

Nicaragua 30 Years After the Sandinista Revolution

During the Cold War in 1979, the socialist Sandinista movement *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (FSLN) ousted Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle, removing a violent dictatorial regime that had been in place for more than three decades. Accused of maintaining close ties with the Soviets, the FSLN soon came under pressure from the United States, which was not willing to risk the rise of a Soviet satellite in its hemisphere. As a consequence, the Sandinistas were forced into a devastating civil/guerrilla war with the US-backed Contras that eventually culminated in the FSLN's loss of the presidential election in 1990.

Thirty years later the Sandinistas are back in power after Daniel Ortega's victory in the 2006 election that marked the FSLN's transformation into a 'normal' party. Although the country had shed its dictatorial past, it remained as poor as it was in the years before and during the revolution. With democracy installed but hardly any economic development taking place, is it fair to ask whether the revolution, initiated in 1979, failed or whether people ultimately profited from Sandinista rule? What is left of the ideology of 1979 and is there anything revolutionary in today's Sandinista politics?

With a GDP of around \$6.6 billion in 2008, Nicaragua is one of the poorest countries in Latin America. It depends heavily on foreign aid and remittances from Nicaraguans living abroad which add up to more than 40 percent of its GDP. The governments' efforts to stimulate the economy over the past 20 years have been undermined by several factors. Firstly, Nicaragua has always been vulnerable to natural disasters. The country never fully recuperated after the earthquake in 1972 and after hurricanes Mitch and Felix in 1998 and 2007. Even today, one can still find mules and cows grazing on acres in the center of Managua, Nicaragua's capital city, alongside the ruins of historic buildings that were destroyed in the earthquake.

Secondly, widespread poverty, both rural and urban, poses a high threat to political stability. In this respect, the Sandinistas face the same kind of societal environment as they did when they first came to power. Moreover, the continuing economic crisis has allowed political clashes and at times even physical violence between Sandinistas and the opposition to re-emerge. After the 2006 election that brought Daniel Ortega to power, his supporters violently suppressed opposition protests. Freedom House notes that the election had been overshadowed by allegations of fraud and manipulation against Ortega's party.

The situation, however, is not the same as it was during the years of civil war. Since 1990, democratic institutions have been consolidated, there is a certain degree of party pluralism and the Contras disbanded after the civil war. The biggest threat to stability today is the government itself. The upcoming regional elections in 2010 and the subsequent presidential elections in 2011 will show whether Ortega follows the Sandinista heritage of a socialist democratic state or whether he

intends to establish yet another authoritarian regime. An authoritarian path that suppresses democratic forces would strongly collide with original Sandinista ideology and be tantamount to a total failure of the Sandinista revolution.

On the level of international politics things are looking different too. Back in 1979, the Sandinistas fraternized with the revolutionary movements in Cuba and El Salvador. "*El imperialismo yanqui*," American imperialism, was considered the main threat, and the long history of American involvement in Nicaragua fostered anti-American sentiment which became very prominent in the FSLN's program of 1969. Today the situation looks remarkably different. The US is one of the main providers of financial aid to the country and resentment of American influence has turned into widely accepted economic dependence.

But there are several other factors, in the regional political setting in particular, that endanger Nicaragua's international standing and stability. Honduras, for example, is experiencing major public uproar over a *coup-d'état against former President Manuel Zelaya*. Political bushfires could easily spread to Nicaraguan territory. Moreover, Ortega sympathizes with controversial political figures such as Venezuela's Hugo Chavez and Bolivia's Evo Morales. Together they pursue the idea of an alternative free trade agreement ALBA that undermines similar endeavours by Central American countries to enforce free trade through the US-backed CAFTA. The socialist approach that these three presidents share is being corrupted by a shade of ugly authoritarianism.

International observers have also claimed that Iran is increasing its influence in Nicaragua by providing financial and material aid. Several reports have noted that Iran has symbolically established itself in Central America by building a "monumental" new embassy in Managua. Whether these claims are true or not, they are likely to raise alarm in the US over rising Iranian influence in their backyard.

Clearly the FSLN still shapes Nicaraguan politics, much as it did thirty years ago. But its current leader is in danger of betraying one of the key aspects of original Sandinism: the abolishment of authoritarian government. If Ortega sticks to power after the next election in 2011, he might become the Somoza of the new Nicaragua, eventually throwing the country back another three decades. It was the FSLN that freed Nicaragua from its dictator in 1979, but who would then free Nicaragua from the FSLN's Daniel Ortega?

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1.1 Resources

1.1.1 International Organizations

Democracies in Development, by the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB)

This publication underlines the importance of politics and how institutional features of democratic

systems affect their functioning as well as the prospects for their consolidation. The authors review Latin America's experience with democratic reform over the past quarter century in order to identify the prevailing trends and to glean some lessons, however tentative and contingent, about the types of reforms that may or may not hold promise for strengthening democracy.

Trade, Regionalism and the Politics of Policy Making in Nicaragua, by the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD)

This paper examines the dynamics of trade policymaking in Nicaragua. It asks how a small and low-income country like Nicaragua uses its negotiating space to shape outcomes in a trade agreement and explores the roles of non-state actors in shaping trade policymaking.

Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)

ECLAC, which is headquartered in Santiago, Chile, is one of the five regional commissions of the United Nations. It was founded with the purpose of contributing to the economic development of Latin America, coordinating actions directed toward this end, and reinforcing economic ties among countries and with other nations of the world. The promotion of the region's social development was later identified as one of its primary objectives.

1.1.2 Research and Academia

The Political Context Behind Successful Revolutionary Movements, by the Strategic Studies Institute of the US Army War College (SSI)

This monograph examines the extent to which some states create the conditions for revolutionary movements to flourish. In particular, it explores how the governments in Vietnam (1955-63), Algeria (1945-62) and Nicaragua (1967-79) unintentionally empowered revolutionary movements, resulting in these governments' demise.

Fundación Internacional para el Desafío Económico Global (International Foundation for the Global Economic Challenges, FIDEG), in Spanish only.

FIDEG is a center of independent and multidisciplinary thinking that concentrates on fostering the development of Nicaraguan society and its institutional capacities. FIDEG strives to give advice on alternative strategies for the development of Nicaragua guided by aspects of economic growth, income distribution, democratic development and the environment.

Centro de Estudios Internacionales de Nicaragua (Nicaraguan Center of International Studies), in Spanish only.

The Nicaraguan Center of International Studies seeks to contribute to social and economic justice by investigating the creation of a critical conscience in society concerning the predominant international system and its principal actors and how those intervene with Nicaraguan society.

1.1.3 Non-Governmental Organizations and Media

What Has Changed 30 Years After Nicaragua's Revolution?, by John Enders for the Global Post

This article summarizes the achievements of the Sandinista revolution from 1979 until today. The author critically analyzes Ortega's political actions and compares it to the old Somozist dictatorial regime.

Daniel Ortega and the Sandinista Revolution Betrayed, by New America Media

The article describes how Mr Ortega's election in 2006 might corrupt the original idea of the Sandinista Revolution by risking the creation of another dictatorial regime.

The Freedom Fighter's Manual, by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)

Published by the CIA, this manual served the Contras to mobilize the Nicaraguan people against the Sandinista government. It illustrates in a simple way various means to sabotage government authorities and supporters of the Sandinistas. A historical curiosity.

Nicaragua Special Report: Daniel Ortega's Media War, by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)

This special report analyzes Ortega's thinking and actions toward the press. During the Somoza era and during the time of the Sandinista revolution, Nicaraguan media often influenced domestic politics and served as a tool for foreign intervention as well as governmental propaganda. This CPJ report analyzes Ortegass' role in today's Nicaraguan media environment.