



## Race for president

Barack Obama is the only black Senator in the US and only the fifth in history. The UK currently has five black Members of Parliament. France has none.

# The reconciliation of Daniel Ortega

Nicaragua

Daniel Ortega, was the leader of the left-wing Sandinista government from 1985 to 1990, a period that saw the country descend into chaos when the US backed the armed Contras movement. But now, after a surprise election victory, he is back in power as President of Nicaragua. Yet people are sceptical. Perhaps because after years of promises, half of them still live below the poverty line. The country's neighbour on the poor list is bottom-ranking Haiti.

Daniel Ortega's home is well guarded. The five-metre-high concrete barricade surrounding his estate in the centre of Managua is topped with coils of barbed wire and has a watchtower every 100 metres. The security is necessary not least because when you take things from people, they typically want them back.

As the head of Nicaragua's Marxist Sandinista regime in the 1980s, Daniel Ortega did a lot of taking – including seizing the compound from a banker named Jaime Morales, who went on to join the US-backed Contra rebels.

Having lost the presidency in 1990, Ortega underwent a 16-year reinvention before winning it back in November 2006. His campaign focused on fighting poverty in what is the second poorest country in the Americas, and mending old wounds from a 10-year civil war. With this in mind, he even recruited Morales to run as his vice-president.

The word *reconciliación* is emblazoned on dozens of giant campaign billboards still hanging over Managua's main boulevard two months after Ortega and Morales won the election. Carr Masaya is one of the few streets in central Managua with a name, the rest being an unsigned web of alleys that survived a catastrophic earthquake in 1972.

During the 30 years of political upheaval that followed, the streets were

renamed so many times that taxi drivers now reference addresses by their proximity to prominent hotels and restaurants. The official address of Carlos Chamorro's leftist weekly news magazine, *Confidencial*, in the leafy Altamira district, is "two blocks south of the Cablevision building".

Chamorro is no stranger to reconciliation. Two of his siblings ran the Contras' newspaper in the 1980s, while he ran the Sandinista one. When the centre-right National Opposition Union defeated the Sandinistas in the 1990 presidential election, it was Chamorro's mother, Violeta Barrios de Chamorro who took over, becoming the first female head of state in Latin America. The mishmash of streets, Chamorro says, is a metaphor for the confused state of Ortega's Nicaragua.

"He is supposed to be a leftist moderniser but he is a traditional *caudillo*," Chamorro says, referring to the charismatic, populist autocrats who ruled Latin America in the 1800s. "Has he gone into a religious transformation or not? I don't know. It is really irrelevant."

Two months after his election win, it is hard to tell what Ortega wants to do. He has jeopardised foreign investment by striking up relations with anti-America cronies such as Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Venezuela's Hugo Chávez. At the same time, Ortega has promised to honour the Central American Free Trade Agreement with the US, Nicaragua's largest trading partner, and keep the country's booming free market rolling.

In Managua's midday heat, the poor who voted Ortega into power with a scant 38 per cent of the vote retire to cafeteria-style *comiderias*. A line of cooks serve fried plantains, *gallo pinto* (rice and beans) and stew-like *carne tapada* as Juan Jose, a 24-year-old car-parts salesman, explains how the working class doubts that Ortega will deliver his pledges of education, jobs and social services. "It is very difficult because we know his history," he



says. "It's easy to promise anything, but to do it is something else."

The sentiment is echoed elsewhere in the city. At a nightclub in the smart Los Robles quarter, a group of wealthy college girls list the houses and businesses Ortega confiscated from their families in the 1980s and say their worst fear is that he will not stand down at the end of his five-year term. A police officer patrolling a dusty downtown barrio counters that the military will check Ortega's power, but says that changes for the working class so far are nonexistent.

A near-reckless free market has transformed the centre of Managua into something like a seedy Orlando suburb, with TGI Friday's, Payless Shoes, Burger King and troops of teenage girls casing the new Santo Domingo mall. Opposite





#### Population

Nicaragua is the largest country in Central America and the second poorest in the Americas. Half of its 5.6 million people live below the poverty line and there is more than 50 per cent unemployment. Its wealth distribution is one of the most uneven in the world.

#### Production

The country has few natural resources, and services account for 56 per cent of

the GDP, with industry (27 per cent) and agriculture (16 per cent) following. Industries include textiles, chemicals, food processing, petroleum refining and distribution, machinery and wood production.

#### Imports and exports

The US is Nicaragua's most important trading partner, receiving 60 per cent of the country's exports and accounting for almost 20 per cent of imports,

followed by Mexico and Venezuela (both around 10 per cent).

#### Ethnicity

Nicaragua's population is 69 per cent *mestizo* (mixed Amerindian and white), 17 per cent white, 9 per cent black and 5 per cent Amerindian. The official language is Spanish, with English and indigenous languages also spoken.

Source: [cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook](http://cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook)

Carr Masaya, where prostitutes laze about, foreign businessmen stroll between casinos, the five-star hotel and a line of American-themed sports bars.

Everything in the country seems to be for sale. Two of Nicaragua's largest banks recently sold to Citigroup and General Electric. Wal-Mart purchased a controlling interest in the Pali discount chain last March and maintains a factory on the outskirts of Managua, as do Levi's, Ralph Lauren and Unilever. The Casa Presidencial office building where Ortega's administration works was a gift from the watchful Taiwanese government.

The business community feels reassured that Ortega is far from the Marxist he once was, claims Israel Lewites of the breakaway Sandinista Renovation Movement. "The people around Ortega are not

revolutionaries or left-wing thinkers any more," Lewites says. "They are entrepreneurs. They are millionaires. They are guys that have the companies. They don't want changes in Nicaragua. They will fight to keep things as they are."

In a city of contradictions, none is more blatant than the view from Martha Eugene Jarquin's stoop. She has lived a few blocks from Casa Presidencial in one of Managua's worst slums for almost as long as Ortega has occupied Morales's home. Her family of eight survives on \$135 (£100) a month in what amounts to a hole in the wall of a condemned building. Before every election, Jarquin says, politicians canvass the neighbourhood, promising better living conditions. The only follow-through she has seen in 20 years, she says, are two toilets. — PF

## Green-sky thinking USA

Downtown LA's first eco-neighbourhood is ready to move into. South is a complex of three elegant towers in South Park. Incredibly, this is the first residential development of any kind in the city in over 20 years. It's also the first residential LEED-certified project in LA. (LEED is the national standard for sustainable construction. Portland and Seattle have the most LEED-certified projects in the US).

The developer of South is renowned for creating environmentally sustainable communities. The South Group's Jim Atkins says, "We're adding 40,000 people inside the city and reducing traffic in and out of downtown LA by 10 per cent."

"Other green elements of the project include using recycled or renewable materials, recycling construction waste and using energy-efficient insulation and glass. We also create spaces for people to sit outside. When all is said and done, we'll have 700 new homes, all within a five- or 10-minute walk of most downtown jobs."

At the time of going to press, there was just one unit left in the first tower – an 80 sq m unit on the 10th floor, for sale at \$589,000 (£460,000). — AG

## Hugo's there

### Venezuela

**President Hugo Chávez has played host to some unusual guests:**

**Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, President of Iran, visited January 2007**

Staged talks to boost ties with Latin America and reduce the amount of crude oil on the market.

**Harry Belafonte, singer and activist, January 2006**

Belafonte and actor Danny Glover were guests on the president's weekly broadcast, *Alo Presidente* where Belafonte called Bush "the greatest terrorist in the world".

**Cindy Sheehan, US anti-war activist, January 2006**

Sheehan, who is a fierce critic of President Bush, met Chávez during the World Social Forum, an annual gathering of anti-war and anti-globalisation activists.

#### Shakira

Visited Caracas last November during her worldwide "Oral Fixation" tour. When she had difficulty finding a concert venue, Chávez opened a military air base and later joked that he might sneak away from his bodyguards to attend the show. — PF