 out of 4 of the CPC administrators are

²² “Mitad de candidatos FSLN seran mujeres.” *Radio La Primerisima*. 29 Feb 2008. [Online] < <http://www.radiolaprimerisima.com/noticias/general/25738>>

²³ “Elecciones del Poder Ciudadano!” *Multinoticias*. 29 Mar 2008. [Online] < http://www.multinoticias.tv/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=230&Itemid=18>

women, and the Community Center transformed into the overtly partisan Campaign Center for the FSLN for the elections.²⁴ At the Central Campaign Center for the PLC, women and men mounted caravans to distribute materials and embark on door knocking visits.

Although not a candidate but nonetheless one of the most recognized female political figures in the country, Rosario Murillo, the first lady and also the National Director of Communications, maintained an ubiquitous presence throughout the electoral season. Coined by FSLN activists as a positive example of female leadership, she was also particularly vocal in her scathing remarks toward feminist civil society organizations critical of Ortega, notably RMCV and MAM, which is aligned with the MRS party. On August 27, about two months prior to the election, she articulated harsh and unambiguous remarks that corresponded with controversial acts of the Ortega government, who had been harassing civil society organizations and summoning FSLN sympathizers daily to publicly “pray against the hate” of such critics.

In response to the assertions of feminist civil society organizations about Ortega’s authoritarianism, Murillo issued a public speech titled, “The ‘Feminist’ Connection and The Low-Intensity War,” stating:

*“False feminism serves the neo-colonization model; it lives in perfect symphony with imperialist designs. It has a key role in the strategy to wear down Revolutionary Projects. In the language of its brainiest analysts, this is called ‘struggles for freedom and democracy,’ ‘struggles against dictatorships,’ or white marches... This is nothing new to us. We have seen it, suffered it and beaten it before; it is called counterrevolution”.*²⁵

Out of this nationally spotlighted conflict arose *El Movimiento por la Dignidad y Derechos de las Mujeres Blanca Arauz*, “The Blanca Arauz Movement for the Dignity and Rights of Women,” created in direct opposition to MAM and in support of first lady Rosario

²⁴ Interview with Hilda Alegria Vega, 8 Nov 2008.

²⁵ Murillo, Rosario. “La Conexión Feminista y Las Guerras de Baja Intensidad.” *Radio La Primerísima*, 27 Aug 2008.

Murillo. Regarding their conception, leaders of the organizations claimed, “This is a true movement to represent Nicaraguan women, as we do not feel represented by other groups of feminist women” such as those of MAM, whom they identified as “the extreme right.”²⁶

Despite these various obstacles, nonpartisan civil society feminist organizations maintained their critical stances in a troubling pre-election climate. However, their mobilization in promoting the female vote had dwindled since the 2006 presidential elections. In 2006, for example, the RMCV publicly proclaimed, “For years, we have been fighting for the recognition of women’s rights to achieve the exercise of full citizenship, which has been impeded by a macho, exclusive, authoritarian, discriminatory, oppressive, and dictatorial society.” The organization put forward electoral platform demands and called on “all women to exercise their citizenship by voting.”²⁷ In 2008, although still critical of the government and challenging serious criminal accusations brought against their leaders by Ortega, the organization itself did not release any public statement regarding the elections.

Furthermore, the feminist magazine *La Boletín* published comprehensive election guides for previous elections, including both the 2004 municipal and 2006 presidential elections. However, in these municipal elections, they produced comparatively little literature. One of two related articles highlighted female perspectives of an ideal candidate, while the latter solely lamented the closing of democratic spaces in the election process, due to what they considered anti-democratic judgments of the CSE.²⁸ The reasons for civil society organizations’ reduction in direct commentary regarding the elections unclear, whether it may be attributed to a lack of resources or diminished faith in the power of the vote in these elections.

²⁶ Pastran, Informe. “Nace El Movimiento por La Dignidad y Derechos de Mujer ‘Blanca Arauz..’” *Multinoticias*, 23 Sep 2008. [Online]

< http://www.multinoticias.tv/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1410&Itemid=18>

²⁷ Puntos de Encuentro. “Posicionamiento Político ante el Proceso Electoral.” *La Boletín*, Oct. 2006: No. 66.

²⁸ Puntos de Encuentro. “En Nuestra Opinion.” *La Boletín*, Oct 2008: No. 72.

Pre-Election Violence

The national climate was further tainted by public acts of physical violence in the days leading up to November 9, intensifying the polarization of the country and exacerbating already inflated claims about a retrocession to the days of the Somoza dictatorship. Both the PLC and FSLN sides condemned the other for instigating such aggression. The first major violent act took place on September 20 in Leon, a historically FSLN stronghold city. The MRS had planned a peaceful march to protest their party's exclusion from the municipal elections. Before they had entered the city, they were obstructed by members of the FSLN directed CPCs, who attacked with rocks and sticks and burned the car of MRS President Enrique Saenz.²⁹

This incident was accompanied by various isolated occurrences between FSLN and PLC Alliance sympathizers, scattered throughout the country but concentrated in Managua during the months leading up to the elections. Archbishop Leopoldo Brenes of the Catholic Church condemned the violence and urged intimidated and timid voters to still exercise their vote, while Police Chief Aminta Garantiza assured that the National Police was prepared to "preserve order" with more than 10,000 police officials posted on election day.³⁰

Factors at Stake

In the 2004 municipal elections, the FSLN won 87 mayoral seats across the country. In the 2008 elections, they aspired to gain at least 100, above all Managua. According to the journalism team of *La Revista Envio*, a monthly political publication of the University of Central America, the FSLN could not afford to lose Managua. If they lost, the FSLN would have to endure three more years with an adverse Managua mayor who would inaugurate new public

²⁹ Alvarez, Leonor. "Marcha en Leon se hara." *El Nuevo Diario*, 23 Sep 2008.

³⁰ Aleman, Luis. "Aminita Garantiza con un Gran Despliegue Policial," *El Nuevo Diario*, 8 Nov 2008.

work projects and issue critical declarations about the fate of the country under Ortega. For Montealegre, a defeat would mean the end of his political career, losing to a candidate as “ill prepared” as Alexis Argüello as well as his best opportunity to challenge the Pacto-Liberal leadership of Arnoldo Alemán.³¹

As a virtual referendum of the FSLN government, critics of the government perceived that a FSLN victory would signal for Ortega a “green light to continue advancing down the authoritarian road, with members of the PLC, the pro- Alemán Liberals, toward approving constitutional reforms” that would bolster the Alemán -Ortega Pacto. These constitutional reforms would include transforming the political system to a parliamentary system, allowing for the reelection of Daniel Ortega, and the installation of a Constituent Assembly that would prolong his presidential term.³² In short, Ortega’s critics framed these elections as a potential means to halt the dictatorial project of Daniel Ortega and the FSLN. Ortega framed the elections as a means of vindicating his government’s two years in the presidency, through a popular vote against what he claimed was the oligarchy’s imperialist campaign to destabilize his government and the voice of the poor.

A National Survey sponsored by the University of Central America predicted that the PLC would claim victory in Managua, with 50% to 40% of the vote in favor of the PLC Alliance. The bulk of this victory would be attributed to the female vote, which was predicted at 53% to 39% in favor of Montealegre, whereas the male vote would be split 49% to 42%, also in favor of the Montealegre. There was also a one percent advantage of 4% in the intention amongst women to vote null to express their lack of confidence in any participating party.³³ The highly

³¹ Equipo Nítlápan-Envío. “Elecciones Municipales: Una Crisis Anunciada,” p. 11

³² Equipo Nítlápan-Envío. “Las Reglas del Juego.” *Revista Envío*, Oct 2008: No. 319.

³³ Foro Electoral. “Encuesta Nacional: Intencion de Voto en Las Cabeceras Departamentales en Occasion de Las Elecciones Municipales,” Oct 2008. [Online] < http://uca.edu.ni/swf/Encuesta_Nacional.swf>

disputed election results, however, would prove to complicate the goals of all parties involved in the electoral process, including the voice of the population.

II. Day of the Elections: “*La Fiesta Cívica*”

The day of the elections developed unlike what many had expected: relatively tranquil. The major newspapers released headlines throughout the day expressing calm in various municipalities: “Polls Close with Calm in Matagalpa,” “Calm in Managua,” “Electoral Process in Jinotega advances tranquilly”³⁴ However, irregularities at various polling places also raised tension and suspicions of fraud once again: Polls in selected neighborhoods closed early, access was limited to non-PLC partisan observers, CPC militants guarded various polling places, and long time residents of specific communities found their names omitted from the electoral roll permitting them to vote. Before the CSE had begun to announce the elections at 11 pm, FSLN sympathizers had already took to the streets to celebrate.

However, the FSLN were not the only ones to announce preemptive victory. The CSE’s preliminary results alleged that the FSLN had won in more than 90 municipalities, including Managua. The PLC claimed victory in 50, and the ALN 3. However, the PLC Alliance refused to recognize the CSE’s results as legitimate, citing a “grand intention of fraud,” while the FSLN also denounced their claims as a “mediated operation” to destabilize the government.³⁵ Montealegre hosted an opposing press conference declaring victory in Managua. With copies of 40% of the results of all polling places in Managua, he announced that his alliance had won more than half of the votes.

“In the case of Managua,” he proclaimed, “the data presented by the CSE is fixed and partial. The data released by the national Computing Center was only that in which the majority of the vote went to the FSLN, and the data showing neighborhoods in which the PLC won was

³⁴ Lopez, Vladimir. “Una Campana Electoral ‘Demasiado’ Tranquila.” *El Nuevo Diario*, 9 Nov 2008.

³⁵ Equipo Nítlápán-Envío. “Elecciones Municipales: Una Crisis Anunciada – Perdió Nicaragua.” p.11.

hidden.”³⁶ Meanwhile, the watchdog organization Ethics and Transparency announced irregularities in more than 32% of polling stations nationwide.³⁷ It was clear that the electoral process itself had not resolved the national question that had been lingering over the country for months, and the weeks following the election would evolve into an even more heated battleground between pro and anti-Ortega factions.

³⁶ Canales, Gisella E. “Burdo y Vergonzoso.” *La Prensa*, 10 Nov 2008.

³⁷ Equipo Nítlápan-Envío. “Elecciones Municipales: Una Crisis Anunciada – Perdió Nicaragua.” p. 9.

III. After the Elections

In the days after the election, Montealegre officially denounced the electoral process as fraudulent and demanded a national recount. Violence once again swept the capital as PLC and FSLN supporters clashed over the highly contested election results. There was attempted arson of the PLC Alliance Campaign House and Montealegre supporters maintained a constant presence outside of the CSE headquarters in protest. Four were injured, including an eight-year-old girl, a pro-FSLN journalist was dragged out of his vehicle and severely beaten, and FSLN militants blockaded marches organized by the PLC Alliance in protest of fraud. Amidst the national disorder in the days immediately following the election, President Daniel Ortega was nowhere to be found, abstaining from issuing any official statement. The CSE, however, blamed the press and the leadership of the PLC Alliance for provoking national discontent and violence.

The Episcopal Conference of the Catholic Church, which had been aligned with the FSLN since Ortega's victory in 2006, made an unusual gesture in an effort to maintain national peace. The same actors who had negotiated the penalization of therapeutic abortion with the FSLN challenged the CSE by proposing a recount of the votes nationwide, putting forward an "a urgent call to the members of the CSE to act with honesty, transparency, and impartiality for their personal dignity and to respect the sacred vote that our people consciously made in the polls."³⁸ Emmett Lang, vice-president of the CSE and member of the FSLN, irately responded by denigrating the Church's disqualification of the elections as a "mortal sin."³⁹

Three days after the elections, the CSE agreed to a recount – however, not nationwide. Despite pleas from the Church, the PLC Alliance, and other oppositional parties, the CSE also

³⁸ Equipo Nítlápan-Envío. "Elecciones Municipales: Una Crisis Anunciada – Perdió Nicaragua." p.10

³⁹ Equipo Nítlápan-Envío. "Elecciones Municipales: Una Crisis Anunciada – Perdió Nicaragua." p.11

refused to invite international observers into the recount process. Their recount reaffirmed the victory of the FSLN, and the PLC Alliance sustained their refusal to recognize the credibility of the CSE's election results.

The Organization of American States (OEA), European Union, United States government, and other international actors also expressed doubts about the legitimacy of the elections and recount process, from questionable actions of the CSE prior to election day to the discovery of ballots marked in favor of the PLC found burned in trash dumps in Leon. Less than a month after the elections, the Millennium Goal Program of the United States moved to revoke \$175 million in foreign aid to Nicaragua in response to the mishandling of the elections.⁴⁰ This blow augmented the 2 million euros that the government of Finland had also suspended days before the elections in protest of the government's harassment of civil society organizations.⁴¹

Weeks after, normally non-partisan events became politicized and amplified as stages of national dispute on the post-election scene, including the Women's March Against Violence on November 25. When the RMCV took to the streets to conduct their annual march against domestic violence, they were obstructed by a pro-FSLN women's organization, AMNLAE, The "Luisa Amanda Espinoza" Women's Association.⁴² In the periods leading up to and following the elections, it was clear that women's organizations were deeply affected by electoral tension.

⁴⁰ Salmeron, Luis Nunez. "EE.UU Congela Cuenta Reto del Milenio." *La Prensa*, 26 Nov 2008.

⁴¹ Arroliga, Lourdes. "Finlandia Corta Ayuda." *El Nuevo Diario*, 3 Nov 2008.

⁴² Lara, Rafael. "Mujeres orteguistas y CPC impidieron marcha de feministas." *El Nuevo Diario*, 25 Nov 2008.

IV. What Influenced the Women's Vote?

Every one of the 29 women I interviewed affirmed that these elections were different in comparison to the all the previous elections in which they had voted, which ranged, for some, from the puppet elections held during the Somoza dictatorship. The 2008 election climate, in their terms, was more heated, tense, non-transparent; there was more propaganda from the national government, violence, and general intolerance. The number of those who had voted in confidence of a candidate matched the number of those who felt they had voted against a candidate, and more than half believed that there was election fraud.

El Voto en Contra, The "Vote Against"

"I did not vote for the PLC because I support them ideologically. I am Sandinista, but I voted for a balance of power ...I wasn't as enthusiastic as I have been in previous elections...I didn't feel good this time around; my position wasn't clean," said Miriam Patricia Guerrero, a former member of the Sandinista Youth and a sociology professor at the National University of Nicaragua (UNAN) in Leon.⁴³

Guerrero's vote - the *contra* vote- or the vote *against* instead of in favor of a candidate, was not a rare explanation that I encountered during my research. The *contra* vote denoted, more specifically, the vote against the FSLN and never, in my research, against the PLC. Although banners erected by the "Movement for the Rescue of *Sandinismo*" throughout the city had urged voters to cast their ballots against the two Pacto Parties, the women I encountered had instead placed their *contra* vote in favor of the party that they believed held the greatest chance to defeat the FSLN; they voted pragmatically for the other Pacto party, the PLC. I did not encounter any woman who voted null nor in favor of the three marginalized parties on the ballot.

⁴³ Interview with Miriam Patricia Guerrero, 15 Nov 2008.

However, those who did vote *contra* had not always had the tendency to cast an “against” vote in previous elections; their history of voting had not always been negative. Some lamented the exclusion of the MRS party as the reason for why they ultimately voted as they did, as they voted “in favor” of the MRS in 2006. All of the women pertaining to civil society organizations and workers of the FTZ either did or said they would have (the two who abstained) cast a *contra* vote. 2 out of 4 of the merchants I interviewed, 2 out of 4 of the professors, and only 1 out of 6 of the campesinas also considered their vote to be a vote against the FSLN rather than ideologically for the PLC. Thus, the *contra* vote was most prevalent amongst civil society and FTZ workers and least prevalent amongst rural women.

The low occurrence of the *contra* vote with campesinas may be attributed more to the specific political context where I conducted my interviews. In my six interviews with rural women in the municipality of San Ramón, they had all cited either perceived merits or failures of their *local* governments more so than women I had interviewed from other sectors. Therefore, I perceive that they voted more with a consciousness of local, rather than national issues. Since the 1979 triumph, San Ramón has never seen a PLC mayor, and those voting for the PLC still maintained hope in the PLC as a positive alternative.

Conversely, all three civil society organizations I visited – The Women’s Network Against Violence (RMCV), Autonomous Women’s Movement (MAM), and the Coordonadora Civil (CC)– have long maintained anti-Pacto stances. 4 of the 5 civil society women I interviewed were from the CC and the RMCV, two organizations that have proclaimed perpetual non-partisanship. The last was from MAM, which is aligned with the MRS, the party excluded from participating in the elections. Therefore, all five women from civil society organizations voted *contra*, excluding one who consciously did not vote.

With the FTZ workers, one considered her vote *contra* despite the fact that her family has always expressed faith in the PLC, and the other also consciously abstained from voting in protest of the two parties, although she did admit that she regretted her decision and would have voted for the PLC against the FSLN. These strong convictions and attitudes against the two parties may be attributed to the fact that FTZ workers find themselves in between a rock and a half place. They suffer considerably from working long, tedious hours under oftentimes abusive private employers that violate labor laws, conditions which are the consequence of neoliberal economic reforms of the PLC. However, they suffer even more when private companies cut and run, leaving millions of workers unemployed, a consequence of the economic crisis, which they perceived to be poorly managed by the FSLN. Thus, workers in the FTZ do not consider that they have benefited from either party, but rather suffered less under one rather than other. “Neither party offers us anything,” Heidi Carolina Velazquez, an 18-year year old worker told me. “One offers war and the other is neoliberal.”⁴⁴

Not surprisingly, the FSLN activists all voted in favor of their party, whereas all four of the PLC Alliance activists considered their vote to be both a “for” and “against” vote. This can be attributed to the fact that not all the women working within the *Vamos con Eduardo* campaign identified with the PLC, but were instead part of the larger Liberal strategy to defeat Ortega. In my first interview with former municipal advisor Marcia Sobelvarro, she reaffirmed that she was not organizing with the PLC, but with the PLC Alliance/*Vamos Con Eduardo* campaign.⁴⁵ The prevalence of the *contra* vote in is evidence of the failure of these municipal elections to serve as an effective tool through which women in these elections felt they could be rightfully represented.

⁴⁴ Interview with Heidi Carolina Velazquez, 28 Nov 2008.

⁴⁵ Interview with Marcia Sobalvarro, 5 Nov 2008.

History, Memories, and Family

Virginia Meneses Mendoza of RMCV affirmed, “Before, women had the attitude of, ‘I’m going to vote with my husband, because he will buy something for me’. Now the attitude is one more of, ‘I have the right to vote, I am going to vote for myself.’”⁴⁶ However, more than 1/3 of women interviewed stated that they voted in line with how their family has traditionally voted. While Mendoza’s claim may stand true in some sectors, all 3 FSLN activists, 2 out of the 4 merchants, and all 6 campesinas stated that they voted according with the rest of their families.

While 11 cited their family’s vote as a direct influence on their electoral choices, 17 – more than half - cited their family’s history during the revolutionary and civil wars as having an influence on their vote, either against the FSLN, for the FSLN, or for the PLC Alliance. 16 of the 17 were not of the sectors of academia or civil society; instead, nearly all were of the rural zones, activists, and merchants. They cited both benefits their family members had received under the FSLN revolutionary government as well as painful stories of FSLN military service and their involvement during the anti-Somoza struggle.

Vilma de Jesus Saenz Zarate, an older PLC activist from El Viejo, Chinandega, specifically remembered the days when the 2008 FSLN mayoral candidate for El Viejo, Asunción Alcides Moradel, took away young men from her neighborhood for the government’s compulsory military service, of which her own sons were casualties.⁴⁷ *Campesina* Yelba Garcia Granada also affirmed, “We don’t want to return to the 1980’s.”⁴⁸

Conversely, Ana Julia Gonzalez Venga, a longtime and continuing FSLN supporter and *campesina*, referenced the days during the anti-Somoza struggle when she received death threats

⁴⁶ Interview with Virginia Meneses Mendoza, 14 Nov 2008.

⁴⁷ Interview with Vilma de Jesus Saenz Zarate, 10 Nov 2008.

⁴⁸ Interview with Yelba Garcia Granada, 19 Nov 2008.

from the National Guard for once harboring FSLN guerilla Victor “El Viejo” Tirado Lopez in her own home, now ironically an outspoken Ortega critic.

Both pro and anti- FSLN women of civil society and academia ceded to participating in the Sandinista Youth Movement in the 1980’s. However, none cited the history of the war as being a factor in their vote, resorting instead to primarily contemporary abuses of the FSLN rather than those of the 1980’s.

Nonetheless, it is clear that the resurgence of the FSLN in the national government has revived memories of the 1980’s, when they last controlled the presidency. Although those from both the anti and pro-Ortega factions would argue that the FSLN has strayed far from what it once was in the 1980’s, it is evident that the party’s history became significantly relevant and was propelled to the electoral scene once again in the 2008 municipal elections. All but 1 woman believed that the political parties were more relevant than the candidates that represented them in these local elections.

Democracy

Although the majority of women I interviewed cited democracy as one of the key factors that affected their vote in these elections, many did not harbor the same concept of democracy as that purported by the PLC Alliance campaign. Unlike Montealegre’s campaign message that declared a vote for him as a vote for democracy and against the dictatorship, nearly a third of the women I interviewed asserted that they felt as if there should have been more options available. This assertion crossed party lines and different sectors. Those who lamented the lack of options also criticized the Pacto and other political alliances as means of diminishing political options. Carmen Espinoza, a merchant in Mercado Huembes, stated, “The Pacto [between the PLC and

FSLN] only means unity between themselves, not between the government and the people. First it was the FSLN with the PLC, now it's the ALN and MRS with the PLC, and still with the FSLN.”⁴⁹

“It's always the same: the FSLN and the PLC. We have to search for other options, or our children are going to suffer under the same two governments,” said Velazquez, a FTZ worker.⁵⁰

Some also lamented the electoral reform law directly as a means of excluding political pluralism: “These elections have demonstrated that we have lost many years in the progress of the democratic process. If we were to elect candidates independent of political parties, we could transform the political culture of this country,” stated Meneses of the RMCV. It was clear that the ideological rhetoric of the PLC campaign rang hollow with many of those whom I interviewed.

However, this does not signify that the democratic-dictatorial paradigm did not influence these women's votes altogether. Of the 29 women, 7 across different sectors invoked the word “dictatorship” to describe the forces against which they were voting, and 14 specifically articulated “democracy” as one of the principal influences swaying their vote. All women representing civil society specifically listed “freedom of expression” as a priority, which can be attributed to their persecution by the Ortega government in the months leading up to the elections.

Class

While Montealegre fell short of convincing women that a vote for him translated to a vote for democracy, the FSLN did not seem to have complete success with their class rhetoric,

⁴⁹ Interview with Carmen Espinoza, 5 Nov 2008.

⁵⁰ Interview with Heidi Carolina Velazquez, 28 Nov 2008.

either. Only 8- about ¼ - of the women interviewed listed class as a factor influencing their vote. Two specifically stated that they voted PLC because they perceived them to represent middle class interests, while 6 – 3 campesinas and 3 FSLN activists – voted for the FSLN because they represented “the poor,” citing concrete benefits they had received, including academic scholarships, free medicine, and small loans for family members.

While merchants and free trade zone workers did not mention class as a factor, it was principally women from civil society and the academic circles that vocally negated class struggle as a factor in these elections. “This is not a class struggle; the ‘revolutionary’ leaders of this country are the richest,” said Juana Jimenez Martinez of MAM. She added, “There are poor supporters of both parties, and there is just as much concentration of capital and of the bourgeois in the FSLN.”⁵¹

The Economy: Foreign Investment, Employment, and the Cost of Living

Women’s negation of the FSLN class rhetoric, however, also does not mean that issues of class and economy were irrelevant to the municipal elections. 18 cited employment and an increase in foreign investment as essential changes they hoped to see, which included all of those who voted *contra* and was also the most pertinent amongst FTZ workers, campaign activists, and merchants. FTZ workers depend entirely on foreign investment for their livelihoods, campaign activists said that they or their family members would be directly affected by an increase in employment, and merchants blamed poor business and the robbery of their stores on the lack of employment and opportunities for gang involved youth.

Merchants, PLC activists and FTZ workers also attributed the decrease in foreign investment and lack of jobs to the FSLN – namely, for depending disproportionately on the

⁵¹ Interview with Heidi Carolina Velazquez, 28 Nov 2008.

government of Hugo Chavez and for generally presenting an unfriendly face to foreign investment. In addition, the majority of *campesinas*, workers, merchants, and activists also cited the increase in the basic price of goods as a main factor influencing their vote.

Academics and women of civil society generally spoke less about the economy, and academics tended to speak in broader terms about the international economic crisis and global neoliberal system, which they considered to be largely out of control of the Nicaraguan government. “With these elections, neither poverty nor the global economic system is going to change much,” said Anthropology Professor Maria Dolores Alvarez of the UNAN in Managua. “We have a failing economy, but what can you do in an unjust world economic system?”⁵²

Infrastructure

The themes most relevant to municipalities - infrastructure issues and public services, namely education, housing, health, and transportation, were raised alarmingly little as issues of importance to women in these elections. In total, only 6 cited streets, 5 mentioned housing, 4 cited the water system, and 3 mentioned the health system as areas of concern. Those who did mention infrastructure were predominantly *campesina*, reinforcing the idea that rural women feel more closely connected to their immediate municipalities. In general, the lack of focus on municipal issues emphasized once again, that for many women, these elections symbolized a vote greater than one to merely determine the fate of their local municipalities.

Women’s Bodies

Issues related directly to women’s health and sexual violence were omitted from both election discourse and as a primary area of concern from the majority of women that I

⁵² Interview with Maria Dolores Alvarez, 13 Nov 2008.

interviewed. When these issues were mentioned, they were brought up in three themes: The FSLN controlled government's penalization of therapeutic abortion, domestic violence, and sexual assault charges brought against Daniel Ortega by his stepdaughter Zoilamérica Narváez. The issue of Zoilamérica and therapeutic abortion were issues of concern that exclusively influenced the *contra* vote of women in civil society organizations, as well as one academic. While two of the FSLN activists affirmed their conviction that the penalization of therapeutic abortion was an error of the party, they also voiced their faith in the FSLN to reform that choice in the future. The two FTZ workers also voiced concern about domestic violence and sexual assault in their assessment of campaign issues. They were also my youngest interviewees; therefore, one might draw a correlation between their concerns about sexual assault and age rather than their professions.

In its 2006 election guide, *La Boletín* cited the eradication of violence and access to the courts as a primary election issue for women⁵³. In my survey, only 9 out of 29 even raised issues of sexual violence, and only 5 considered it a factor that influenced their vote. However, this does not necessarily signify that interfamilial violence, sexual assault, and abortion are not issues of great relevance and importance to women. According to Human Rights Ombudsman's Office, 60 women were murdered in Nicaragua in 2007, the majority by their partners or ex-partners, and another 48 were killed in the first seven months of 2008.⁵⁴ The Office also asserted that the increase in violence against women was a symptom of the country's growing unemployment. Therefore, women's concerns surrounding female assault may have either have manifested in their concerns regarding the economy, or furthermore, demonstrate that they are not accustomed to viewing the government as a vehicle by which those issues may be addressed and ameliorated.

⁵³ Puntos de Encuentro. "Posicionamiento Político ante el Proceso Electoral."

⁵⁴ Envio Team. "Violence Against Women." *Revista Envio*, Aug 2008: No. 325.

Peace

Campaign analysts claim that Violeta Barrio Chamorro of the UNO Coalition defeated the FSLN in 1990 by running on a platform for peace, to end the civil war and convene national reconciliation. In the 2008 elections, in a period that did indeed witness sparse election violence but not war, 11- more than 1/3- of all women I interviewed cited peace as one of the most important factors influencing their vote. Even more remarkable was that these 11 women were represented across all five sectors – civil society activists, academics, merchants, garment workers, and campaign activists. While some labeled the election violence as “Ortega’s war,” “the war of the FSLN,” or a result of the bitterness of the Liberals, the majority spoke of reconciliation in non-partisan terms or blamed both parties for the election violence.

“What’s going on in the streets is making me lose business,” said Carmen Espinoza of her business in Mercado Huembes, “As long as they take care of what they need to and there’s no more of these gangsters walking the streets, I don’t care who wins.”⁵⁵

“They’re both at fault. Both sides are out in the streets, without even thinking about mothers and their children,” said Vazquez, FTZ worker.⁵⁶

Bilma Lopez, also a garment worker in the FTZ, simply declared, “We’re all Nicaraguans. We should all love each other.”⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Interview with Carmen Espinoza, 12 Nov 2008.

⁵⁶ Interview with Heidi Carolina Velazquez, 28 Nov 2008.

⁵⁷ Interview with Bilma Lopez, 28 Nov 2008.

V. Is There a Women's Vote?

Reflecting on the wide diversity of priorities and perspectives that exists within a small pool of only 29 women prompts one to ponder if the concept of a solid “women’s vote” even exists in Nicaragua, or more specifically, in the 2008 electoral context. In order to understand whether the concept of a female vote exists, one must also investigate women’s attitudes toward whether or not a political option even exists that represents their interests.

Surprisingly, the majority of women, even those who had voted in favor of a party, answered negatively. The three FSLN activists answered affirmatively, citing programs of the FSLN that have benefited women by providing them with free propane kitchens, farm animals as reproductive investments, and low interest mini loans through *Hambre Cero* and *Usura Cero*. However, they still maintained their identity as Sandinistas, not “Danielistas,” and asserted that their party could still improve to better to represent their female constituencies, specifically concerning the decision of therapeutic abortion.

Academics, civil society activists, PLC voting *campesinas*, and FTZ workers were especially vocal in their disdain for political parties. Anti-FSLN *campesinas* cited NGOs, not political parties, as agents of positive change in their lives. Multiple academics and civil society activists stated bluntly, “No political party is good for women,”⁵⁸ while some also criticized FSLN programs on both practical and ideological grounds. “Women are only grateful to the FSLN because they are the first government that has done anything for them...but what does a 5,000 cordoba (\$250) loan do for me when men are getting loans of 200,000 (\$1,000)?” asked Aura Lacayo of the RMCV.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Interview with Maria Dolores Alvarez, 13 Nov 2008.

⁵⁹ Interview with Aura Lacayo, 14 Nov 2008.

Velazquez, FTZ worker, expressed frustration in relation to the government's failure to transform gender consciousness, "[The parties] don't listen to us- only men- not women nor children. There is so much *machismo* in our culture, in my workplace and in my home."⁶⁰

10 of the women stated that they believed there was a strategy, only by the FSLN, to gain women's votes. This strategy manifested itself through what they perceived to be clientelism, "buying votes" through offering bonuses and material goods such as the aforementioned propane kitchens, characterizing it as an "insincere" effort to win women's votes. Many lamented the discrimination of the manner in which top-down benefits were distributed exclusively to FSLN supporters, from latrines in rural areas to university scholarships in Managua.

Others – mainly academics and civil society activists– criticized the offerings altogether. Professor Brenda Cansuelo Ruiz of the UPOLI stated, "This is a very serious form of manipulation. My employee receives loans from the government. She is scared of voting against the FSLN because she is scared of losing her loans. This isn't about ideology, it's about survival."⁶¹ In even more serious terms, Professor Miriam Patricia Guerrero of the UNAN Leon asserted, "The FSLN is creating a tradeoff between liberty and basic goods; one has to choose between the right to live and the right to liberty – this is slavery. It's a problem of the political class; it's not only an electoral campaign, but an ongoing political campaign."⁶²

Likewise, only two women stated that they believed the PLC was good for women. One cited the PLC Alliance campaign proposal to support working single mothers with the establishment of daycare centers.⁶³ The other touched upon the subject of what she perceived to

⁶⁰ Interview with Heidi Carolina Velazquez, 28 Nov 2008.

⁶¹ Interview with Brenda Cansuelo Ruiz, 27 Nov 2008.

⁶² Interview with Miriam Patricia Guerrero, 15 Nov 2008.

⁶³ Interview with Marcia Sobalvarro, 5 Nov 2008.

be the exclusive distribution of benefits from the government to FSLN supporters, stating, “In the Liberal governments, they helped women of all political colors.”⁶⁴

Thus, few of those whom I interviewed considered a political party to be positive for women, and most failed to identify any party that they felt rightfully represented their interests as women. A minority, mainly from civil society, cited the MRS party as one more inclusive of women in its structure and supportive of the right to therapeutic abortion, but overall, there was a lack of faith in the currently presented political parties. These doubts manifested themselves in votes for different parties, thus impeding the ability to define a solid “women’s vote.”

Furthermore, there was a clear correlation between class and political attitudes, yet generalizations cannot be made across the board. Academics and civil society – those who represented the educated middle class – tended to vote *contra*, and also valued broader issues such as democracy. Those with the fewest resources – *campesinas* – were those that represented the votes in favor of a candidate and prioritized issues related to infrastructure and basic needs for survival. However, there was considerable diversity within the merchant class, and FTZ working class women tended to be as ideological as they were focused on concrete needs. I found no direct correlation between class and political party choice. There were women from both the working and middle classes who voted *contra* the FSLN, although middle class women’s opposition had more ideological, rather than material grounding.

However, I would argue that although women may not vote in unison and that a general “women’s voting bloc” may not exist in the current political context, there still exists a common thread amongst them. Nearly all share the general sentiment that none of the political parties rightfully represents women’s interests, yet, surrendering idealism and acting pragmatically, nearly all still voted.

⁶⁴ Interview with Yelba Garcia Granada, 19 Nov 2008.

VI. Do Women Represent Women?

Most women stated uncertainty as to whether Nicaraguan society would be different with more female representation in the government, and in many of my conversations, this discussion somehow evolved into a commentary about Rosario Murillo, the first lady and National Secretary of Communication. The mentioning of her name was oftentimes accompanied with either praise or snickers, and she was referred to by a variety of terms: *La Chayo*, *La Chamuca*, “Evil Witch,” *La Mujer de Ortega* “The Woman of Ortega,” and *La Bruja*/The Witch.

She is a controversial figure, one who has abrasively derided civil society feminist organizations and has denied accusations of sexual assault brought by her daughter against her husband. She also considers herself a revolutionary feminist and directs the country’s extensive network of CPCs, community watch groups that provide subsidized basic grains but have come under fire for serving partisan interests. Murillo is accredited with the FSLN proposal to create quotas for female candidates and spearheading campaigns such as “Love for the Children” in support of orphans and homeless children.

While most women remained silent on their perspectives toward female representation, 10 women across different sectors stated that they believed that more female representation in government could positively transform the political scene, while 4 – exclusively from civil society and academia – stated that it would not. Both sides mentioned Rosario Murillo – either as a positive example for women or as an example demonstrating that female representation does not translate to female interests. Those with faith in female politicians referred to personal characteristics which they believed to be particular to women – trustworthiness, sincerity, and reflection– as qualities that could potentially eradicate political corruption and serve as a positive

force for Nicaragua. Karla Vanessa Rojas, a merchant in Mercado Oriental II, put it simply, “We have children; we can’t mess around.”⁶⁵

Those in civil society and academia had a less idealistic view of female representation, asserting that females in Nicaragua are raised in the same society and thus have the same capacity as men to internalize *machismo*. In terms of Rosario Murillo, the professors and civil society activists affirmed that “Rosario Murillo is not a symbol for anyone”⁶⁶ or “*La Mujer de Ortega* is a woman for the sake of being a woman, not to reclaim the rights of women.”⁶⁷

Professor Brenda Cansuelo Ruiz articulated: “The focus should be on quality, not quantity. Rosario, for example, has a very masculine type of power – it’s power over the people, not with the people – in this sense, there is no difference between her and a man.”⁶⁸

In accordance with the attitude that women’s representation does not translate to women’s rights, Cynthia Chavez Metoyer affirms in her book, Women and the State in Post-Sandinista Nicaragua, that with the Chamorro victory in 1990, women were appointed to key government posts for the first time in Nicaraguan history and commanded nearly 20% of the National Assembly, yet few worked to advance women’s interests.⁶⁹

Ultimately, the official election results announced that 19 out of 146 mayoral seats went to women in the 2008 elections.⁷⁰ Female representation in the mayoral seat now constitutes less than 15% in all municipalities in the country. Despite the debate concerning whether or not women in office would bring political change, it is clear that women’s voices are still largely excluded from positions of power.

⁶⁵ Interview with Karla Vanessa Drugama Rojas, 11 Nov 2008.

⁶⁶ Interview with Aura Lacayo, 14 Nov 2008.

⁶⁷ Interview with Juana Jimenez Martinez, 17 Nov 2008.

⁶⁸ Interview with Brenda Cansuelo Ruiz, 27 Nov 2008.

⁶⁹ Metoyer, Cynthia Chavez. Women and the State in Post Sandinista Nicaragua. Lynne Rienner Publishers: London, 2000, p. 115

⁷⁰ “Listado de Alcaldes Electos: Elecciones Municipales 2008.” *El Nuevo Diario*. [Online] <http://www.elnuevodiario.com.ni/upload/Alcaldes%20Electos_2008.pdf>

VII. Perspectives on the Role of Government, Democracy, and the Future

Women's reflections on the role of government and the electoral process were divided amongst different sectors of society. Civil society activists and academics tended to share similar ideological concerns and bleak views toward the ability of the government or elections to positively change society, although those from civil society looked toward the future with a more activist approach. Civil society activists stressed the need for electoral reform and placed little hope in the government to bring about change. Instead, they focused their energy on developing political consciousness amongst grassroots constituencies, fighting to transform what they believed was an anti-democratic, *machista*, and patriarchal political culture. Academics, on the other hand, assumed a more resigned attitude toward the political scene, one professor stating that "divine intervention" would be the only means of transforming Nicaragua's political culture and the establishment of clean elections.⁷¹

Campaign activists, on the other hand, held more expectations directly from their government, and expected to achieve them from working within their parties. PLC activists stressed the need peace and jobs, while FSLN activists stressed the need to continue demanding improvements within their party to support women. The majority of the merchants and anti-FSLN *campesinas* asserted that there has always been electoral fraud and all politicians have robbed the people. However, their recommendations for the government were mixed: some affirmed that the government would not help anyone and women must help themselves, while others suggested that the government could potentially help women by creating more productive projects for women. Lastly, FTZ workers demanded the provision of better pay as a responsibility of the government.

⁷¹ Interview with Brenda Cansuelo Ruiz, 27 Nov 2008.

Whether or not they believed the government would realize these changes in the future was a different question. While the majority of women stated that they have faith in change for the electoral process in the future, 5 blatantly stated that they would not vote again in the future if the process were to develop as it had in the 2008 elections. “The elections are already fixed...and I’m going to make a line for what?” asked Aura Lacayo of the RMCV. “That’s an insult to me. Whether or not I vote, the Pacto is going to win.”⁷²

While 5 stated the potential of abstention in the future, 8 – nearly 1/3- stated a complete lack of confidence in a positive future for the electoral process. Nonetheless, half still affirmed their faith in elections for the future, all of whom included FSLN supporters. However, in the end, even those without hope, those who reinforced accusations of fraud and affirmed that they felt as if their vote did not count in these elections, still firmly asserted, “one must vote.” More than half of all women believed that it was an error to abstain from voting and that one must practice their duty as citizens, a right that women had not won until 1955.

Even after Ana Maria Lopez Garcia, merchant at Mercado Oriental II, criticized the bribery and fraud she felt tainted these elections, she declared, “We must vote; we have to still believe that we can influence our society.”⁷³

⁷² Interview with Aura Lacayo, 14 Nov 2008.

⁷³ Interview with Ana Maria Lopez Garcia, 13 Nov 2008.

Conclusion

As evidenced by the title of this report, I found that the women I interviewed are nihilists and idealists, but above all, pragmatists. Women's perspectives toward the future ranged from "There will always be fraud" to "We will not lose the fight," but their decisions – including those who consciously abstained – were all rooted in what they believed would concretely benefit themselves. This pragmatism did not manifest itself in a singular manner, but in diverse attitudes, as follows: 1) I will continue voting for you because you are providing me with basic goods for my survival, 2) I will not vote for you because you are discriminatory and do not provide me with goods for my survival, 3) I will not vote for you because you are bad for democracy, and thus, bad for me in the long-term, and/or 4) I will vote for you because you represent the best chance to defeat the opponent that is bad for me in the short term and the long term.

Although a woman's voting bloc may not exist in the current political context in Nicaragua, that does not mean that women do not have special needs and distinct voting behaviors. Nearly all of the women I interviewed still voted, which despite all their criticisms of the municipal elections, demonstrate some measure of hope that they still possessed in the electoral process. Above all, they perceived their futures as something to be taken into their own hands, understanding elections to only be a minor part of a larger process to improve their lives and to practice active citizenship. From those who expressed their complete lack of faith in the government to do anything for them, to those whose confidence in the government has considerably grown since the FSLN came to power in 2006, the diverse women I spoke to were all prepared to *seguir adelante*, to fight on in the struggle for their own livelihoods, in whatever manner that would manifest itself.

Virginia Meneses Mendoza of the Women's Movement Against Violence, told me:

Feminismo es la subversion del gobierno que no satisface los derechos de las mujeres,

“Feminism is the subversion of the government that does not satisfy the rights of women.” From the many women I had the privilege to speak with, I can confidently conclude that the struggle is not ending any time soon.

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