

Panama Report by Carlos Wesley

The U.S. Establishment in a bind

With the coming elections, the pretext for U.S. sanctions—that Delvalle is still the legitimate President—will soon be gone.

It has been almost two years since Washington launched in earnest its campaign to oust from power the government of Panama and the commander of its Defense Force (PDF), Gen. Manuel Noriega. Ronald Reagan is no longer President of the United States. His administration's point-man to destabilize Panama, Elliott Abrams, is also out of office. But Noriega is still commander of the PDF.

The people of Panama are now preparing to hold elections May 7, in accordance with their Constitution. With the official closing of the nomination period Feb. 7, three major forces emerged to dispute the presidency, vice presidencies, and seats in the National Legislative Assembly and municipal governments.

The elections present a major problem for the U.S. Establishment. Whatever the results, this will bring to an end the fiction that ousted President Eric Delvalle is "the constitutional President of Panama," adopted by the Reagan administration to justify economic sanctions.

The forces backing the nationalism of President Manuel Solís Palma and General Noriega, united in the Coalition for National Liberation (COLINA), selected Carlos Duque as its presidential candidate. Duque is head of the ruling Revolutionary Democratic Party (PRD).

The opposition is split. The Panamenista Party, the largest opposition party, selected Hildebrando Nicosia as its presidential nominee, while the Democratic Opposition Alliance (ADO) nominated Guillermo Endara, a member of the Panamenista Party

until his recent expulsion on charges of taking orders from the U.S. embassy.

The *Washington Post* acknowledged the truth of those charges Jan. 21. "The U.S. embassy here has been promoting opposition unity and participation in the election in an effort to breathe new life into a listless anti-Noriega movement." Endara himself said that, if elected President, he might seek to reopen negotiations with the United States on the Canal Treaties.

From the beginning of the crisis with the United States, the Panamanian government has insisted that the U.S. Establishment push to oust Noriega is aimed at imposing a "docile government" to renegotiate the treaties, to allow the U.S. to retain control of the Canal and/or its military bases beyond the year 2000, when the treaties mandate U.S. withdrawal.

The fact that the United States is openly backing the ADO opposition alliance pretty much dooms its chances in the elections. Even more embarrassing for the United States is that one of Endara's running mates is Guillermo ("Billy") Ford, candidate for second vice president.

Ford, together with Roberto ("Bobby") Eisenmann and Carlos Rodríguez, two other major players in the ADO alliance, was a co-owner of Miami's Dadeland National Bank at the time when that bank was engaged in money laundering for convicted drug trafficker, Antonio ("Tony") Fernández. The transcripts of the 1985 federal trial of Fernández's accomplices (he pleaded guilty) contains an exchange between the prosecutor and

one of Fernández's co-conspirators, naming Eisenmann, Ford, and Rodríguez as accomplices at the bank.

It was proven during the trial that drug trafficker Fernández was also a co-owner of Dadeland National Bank, which was again placed under investigation for drug money laundering in October 1988.

While Fernandez is currently serving a 50-year sentence in a U.S. federal penitentiary, Billy Ford is running for Panama's vice presidency with U.S. blessing.

So much for the nonsense that the United States wants Noriega out because he is "involved in drug trafficking."

By the end of this year, the United States must name a Panamanian national, nominated by the Panamanian government, to be the new administrator of the canal. Since there is little likelihood that the U.S.-sponsored opposition could win, the U.S. strategy seems to be, as was the case with Marcos's ouster in the Philippines, to scream "fraud" and disrupt the elections.

Endara's other running mate, Christian Democrat Ricardo Arias Calderón, candidate for first vice president, described the plan in an interview with the Venezuelan daily *El Nacional* Dec. 24: strikes, street confrontations, and other disruptive actions to create the perception that the elections are not legitimate.

A parallel tactic is to "Latinize" the attack on Panama, so that the question of U.S. compliance with the Canal Treaties is no longer so clearly the issue. The Establishment's "Great White Hope" in this is Venezuela's new President Carlos Andrés Pérez, who used his inauguration Feb. 2 to make clear that he would seek to paint the Panamanians in the same "undemocratic" colors as the U.S. State Department has tried to do.