

Nicaragua
Atlantic Coast Elections
March 1, 1998
Observation Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Nicaraguans in the North and South Autonomous Regions of the Atlantic Coast - known as the RAAN and the RAAS - elected their 45-member Regional Councils on March 1, 1998. Ballots were cast by 86,121 citizens, representing 57 percent of the Atlantic Coast's accredited voters. Fourteen political groups, ranging from national parties to local "popular associations," fielded candidates in the RAAN. Thirteen political organizations were on ballots in the RAAS.

With funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), IRI deployed a 14-member delegation of election observers to monitor the March 1 vote. IRI was invited to observe the elections by Nicaragua's Supreme Electoral Council (CSE). Traveling by airplane, boat, automobile, and horse, the observers visited scores of polling stations in nine of the 14 municipalities of the Atlantic Coast. IRI delegates focused on adherence to proper voting and counting procedures, the secrecy of the vote, the presence and behavior of party pollwatchers, and any impermissible campaigning. (See Appendix I for further details.)

As in the past, administering elections in the Atlantic Coast represented a daunting challenge for the CSE. The region is geographically isolated and culturally distinct from the rest of Nicaragua, and its scattered population consists of ethnic groups (including indigenous groups such as the Miskitos, Ramas, and Sumos as well as English-speaking Nicaraguans of African and Caribbean ancestry) whose concerns often have been ignored by the government in Managua. The region's infrastructure is in very poor condition. Driving from Managua to Puerto Cabezas, the administrative seat of the RAAN, until recently took as long as a week, and regular telephone service is available in just seven of the 14 municipalities.

However, IRI observers concluded that the CSE overcame most of these difficulties and administered the balloting in a transparent and efficient fashion. Reflecting on the findings of IRI missions to observe Nicaraguan elections in 1990, 1994, and 1996, the delegation noted visible improvement to several key aspects of the electoral process. Among these positive developments are the following:

- X The proportion of the Atlantic Coast's registered voters for whom permanent identification cards (*cédulas*) have been manufactured rose from less than half in 1996 to about 80 percent this year. In the end, permanent or temporary voting documents were produced for all of the Atlantic Coast's 176,610 registered voters. Some 14 percent of these people failed to receive their voting documents, though part of this shortfall can be attributed to voter apathy rather than administrative failure.
- X The citizens staffing the polling stations were significantly better trained than in past elections, with the upshot that the vote was conducted in an extremely orderly fashion. IRI observers were impressed with the dedication of the pollworkers, the party pollwatchers, and the electoral police. Pollworkers opened most polling stations on time and generally adhered closely to procedures established in the electoral law and other official norms.
- X In 1996, 19 days passed before total preliminary results were made available. This year, the CSE was able to release returns from about 90 percent of all polling stations by the evening of March 2, and full returns were released 60 hours after the polls closed. Given the poor condition of the Atlantic Coast's infrastructure, this achievement is impressive.

As with any electoral process, some aspects of Nicaragua's elections leave room for improvement. IRI observers offered a number of recommendations to improve election administration and the election environment in Nicaragua.

- X Completing the distribution of permanent voting documents (*cédulas*) to all registered voters prior to the 2000 municipal elections should be the CSE's top priority.
- X In future elections, the CSE should redouble its efforts to inform voters about the location of their assigned polling stations.

- X The CSE should adhere to the highly effective training schedule employed in the Atlantic Coast in future elections.
- X The CSE and the National Assembly should review the criteria that political organizations must meet to receive public financing, with a view toward ensuring that funds are given only to those that enjoy a minimum level of popular support.
- X Clear guidance should be provided to the parties regarding the legality of organizing campaign events prior to the official beginning of the campaign period.

See the following section (“Recommendations”) for further details.

The results of the March 1 vote underscored the strength of the governing Liberal Constitutionalist Party (PLC), which won a majority of Regional Council seats in the RAAN and a large plurality of seats in the RAAS. The Sandinista Front (FSLN), Nicaragua’s leading opposition party, suffered its fourth consecutive electoral defeat. The Sandinistas garnered significantly fewer votes than they did in 1994. (See the table on the next page.)

Thirteen of the 18 political organizations on the ballot failed to win a single seat. Before election day, many Atlantic Coast residents spoke to IRI staff and observers about their preference for local political groups (as opposed to national parties such as the PLC and the FSLN), but the institutional and financial weakness of these organizations apparently discouraged potential supporters. The exceptions were Yatama, which draws most of its strength from indigenous groups, and the new Indigenous Multiethnic Party (PIM) led by the outgoing governor of the RAAS, Rayfield Hodgson, who was elected to that office in 1994 as a member of the PLC.

FINAL RESULTS OF MARCH 1 ELECTIONS FOR REGIONAL COUNCILS¹ (Source: CSE)	North Autonomous Region of the Atlantic Coast		South Autonomous Region of the Atlantic Coast		Total no. of seats: 1998	Total no. of seats: 1994
	% of votes	No. of seats	% of votes	No. of seats		
Liberal Constitutionalist Party	49%	24	53%	20	44	37
Sandinista Front	29%	13	21%	12	25	33
Yatama	12%	8	10%	4	12	12
Indigenous Multiethnic Party	1%	0	4%	7	7	--
Coast Alliance	1%	0	4%	2	2	--
Other parties ²	8%	0	8%	0	0	8
TOTAL	100%	45	100%	45	90	90

¹ The RAAN and the RAAS are each divided into 15 electoral districts. From each district, three councillors are elected according to proportional representation, for a total of 45 councillors on each of the two Regional Councils.

² Nine other parties were on ballots in the RAAN; eight were on ballots in the RAAS.

In this report, IRI examines the strengths and weaknesses of Nicaragua's electoral system and issues recommendations for improvements to be considered by the CSE and the National Assembly in preparation for the 2000 municipal elections and the 2001 presidential and legislative elections. The report scrutinizes administrative aspects of the electoral apparatus such as electoral institutions, voter registration, the organization of polling stations, and the counting process. The report also surveys the electoral environment, focusing on voter participation, campaign finance, media access, campaign activities, and security issues.

RECOMMENDATIONS

IRI observers concluded that the CSE administered the March 1 vote in a transparent and efficient fashion. However, some aspects of Nicaragua's elections leave room for improvement:

- X **Voter Registration:** As the CSE has recognized, its energies should now be directed toward completing the process of citizen identification registration. Five years after beginning work on the task, the delivery of permanent voting documents (*cédulas*) to all registered voters has yet to be completed. CSE President Rosa Marina Zelaya has set the explicit goal of finishing this labor prior to the 2000 municipal elections and thus ending once and for all the need for single-use voting documents (*documentos supletorios*). IRI agrees that this effort should be the CSE's top priority. In the long run, Nicaraguan political and electoral leaders might usefully consider the example of Mexico, where an extremely high registration rate (98 percent) was achieved by making the voting document a multi-use identification card.

- X **Polling Locations:** While their numbers were not sufficient to compromise the integrity of the electoral process, a significant number of people were turned away from polling stations for various reasons. Most of these people were poorly informed about the location of the polling station to which they had been assigned. In future elections, the CSE should refine and redouble its efforts to inform voters about the location of their assigned polling stations.

- X **Pollworker Training:** IRI observers judged that the citizens staffing the polling stations were significantly better trained than in past elections. In at least some areas, pollworkers received three days of training, a notable improvement over the single day provided in previous electoral cycles. The additional training clearly improved the conduct of the balloting, and IRI encourages the CSE to adhere to the same expanded training schedule in future elections.

- X **Campaign Finance:** Despite the distribution of state funds to all the political parties and popular associations on the ballot, 13 of these 18 organizations failed to win a single seat on the Regional Councils. IRI's final report on the 1994 Atlantic Coast elections noted that political organizations are not required to demonstrate a significant level of popular support to receive state funds, only that a minimal administrative structure exists. IRI agrees that the criteria organizations should face to get on the ballot should be easy to meet (as they are in Nicaragua). However, IRI reiterates its 1994 recommendation that the CSE and the National Assembly should review the criteria that political organizations must meet to receive public financing, with a view toward ensuring that they enjoy a minimum level of popular support (e.g., by gathering a minimum number of signatures).

X **Campaign Activities:** Controversy arose in January regarding the legality of holding campaign events prior to the official beginning of the campaign period. In a resolution issued on January 12, the CSE reproved both the PLC and the FSLN for such activities but exacted no punishment. The magistrates noted that the electoral law fails to declare such campaign activities inappropriate or illegal, but several parties continued to criticize their rivals for this purported violation of electoral norms. IRI suggests that the code of electoral ethics or the electoral law be amended to provide clearer guidance on this matter.

ELECTION ADMINISTRATION

The Supreme Electoral Council

The Supreme Electoral Council is Nicaragua's fourth branch of government. Its authority is vested in five magistrates and five substitute magistrates elected by the National Assembly. The magistrates serve five-year terms, and those of the current members expire in 2000. By law, the staff of the CSE and its local delegations are drawn from a range of political parties, a structural feature which bars any one party from gaining undue influence but which has given rise to some internal conflicts in recent years.

Constitutional reforms in 1995 enhanced the powers of the CSE. In electoral matters, any resolution reached by the CSE is final. The CSE has exclusive responsibility for the citizen identification registration program (which includes voter registration) and the voter registry. It also has the exclusive authority to grant official recognition to political parties.

During this electoral cycle, the CSE's local delegations in the Atlantic Coast included Regional Electoral Councils based in Puerto Cabezas and Bluefields. The authority of these institutions rests with three magistrates, who, like their counterparts in Managua, represent different political tendencies. The same is true of the Municipal Electoral Councils overseeing balloting in each of the six municipalities in the RAAN and the eight municipalities in the RAAS.

Under electoral reforms approved in September 1997, the two most senior magistrates staffing the Regional and Municipal Electoral Councils - the president and first member - must belong to the two parties that won the most votes in the previous Atlantic Coast elections, namely, the PLC and the FSLN. While the CSE selects these officials from among nominees presented by the political parties, negotiations between the PLC and the FSLN were key in determining the allocation of positions. The president of the RAAN Electoral Council is a member of the PLC, and his counterpart in the RAAS belongs to the FSLN. (The reforms included an identical provision for staffing the 683 polling stations in the two autonomous regions, as described under "Polling Stations," below.)

In the current electoral cycle, the harshest criticism of the CSE came from the Sandinista Front, but these comments were generally vague. In January, for instance, FSLN Secretary General Daniel Ortega described the CSE as "run down and discredited," using language employed by the Sandinistas after the 1996 presidential elections.

Voter Registration

In 1993, the CSE initiated a new process of citizen identification registration, known as *cedulación*. The national citizen identification document produced upon registration - known as a *cédula* - serves as Nicaragua's chief voting document. This registration process also has served to create a permanent voter registry (*padrón electoral*). For a variety of reasons, the process of *cedulación* in Nicaragua has taken far longer than anticipated. Failure to complete this process greatly complicated the 1996 elections, as illustrated by the fact that four distinct kinds of voting document were in use on election day.

In contrast with 1996, just two kinds of voting document were in use on March 1: *cédulas* and *documentos supletorios*. As dictated by the electoral law, the CSE suspended citizen identification registration on November 30 and suspended the manufacture of *cédulas* on December 30. For those whose names were inscribed in the voter registry by November 30 but whose *cédula* had not yet been made by the end of the year, a separate, temporary voting document - known as a *documento supletorio de votación* - was produced.

Significant progress has been made toward completing the *cedulación* of Atlantic Coast residents, as the table in Appendix II indicates. In 13 of the 14 Atlantic Coast municipalities, *cédulas* have been made for about 80 percent of all registered voters. (The special case of Paiwas is examined below.) Prior to the 1996 elections, *cédulas* were produced for less than half of all registered voters nationwide.

Documentos supletorios were produced for the remaining 20 percent of registered voters. The CSE's continued reliance on these single-use voting documents is somewhat disappointing, particularly because it underscores the fact that the *cedulación* campaign has yet to be completed five years after its initiation. (Indeed, *cedulación* in the rest of the country now lags the Atlantic Coast.) Voters receiving a *documento supletorio* instead of a *cédula* often complain that they are being treated as second-class citizens. On the other hand, the address and other information printed on *documentos supletorios* are generally more accurate than those provided on *cédulas* because the temporary documents are manufactured just a few weeks before the election in which they are to be used.

Delivery of voting documents went fairly well. Ninety-two percent of the *cédulas* manufactured were successfully delivered by February 15, the last day on which distribution of voting documents could legally take place. The corresponding figure for *documentos supletorios* was about 60 percent. Of the 25,469 registered voters who received no voting document, the CSE indicated that over half (13,326) simply failed to present themselves at the local delivery sites during the intensive distribution campaign conducted in early February. A majority (8,909) of the remainder were reported as being out of the area.

The RAAS municipality of Paiwas presented the CSE with unique challenges. Previously administered as part of the department of Matagalpa, the September 1997 electoral reforms paved the way for residents of Paiwas to vote as residents of the RAAS for the first time. In part due to the late date of the reforms, *cédulas* had been made for just 20 percent of the registered voters in Paiwas by the end of 1997. Consequently, *documentos supletorios* were produced for 80 percent of the municipality's voters - a much larger proportion than anywhere else in the Atlantic Coast. Nonetheless, the CSE made a particularly concerted effort to distribute voting documents in Paiwas, as the data in Appendix II indicate. The CSE's success rate in delivering *documentos supletorios* in the municipality (81 percent) was significantly higher than elsewhere in the Atlantic Coast, and just 16 percent of all registered voters in Paiwas failed to receive a voting document. The latter figure is virtually indistinguishable from those obtained elsewhere in the Atlantic Coast.

While their numbers were not sufficient to compromise the integrity of the electoral process, a significant number of people were turned away from polling stations for various reasons. Most of these people were poorly informed about the location of the polling station to which they had been assigned. Others had been given voting documents that assigned them to distant polling stations. Finally, a few people presenting *cédulas* at the polling station indicated on the document itself did not appear on the corresponding voter list. At most of the polling stations visited by IRI observers, between three and six people were turned away in this fashion.

At the March 20 news conference during which the final, official election results were released, CSE officials announced plans to relaunch the national *cedulación* campaign immediately after the members of the new Regional Councils are sworn in on May 4. CSE President Rosa Marina Zelaya set the explicit goal of providing all Nicaraguans with *cédulas* prior to the 2000 municipal elections and thus ending the use of *documentos supletorios* once and for all. She also pledged to begin work on a new civil registry, the record upon which the voter registry is based.

Polling Stations

Residents of the Atlantic Coast voted in 683 polling stations (389 in the RAAN and 294 in the RAAS), which are known in Nicaragua as *Juntas Receptoras de Votos* (JRVs). A JRV voter list may include the names of up to 400 citizens. The staff of each JRV consists of a president and two other pollworkers, called the first member and the second member. Also standing by are alternates who are available in case any of the members of the JRV fail to arrive or are otherwise unable to perform their duties. Secretaries (*amanuences*) assist the members of the JRV.

The Municipal Electoral Councils were charged with selecting pollworkers between January 5 and February 14, and this task was largely complete by early February. However, the September 1997 electoral reforms requiring that the president and first member of each JRV should belong to the two parties that won the most votes in the previous regional elections stirred some controversy. CSE President Zelaya told IRI staff that this stipulation,

approved by the National Assembly without significant public debate, threw a spanner in the gears of the electoral process. In some areas of the Atlantic Coast, she noted, finding people with the level of education required to staff a polling station posed a real challenge, and adding a partisan litmus test only made the task more difficult. (Other electoral officials disagreed, contending that they were able to comply without difficulty.) Not surprisingly, some political parties protested the exclusion of their members from two-thirds of all the positions in the Atlantic Coast's electoral apparatus.

IRI observers judged that the citizens staffing the JRVs were significantly better trained than in past elections, with the upshot that the vote was conducted in an extremely orderly fashion. Pollworkers opened most polling stations on time and generally adhered closely to procedures established in the electoral law and other official norms. Bernard Brown, president of the RAAS Electoral Council, said in early February that pollworkers would receive three days of training, a notable improvement over the single day provided in previous electoral cycles. It was unclear whether this was the case everywhere in the Atlantic Coast, but IRI delegates who monitored the vote in the RAAN gave an equally positive assessment of the labor performed by the pollworkers.

The IRI delegation also was impressed by the dedication of the accredited party pollwatchers, known as *fiscales*, and the electoral police. Party pollwatchers may not interfere in the electoral process or overturn decisions taken by the JRV president; however, they may issue formal protests (*impugnaciones*) to the CSE. Most JRVs had at least half a dozen pollwatchers on hand, and most of them remained standing behind the seated pollworkers for the entire day. Every polling station visited by IRI delegates had the requisite pair of unarmed electoral police officers, who assisted the JRV workers in regulating the flow of voters in and out of the polling station.

The election materials were to be delivered to each JRV between one and four days before March 1, and the CSE completed this task on schedule virtually everywhere. Few polling stations were lacking any of the necessary materials.

In Nicaragua, unlike many Latin American countries, pollworkers are paid for their work. Bernard Brown of the RAAS Electoral Council told IRI staff in early February that pollworkers would be paid for their services only upon delivering all electoral materials to their respective Municipal Electoral Councils. In the past, pollworkers were paid before or during the balloting (or in some cases never paid at all). Brown contended that this change - taken at the Regional Electoral Council's initiative - would improve the collection of electoral materials after the polls close.

The Vote Count

Preliminary, unofficial results are generated based on counts conducted at the JRVs and transmitted over the hours and days immediately after the polls close to the CSE in Managua. If no party pollwatchers challenge these results, they become official; otherwise, recounts are conducted after the ballots have been delivered (in the case of the Atlantic Coast) to the Regional Electoral Councils.

According to the electoral law, the polls close at 6 p.m., but any voters standing in line at that time should be allowed to cast ballots. Pollworkers are then instructed to count the votes and complete the required vote count form, known as an *acta de escrutinio*. This *acta* includes tallies of votes cast, invalid votes, ballots received, and ballots used, as well as the number of votes received by each political party or organization. Once the vote count is concluded, the JRV president is to deliver the *acta* and other election materials (including all marked and unmarked ballots) to the Municipal Electoral Council.

In 1996, the vote count was the most troubled phase of the electoral process. Nineteen days passed before total preliminary results were made available. This delay was largely due to logistical problems in gathering election materials and transporting them to Managua. In addition, IRI observers noted that many minor errors in the initial count - which proved very difficult to correct - stemmed not from fraudulent intentions but from inadequate training of pollworkers. For instance, votes were often deemed invalid even though the voter's intention was clear. In some cases, inadequate supplies of basic materials such as carbon paper complicated the pollworkers' labor.

The vote count went much more smoothly this year. Improved training for pollworkers was probably the most important factor in this development. In addition, the pollworkers faced a much easier task: a single ballot was in use this year, whereas in 1996 each voter marked six different ballots. As noted, almost all JRVs were provided with adequate supplies.

IRI staff expressed concern prior to the March 1 vote about the CSE's plans for gathering and transmitting results from the JRVs to CSE officials in Managua, but these fears were not borne out. The September 1997 electoral reforms included a new requirement that the individual *actas de escrutinio* from each JRV - once they were delivered to the 14 Municipal Electoral Councils - were to be transmitted onward by fax. Three weeks after the reforms became law, CSE President Zelaya expressed her concern to IRI staff about this specific requirement. Only seven of the 14 municipalities in the Atlantic Coast have regular telephone service, and even calls between Managua and Puerto Cabezas are often impossible. To fill the gap, a satellite telephone system was purchased in January at great expense to be employed in townships lacking regular telephone service (with independent generators at some locations).

Notwithstanding these concerns, the new system worked extremely well on election day. The satellite telephone system functioned as promised, and the CSE was able to release returns from approximately 90 percent of all polling stations by the evening of March 2. Full returns were released ahead of schedule, just 60 hours after the polls closed.

ELECTION ENVIRONMENT

Voter Participation

Despite predictions that turnout for the March 1 vote might be as low as 40 percent, 57 percent of accredited voters in the RAAN and 58 percent of those in the RAAS participated in the elections. CSE President Zelaya characterized this level of participation as “neither good nor bad.” These figures represent a small decline in participation from 1996 (when 60 percent of the Atlantic Coast’s accredited voters cast ballots) but a fairly sharp drop from the previous Atlantic Coast elections in 1994 (when 74 percent voted).

One factor that may have depressed voter turnout was a rumor that the Council of Elders, which purports to represent the Atlantic Coast’s indigenous communities, had called for citizens to boycott the elections. This rumor circulated widely in the week before the vote, and the IRI delegation received contradictory reports regarding its veracity. Urging citizens not to vote is a violation of Nicaragua’s code of electoral ethics and is punishable under the electoral law.

The alleged call for citizens to abstain from voting may have contributed to the low turnout in the municipality of Waspám, the population of which is largely Miskito. In the most extreme case, IRI observers visited JRV no. 8150 in the Río Coco community of Kiwas Tara at 4 p.m. on election day and found that not one of the 293 people on the voter list had cast a ballot. The only votes cast were those of the pollworkers, party pollwatchers, and electoral police, all of whom were residents of other towns in the municipality. A leading citizen offered his opinion that people were responding to the putative recommendation issued by the Council of Elders.

Campaign Finance

As dictated by the September 1997 electoral reforms, 10 percent of the funding provided by the Nicaraguan government to the CSE was given to political parties and other organizations to help finance their campaigns. With the notable exceptions of the PLC and the FSLN, the political organizations that participated in the March 1 elections were almost wholly dependent on these state funds, though most groups received just a few thousand dollars. (Appendix III provides details on how much money each political organization received.)

The National Assembly appropriated some C\$40 million (approximately US\$4 million) for the CSE to administer the Atlantic Coast elections, C\$4 million of which was set aside for the parties. Half of this sum was distributed among the parties according to the number of candidates they fielded. The remaining C\$2 million was distributed according to the number of seats the parties won on the Regional Councils in 1994, with the PLC taking about 45 percent of this total, the FSLN 40 percent, and Yatama 15 percent. Half of the state funding for political parties was disbursed on December 30 and the remainder on January 30. The 13 political organizations that failed to win a single seat on the Regional Councils are required to refund the money, though enforcement of this rule historically has been weak.

Unlike past elections, the process of disbursing state funds to the political parties stirred little or no controversy this year. In 1996, IRI noted that this process suffered numerous delays, provoking complaints from smaller, less well financed parties. But the political party representatives who met with IRI representatives voiced no particular concerns about this matter, though they were quick to point out the difficulty of running a campaign with so little money.

Significant concerns were voiced by party representatives and civic leaders regarding the alleged use of state resources by the governing PLC in its campaign. Denying these charges, PLC campaign officials produced financial documentation to show, for example, that the party had reimbursed the armed forces for use of a helicopter.

After reviewing the charges, the CSE ruled on January 12 that it had no jurisdiction, a stance which appears to be supported by the electoral law.³ A group of eight political parties (including the FSLN) voiced displeasure with this outcome, briefly threatened to boycott the elections, and took their case to court (as indicated by the CSE). It is unclear when the matter may be resolved, but it is unlikely to be soon. The FSLN, which advanced the charges against the PLC with particular vigor, made the allegations a central theme in its campaign.

Media Access

Political organizations have extremely limited access to the media in the Atlantic Coast. Few local residents have televisions; indeed, electrification has yet to reach many rural areas. There are no newspapers published in the RAAN or the RAAS. Managua newspapers arrive late, provide little coverage of local events, and are little read due to illiteracy and poverty. With the mass media providing so few options in the Atlantic Coast, many candidates in the recently concluded campaign relied on fliers, posters, and painted signs to raise their public profile.

Radio historically has been the most important medium for disseminating news in the Atlantic Coast. However, most stations have an acknowledged partisan affiliation: of the five stations in Bluefields, for example, one belongs to the government, one the Sandinistas, and one the PLC. The two remaining stations are held to be relatively independent, but the extremely limited campaign budgets of most political organizations barred many from advertising on radio.

One development in the national media may have had a psychological impact on the Atlantic Coast election campaign. The Sandinista newspaper *Barricada* halted publication on January 30 due to financial problems including unpaid taxes. The daily newspaper had been a primary source of information on government views while the FSLN ruled Nicaragua during the 1979-90 period. "The failure of the paper definitely is the result of internal political struggles for leadership within the FSLN," said Manuel Calero, a member of the editorial staff, in an Associated Press report. He added that the staff had not been paid in months. Since the newspaper's closure, plans to relaunch it in some form - possibly with worker ownership - have been widely reported. Representatives of other parties expressed amazement to IRI staff and delegates that none of the known millionaires among the Sandinista leadership was willing to keep the paper afloat, even with an election looming.

Campaign Activities

Controversy arose in January regarding the propriety of organizing campaign events prior to the official beginning of the campaign period (January 15). The group of eight parties that charged the PLC with using state resources in its campaign also issued a protest to the effect that the governing party had organized campaign rallies as early as December. As evidence, the parties presented a videotape, an audiotape, and photographs from a December rally in Bluefields at which President Arnoldo Alemán appeared. PLC officials issued similar accusations against the Sandinista Front.

In a resolution issued on January 12, the CSE reproved both the PLC and the FSLN for these activities but exacted no punishment. The magistrates noted that the electoral law fails to declare premature campaign activities inappropriate or illegal. The opposition parties voiced their displeasure with this decision repeatedly during the campaign period.

³ Discussing the matter with IRI representatives, CSE President Zelaya cited Article 185 of the electoral law, which states: □The injured parties and the Prosecutor's Office are responsible for exercising the corresponding penal actions. The Ordinary Criminal Courts shall be competent to try them.□

Complaints were also issued by opposition candidates about the intimate involvement of government officials (including four ministers) in the day-to-day affairs of the PLC's campaign, but in this instance no formal charges or rulings were issued. Interior Minister José Antonio Alvarado directed the party's campaign in the Atlantic Coast, and although he went on unpaid leave beginning February 14, he continued to work out of his office in the ministry. However, the tactic of employing ministers as campaign staff may well have backfired on the PLC: on Corn Island, where Health Minister Lombado Martínez led its campaign, the PLC finished in fourth place. Eliseo Núñez, the PLC's parliamentary leader, described the strategy of employing ministers as campaign staff as a mistake.

Security Issues

On the occasion of the first anniversary of President Alemán's inauguration in January, many commentators cited the demobilization of several armed groups (known as *rearmados*) as his most notable achievement to date. Particularly significant was the disarmament in late 1997 of the Frente Unido Andrés Castro (FUAC), a group of some 100 men alleged to have committed acts of violence and banditry in the central and northern mountains. Critics of the government have argued that there is less to these disarmament efforts than meets the eye, insisting that a number of politically-motivated armed groups are still at large.

Nonetheless, the security environment on March 1 was markedly better than it was during the 1996 or 1994 elections. For example, several reports of an armed group-robbing passersby of their *cédulas* in Paiwas appeared in the Managua press in the weeks before the vote, but IRI observers found that the balloting proceeded uneventfully in the municipality.

A disturbing incident did mar the voting in the community of El Guineo in the municipality of Siuna. IRI observers interviewed a number of people who witnessed an attack in which ballots and other election materials from five JRVs were burned by bandits. Adhering to the standard practice, pollworkers, party pollwatchers, and unarmed electoral police spent the night before the vote guarding the election materials at the school where the five JRVs were based. Around 1 a.m., between two and four armed men appeared and demanded that the pollworkers carry the election materials out of the school. The men were masked and, according to some witnesses, drunk. Once the pollworkers had complied, they set fire to the ballots and other items and disappeared into the night.

CSE officials in Managua responded rapidly to the incident, sending new election materials to El Guineo by helicopter. By 1:30 p.m., the polls had opened, and the voting proceeded normally. No other significant acts of violence were reported.

APPENDIX I
The International Republican Institute
in Nicaragua

With funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), IRI deployed a 14-member delegation of election observers to monitor Nicaragua's March 1, 1998, Atlantic Coast elections. Among the delegates were 12 election law and regional experts from the United States and two representatives of Hagamos Democracia, a Managua-based civic group. IRI was invited to observe the elections by Nicaragua's Supreme Electoral Council (CSE).

Before and after the elections, IRI delegates and staff met with Nicaraguans representing a wide range of institutions and perspectives in Atlantic Coast communities and in Managua. They interviewed officials with the CSE, representatives of many of the political organizations fielding candidates, civic and community leaders, members of the clergy, and private citizens.

On election day, the observers visited scores of polling stations in nine of the 14 municipalities of the Atlantic Coast: Bonanza, Puerto Cabezas, Rosita, Siuna, and Waspám in the RAAN; and Bluefields, Kukra Hill, Laguna de Perlas, and Paiwas in the RAAS. IRI delegates focused on issues such as the secrecy of the vote, adherence to proper voting and counting procedures, the presence and behavior of party pollwatchers, police or military presence at the polls, and any impermissible campaigning. The observers then reconvened in Managua for debriefings and a March 3 press conference at which IRI issued its preliminary statement.

The objectives of IRI's observation project were to lend international support for an open and fully participatory democratic process in Nicaragua; to help ensure a peaceful electoral environment and to deter electoral irregularities and acts of intimidation; and to offer an objective analysis of the electoral system, identify its strengths and weaknesses, and make recommendations for future elections.

Nicaragua was one of the first countries where IRI began conducting programs in the mid-1980s. In addition to major election observation programs focused on the 1990 and 1996 presidential and legislative elections and the 1994 and 1998 Atlantic Coast elections, IRI has worked to strengthen Nicaragua's democratic institutions through programs with local civic organizations.

Hagamos Democracia (HD) is one of these groups. HD was founded in 1994 with the goal of strengthening the country's democratic institutions and values. Currently, IRI and HD are implementing a project designed to give Nicaraguan citizens a voice in the democratic process and ensure that legislators are held accountable by their constituents. To do so, IRI and HD are organizing town-hall meetings with deputies in nine departments, including the historically isolated South Autonomous Region of the Atlantic Coast. These events build on experience garnered through IRI and HD's 1997 town-hall meetings, which brought together several thousand citizens and their representatives in the National Assembly. IRI and HD have also created a National Assembly database to monitor votes and attendance of deputies and to track the progress of legislation - something which has never been done before in Nicaragua.

IRI and HD are also establishing grassroots committees - consisting of civic leaders, members of the clergy, and local government officials - in each of these nine departments to make the town-hall meetings even more substantive than those held last year. Serving as a primary interlocutor for the departmental deputies, the grassroots committees will present specific proposals through town-hall meetings and other forums and follow up on whether the National Assembly has responded. Soon, IRI and HD will be launching a series of radio programs with departmental deputies to be broadcast on their hometown stations.

IRI has conducted over 60 election observation missions. Through these activities, IRI has earned a reputation for impartiality and professionalism in the analysis of this fundamental democratic practice. In Nicaragua, IRI played an important role in making the case for extending voter registration deadlines by two additional

weekends prior to the 1996 elections. This move was particularly significant in the 26 municipalities in the northern and central regions of the country where *ad hoc* registration has traditionally been employed. The people of these war-torn regions in the past have been excluded from the political process, and IRI's efforts helped ensure that they were given a voice in government.

IRI's long experience in Nicaragua also includes party-training and civic education activities conducted with Grupo FUNDEMOS, a local civic organization currently receiving funding from USAID/Managua. In 1995, IRI helped launch Etica y Transparencia, an umbrella group that brings together dozens of non-governmental organizations.

APPENDIX II
Distribution of Voting Documents
in Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast

Geographic Area		RAAN	RAAS excluding Paiwas	Paiwas
Number of registered voters		101,463	58,872	16,275
Registered voters for whom <i>cédulas</i> were produced	Number	81,361	47,215	3,243
	As percentage of all registered voters	80%	80%	20%
Registered voters for whom DSVs* were produced	Number	20,102	11,657	13,032
	As percentage of all registered voters	20%	20%	80%
Registered voters to whom <i>cédulas</i> were delivered	Number	75,197	43,455	3,151
	As percentage of <i>cédulas</i> produced	92%	92%	97%
Registered voters to whom DSVs* were delivered	Number	12,164	6,671	10,503
	As percentage of DSVs* produced	61%	57%	81%
Registered voters who received no voting document	Number	14,102	8,746	2,621
	As percentage of all registered voters	14%	15%	16%

* DSVs: *documentos supletorios de votación*.

Source: CSE

APPENDIX III
Political Organizations Participating
in Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast Elections

Source: CSE

CAMINO CRISTIANO NICARAGÜENSE
Christian Way of Nicaragua

Electoral districts in which candidates were fielded:

RAAN: ALL 15

RAAS: ALL 15

State funding received for 86 candidates:

First disbursement: C\$80,746.79

Second disbursement: C\$89,413.86 for 87 candidates

FRENTE SANDINISTA DE LIBERACION NACIONAL (FSLN)
Sandinista Front for National Liberation

Electoral districts in which candidates were fielded:

RAAN: ALL 15

RAAS: ALL 15

State funding received for 90 candidates:

First disbursement: C\$84,502.46

Second disbursement: C\$92,497.09

Additional funding received in proportion to 33 seats won in 1994:

First disbursement: C\$392,592.50

Second disbursement: C\$392,592.92

PARTIDO MOVIMIENTO DE UNIDAD REVOLUCIONARIA (MUR)
Party of the Revolutionary Unity Movement

Electoral districts in which candidates were fielded:

RAAN: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15

RAAS: ALL 15

State funding received for 74 candidates:

First disbursement: NA

Second disbursement: C\$76,053.17

PARTIDO LIBERAL CONSTITUCIONALISTA (PLC)
Liberal Constitutionalist Party

Electoral districts in which candidates were fielded:

RAAN: ALL 15
RAAS: ALL 15

State funding received for 90 candidates:

First disbursement: C\$84,502.46
Second disbursement: C\$91,469.35 for 89 candidates

Additional funding received in proportion to 37 seats won in 1994:

First disbursement: C\$440,179.90
Second disbursement: C\$440,179.94

PARTIDO LIBERAL NACIONALISTA (PLN)
Liberal Nationalist Party

Electoral districts in which candidates were fielded:

RAAN: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14
RAAS: ALL 15

State funding received for 86 candidates:

First disbursement: C\$80,746.79
Second disbursement: C\$88,386.11

PARTIDO UNIONISTA CENTROAMERICANO (PUCA)
Central American Unity Party

Electoral districts in which candidates were fielded:

RAAN: 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14
RAAS: ALL 15

State funding received for 70 candidates:

First disbursement: C\$65,724.13
Second disbursement: C\$71,942.18

ALIANZA COSTEÑA (AC)
Coast Alliance

Consists of four parties:

- \$ Partido Liberal Independiente (PLI)
Liberal Independent Party
- \$ Movimiento Democrático Nicaragüense (MDN)
Nicaraguan Democratic Movement

\$ Partido Conservador de Nicaragua (PCN)
Conservative Party of Nicaragua
\$ Partido de los Pueblos Costeños (PPC)
Party of the Coastal Peoples

Electoral districts in which candidates were fielded:

RAAN: ALL 15
RAAS: ALL 15

State funding received for 90 candidates:

First disbursement: C\$84,502.46
Second disbursement: C\$90,441.60 for 88 candidates

PARTIDO MOVIMIENTO DE UNIDAD COSTEÑA (PAMUC)
Party of the Coast Unity Movement

Electoral districts in which candidates were fielded:

RAAN: ALL 15
RAAS: NONE

State funding received for 45 candidates:

First disbursement: C\$42,251.23
Second disbursement: C\$40,082.07 for 39 candidates

PARTIDO INDÍGENA MULTIÉTNICO (PIM)
Indigenous Multiethnic Party

Electoral districts in which candidates were fielded:

RAAN: ALL 15
RAAS: ALL 15

State funding received for 90 candidates:

First disbursement: C\$84,502.46
Second disbursement: C\$90,441.60 for 88 candidates

PARTIDO REGIONAL NUEVA ALTERNATIVA (PARNA)
Regional New Alternative Party

Electoral districts in which candidates were fielded:

RAAN: ALL 15
RAAS: NONE

State funding received for 45 candidates:

First disbursement: C\$42,215.23
Second disbursement: C\$46,248.55

PARTIDO AUTÓNOMO DE LA RAAS (PAR)
RAAS Autonomy Party

Electoral districts in which candidates were fielded:

RAAN: NONE

RAAS: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15

State funding received for 32 candidates:

First disbursement: C\$30,045.32

Second disbursement: C\$32,887.86

MISKITOS ASLA TAKANKA NICARAGUA RA (MISATAN)

Electoral districts in which candidates were fielded:

RAAN: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8

RAAS: NONE

State funding received for 24 candidates:

First disbursement: C\$22,533.99

Second disbursement: C\$24,665.89

EX-COMBATIENTES POR LA AUTONOMIA DE LA COSTA ATLÁNTICA (ECA)
Ex-Combatants for the Autonomy of the Atlantic Coast

Electoral districts in which candidates were fielded:

RAAN: 8

RAAS: NONE

State funding received for 3 candidates:

First disbursement: C\$2,816.75

Second disbursement: C\$3,083.24

MOVIMIENTO INDÍGENA AL RESCATE (MIRE)
Indigenous Rescue Movement

Electoral districts in which candidates were fielded:

RAAN: ALL 15

RAAS: NONE

State funding received for 45 candidates:

First disbursement: C\$42,251.23

Second disbursement: C\$45,220.80 for 44 candidates

YAPTY TASBA MASRAKA NANIH ASLA TAKANKA (YATAMA)

Electoral districts in which candidates were fielded:

RAAN: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 13, 14, 15

RAAS: 1, 2, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11, 15

State funding received:

First disbursement: C\$30,984.23 for 33 candidates in the RAAN
and C\$25,350.74 for 27 candidates in the RAAS

Second disbursement: C\$32,887.86 for 32 candidates in the RAAN
and C\$27,749.13 for 27 candidates in the RAAS

Additional funding received in proportion to seats won in 1994:

In the RAAN for 7 seats:

First disbursement: C\$83,277.29

Second disbursement: C\$83,277.29

In the RAAS for 5 seats:

First disbursement: C\$59,482.28

Second disbursement: C\$59,483.78

MOVIMIENTO JUNTOS HACIA EL DOS MIL (MJHD)

Together to 2000 Movement

Electoral districts in which candidates were fielded:

RAAN: NONE

RAAS: 3, 15

State funding received for 6 candidates:

First disbursement: C\$5,633.50

Second disbursement: C\$6,166.47

MOVIMIENTO LIBERAL REGIONAL (MLR)

Regional Liberal Movement

Electoral districts in which candidates were fielded:

RAAN: NONE

RAAS: 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 11, 12, 13, 14

State funding received for 25 candidates:

First disbursement: C\$23,472.90

Second disbursement: C\$25,693.64

INDIGENOUS MOVEMENT SEVEN TENDER LEAVES (IMSTL)

Electoral districts in which candidates were fielded:

RAAN: NONE

RAAS: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 15

State funding received for 36 candidates:

First disbursement: C\$33,800.98

Second disbursement: C\$34,943.3530,984.23 for 34 candidates