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Nicaragua

# The evolution of the regime of President Daniel Ortega since 2007

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**In order to win the presidential election of November 2006, Daniel Ortega succeeded in making his election acceptable to the ruling classes, and in particular to the COSEP (Superior Council for Private Enterprise), the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church, represented by Cardinal Obando y Bravo, former presidents Arnaldo Alemán and Enrique Bolaños, and the IMF. Daniel Ortega had also done his best to keep the support of a number of leaders of Sandinista popular organizations. He succeeded in doing that, and has continued to do so until today. These leaders consider Ortega to be the protector of a series of entitlements achieved by the organisations, and above all of their leadership.**

[1]

What Daniel Ortega succeeded in doing between 2007 and 2018 is reminiscent of what Mexico's Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) did during the 1960s and 1970 (see *the box on the PRI regime*): defend the interests of big capital, open the economy more to major foreign corporations, and maintain good relations with the IMF, the World Bank and other multilateral entities, while maintaining the support of a number of popular organisations over which it has very strong influence, and by maintaining a policy of minimal social assistance (financial and material support for the poorest citizens, but without intervening structurally on the causes of poverty), all of which was enabled by an international economic situation that was favourable to exportation and by aid from Venezuela. Like the PRI in 1968, Ortega did not hesitate to use violence against social protest. But, proportionally to the size of the population, in 2018 he did it on a larger scale than had the PRI. Like the PRI at that period, Ortega still has the support of several anti-imperialist governments (Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia) and a part of the Latin American Left. How long can that last? That will depend on several factors: the scope of the economic crisis, which is reducing the manoeuvring space for the policy of distributing crumbs to the poorest segment of the population, the ability of the social movements and the radical Left in Nicaragua to overcome their disorientation and disgust, the brutal repression, the discredit to Sandinism and socialism resulting from the caricatural nature of the regime of Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo, and the ability of the international Left to overcome its perplexity.

### **The PRI regime in Mexico**

The PRI, which came into existence in 1946, had succeeded, starting in 1950-1960, in co-opting and diverting what remained of the Mexican revolution of 1910-1920 and the major social advances achieved during the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas between 1934 and 1940: nationalization of oil and of the railways, expropriation of 16 million hectares from the big foreign or national landowners and the redistribution of the land to the native indigenous communities for their collective use, and the victory won over the banks – primarily in the USA –, reducing the public debt by 90% (see Éric Toussaint, *The Debt System* [2]). The PRI monopolized power and surrounded itself with satellite parties. It controlled the trade unions and the public service, along with most farmers' organizations. It controlled all the organs of the State, a part of the strategic industries and the means of mass communication. It engaged in very harsh repression during the student protests of 2 October 1968, resulting in the Tlatelolco massacre. The exact number of dead due to that repression has never been revealed. Serious sources estimate it at 300. The PRI government eventually recognised some thirty deaths, but that number is not convincing. As part of the repression of 1968, the PRI had hundreds of leftist militants eliminated in a generalized wave of disappearances in order to stay in power. It used paramilitary groups to organize the repression and perpetrate executions. Beginning in the 1980s, it gradually eliminated many of the social advances that still existed from the period of 1910-1940. As a

## The evolution of the regime of President Daniel Ortega since 2007

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State-Party, it has adopted the recommendations of the Washington Consensus, massively privatized the public sector and begun an intensive liberalization of markets in Mexico.

Despite the repression, the PRI government benefited from an embarrassed silence on the part of several governments and parties of the Left in Latin America until the 1990s since it had interests that deviated from those of Washington in certain significant areas.

To understand the complex nature of the policies of the PRI since it has been in power and its specific relations with the Left in Latin American, it is worthwhile to consider a few examples. The “third-worldist” president Echeverría (1970-1976) broke off relations with the Pinochet dictatorship and welcomed hundreds of persecuted Chilean militants. He also offered asylum to leftist political activists from Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil. But at the same time, Echeverría (who was also a collaborator with the CIA) was the first to massively apply the policy of forced disappearances in order to eliminate Mexican *guerrilleros*. But progressive policies such as providing asylum for leftist exiles from Latin America led a part of the Left to refrain from criticizing the PRI regime. Accordingly, when the human-rights activist Rosario Ibarra (whose son was “disappeared” by the PRI regime in April 1975) took part as a member of the Eureka Committee in the meetings of FEDEFAM (*Federación Latinoamericana de Asociaciones de Familiares de Detenidos-Desaparecidos* – Federation of Associations for Relatives of the Detained-Disappeared), she was harshly criticised by mothers of *desaparecidos* in the Southern Cone (Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, etc.), especially Chileans, who refuse to include Mexico in the list of regimes who practiced forced disappearances. The Chilean members did not want the regime of President Luis Echeverría to be mentioned, in part because it provided asylum to leaders and members of Popular Unity who were fleeing the Pinochet dictatorship. Later, the Mexican government was among the first to recognize the Sandinista regime that had overthrown the Somoza dictatorship. It also supported the process of negotiations between the guerrillas in El Salvador and the regime in place there. The Mexican government had also allowed Fidel Castro and his comrades, including Raul Castro and Che Guevara, to train in Mexico before launching their expedition against the Batista regime in November 1956, leaving the Mexican coast aboard the yacht Granma. The Mexican regime defended the Cuban regime against the USA after the victory of the revolution in 1959.

The PRI government of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988 to late 1994) repressed the Zapatist uprising beginning in January 1994. The PRI’s power monopoly began to break up with the tragic events of the earthquake in 1985, which hit the City of Mexico very hard. The society was forced to organize itself in the face of government inaction during the catastrophe, which marked a new social and political awareness. The decisive break-up of the PRI’s monopoly became evident with the election for governor of Mexico City in 1997, when Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas (the son of Lázaro Cárdenas) was elected governor as candidate of a party opposed to the PRI.

The PRI returned to power in 2012. In July 2018, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, an opponent of the PRI and leader of Morena, a centre-Left group, was elected president. Let us return to what happened between Daniel Ortega’s victory in the November 2006 election and the beginning of his presidential term in 2007. In the words of former guerrilla commandant Mónica Baltodano: *“With Ortega’s arrival in the presidency in 2007, a tendency that had been becoming more and more clear was patently manifested. The economic pragmatism shown by the FSLN with respect to privatizations and neoliberal policies was fully displayed.*

*That initiated a new phase in which Ortega entered a rapprochement process with the other pillar of national power: the heads of big business grouped under the Superior Council of Private Enterprise (COSEP) umbrella. That was when the symbiosis was initiated between Ortega and big national capital. I call it a symbiosis rather than an alliance because what defines the nature of the current regime is that its main mission is to create or strengthen the market economy conditions, buttressing big capital, while handing out crumbs to the poor to keep them pacified. [...] That economic power group has a community of interests with big national capital. It's not an alliance for tactical reasons as some believe, warning the big business leaders to be careful for fear they'll be knifed in the back one day. No, no, no, what they have is a symbiosis of interests. Ortega and his group are with big capital because they themselves are now an important capitalist group and the government represents its community of interests with the traditional oligarchy and transnational capital.” [3]*

### **Daniel Ortega refused to challenge the legitimacy of the debt claimed against Nicaragua and renewed agreements with the IMF**

Already after the victory of the revolution in July 1979, the Sandinista leadership had decided not to question repayment of the debt contracted by the Somoza dynasty. And yet that debt met both criteria for considering it odious and refusing to repay it: it had not benefited the nation, and the creditors were aware of that fact since they were directly complicit with the corrupt Somoza regime. [4] And an aggravating factor, although one that is not indispensable for qualifying the debt as odious, was that it had served to finance a dictatorship that was guilty of crimes against humanity.

The debt that was later accumulated by the three rightist governments that succeeded one another between 1990 and 2007 served to finance neoliberal counter-reforms, privatizations, and attacks on the economic and social rights of the population. What's more, it could have been demonstrated that this debt had supported corruption, in particular during the term of office of Arnaldo Alemán (1997-2002). Daniel Ortega, once elected president, could have – had he wanted to – taken inspiration from the president of Ecuador, Rafael Correa, who had also been elected in late 2006. Correa had set up a debt audit commission in July 2007 with broad citizen participation (including representatives of social movements that were highly critical of him, such as CONAIE and Ecuarrunari). The task of this commission was to identify the portion of Ecuador's internal and external public debt that was illegitimate and illegal. Based on the work of the audit commission, in November 2008, Ecuador's government unilaterally suspended repayment of a portion of the debt that had been identified as illegitimate and illegal. Through this process, Ecuador had scored a victory over the creditors in 2009. We should add that in May 2007, Ecuador had expelled the permanent representative of the World Bank. It had also requested that the IMF leave the facilities it occupied within the central bank buildings and had decided not to enter into any further loan agreements with that institution. We should also point out that Bolivia, followed by Ecuador and Venezuela, had decided to leave the ICSID (International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes), the World Bank's arbitration entity.

Daniel Ortega took a completely different attitude – he did everything in his power to maintain good relations with the IMF and stated that he would pursue the reforms it was demanding. He committed to achieving a primary budget surplus in order to continue repaying the debt and reduce the budget deficit. His choice of that option required him to reject a legitimate demand of the country's public-service workers for an increase in their wages, which were and still are particularly low, including in education and health-care. [5]

### **Daniel Ortega increased the number of free-trade treaties**

In 2006, when the FSLN was in the opposition, Daniel Ortega, as its principal leader, persuaded his parliamentary group to vote in favour of the CAFTA free-trade treaty with the USA. This marked another turning point in the FSLN's

orientation, since prior to that point the party had accused the government of President Enrique Bolaños of subjugating Nicaragua to Washington's economic interests. The approval of this treaty by the FSLN MPs was accompanied by support for changes in a whole series of laws to conform to the prior conditions imposed by the USA. Other free-trade treaties were approved with the FSLN's support: a treaty with Taiwan (which entered into force in 2008), one concerning Central America with Mexico (2011) and another between Central America and the European Union (2012).

### **Daniel Ortega opened Nicaragua more widely to the interests of foreign companies in the areas of agribusiness, mining and fisheries**

The Observatory of Multinationals in Latin America (OMAL), based in the Basque country and oriented clearly toward defence of the peoples' interests, has conducted in-depth studies of the compromises made by the Daniel Ortega government regarding multinationals, which extended the efforts made by his predecessors in that direction.

Mónica Baltodano makes reference to this and adds her personal experience. The Bolaños government's relations with the Spanish energy transnational Unión Fenosa, she says, were "tense." Bolaños had in fact filed twelve actions against Unión Fenosa and the courts had ordered fines against the Spanish company. But, Baltodano says: "[...]the Ortega government resolved all that. In November 2007, ironically while Ortega was in the Ibero-American Summit in Santiago, Chile, unleashing a virulent discourse against transnationals, Unión Fenosa included, Bayardo Arce [a trusted associate of Daniel Ortega, a former member of the national leadership who profited greatly from the piñata, ET] was in the Moncloa Palace in Madrid, meeting with Unión Fenosa's corporate management. Based on the "Protocol of Understanding between the Government of Nicaragua and Unión Fenosa," which included guarantees of all kinds for the latter and was given the rank of law in Nicaragua's National Assembly on February 12, 2009, all pending trials, demands and fines were wiped out with a swipe of the pen. Later came still other laws, always to Unión Fenosa's benefit. While what we remember is Ortega's constant diatribe against it, Nicaraguan government relations with it were never as fluid as they were with Ortega in office."

Baltodano adds that under the presidency of Daniel Ortega, privatization of the energy sector, and therefore of Nicaragua's natural resources, increased, benefiting the multinationals, and in particular those in which Ortega himself owns stock. She points to the appropriation, supported by the government, of "the country's main mineral exploitations" by the company B2Gold, headquartered in Canada, [6] with dramatic consequences for the environment and for the local communities. She also denounces the deforestation perpetrated by the "lumber mafias" through concessions granted by the government.

Mónica Baltodano describes in detail how the multinational Pescanova succeeded in making lucrative deals under the Ortega government: "A lesser known example is the fishing exploitation operated by the Spanish transnational Pescanova. Spanish environmental researcher María Mestres published a report in a December 2010 issue of *Diagonal* on how Pescanova has functioned in Nicaragua after arriving in 2002 with the acquisition of Ultracongelados Antártida, S.A., Spain's largest seafood cooking plant, which owned a third of a Nicaraguan shrimp farming company operating in Chinandega. From there Pescanova began expanding its shrimp rearing and processing, raising shrimp larvae in laboratories and continually expanding its fish farming area. By 2006, Pescanova had 2,500 hectares in concession, and two years later, now under the Ortega government, it had doubled that, controlling 58% of the surface granted in fishing concessions. Between January and April 2009 alone, it increased its ownership to 82% of the total surface granted in concessions, although not all of that was put into production." [7]

### **The Interoceanic Canal**

This two-centuries-old project was reactivated by the government of Daniel Ortega. On 14 June 2013, the National Assembly of Nicaragua approved, by a vote of 61 to 28, a bill which grants a concession for a renewable term of fifty years to the Chinese consortium HKDN Nicaragua Canal Development. The estimated cost is 50 billion dollars, or 41 billion euros. Construction began in 2015 and was to be completed in 2019, with the canal to open in 2020. But the project has been suspended since the Chinese company has gone bankrupt and its owner has disappeared.

The project is opposed by environmental scientific groups. There is a serious risk of pollution of Lake Nicaragua, which is vital as a freshwater reserve for biodiversity and for the local population, which drinks the lake's water and uses it to irrigate agricultural land. In terms of social impact, 25,000 persons are to be displaced by the project.

### Total prohibition of abortion entered into force in the criminal code in 2008

As mentioned in the preceding article, in 2006 the Sandinista parliamentary group, hand in hand with the conservative MPs, voted in a law totally prohibiting abortion. It was under the presidency of Daniel Ortega, who refused to call the measure into question, that the prohibition was included in new criminal code that entered into force in July 2008. There are no exceptions whatsoever to the prohibition, including cases of danger to the health or the life of the pregnant woman or pregnancy resulting from rape. Amnesty international says in its report [8]: *“The high level of teenage pregnancies in Nicaragua means that many of those affected by the revised laws are girls under 18. The repeal of the legal provisions allowing for therapeutic abortion endangers the lives of women and girls and puts medical professionals in an unconscionable position.”* Before the adoption of the new criminal code, “therapeutic” abortion (in case of danger to the health of the pregnant woman or pregnancy resulting from rape) was legal and considered legitimate and necessary, dating back to a law adopted in 1893 under the government of the liberal Zelaya, and which was an initial result of changes that began as early as 1837. A government that represents its people's interests would have further advanced the legislation by extending the right to an abortion (for example, authorising a pregnant woman to decide on her own regardless of the causes of the pregnancy, and by eliminating the conditions that required three practitioners to agree on interrupting the pregnancy and the pregnant woman to obtain authorization from her husband or close family). Instead, Ortega decided to take an overwhelming step backward.

This retrograde legislation is accompanied by serious attacks on organizations defending women's rights, who have been among the most active in the opposition to the Ortega government. In particular, the autonomous women's movement (MAM – *Movimiento Autonomo de Mujeres de Nicaragua*), strongly mobilized against the abortion ban, is now being targeted by the authorities. Feminist movements have been the victims of administrative, police and judicial repression. In order to gag them, Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo have ordered them to join the women's movement that is aligned with the regime. In another very troubling measure by the regime, Murillo has made a point of denouncing the autonomous women's movement and the support it enjoys abroad in its struggle for the right to abortion as being “the Devil's work.”

### The use of religion

Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo systematically make use of references to the Catholic religion, constantly proclaiming that God is at their side. The regime headed by the presidential couple has caused a profound ideological backslide. In the rest of this text, “God,” “Devil,” “Faith” and “Divine Justice” are capitalised because that is how they appear in all Murillo's and Ortega's writings.

Speaking of the changes the FSLN has undergone under the leadership of Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo, Mónica Baltodano writes: “[A second change that should be analysed is the one that has brought the Sandinista Front] *from rationalism to religious fundamentalism. The revolutionary program involved respect for religious beliefs but promoted*

laicism. The 1987 Constitution established that the State has no official religion and that public education was secular. And what do we have now? The use and abuse of grassroots religiosity and its constant manipulation to strengthen the Ortega-Murillo family power project. The state institutions are operating as reproducers of religious beliefs to emphasize that everything that happens in the country is ‘God’s will,’ thus establishing that Chayo-Orteguista authority [that is, of Rosario Murillo and Daniel Ortega, ET] comes from divine will, just as in the old absolutist monarchies the power of the kings came directly from God. This divine link, according to the official discourse, makes Nicaragua ‘blessed and prosperous.’ As a result of this model, religious hierarchies legislate, churches determine, civil authorities promote religious beliefs and all state and municipal institutions are full of religious images, symbols and messages.”

With Rosario Murillo, references to God and the Devil go back a long way. I found an excerpt from a piece she wrote in 1991 as head of Ventana, the cultural supplement of the Sandinista daily Barricada. In preparation for the first Congress of the FSLN, she wrote “*Within the Front, one finds Sandinistas and non-Sandinistas. Millionaires and the destitute. **Souls of God and souls of the Devil** [...]. Yes, gentlemen, the Sandinista Front is currently a front, and as a front, where one finds anything and everything, it is currently a shit-pile.*” [9] Later, Murillo abandoned this offensive characterization of the Front as a heap of excrement, but on the other hand she introduced into all her speeches a Manichean, religious-fundamentalist, conservative, obscurantist representation of events and people.

In the speech Rosario Murillo gave on 19 July 2018 on the occasion of the celebration of the 39th anniversary of the victory of the revolution, she constantly called on Faith and the grace of God, denouncing the diabolical actions of the demonstrators who protest the policies of the regime of which she is co-leader.

The following day, she continued in the same vein in a declaration on Canal 4 television, which is owned by one of her sons: “*We know that there are institutions which will be capable of recognising the crimes of those who have caused so much pain, so many deaths, so much suffering, so many aberrant, diabolical crimes in our Nicaragua. And we trust in Justice, and also trust in Divine Justice.*” [10]

She continued later: “*This people of God, because the Nicaraguan people are God’s people! Few peoples in the world show so much Faith and so much Devotion, with such a strong relationship with God. And we Catholics, with the Virgin Mary, with so much [...] Faith.*” [11]

In the same speech, she opposes the people to the women and men who are struggling for decriminalization of abortion in the following way: “*A people who have defended life in all its forms, from the mother’s womb... From the mother’s womb! Whereas many of them pretend to be conducting civil actions, when in fact there is nothing civil about them because they are criminals, they have marched in the streets of Managua, demanding Abortion. Committing an offence against life! That is the truth.*” [12]

She then describes the demonstrators who have been protesting since 18 April 2018 as the real perpetrators of the hundreds of deaths mourned by the people: “*...the People know it, they know who has caused death; they know, because we know, how amongst themselves, because of their conflicts caused by their ambitions, for their conflicts caused by their culture of drugs, with which they have sought to terrorize the country, these are drug users, alcoholics, individuals linked to all sorts of crimes and delinquency. The People know that they caused death among themselves and then blamed the Government.*” [13]

The previous day, 19 July 2018, during the big rally held by the regime, Daniel Ortega had gone just as far in this Manichean and inquisitorial reasoning. He had claimed that the protestors engaged in diabolical and satanic practices. He stated that the terrorists tortured people “satanically” (*sic!*) at the barricades! [14] He literally said that the protesters are “terrorists” and “putschists” who are totally “satanized.” He called on the Catholic bishops to “exorcize” these “Devils” or “demons” (the terms Ortega uses to designate the demonstrators) and chase out the Devil who has

taken possession of them. Ortega claimed that they burn corpses near the barricades and dance around them. He called on the bishops to respect God's word and not support the demands of the dissident demonstrators that the presidential couple resign.

[Link to the first part here:](#)

[15]

*Translated by Snake Arbusto*

[Cadtm](#)

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[1] [See first part here:](#)

[2] Les liens qui libèrent, 2017, chapter 11, p. 242-243 (in French). To be published in English in September 2018 by Aakar in India and in December 2018 by Haymarket in Chicago (<https://www.haymarketbooks.org/books/1234-the-debt-system>)

[3] Mónica Baltodano, What mutations have turned the FSLN into what it is today? Revista Envío <http://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/4804> (also subsequent references)

[4] See <http://www.cadtm.org/Demystifying-Alexander-Nahum-Sack>

[5] Adolfo Acevedo Vogl, Nicaragua: Hacia el quinto programa con el FMI, 23 novembre 2006,

<http://www.cadtm.org/Nicaragua-Hacia-el-quinto-programa>

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<http://www.cadtm.org/Nicaragua-La-Carta-de-Intencion-al>

[6] See <http://www.b2gold.com/projects/nicaragua/>

[7] Maria Mestre, « Pescanova, el gigante camarero de Nicaragua », 3 décembre 2010, *Diagonal*:

<https://www.diagonalperiodico.net/global/pescanova-gigante-camarero-nicaragua.html>

[8] <https://www.amnestyusa.org/pdfs/amr430012009en.pdf>

[9] Quoted by Éric Toussaint in an article in French « Front ou parti : que choisir ? », *Inprecor* n° 329, 26 April 1991

[10] « Sabemos que hay Instituciones que serán capaces de reconocer los delitos y los crímenes de quienes han causado, tanto dolor, tanta muerte, tanto sufrimiento, tantos crímenes aberrantes, diabólicos, en nuestra Nicaragua. Y confiamos en la Justicia, confiamos en la Justicia

*Divina también.'*

<http://www.lavozdelsandinismo.com/nicaragua/2018-07-20/declaraciones-de-la-companera-rosario-murillo-vicepresidenta-de-nicaragua-20-07-2018-texto-integro/> ou <https://www.el19digital.com/articulos/ver/titulo:79300-rosario-en-multinoticias-20-de-julio-del-2018>

[11] *“Ese Pueblo de Dios, porque el Pueblo nicaragüenses és el Pueblo de Dios ! Pocos Pueblos hay en el Mundo con tanta Fé y tanta Devoción, y con tanta Relación con Dios. Y nosotr@s, los Católic@s, con la Virgen MarÁ-a, con tanta Relación, con tanta Fé.’*

[12] *“Un Pueblo que ha defendido la Vida en todas sus formas, desde el vientre materno... Desde el vientre materno ! Mientras, muchos de los que hoy se llaman “CÁ-vicos”, que de CÁ-vicos no tienen nada porque son criminales, han desfilado en las Calles de Managua, pidiendo Aborto. Atentando contra la Vida ! Esa és la Verdad’.*

[13] *“...el Pueblo lo sabe, sabe quién produjo los muertos; sabe incluso, porque sabemos cómo entre ellos mismos por sus pleitos de ambición, por sus pleitos también propios de esa cultura de drogadicción con la que pretendieron aterrorizar al PaÁ-s, personas drogadictas, alcohólicas, personas vinculadas a todo tipo de crÁ-menes y delincuencia; el Pueblo nicaragüense sabe que ahÁ- también entre ellos mismos se quitaron la Vida para culpar al Gobierno.’*

[14] See Rosario Murillo and Daniel Ortega’s recorded speeches. The passage referred to occurs after 2 hours and 10 minutes. Nicaragua: Con una multitudinaria concentración el FSLN recordó el triunfo de la Revolución en 1979 - *Resumen Latinoamericano*, <http://www.resumenlatinoamericano.org/2018/07/19/nicaragua-con-una-multitudinaria-concentracion-el-fsln-recordo-el-triunfo-de-la-revolucion-en-1979/>

[15] The author made a dozen trips to Nicaragua and the rest of Central America between 1984 and 1992. He participated in organising the volunteer work brigades, made up of unionists and other international-solidarity activists, who left Belgium for Nicaragua during the years 1985-1989. He was a leader of the “FGTBistes pour le Nicaragua” group. He met with various members of the Sandinista leadership – Tomas Borge, Henry Ruiz, Luis Carrion, VÁ-ctor Tirado López – during the period 1984–1992. He was in close contact with the ATC, the Sandinista organisation of agricultural workers. He was present in Managua in July 1990 during the barricades movement and the general strike against the measures taken by the rightist government of Violetta Chamorro. He was invited to the First Congress of the FSLN in July 1991 and to the Third Forum of SÃ£o Paulo, held in Managua in July 1993. At the international Institute for Research and Education in Amsterdam in the 1980s, he conducted training on the revolutionary strategy of the FSLN before it took power and on the post–1979 period.

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