

# Elections in the Caribbean Coast: Drugs, Abandonment and Apathy

*Another election for the autonomous governments of Nicaragua's Caribbean region will be held next March. Before evaluating the performance of the previous governments and the competing parties' proposals—assuming they will eventually be unveiled—we need to take another look at this abandoned half of the country.*

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Seldom has Nicaragua's Caribbean region been so important to the country's political class. It has nothing to do with the coast's endemic hunger or generalized poverty, or with the autonomous regime theoretically enjoyed by its ethnic communities. The politicians from the Pacific don't waste their time on problems so alien to them. What makes the region appealing right now is that it's upcoming elections, on March 5, 2006, offer them a chance to measure their relative strength. The Liberals from the Constitutionalist Liberal Party (PLC) want to show banker Eduardo Montealegre who has the Right's votes, and Daniel Ortega and Herty Lewites want to show each other who owns the Sandinista electorate.

It will be the fifth election of the respective Regional Councils in the North and South Atlantic Autonomous Regions (RAAN and RAAS) since the autonomous government was instituted in 1990. Article 16 of the Autonomy Statute stipulates that the Regional Council and Regional Coordinator will serve as the highest authorities of the corresponding region in their respective spheres. Article 19 adds that each Regional Council will consist of 45 members elected by universal, equal, direct, free and secret vote, in which all ethnic communities from the respective region must be represented according to the system determined by the country's Electoral Law. The statute also grants the elected National Assembly representatives for each region voice and vote in their region's Council.

In practice, the central government has systematically impeded these "highest authorities" from exercising the 16 functions the law attributes to them. For example, they must legally "participate in the preparation, planning, implementation and follow-up of the economic, social and cultural policies and programs affecting or concerning their region," but this right is still only a dream for the coast governments.

## **Nicaragua's highest demographic growth**

Nicaragua's two autonomous regions account for 45.8% of the national territory (59,673.60 km<sup>2</sup>), of which the RAAN occupies 24.7% (32,127.28 km<sup>2</sup>) and the RAAS 21.1% (27,546.32 km<sup>2</sup>).

Three different indigenous peoples (Ramas, Mayangnas/Sumus and Miskitus) and three non-indigenous ethnic communities (Creoles, mestizos and Garífunas) live in this half of the country, distributed as follows: 72.54% mestizos, 18.04% Miskitus, 6.22% Creoles, 2.45% Mayangnas, 0.43% Garífunas and 0.32% Ramas. Considering the main population centers, mestizos predominate in the mining towns, Miskitus in Bilwi (Puerto Cabezas) and Waspam, Creoles in Pearl Lagoon and Corn Island, and mestizos and Creoles in Bluefields. Most of the roughly 1,300 Ramas live on or near Rama Cay in Bluefields Bay and the 3,500 Garífunas in several communities on the western banks of Pearl Lagoon, all of which are in the RAAS.

The Miskitu population predominates in the RAAN (45%), followed by Spanish-speaking Mestizos (38%), English-speaking black Creoles (14%) and the Twahka- and Panamahka-speaking Mayangnas (3%). Miskitus represent 43% of the population in the municipality of Puerto Cabezas and 40% in that of Waspam. Nearly 84% of all Miskitus live in these two municipalities, the former covering part of the northern seaboard area and the latter the Río Coco, or Wankí, as the Miskitus historically call the river that divides Nicaragua from Honduras. They are also found in Rosita (9.3%), Siuna (3.1%), Prinzapolka (2.3%) and Bonanza (1.5%).

Most Mayangnas are found in the municipality of Rosita (57.3%), and are also found in Waspam (18%), Bonanza (18.4%), Siuna (5%), Prinzapolka (1%) and Bilwi (0.3%), all in the RAAN. Some 1,000 Ulwa-speaking Mayangnas live in the RAAS community of Karawala. Another 2,000 are settled along the Río Bocay in the department of Jinotega, which is not governed by the coast's Autonomy Statute, but they maintain close ethnic, cultural and ancestral relations with the groups from the Autonomous Regions.

The Creole population in the RAAN is found mainly in the municipality of Puerto Cabezas (69.6%), Siuna (29.2%), Bonanza (6%) and Rosita (5.2%), although they are notably absent from the municipality of Waspam. Mestizos make up 92.7% of the total population in the mining towns of Siuna, Bonanza and Rosita and their outskirts. In terms of municipal distribution, 51.5% are found in Siuna, 24.8% in Rosita, 16.5% in Bonanza, 4.8% in Puerto Cabezas and 2.5% in Prinzapolka.

According to the population projections for 2004 by the Nicaraguan Institute of Censuses and Statistics (INEC), the total population in the two autonomous regions is 645,680 (72% mestizos, 18% Miskitus, 7% Creoles, 2% Mayangnas, 0.60% Garífunas and 0.40% Ramas). These two regions have the highest demographic growth in the country, with a rate of 219.5% during the 1971-1995 inter-census period and an annual growth rate of around 4.6% during the nineties, exceeding the national median of 3.1%. While the national figure is largely synonymous with the birth rate, the former has been skewed by the waves of mestizo migration to the region in recent years.

## **15 electoral districts in each region**

The Electoral Law determined 15 electoral districts per autonomous region, each of which elects 3 Regional Council members. In the RAAS, the municipality of Bluefields has 7, thus contributing 21 of the 45 Council members, and the other 8 districts are distributed in the municipalities of

Paiwas, Kukra Hill, Pearl Lagoon (which gets 2), Corn Island, Desembocadura del Río Grande, la Cruz de Río Grande and Tortuguero. Six of the 15 in the RAAS are specifically designated by the predominance of a given ethnic group, requiring that the first candidate on any party slate must be from that group: Pearl Lagoon's district 8 for Miskitus, Corn Island for Creoles, Pearl Lagoon's district 11 for Mayangnas, Bluefields' district 12 (which includes Rama Cay and surrounding communities) for Ramas and Tortuguero for mestizos.

In the RAAN, Waspam has 3 electoral districts (the upper, lower and central part of the river), Puerto Cabezas has 5, Siuna 4 and Rosita, Prinzapolka and Bonanza 1 each. A Miskitu must head the parties' slates in Waspam's district 1, a Creole in Puerto Cabezas' district 7, a Mayangna in Rosita and a mestizo in Prinzapolka.

**Table 1 Caribbean Population**

	TOTAL			URBAN			RURAL		
	Both sexes	Men	Women	Both sexes	Men	Women	Both sexes	Men	Women
<b>RAAN</b>	256,440	129,892	126,548	73,415	35,589	37,826	183,025	94,303	88,722
<b>RAAS</b>	389,240	196,588	192,652	167,780	82,828	84,952	221,460	113,760	107,700
<b>Total</b>	645,680	326,480	319,200	241,195	118,417	122,778	404,485	208,063	196,422

According to the Autonomy Statute, only the inhabitants of eight of the RAAS' 12 municipalities participate in the regional elections (Bluefields, Kukra Hill, Laguna de Perlas, la Desembocadura del Río Grande de Matagalpa, La Cruz de Río Grande, Tortuguero, Corn Island and Bocana de Paiwas, the last one incorporated in the 1998 elections). The 4 municipalities still excluded are Nueva Guinea, Rama, Muelle de los Bueyes and El Ayote. In the RAAN, the residents of the recently created municipality of Mulukukú do not participate. The original reason given for this exclusion was that the newly-created regional governments did not have the infrastructure to govern these municipalities, which are situated along the western edge of the autonomous regions. But they also contain almost exclusively mestizo populations that have migrated from the Pacific in recent decades, do not share the historical formation of the coast populations and thus have little appreciation of the importance of autonomy.

## Huge electoral abstention

The region's tough political, social and economic reality is very probably the main cause of the growing disinterest in elections among coast voters since 1990. Even when they don't hold their regional authorities responsible for the disaster, they simply view it as useless to elect them, because it's the distant central government in Managua that really runs everything anyway. As a result, abstention has almost tripled over the four elections between 1990 and 2002:

Table 2 Electoral Abstention

	1990	1994	1998	2002
	22%	26%	43%	62.5%

The healthy participation in 1990 is probably explained by the fact that the regional elections coincided with the general elections that year, which has not happened since because the President and National Assembly representative have five-year terms, while the autonomous governments serve a four-year term. Even the municipal elections, which are also every four years, are staggered two years apart from the regional elections. The absurdity of the 1995 changes in the electoral law that created this situation is reflected not only in the exorbitant cost of so many separate elections, but also in the fact that the coast has been expected to go to the polls eight years out of the past ten.

Regional election abstention tends to be higher in the south than in the north: in 2002 it was just over 45% in the RAAN while it was more than 75% in the RAAS. Participation in the municipal elections two years later was greater and the abstention gap between the two autonomous regions closed considerably: nearly 52% in the RAAN and 59% in the RAAS.

The turnout tends to be higher for general elections. In the RAAN it was 64% in 1984, 66% in 1990 and 69% in 1996. In the RAAS it was 60% in 1984 and 73% in 1990, only to plummet to a little over 52% in 1996.

Shortly after learning the results of the 2002 regional elections, Miriam Hooker, who heads the Civic and Autonomous Human Rights Center (CEDEHCA) on the coast, commented: “We coast people are tired of the promises made by the central government and central institutions during elections, because they don’t respond to local people’s greatest needs. This is reflected in the United Nations Human Development Report, which notes that 12 of the country’s 25 poorest municipalities are in the Caribbean Coast. As long as these significant equity gaps continue, we coast people will have to think whether it’s worth getting involved in processes that don’t respond to our needs.” In the opinion of Mauricio Zúñiga, who headed the election observer team deployed by the Institute for the Development of Democracy (IPADE), “When the electoral mechanism doesn’t bring political and economic transformations and the authorities don’t promote changes to reduce the region’s poverty level, it discourages the citizenry from turning out to elect its authorities.”

**The penetration of drugs:  
From “God’s gift” to “diabolical trap”**

This regional reality hasn't changed for the upcoming elections. To the contrary, the problems have gotten worse and now include two additional ingredients, neither of which is new but both of which have grown into serious threats. The first is the ferocious penetration of drugs (marihuana and cocaine) used by the youth of virtually all the ethnic groups, together with the economic might of the drug dealers and their growing political influence in both Caribbean regions.

According to the 2005 regional Human Development Report on the Caribbean Coast, titled "Is Nicaragua Assuming Its Diversity?" by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), drug use is destroying the human capital in indigenous communities, mainly the Miskitu ones, and in mestizo peasant populations. It was believed that drug addiction only affected Afro-Caribbeans and urban dwellers, but the UNDP demonstrates that locally produced marihuana and crack from Colombian cocaine are being used in the coast's indigenous communities as well. Drug use has affected young people of working age and adults, which has a negative repercussion on the region's productive activities. "The sales outlets largely appear to be run by adult women, under the logic of ensuring the family's economic survival," the report states. In Miskitu communities, drug addiction is triggering the theft of crops, violence against the elderly and attacks on the common good, unity and peace, values that have previously kept indigenous people united. Social and domestic violence has also increased in mestizo peasant villages to the point of what the report calls "atrocious violence," while underscoring the community perception that the authorities have no interest in dealing with these problems, despite the irreversible damage they cause.

According to some reports, drug addiction in Nicaragua's Caribbean region began in the nineties, when the Miskitu seaside communities north of Bilwi found loads of contraband cocaine on the beach and in the Miskitu Keys, apparently thrown overboard by traffickers being pursued on the high seas. The UNDP study cites an indigenous elder who accepts that his community "is implicated in the drug trade and now needs help." He recounts that some years ago "sacks of Colombian cocaine just appeared, floating on the waves, and the people called them 'a gift from God.' Only later did they realize they were a "diabolical trap that kills men."

While there may be truth to the story of cocaine sacks washing up on shore, another version had more currency in the early nineties. Numerous newspaper reports told of Miskitu lobster divers from the same seaside communities exchanging their catch or weapons with drug dealers on offshore boats who gave them cocaine, a habit they had been introduced to in their military camps in Honduras in the eighties, where they trained to fight the Sandinistas.

## **The devastating affects of the agricultural frontier's advance**

The second huge problem is the pushing eastward of what is known as the agricultural and cattle frontier by mestizos from the western side of the country. This penetration of mestizo immigrants is threatening the remains of the rainforest, historically preserved by the Miskitu and Mayangna communities. As the UNDP report explains, it has had "a devastating effect on the existence and use of the natural resources and threatens the autonomous regions' economic, social, multicultural and political viability."

The most relevant migratory flow in the Caribbean region is by “extremely poor mestizo peasants” to supposedly “empty,” “national” and “ownerless” lands in this agricultural frontier which, according to the 2005 Human Development Report “has virtually reached its end.” In fact, the term agricultural frontier refers precisely to the fact that the further east the rainforest is cut down to make way for farming, the less apt the acid soils are for that purpose. The report explains that “for many peasants of the country’s different regions, it is attractive to farm supposedly empty national lands to establish ‘improvements’ and eventually sell them.” A Catholic priest from Bluefields told UNDP researchers that “the main figures on the agricultural frontier are the huge landowners who have acquired vast extensions of land. They are mestizos, not coast mestizos but from Chontales and the center of the country, and they are destroying our natural resources.” The process works like this: once the cleared land has given the peasant a couple of good crops of basic grains, the yield begins to drop, which is the sign that it’s time to sell to the big cattle ranchers and move on, cutting down more forest and repeating the process.

For 17 years after the autonomy law was passed it was denied the accompanying regulatory law needed to permit the indigenous and Afro-Nicaraguan communities to file for collective property titles on territories they were claiming. The territories threatened by mestizo migration have largely belonged to Mayangna (Sumu) and Miskitu communities, located in what is left of the broadleaf rainforest. The arrival of more people from western and northern Nicaragua has put the flora and fauna at the edge of extinction, threatened the soils and reduced the quality of life of the coast’s native population.

## **The peasant and rural drama could erode coast autonomy**

The growing predominance of mestizos could erode the principles of the Autonomy Statute, established to “guarantee multiethnic representation and coexistence, through the democratic exercise of the historic rights of indigenous peoples and ethnic communities in the framework of national unity.” The UNDP suggests that the resulting tension could be dealt with “urgently, constructively and in an integral manner” by the autonomous institutions, the regional governments and the central government. “The problem isn’t the peasant on the frontier,” says the report, but rather “a complex process of expulsion toward the autonomous regions of the largely peasant population living in extreme poverty in the central and northern part of the country due to a dramatic reduction of the state’s presence and services, land speculation, unemployment and lack of income in the rural sector.”

This migration has increased the mestizo population to over half a million in the Caribbean regions over the years, turning indigenous and Afro-Caribbean peoples into minority groups. And as the UNDP report points out, this “has turned 9 of the 19 municipalities into mono-ethnic administrative units, comparable in their demographic profile to the adjoining municipalities in neighboring departments.

Pearl Marie Watson, community representative of Monkey Point, jurisdiction of Bluefields, recently charged that regional coordinator Rayfield Hodgson and Liberal Regional Council representative for Bluefields Luis Gutiérrez had authorized over five thousand peasants from

Chontales to settle on the strip of land located in Río Indio and Monkey Point, which is a protected reserve and is part of the Ramas' communal lands. "These settlers are felling well over a hectare of forest a day between the Indio Maíz River and Yaladina [Bluefields]." Hodgson admitted that it was an error to endorse the settlers' move into those territories, but alleged he did it "to avoid bloodshed, because they showed up at my office saying that they were commanders of the Resistance" [the former *contras*]. Watson insisted that the Creole and Rama communities will dislodge all the Chontales settlers from the communal lands they invaded, "but we'll first try to do it in an orderly manner and the police and army have said that they'll help us."

## Historic abandonment

Many realities reflect the degree to which the coast population has been left to its fate. Among the most serious indicators are those for the RAAN, shown in Table 3 below.

**Table 3 Comparative Indicators in the RAAN**

Indicator	National	RAAN
Electrification	52.3%	8.9%
Telephones per 100 inhabitants	3.40	0.82
Potable water	32.3%	8.8%
Sewage services	21.1%	5.2%
<b>Vaccination in children under 5 years old</b>		
BCG	82%	55%
Polio	78%	36%
DPT	82%	36%
Measles	80%	16%
Doctors per 10,000 inhabitants	7.26	4.93

Another major unresolved problem is the demarcation of the ethnic communities' ancestral lands. During a forum on territorial demarcation at the end of November, Alta Hooker, rector of the University of Nicaragua's Caribbean Coast Autonomous Regions (URACCAN), accused President Enrique Bolaños of mocking the ethnic communities by ordering that the community property titles he himself granted in May to 85 indigenous communities in the coast and Jinotega not be registered. "The President of Nicaragua is making a mockery of the Caribbean Coast," she said. "It represents a setback to the communal land demarcation process." The titling of these lands was based on the Law of the Community Property Regimen of the Indigenous Peoples and Ethnic Communities of Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast Autonomous Regions and of the Bocay, Coco, Indio and Maíz Rivers, approved in January 2003. One of the Law's objectives is to guarantee indigenous peoples and ethnic communities full recognition of their rights to communal property and the use, administration and management of their lands and natural resources through their demarcation.

In May 2005, the President demarcated and titled 587,629 hectares of land (5,876.29 km<sup>2</sup>), stating that this would benefit 31,705 indigenous inhabitants. "When they approved the titles for Waspam," lamented Alta Hooker, "we all felt happy because we said this process was going to go forward. But now we realize that... this is just another of the government's maneuvers against Nicaragua's Caribbean Coast. They've been telling us for years that they haven't gone further with the autonomy process because we coast people aren't reaching agreements, that we don't have proposals. But now I'm more convinced that they [the central government] want to continue making decisions for us."

## **Numbers that don't add up**

According to Roberto Rivas, president of the Supreme Electoral Council (CSE), approximately 211,000 voters are registered for the March 2006 regional elections, but it is estimated that 20% of the population, particularly young, first-time voters, don't have their identity/voting cards. In 2002, the electoral rolls consisted of 112,212 registered voters (33,163 urban and 79,049 rural) in the south and 83,438 (35,297 urban and 48,141 rural) in the north.

The Regional Electoral Council president in the RAAS, Hugo Saavedra, says that the current electoral roll in his region includes 124,947 people (40,081 in the Bluefields urban center and 84,866 in the rural areas). Nery González, president of the Regional Electoral Council in the RAAN, estimates the electoral roll there at 86,250 people (39,352 in urban zones and 46,898 in rural ones). In other words, Saavedra confirmed, a total of 211,197 citizens, which almost matches Rivas' figure.

Nonetheless, according to an INEC projection, there should have been 122,773 citizens of voting age (16 years old) in the RAAN and 201,997 in the RAAS in 2004, for a total of 324,770. So why does the electoral roll show a third fewer people of voting age?



**Table 4 2002 Regional Election Results (Valid Votes)**

Region	PLC	FSLN	PAMUC	PRN	Yatama	Totals	Electoral Roll	Abstention	
RAAN	16,584	14,961	3,240	1,109	9,837	45,731	83,438	37,707	45.19%
RAAS	17,245	7,272	n/a	1,425	1,727	27,652	112,212	84,560	75.35%
<b>Total:</b>	<b>33,829</b>	<b>22,233</b>	<b>3,240</b>	<b>2,534</b>	<b>11,564</b>	<b>73,128</b>	<b>195,650</b>	<b>122,267</b>	<b>62.49%</b>

## Charges of important anomalies

The Nicaraguan Liberal Alliance (ALN), created by presidential candidate Eduardo Montealegre, has charged that over 30% of the people listed on the electoral roll are not to be found in the Caribbean Coast. “We don’t know if these people are dead, have emigrated or the electoral roll on the Atlantic Coast has never been even minimally cleaned,” declared Salvador Talavera, president of the Resistance Party, one of the ALN’s members and campaign manager for the alliance’s Caribbean election. Talavera cited the example of Bocana de Paiwas: 17,753 names appear on the voter list, distributed into 60 voting centers, but his people verified that only 12,306 people even live in that municipality.

The Constitutionalist Liberal Party (PLC) has also denounced anomalies. Its national spokesperson, Leonel Téller, said that during the preliminary reviews at least 11,032 people could not be found on the voter lists for any voting center, particularly in the upper Río Coco. “To date we’ve identified voters who are residents of the Autonomous Region and have been sent to vote in other places that are neither the centers nor the tables where they’re really supposed to be voting,” said Téller. According to Léster Flores, the PLC’s political action secretary in the Caribbean, “this is an old problem. Don’t believe that it started with what you wrongly call the Liberal-Sandinista pact, it started before.” Following the PLC’s electoral defeat in the 2004 municipal elections, Liberal CSE magistrates declared that some thirty thousand voters had been unable to vote because they couldn’t find the voting table that corresponded to them. The CSE’s Cartography Department registers 425 Voting Centers scattered through the two regions, some of which have several tables.

## The verification process was a failure

On November 1, the CSE began a verification process that allowed people to check where they were registered to vote. Between November 24 and 27, a massive simulation was done in which people were to go to their assigned voting center, as if it were election day, to verify on site that their name was on that center’s role. It was a total flop. The CSE reported that only 36% of voters showed up at the 167 voting centers in the RAAS and 258 in the RAAN, but information from some areas calls even that figure into question. For example, only 5,425 of the 22,436 voters registered in six electoral districts of the RAAN actually turned up, according to Victor Calderón, director of the electoral organization ascribed to the CSE, who attributed the low turnout to lack

of civic custom. "They don't give it any importance," he said. Worse yet, Saavedra reported that in the RAAS only 946 of the 27,690 voters registered in the 23 centers in the municipality of Bluefields bothered to verify if they were on the list. Saavedra prided himself on "having all the verification centers open, despite the limitations," and claimed that the problem was "passivity on the part of the population." It did not seem to occur to him that the "old problem" of errors and confusion may have something to do with the passivity toward such exercises: by his own admission, only 309 of the 946 actually found their name recorded at the center to which they had been directed.

Mauricio Zúñiga from IPADE, which sent a team to observe this verification in the two Caribbean regions, includes "civic apathy, lack of collaboration by the political parties and an inadequate public campaign" among the factors that affected the extremely low participation. According to IPADE's figures, participation in the verification only hit 12%.

CSE president Roberto Rivas argues that one reason for the low turnout is that some political parties made house-to-house visits in the urban sectors with the electoral rolls provided by the CSE. "They are within their right to do so," said Rivas, "but it made those people feel they were already verified." IPADE agrees, adding that the parties that held primary elections contributed even further to that false sense of security. "The parties checked the citizen's location against their copy of the electoral role and many believed that was good enough, that they didn't need to show up and verify it for themselves. In addition, the parties didn't urge voters to go verify themselves," said Zúñiga. While that may explain the low turnout at the voting centers on the verification days, it doesn't seem unreasonable for both parties and voters to assume that if they are on the parties' copies of the lists, they would be on the voting centers' copies as well.

Zúñiga argued that the low participation was also the result of political disillusionment, the absence of an intense local radio campaign in Creole, Miskitu, Garífuna and Spanish and the fact that many citizens trusted that their data was correct because they had voted in the 2000 municipal elections. Added to that was the inconvenience or impossibility of traveling long distances, abandoning their crops and the fact that many people have been temporarily relocated following Hurricane Beta.

The verification process also revealed some very serious anomalies. Thousands of residents from Nueva Guinea reportedly tried to register in the voting center rolls in Punta Gorda, a community in the municipality of Bluefields, without having any right to vote in these elections. Some five hundred people were expected for verification in Punta Gorda, but nearly three thousand showed up, according to official data. "Anybody found to be fraudulently changing domicile will be prosecuted," warned CSE vice president Emmet Lang. Rivas, however, was more prudent, stating that "an in-depth analysis needs to be done, since it could be a migratory movement for work reasons or some other cause."

**Table 5 Ethnic Representation on the Regional Councils**

Region	Period	Mestizo	Miskitu	Creole	Mayangna	Garifuna	Rama
	1990-1994	18	25	2	3		
RAAN	1994-1998	22	22	2	2		
48 members	1998-2002	23	21	2	2		
	2002-2006	27	18	1	2		
<b>Total</b>	<b>1990-2006</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>9</b>		
	1990-1994	17	6	17	2	3	2
RAAS	1994-1998	24	4	12	2	3	2
47 members	1998-2002	27	5	7	3	3	2
	2002-2006	28	3	9	2	3	2
<b>Total:</b>	<b>1990-2006</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>8</b>

## The last elections and the abstention surrounding them

In the 2002 regional elections, the Caribbeans voted as indicated in Table 5 on the previous page. With those results, the PLC won 16 Regional Council seats in the RAAN, the FSLN 15, Yatama 11 and the Coast Unity Movement Party 1. In the RAAS, the PLC got 29 seats, the FSLN 14 and Yatama 1. By law, the three National Assembly representatives elected from the RAAN and the two from the RAAS are also full members of the Council in their respective region. In the RAAN that has meant two Liberals and one Sandinista in this last term while in the RAAS both are Liberals. From the ethnic perspective, Table 6 reflects the increasing weight of mestizos in the regional bodies.

Considering electoral participation trends, the coast people's perception of the efficacy of their regional government bodies and the mestizo peasants' colonization of their lands, abstention could be as high as 65% in 2006. But this prognosis could be altered by the political agitation affecting the PLC and the FSLN, the country's two major parties, and by Yatama's resounding success in the 2004 municipal elections in the RAAN, where it won three mayoral seats, including the regional capital of Bilwi. This could encourage Miskitus in particular to vote again, but will it be possible to overcome the apathy caused by the same old party discourses, replete with demagoguery but utterly lacking in proposals for the Caribbean region's populations?

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