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Nicaragua

An authentic revolution in 1979

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On 9 July 1979, an authentic popular revolution triumphed over the dictatorial dynasty of the Somoza regime. The Sandinista National Liberation Front (in Spanish – *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional-FSLN*) played a fundamental part in the victory thanks to its role in the armed struggle, its political initiatives and its capacity to represent the aspirations of the people. Nevertheless, the FSLN would never have won out against the dictatorship without the immense mobilization of the majority of the Nicaraguan population. Without the courage and abnegation of the people, the Somoza dictatorship, supported by Washington for several decades, could not have been decisively overthrown. Support from Cuba also had a decisive effect.

The FSLN played a fundamental role in the victory of an authentic popular revolution in 1979

In the years that followed, the health, education, housing, freedom of expression and organization, and labour rights in both town and country and the living conditions of a large portion of the popular classes improved significantly. Banks along with a number of industrial and food corporations were nationalized. This resulted in great domestic enthusiasm and a really important international support. Tens of thousands of volunteers from all over the World (mainly from Latin America, North America and Europe) arrived in Nicaragua to help in the work brigades, to contribute to the improvements in health, education and housing and to prevent the revolution from becoming isolated.

At the beginning of the 1980s, Nicaraguan big capital, big multinationals present in the region (food industry, mining, etc.), US imperialism and its vassals (such as the “socialist” regime of Carlos Andrés Pérez in Venezuela or dictatorships as in Honduras) formed a coalition to try to put an end to this extraordinary experiment in social liberation and renewal of national dignity. They found it necessary to contain the spreading of such tendencies which became very vigorous in the 1990s. In fact, social revolt was rampant in the region, in particular in Salvador and Guatemala where revolutionary forces close to the Sandinistas had been active for decades. Neither did Cuba hesitate to defy Washington and the American dominant classes by bringing its support to the Central American revolution.

The Contras

The revolution’s enemies at home and abroad created the Contras, a counter revolutionary army that aimed at overthrowing the Sandinistas. They obtained so much fire-power that they had the capacity to hit the revolution very hard and prolong the conflict until 1989. It was financed, trained and advised by Washington, who presented the Contras to the international community as a liberation army. What’s more, US forces mined the ports, an act condemned in 1986 by the International Court of Justice at The Hague. The US ceased forthwith to recognize the competence of the International Court of Justice.

In spite of social and democratic achievements, the policies of the Sandinistas quickly showed their limits. The agricultural reform, so long awaited by so many in rural Nicaragua, was quite insufficient: the authorities took too long to redistribute land and property titles to small farmers. It was among these small farmers who were disappointed by

such reticence that the Contras developed a social base. The majority of the urban population took part in the revolution whilst feelings were more mixed in the rural areas.

“Direction: Command”

Of course, the primary cause of the difficult situation with which Nicaraguan society had to cope was the imperialism of the US and the local elites who wished to maintain their privileges and continue to exploit the people. But the policies of the Sandinistas themselves also played a part in the failure to extend, consolidate and develop the revolution. Among the causes that originated among the leaders were their authoritarian tendencies, expressed by the slogan “Direction: Command”. This meant that the Masses should await orders from above to apply the revolution. This advice sapped the Masses’ revolutionary ardour.

The way the war was conducted was also cause for concern. The left of the FSLN (particularly through the magazine Nicaragua Desde Adentro) criticized Humberto Ortega, the head of the army and Daniel Ortega’s brother, for forming a regular army equipped with expensive heavy tanks, unsuitable against the guerrilla methods of the Contras. The conscription of the country’s youth in order to reinforce the army was also badly perceived by the population.

The Sandinista government introduced a structural adjustment plan

As from 1988, the Sandinista leaders introduced a structural adjustment plan that degraded the conditions of the poor without affecting the rich. [1] These policies very much resembled the usual conditions imposed by the IMF and World Bank while at the same time, under pressure from Washington, the two institutions had suspended their aid to the Sandinista authorities. These adjustment policies were very much criticized by certain tendencies within the FSLN because it burdened the popular classes with the adjustment effort.

I remember well the reply by Omar Cabezas, [2] revolutionary leader and member of the Sandinista Assembly, in a public gathering in 1989 when we asked him how it was possible that the Sandinista government could apply a structural adjustment plan just like an IMF plan. The gist of his reply was that a structural adjustment plan is like a kalashnikov or a FAL rifle, it all depends on who’s doing it. If it’s the revolutionaries that are doing it then it’s fine. We certainly cannot be satisfied with this kind of answer.

The export-oriented extractivist model with low wages is maintained

Actually the Sandinista leaders conceded a lot to the employers, especially concerning wages, which remained very low. The argument that was used to vindicate this policy was that Nicaragua had to export as much as possible on the global market and that in order to be competitive it had to squeeze wages. Few or no measures were taken to move away from the export-oriented extractivist model with low wages. If they had really wanted to break away from that model that depends on competitiveness on the global market, they should have gone against the interests of the capitalists that still dominated the export-oriented extractivist industry. They should have supported the small and medium-sized producers who supplied the domestic market.

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In 1989 the FSLN government reached an agreement with the Contras on putting an end to fighting, which was of course a good thing. It was presented as the victorious outcome of the strategy that had been adopted. Yet it was a Pyrrhic victory. The Sandinista leadership called a general election in April 1990 and felt certain they would win. Election results struck the Sandinista leadership with an amazed wave of panic: the right had won because it had told voters that if the FSLN won, fighting would resume. The majority of the people wanted to avoid further bloodshed [3] and thus reluctantly voted for the right. They were hoping for an end to war for good. Some were also disappointed by the FSLN government's policies in the countryside (deficient agrarian reform) and in cities (negative consequences of the austerity measures enforced by the structural adjustment programme begun in 1988) though Sandinista organizations could still rely on a lot of support among young people, workers and civil servants, as well as among a significant number of farm labourers.

The Sandinista leadership expected to reap 70% of the votes in the April 1990 elections, so it was flabbergasted, as it hadn't perceived the growing discontent in a large portion of the population. This illustrates the gap between the majority of the people and a leadership that had become used to giving orders.

The orientation of the Sandinista leadership was mostly determined by Daniel Ortega and his brother Humberto.

The *piÃ±ata*

After the victory of the right, a significant part of the estates formerly expropriated from the Somozistas after the 1979 victory were appropriated by a few Sandinista leaders, who consequently became very rich. This process was called *piÃ±ata*. Those who organized the *piÃ±ata* accounted for it as meeting the need to secure assets for the FSLN against a government that might want to confiscate the Party's assets.

They claimed that it was better to turn them into private property owned by trustworthy people such as themselves. In fact, quite a lot of those historical leaders acquired the mindset of the *nouveaux riches*.

The Sandinista Army after the defeat in the April 1990 elections

The Sandinista leadership, with Daniel and Humberto Ortega at its head, negotiated the transition with Violeta Chamorro's new government. Humberto was still General in Chief of a starkly reduced army. The most left-wing members of the army had been dismissed, under the pretext that they had supplied missiles to the "Farabundo MartÃ- National Liberation Front" (FMLN), which was still attempting to bring about a general uprising in Salvador. In the context of presidents Gorbachev [4] and Bush [5] coming closer together, Soviet authorities had denounced the fact that SAM 7 and SAM 14 missiles that had been supplied by the USSR [6] to the Sandinistas had been passed on to the FMLN and used to shoot down US army helicopters operating in El Salvador. [7] [Four Sandinista officers were imprisoned on an order from Humberto Ortega with the following explanation: "Blinded by their political passion and guided by extremist arguments, this small group of officers flouted military honour and the Institution's and Military Command's loyalty, which is the same as flouting the sacred, patriotic and revolutionary interests of Nicaragua." [8]

This led to strong criticism from the Workers' National Front (which included Sandinista trade union organizations), from the Sandinista Youth as well as from a number of FSLN activists. Moreover a left-wing faction of the FSLN

disapproved of Humberto Ortega remaining head of the army under a right-wing presidency instead of joining the political opposition to the new regime and leaving his position to his deputy, who was also a member of the FSLN.

The FSLN and the Chamorro government

Only a few months after Violeta Chamorro started her mandate as president, a massive protest movement spread throughout the country in July 1990. Managua and other cities were covered with Sandinista barricades and the trade unions launched a general strike. This resulted in a compromise with Violeta Chamorro's government, which was forced to withdraw some measures, but the Sandinista grassroots was disgruntled at the FSLN leadership having halted protest actions. Later, the Front's leadership gradually made concessions to Chamorro, accepting the dismantling of the public banking sector, the reduction of the public sector in both agriculture and manufacturing, the end of the State's monopoly on foreign trade. Chamorro also organized the cleansing of the police force and incorporated former Contras into it. This police force was in the front line to repress social protests in 2018, along with paramilitary militia, about which more will be said below. Chamorro did not directly tackle the army, in the context of the co-existence agreement with the FSLN leadership. Now in the opposition the Sandinistas committed themselves to disarming the people.

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The first six months of 1991 were marked by a radicalization of the FSLN leadership, under the combined pressure of Sandinista trade union leaders and of actions initiated by the grassroots movement that wanted to stand up for the revolution's achievements. We can only stand in awe in front of the degree of self-mobilization of the popular masses, who, determined to resist, adopted various forms of struggle: land occupation, occupation of plants, worker-managed production, general forms of struggle (strikes, marches, barricades) addressing various sectors. Young people's dynamism was an essential factor.

Some of the Sandinista leaders, however (not members of the national leadership but rather former Sandinista ministers such as Alejandro Martínez-Cuenca) openly mention the need for a 'co-gobierno,' a kind of conditional external support to Violeta Chamorro's government, and support the policy enforced by the International Monetary Funds, for to some extent it can be perceived as in line with the policy followed by the Sandinista government from 1988. [9]

The first FSLN Congress in July 1991

The first FSLN Congress, held in July 1991, still displayed the movement's great vitality and the leadership submitted a text in which it criticized the deficiencies in its own agrarian policy in the 1980s and the verticality in the way it functioned. [10] A token of this radicalization was that the Sandinista MPs left parliament for an unlimited period to protest against neoliberal reforms and the offensive of the right.

However, in the run-up to the 1996 elections Daniel Ortega initiated a shift to the right.

Daniel Ortega's sharp right turn in 1996

During the 1996 electoral campaign, Daniel Ortega bent over backwards to reach out to the upper classes, showing he had been converted to the benefits of the market economy and moderating his discourse towards Washington. The right-wing candidate Arnoldo Alemán won the elections with 51 % while Daniel Ortega only gained 38 % of the votes. Sergio Ramirez, former member of the National Directorate that broke away from the Sandinista National Liberation Front to start the Sandinista Renovation Movement, got no more than 0.44 % of the votes.

According to Monica Baltodano, former FSLN activist: [\[11\]](#) “The confrontations at the heart of the Sandinista Front between 1993-1995 [Author’s note: of which one of the outcomes was the foundation of the Sandinista Renovation Movement] convinced Ortega and his inner circle of the importance of controlling the party apparatus. This came to a head at the Front’s 1998 Congress, where what was left of the National Directorate, the Sandinista Assembly and the Congress of the Front began to fall apart. They were replaced by an assembly where most of the participants were leaders of popular organizations faithful to Ortega. Eventually even this assembly ceased to meet. At that point, there was a significant fracture. It was by then obvious that Ortega was drifting ever further from left-wing positions and was centering his strategy on broadening his power-base. He sought power for power’s sake.

From then on, to increase his power, he embarked upon a series of alliances. The first one, with President Arnoldo Alemán, resulted in the constitutional reforms of 1999-2000. The central proposition of the alliance with Alemán consisted of reducing by the percentage required to win the elections to 35%, sharing the posts of all State institutions between the two parties and guaranteeing the safety of properties and companies belonging to the leaders of the FSLN. In exchange, Ortega gave Alemán assurances of “governability”. It was the end of strikes and industrial action. The Sandinista Front stopped opposing neoliberal policies. Organizations whose main leaders became elected Members of Parliament in the ensuing years or integrated the structures of Ortega’s circle of power ceased to resist or struggle”. [\[12\]](#)

In other words, at the end of his mandate, Arnoldo Alemán made a pact with Daniel Ortega so that they could have more loyal representatives in the institutions thereafter. Thus they strengthened their presence in such institutions as the Electoral Council, the Court of Auditors and the Supreme Court.

Daniel Ortega lost the presidential elections in 2001 with 42 % of the votes against Enrique Bolaños, former Vice-President of Arnoldo Alemán, who gained 56 %.

Daniel Ortega made a pact with Arnoldo Alemán, one of the main right-wing leaders

The Alemán-Ortega Pact was triggered by the decision of Enrique Bolaños, now president, to lash out at his former team-mate Alemán by supporting his indictment for corruption and the subsequent conviction of 20 years imprisonment. In 2003, Daniel Ortega saw to it that the men he had placed in the judicial system arranged preferential treatment for Alemán, allowing him to serve out his sentence in house arrest.

Later, in 2009, two years after his election as president of Nicaragua, Daniel Ortega gave his support to the Supreme Court’s decision to quash Alemán’s conviction and release him. A few days later Alemán returned the favour by ensuring that the parliamentary group of the Liberal Party he led voted for the election of a Sandinista at the head of the National Assembly.

In 2005, Daniel Ortega reconciles with the

ultra-conservative Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo, converts to Catholicism and marries in Church

In 2007 Daniel Ortega won the presidential elections by making pledges to several major enemies of Sandinismo. Daniel Ortega had won over Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo, who had fought hard against him as he had fought hard against the Sandinista Revolution throughout the 1980s and 1990s, to the extent that he had openly supported the Contras. To improve his relationship with the reactionary cardinal, Daniel Ortega apologized for the way the Church had been treated during the revolutionary process. He converted to Catholicism and asked Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo to officiate at his marriage to his companion Rosario Murillo in September 2005 [13] (in French).

In 2006, Daniel Ortega gave his support to the adoption of an ultra-reactionary law totally prohibiting abortion

In 2006, Daniel Ortega supported the total prohibition of abortion

In 2006, a few months before the elections, the FSLN's parliamentary group, led by Daniel Ortega, gave their support to the adoption of an ultra-reactionary law totally banning abortion, including in cases where the pregnant woman's health or life are in danger or where the pregnancy resulted from rape. This legislation came into effect with the new Penal Code in July 2008, under the presidency of Daniel Ortega. Previously, "therapeutic" abortion (in case of danger to the woman's health or when the pregnancy resulted from rape) had been authorized in the country since 1837. [14]

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[1] <http://www.cadtm.org/Structural-Adjustment.1133>

[2] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Omar_Cabezas

[3] The following comparison gives an idea of human losses in the struggle against the Contras: if they were extrapolated on a scale proportionate to the US population, they would amount to two million dead.

[4] Mikhail Gorbachev, born in 1931, was President of the Soviet Union from 1985 to 1991

[5] George H. Bush, born in 1924, was the 41st President of the United States for one single term from January 1989 to January 1993. He is the father of George W. Bush, born in 1946, who was the 43rd President of the United States, from January 2001 to January 2009.

[6] In 1990, the USSR still existed; it was led by Mikhail Gorbachev. It went through a process of dislocation between March 1990 and December 1991, resulting in the Federation of Russia, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldavia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan,

Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia.

[7] See Éric Toussaint, "Le dilemme de l'armée sandiniste," Inprecor n° 328, 12 April 1991. (in French)

[8] Quoted in Éric Toussaint, "Le dilemme de l'armée sandiniste," (The dilemma of the Sandinista Army) Inprecor n° 328, 12 April 1991 (in French)

[9] See Éric Toussaint, "« Front ou parti : que choisir ? » (Front or party: which shall it be?) Inprecor n° 329, 26 April 1991 (in French)

[10] See Éric Toussaint, "Renouveau du Front sandiniste," Inprecor n° 337, 27 September 1991 (in French)

[11] Mónica Baltodano ("Isabel 104" in the underground), one of the leaders of the urban uprising of June 1979 in Managua, a guerrilla commandante, former member of the National Directorate of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) and former Member of Parliament for the FSLN. At the FSLN congresses of 1994 and 1998, Mónica Baltodano was promoting the Izquierda Democrática (Democratic Left) tendency, in opposition to those who were to found the Movimiento renovador sandinista (MRS or Sandinista Renovation Movement) led by Sergio Ramírez who had been Vice-President of Nicaragua from 1985 to 1990 at Daniel Ortega's side. She had then supported Daniel Ortega as General Secretary of the FSLN (against Henry Ruíz, who challenged Daniel Ortega in 1994), convinced by his "left wing discourse". She left the FSLN in 1998, at the time of the Ortega-Alemán pact. In 2005 Baltodano, with former commandante Henry Ruiz, helped found the Movimiento por el Rescate del Sandinismo (MpRS, Movement to Rescue Sandinismo) see (in Spanish): <http://www.rebellion.org/noticia.php?id=33344> She remains politically active in Nicaragua.

[12] Mónica Baltodano, What is this regime? How has the FSLN changed to reach its present-day situation ?, Inprecor n° 651/652, May-June 2018 or at: <http://www.inprecor.fr/article-Nicaragua-Qu'est-ce-que-le-regime-C2%A0-%20Quelles-ont-été-les-mutations-le-FSLN-pour-arriver-%20-%20qu'il-est-aujourd'hui-%20?id=2144>

[13] See the interesting Obituary published 4 June 2018 on the official Swiss portal of the Catholic Church: Centre catholique des médias Cath-Info, "Nicaragua: décès du cardinal Miguel Obando Bravo à l'âge de 92 ans" (Nicaragua : Cardinal Miguel Obando Bravo has died at the age of 92) <https://www.cath.ch/news/nicaragua-deces-du-cardinal-miguel-obando-bravo-a-lage-de-92-ans/>

[14] See Amnesty International, The Impact of the Complete Ban on Abortion : Women's lives and health endangered, medical professionals criminalized, 2009 : http://www.amnesty.eu/static/documents/2009/0709Nicaragua_report_.pdf On the American continent, there are five countries other than Nicaragua which impose a total ban on abortion: El Salvador, Honduras, Suriname, Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Three countries authorize unconditional abortion: Cuba, Uruguay and Guyana. Source: <https://www.courrierinternational.com/article/societe-seuls-trois-pays-autorisent-lavortement-sans-condition-en-amerique-latine> or in English, see "Global, regional and sub-regional classification of abortions by safety, 2010–14", The Lancet Vol. 390 No. 10110 p.2372-2381, 25 November 2017: [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(17\)31794-4/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(17)31794-4/fulltext)