



PALABRAS DEL PRESIDENTE DE LA REPÚBLICA
ENRIQUE BOLAÑOS GEYER

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR DEMOCRACY

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1. Democracy has few more formidable enemies than corrupt democrats.
2. Since the end of the Cold war, and the first free elections in Nicaragua beginning a democratic process 13 years ago today, democracy as a form of government has spread to more places on earth than ever before.
3. However, in many of these new or restored democracies, the promise of prosperity associated with a democratic form of Government has not been fulfilled. And, in these shortcomings, few bear more responsibility than corrupt democrats!
4. Corrupt democrats are politicians affiliated to democratic parties who have been duly elected or appointed to a position in a democratic administration, who then turn around and rob the poor, stealing the people's money.
5. Nothing discredits democracy as a form of government faster in the eyes of the governed than to witness government officials stealing from the poor with impunity.
6. So, in new democracy or restored democracy after another, free elections after free elections have been held with disappointingly little improvement in the lives of everyday people. Too often, the primary reason for this state of affairs is that democratic leaders are either involved in corruption themselves or tolerate corruption, because they are afraid to pay the political costs of tackling this timeless scourge.
7. Indeed, corruption is difficult to defeat. In nations with a culture for impunity there are significant risks for any leader who dares to say: ENOUGH!
8. Corruption has a constituency of powerful beneficiaries. These beneficiaries have no concern for democracy and take no pity on their fellow citizens who are living under the poverty line.
9. They are thus contributing, with their greed and arrogance, to undermining the nation's faith in democracy. Furthermore, these powerful enemies of democracy flourish under a culture of impunity such as the one we had in Nicaragua for so long.
10. When I became President, a little over a year ago, I knew that if Nicaragua were to advance into the XXI century, if democracy was to take root, the rule of law had to become deep-seated.
11. Soon after I was elected, some people advised me not to pursue transparency during the first year in my administration. They warned me that, in spite of my having been elected with 54% of the popular vote (and over 93% of registered voters went to the polls in Nicaragua during this election), my Administration was weak in the National Assembly, where we could count on the votes of maybe nine out of ninety two members.
12. Many urged caution, that we should "save our strength for later", they warned us that our fragile institutions would not be "up to the task".

13. Later I found, to my chagrin, that my predecessor and running mate of 1996 was deeply and grossly involved in dreadful acts of corruption.

14. I ought not, I would not renege on my campaign promise, and I could not in essence balk on my deeply held and long cherished value, that “no one would be above the law; neither then President Alemán, nor Vice-President Rizo, nor former president Ortega, nor myself, nor anyone else”.

15. I tried to start a light at the end of the tunnel for hope, to shine through to those who despair in hunger and disease.

16. Therefore, I want to tell you today about some of the lessons I have learned. There is only one right time for the president of a democratic nation to fight corruption, and that is: always! Starting from the inaugural speech, I charged forward and put my faith in God and the Nicaraguan people.

17. Yes, we had faith, we knew that against all odds we would win this battle to begin to put an end to Nicaragua’s well entrenched culture of impunity.

18. Fourteen months later, I can tell you that our faith has paid off. Granted, I am not saying we have solved the quandary of government corruption in Nicaragua, far from it. That is still an ongoing war.

19. We still have a tremendous amount of work to do; there are important battles to be fought, for instance, in taking party politics out of the Supreme Court rulings, the Electoral College (a permanent 5 man structure in Nicaragua), the Comptroller General (another 5 man structure) and the assembly itself where congress-people are elected by party slates rather than through face-off elections.

20. However, I can say this: We have broken the culture of impunity in Nicaragua. We have shown our people that the rule of law in a democracy applies equally to the rich and powerful as to the poor and dispossessed.

21. We have shown that no matter how powerful the position you hold – up to the highest position in the land, if you steal from the people you will face justice.

22. “The Economist” of last week, when talking about corruption in Central America reads “Some governments are trying to answer that. Nicaragua has charged former president Arnoldo Alemán, and several associates, with corruption.

23. That has carried a cost: Mr. Alemán’s supporters in Congress have held up several government’s reforms in retaliation”.

24. I will not purport that the first year of my Administration has been easy. I have shared private moments of personal anguish with my wife Lila T. and some of my closest collaborators. I have lost some of my friends; I even lost my party who is now in opposition. The correct path is difficult, but it must be pursued.

25. For that reason, it is specially gratifying to receive, on behalf of the people of Nicaragua who have supported me throughout this struggle, the Democracy Service Medal presented to me by the National Endowment for Democracy. The honor you have granted upon me makes me redouble the pledge I made during the campaign, “that I would be serving my people, rather than using my people to serve myself”.

26. I said before, that I had learned some lessons. Here is a sampling:

I. To establish the rule of law, one must remain within the law. Machiavelli was wrong; the end does not justify the means. You cannot break the law or ignore constitutional precepts in order to triumph over the forces of corruption. You cannot bribe a congressman or buy his or her vote in order to impeach a corrupt official for you may become tainted with corruption as well.

The impeaching vote on 10th December was arranged by appealing to the conscience of an honest man who thought “*he had to do the proper thing*”. He became vote number 47, the magic number needed for impeachment.

II. The second lesson I will share with you is: do not try to fight this grand battle alone. To win this battle, a democratically elected government must ally itself with Civil Society and with like-minded governments.

27. In Nicaragua, the support of Civil Society has been critical to our success. The Government has worked with vibrant and dynamic NGO’s, such as “*Conciencia Nacional*”, “*Ética y Transparencia* – (local chapter of Transparency International) and others to rally popular support behind the anti-corruption campaign.

28. It has also relied on the analysis and advice provided by the National Social and Economic Planning Council, a consultative body established by constitutional mandate.

29. Another key element in our ongoing struggle is the moral, and sometimes, economic support received “*dripping in*” rather than “*flowing in*” from other democratic nations: Taiwan, Japan, The European Union, Norway, Canada, Switzerland and the United States.

30. Let me take a moment to say a word of thanks for the moral support received from

the United States throughout this ordeal. There are men and women standing in this room today, officials of the State Department, the National Security Council, the Treasury Department, HUD and from the US Congress who have and are providing my government with unstinting moral support.

31. There are men and women who have recognized our struggle, they have made it America’s fight, they have made it democracy’s fight.

32. Nevertheless, the eyes of the continent, I may even venture to say, the eyes of the world are still turned to this unfinished struggle. If we fail, transparency in the world would be set back, those leaders in the future, contemplating the task ahead would think it worthless. There are too many dangers, too many doubts, too many hesitations, it is a lonely path.

33. For if it is true that man does not live by bread alone, it is also true that man does not live without bread!

34. We have faith democracy will find a way to save democracy, but time may be running out.

35. What we are doing to replace the culture of impunity with a culture of transparency and service, will pay in the medium-term allowing economic growth to take place by reassuring investors about the business environment they will find when they take the risk of going to Nicaragua.

36. However, the results of corruption in the 80’s, the results of more recent corruption and the demands by our US friends regarding outstanding property issues have combined to create an asphyxiating internal debt that threatens to put out the light at the end of the tunnel.

37. Let us act together to make sure that does not happen.
38. God Bless the Unites States of America,
God Bless each and every one of you, and
God Bless Nicaragua

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