

<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article4877>



Nicaragua

Sandinism or "Danielism"?

- IV Online magazine - 2017 - IV505 - February 2017 PDF -

Publication date: Friday 24 February 2017

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

The recent elections of November 2016 - won by the presidential ticket of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), Daniel Ortega Saavedra and Rosario Murillo (vice-president) - reopen the debate on the evolution of this party, particularly among those who supported the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua in the 1980s.

Having been the hegemonic party from July 1979 until February 1990, the FSLN lost the presidential election to Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, candidate of the Union nacional opositora (UNO), a grouping of right, centre and even left (the Socialist Party and the Communist Party) parties! The UNO also won the legislative elections. This defeat put an end to the revolutionary process that opened in July 1979, with the fall of the Somoza dictatorship, and for sixteen years enabled neoliberal governments to govern the country, liquidating most of the revolutionary conquests of the previous decade (including the agrarian reform). From a political-military organization, born in the armed struggle against the Somoza dictatorship, the FSLN became a political party competing for power through the electoral process. Apart from the consequences of its defeat and the disquiet caused by the *piñata* (privatization of state property for the benefit of the FSLN and its leaders), Sandinism was not insensitive to the (political and ideological) consequences of the implosion of the "socialist camp with the Soviet Union at its head" (a famous formula of the 1950s), which was then considered as a counterweight to US imperialism by several sectors of the Latin American (and world) left.

During the 1990s, the FSLN adopted a re-centred policy, allying itself with former enemies (in 2006, the candidate for the vice-presidency for the coalition Unidad Nicaragua Triunfa, led by the FSLN, was a former sympathizer of the counter-revolution in the 1980s) and making pacts with its political rivals (such as the one with the Liberal President, Arnoldo Alemán, in 1998). Divergences with these orientations led to the departure of historical militants and the creation of new political formations, such as the social-democratic Movimiento renovador sandinista (Sandinista Renewal Movement, MRS) and the Movimiento por el rescate del sandinismo, (Movement for the Rescue of Sandinism, MpRS) - created by members of the Izquierda Democrática tendency.

Today, the FSLN is controlled by Daniel Ortega (eternal candidate for the presidency) and his close entourage. Of the nine commanders of the national leadership during the 1980s, two (Tomás Borge Martínez and Carlos Nuñez Tellez) have died, only one (Bayardo Arce Castaño) remains in the present FSLN, the other six have retired from political life or distanced themselves from the line of their former party. One of them, Henry Ruiz Hernández, recently made this bitter observation: "Today, only a political group around the caudillism of Daniel Ortega continues to maintain the acronym FSLN, but there is neither mystic nor norms, programmes, or debates, there is nothing left" [1]

A sign of this change of optic was given in an interview with the Argentine newspaper *Clarín* (8/11/2006) by Tomás Borge Martínez, the last founder (then living) of the FSLN. Borge defined the new line: "Working for the poor, but without fighting with the rich because it is possible. (...) Part of the revolution must come back: health for all, literacy programmes, the decline in infant and maternal mortality. But we were arrogant and I hope that the evils of an arbitrary agrarian reform, the nationalization of foreign trade or the arbitrary expropriations will not return. Now, we are a realistic, lucid left, faithful to the interests of the poor". [2]

Another element of this mutation: in the 1980s, the FSLN was supported by the grassroots Christian communities, influenced by liberation theology. After his electoral failure in 2001, Daniel Ortega became reconciled with the traditional Catholic hierarchy and more particularly with Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo, Archbishop Emeritus of Managua and old enemy of the revolution (in 1996 and 2001, he had specifically supported the anti-Sandinista candidates for the presidency). In November 2006, following a campaign by the Catholic and Evangelical churches,

the FSLN parliamentary group voted (along with the right) for a total ban on abortion, abolishing the right to therapeutic abortion introduced in 1893 by the Liberal government of José Santos Zelaya. A few months previously, Rosario Murillo (electoral campaign coordinator for the FSLN, who had become deeply pious) declared on August 15, 2006 to Radio Ya: "We defend and fully agree with the Catholic Church and the other Churches that abortion basically affects women, because we never recover from the pain and trauma of an abortion. When you have resorted to it or you have had to resort to it, you never get over it! [3]

However, despite these new orientations, the return of the FSLN to power (in January 2007) was considered by the Latin American left and sectors close to the "Bolivarian" processes (including in Europe) to be "the second stage of the revolution", defined (including in the Constitution) as "Christian, socialist and based on solidarity". [4] Having joined the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), the government of Daniel Ortega was able to implement a series of Venezuelan-funded social programmes - Hambre Cero, Usura Cero, Bono Productivo: between 2008 and 2015, it received \$3.612,700,000 under the oil agreement with Venezuela. However, in view of the current crisis, the loans from the public oil company (PVdSA) decreased from \$435 million to \$309.4 million between 2014 and 2015. [5]

However, we cannot speak of an alternative model of development. Indeed, "Nicaragua is a key site in the 'near-shoring' [6] strategy of multinational enterprises. These enterprises cooperate with national governments to establish production areas exempted from labour protection clauses and import taxes, where they can freely exploit local labour to produce consumer goods destined to be sold in the United States. For Nicaragua, these "free trade zones" represented in 2014 exports of \$2.4 billion. (...) Neoliberal ideas continue to guide Ortega's economic policies, just as the anti-poverty initiatives financed by ALBA dominate the public face of its administration. Recognition of this fact helps to explain an apparent paradox: in recent years, Nicaragua has won the superlative praise of left-wing governments and neo-liberal institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund." [7]

Today, although poverty has stagnated in recent years, "inequalities have reached aberrant levels: the patrimony of wealthy Nicaraguans (0.003 per cent of the 6 million citizens of the country) is equivalent to 2.7 times the national GDP. The informal sector alone accounts for more than three-quarters of the working population. And the strong tendency to emigrate does not diminish, the increase in remittances sent to their families constituting, moreover, the main factor – more than the social programmes - in limiting poverty". [8].

Nicaragua, however, is experiencing social struggles. Recently, 12 workers were arrested and charged, simply for protesting against the dismissal of their trade union representatives in June 2016, in front of the SAE-A Tecnotex plant, belonging to a South Korean group, in the Tipitapa free trade zone. The workers' protest against these dismissals was violently dispersed by the riot police, and these workers await a court ruling which could inflict up to three years in prison. [9]

Another problematic issue is the Grand Canal of Nicaragua megaproject, which was awarded to a Chinese consortium in Hong Kong (whose shares have recently fallen by 85 per cent on the stock exchange, the owner's fortune declining from 9 million to 3 million euros, according to *Le Monde Economie* of December 5, 2015). A 116-year concession would allow the group HKDN (Hong Kong Nicaragua Canal Development) to build and operate a transatlantic canal cutting through Nicaragua from east to west for 278 km, including 105 km in the middle of Lake Nicaragua (or Cocibolca), the second largest freshwater reservoir in South America. [10]. This ecologically disastrous project is challenged by the Nicaraguan Academy of Sciences and by the local people who would be expelled from their homes to make way for the canal: "The peasants directly affected by this gamble completely reject the concession. In spite of intimidation, blackmail, deception, threats and direct repression, the government has failed to dislocate the resistance of a popular movement that has already organized 57 marches against the canal, three of them on a national scale. (...) According to the experts, this project has not yet demonstrated that it can be economically feasible, ecologically viable or socially beneficial. Whatever happens, it is clear that the poor in Nicaragua will not benefit from a growth model based on mega-projects that are oriented first and foremost by the

interests of transnational corporations and their local partners". [11].

No more than in the 1980s, no one is demanding that Nicaragua (a country of the South, poor and little industrialized) should embody the quintessence of socialism (which cannot be built in one country). But it is clear that the present government's orientation differs greatly from that resulting from the victory of 19 July 1979 over the Somozist dictatorship.

[1] Henry Ruiz Hernández, "Daniel Ortega es un transfuga política y la tarea hoy es evitar que consolide su dictadura familiar", *Envío*, n.º 414, September 2016. We have published large extracts of this article: see "[Daniel Ortega is a political turncoat and the task today is to avoid consolidating his family dictatorship](#)".

[2] These quotes are translated from Celia Hart Santamaria, "[Las elecciones rosa de Nicaragua](#)", (November 18, 2006).

[3] In 1985, *Barricada* (the FSLN daily) published a survey on clandestine abortions, opening a debate, which was not carried to its conclusion, within Nicaraguan society and feminist associations, but which did not lead to a step backwards like that in 2006. See Marie-Thérèse Sautebin, "Débat sur l'avortement au Nicaragua: le tabou est levé", *La Brèche*, bi-monthly of the Parti socialiste ouvrier, No. 364, May 24, 1986.

[4] Sergio Ferrari, "Un pays différent, un sandinisme à remodeler", *Le Courrier* (Geneva), July 29, 2016.

[5] On the overall situation in Nicaragua, see Oscar René Vargas, "[Nicaragua: démocratie autoritaire ou dictature familial?](#)", (12/09/2016).

[6] Near-shoring: installation of production sites around, but not within, the United States.

[7] Jonah Walter, "[Nicaragua's compromised revolution](#)", (25/07/2016).

[8] Bernard Duterme, *Politique*, review of debate, n.º 97 (November-December 2016) "[Du sandinisme à l'orteguisme](#)".

[9] "[Halte à la criminalisation de la protestation ouvrière au Nicaragua](#)» (19/12/2016).

[10] Report of the International Federation for Human Rights [here](#).

[11] Manuel Ortega Hegg, "[Le grand canal du Nicaragua: une concession imposée à un pays vaincu](#)"(22/03/2016).