TOWARD GROWTH WITH EQUITY
A chat with Nicaraguan presidential candidate
Eduardo Montealegre Rivas

By Jacqueline Nalbert Brysacz*

On June 15, 2006, Eduardo Montealegre Rivas, a leading presidential candidate, representing the Nicaraguan Liberal Alliance (ALN) gave a talk at The Center for Latin American Issues highlighting his platform as he heads into the November 5 elections. After his initial remarks, Montealegre opened up the floor for a lively discussion with the audience, which included former and current members of the US State Department, InterAmerican Development Bank, development agencies, non-governmental organizations, and GW students and faculty.

Mr. Montealegre, the leader in the presidential polls of Nicaragua’s 5.5 million people, began his remarks by noting the tremendous recovery Nicaragua has made since the end of Sandinista rule in 1990. During the 1980s, Nicaragua’s debt skyrocketed, export earnings fell, and inflation hit a record high 40,000%. Even more devastating was the death of 50,000 citizens and the emigration of thousands more of Nicaraguan nationals. In the last 15 years the nation has worked tirelessly, he stated, to return to its 1979 economic levels. For the first time, economic growth now outpaces population growth, a trend Montealegre plans to see continue.

Despite the great strides Nicaragua has made in the past 15 years, Montealegre pointed out a number of obstacles the nation faces on the road to prosperity. First, 80% of the population subsists on less than $2 a day. The public is becoming impatient with the high levels of poverty as in need of new broader, sustainable projects to create better lives for themselves. Second, the nation faces the danger of the return of Daniel Ortega and intervention in the Nicaraguan political campaign by populist Venezuelan leader President Hugo Chavez. Montealegre stated that the return of Ortega would usher in the kind of corruption that damaged the Nicaraguan economy and fractured the careful social balance within the country in the 1980s. He stated that Nicaraguans must not be swayed by the incentives Sandinista-controlled municipalities have been receiving from Chavez, such as the gift of 30,000 metric tons of urea, a fertilizer used by farmers. He stated that the in the coming election, the people of Nicaragua face a “decision between the past and the future”; the past being the corrupt, populist tactics of the Sandinistas and the future being broader, deeper growth based on western democratic values.
Mr. Montealegre outlined three pillars of his current campaign: a focus on health and education, broad economic growth, and strong, transparent government institutions. First, he stated that 880,000 Nicaraguans, or 18% of the population, lack a primary education. He plans to double the budget of the ministry of education, noting that education is an investment that will enable the government to spend less on public health and other sectors in the future. He also proposed a change from curative medicine to preventative medicine in the public sector, as both a money-saving venture and a way to improve the lives of the Nicaraguan people. In pursuit of broader, deeper economic growth, Montealegre proposed a focus on the small farmer, who constitutes the majority of the population. He plans to increase productivity with improvements in technological capacity and micro financing. Finally, Montealegre would seek better transparency in government organizations with a revitalization of checks and balances among the various branches of government. One example of this would be returning the power of nominating Supreme Court justices to the office of the president. Under Ortega, this power was handed over to the National Assembly, which also holds the power to approve the nomination.

Mr. Montealegre opened up the floor to questions from the audience, fielding questions ranging from politics to the environment. Many questions revolved around the production of biofuels as a potential energy source for the nation as well as a potential export. Montealegre noted his campaign’s program of biofuel production entitled “Let’s Plant Fuel” as evidence of his platform’s dedication to a sustainable environmental policy balanced with liberal economic growth. He also stated that in the face of possible corruption and intervention in the election by Chavez, the freeness and fairness of the elections would be preserved by the will of the Nicaraguan people and hoped for by supervision by the Organization of American States, the National Democratic Institute, and other non-partisan institutions. In the face of these many challenges, Mr. Montealegre concluded that he is “the candidate of the Nicaraguan people,” and is confident that this will prove victorious in November.

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