Are We on the Eve of Another Nicaraguan Revolution?

written by Dan La Botz | April 24, 2018

The government of former revolutionary and Nicaraguan president Daniel Ortega has in the last few days killed at least 24 protestors who were demonstrating against sudden and drastic alterations in a new pension law, changes that would have adversely affected the incomes and lives of tens of thousands. Some 200 were arrested and 20 are missing, according to the National Human Rights Commission. Other protestors, many of them university students, were beaten by the police or by goons armed with pipes sent by President Ortega's party, the Sandinista Front for the Liberation of Nicaragua (FSLN).

Ortega's administration also shut down the Noticias news channel and Channel 12 to prevent both coverage of the events and criticism of his government. Sandinista thugs beat reporters and destroyed TV video cameras as well. Angel Gahona, a journalist with the show "Onda Local" on Facebook Live, was reporting on the protests when was shot and killed in the midst of his broadcast. His murder, the censorship and the repression led in turn to more protests and to looting in Managua markets.

Students have called for a strike on all college campuses and remarkably farmers have called for a strike until the students' demands are met. Large protest marches of thousands have taken place in Managua and other cities. U.S. diplomats have been ordered to leave the country as soon as possible. The Catholic Cardenal Leopoldo Brenes is attempting to set up a meeting between the National Council of Businesspeople (COSEP) and the Ortega government. While it it too soon to say what will happen, the current upheaval has all the earmarks of a revolutionary movement—though so far without a leadership.

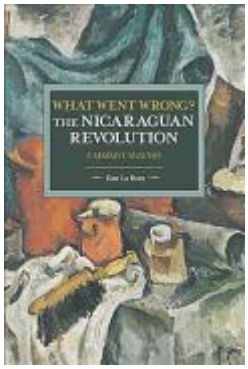
Ortega's pension law follows the same neoliberal logic as that of other similar legislation in countries around the world; that is, the imposition of austerity on the working class and the poor. The new law would have increased both employer and worker contributions while at the same time lowering overall benefits. Nicaragua, with a population of six million, is one of Latin America's poorest countries, with over a third of the country living in poverty and half in rural areas in extreme poverty. There the average income is about $2.00 per day.

The protests led Ortega to announce that he is cancelling the pension reform law and will negotiate, but it is not clear with whom he will negotiate or whether or not he is prepared to make meaningful concessions. Some opponents, raising the slogan "We are not afraid," are demanding that Ortega, now in his third consecutive term as president (his fourth term altogether), must resign.

What Went Wrong?

How did a political party and a government born in a popular revolution in 1979 go so wrong? And

wrong in so many ways? For, while this is the worst repression in post-revolutionary Nicaraguan history, it is not unique. Since 2014 farmers and environmentalists have demonstrated against Ortega's plans for a Chinese-financed inter-oceanic canal across Nicaragua, and police have frequently used violence against those protestors. The government, which is allied with the Catholic Church, has also harassed the feminist movement that seeks to overturn the country's laws against abortion.



Huge billboards throughout Managua, bear smiling portraits of Ortega and his wife and virtual co-president Rosario Murillo, proclaiming, "Cristiana, Socialista, Solidaria!" But the regime would better be described as authoritarian, pro-business, and anti-worker. The Ortega Sandinista government is a product of both the ideology that inspired its revolutionary past and of the deals that constituted its practice since 1990. As I argue in my book *What Went Wrong? The Nicraguan Revolution: A Marxist Analysis,* that the central problem is that the Sandinistas have never held democracy as a core value, neither in their revolutionary past nor in their post-revolutionary and quite reactionary present.

Yet at one time the Sandinistas had inspired the left around the world. From 1936 to 1979 Nicaragua was run by the Somoza family, a brutal dynastic dictatorship, supported by the United States, that in alliances with sections of both the Liberal and Conservative parties used the state to protect the landlords, to modernize the economy, and to repress its opponents. The Sandinistas, founded in 1961 by a small group of former Stalinist Communists (members of the Nicaraguan Socialist Party) who had become admirers of Fidel Castro and Ernesto "Che" Guevara, adopted a guerrilla strategy.

After almost fifteen years operating as tiny guerrilla bands in the mountains as well as the organizers of some spectacular kidnappings and killings of government officials, the Sandinista's revolutionary movement stalled. The guerrilla war was a failure. What was to be done?

The frustrated Sandinista leaders divided into three rival factions, one led by Daniel Ortega and writer Sergio Ramírez, called the "Third Tendency," which eventually won out, called for a new strategy based on a moderate program, an alliance with the progressive bourgeoisie, support from other Latin American governments, and an armed military invasion from Costa Rica combined with a national uprising. Bolstered by thousands of Latin American foreign fighters, the Sandinistas took power in 1979.

Inspired by *el triunfo*, thousands of foreigners flocked, myself among them, traveled to Nicaragua to learn or to help, some stayed for days or weeks, others for years or even decades. The revolution would turn out to be different than they imagined.

In Power and at War

While there was briefly an ostensibly coalition government, in fact the Sandinistas dominated the

country from day one of the revolution, their coalition partners gradually resigning. The revolution was founded on deception. In a post-revolution secret three-day meeting, the Sandinsta directorate, the collective leadership, proclaimed that the party would be Marxist-Leninist, would establish "the dictatorship of the proletariat," and would become part of the Communist camp with the Soviet Union, the Eastern Bloc, and Cuba. Ortega and other FSLN leaders, however, told the Nicaraguan people and the world that they would establish a democratic government, a mixed economy, and a non-aligned foreign policy.

Unconcerned with democracy or honesty but deeply committed to social equality, the Sandinistas carried out remarkable national literacy and health campaigns. The FSLN created a series of party-led mass organization of workers, women, and youth through which it could both mobilize and constrain the population. And with the aid of the Soviet Union and Cuba, it created a new state, an army and a police force. Meanwhile, President Ronald Reagan decided he would destroy the revolution.

The U.S. State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency took responsibility to organize and to arm former *Somocistas* and new opponents into the *Contras,* counter-revolutionaries. But the FSLN's political mistakes also contributed to the growth of the *Contras.* The FSLN's refusal to distribute land to the peasants and its heavy-handed treatment of the indigenous population on the Caribbean Coast created a large-scale rural opposition and led to what became a genuine civil war. Unable to rely on a volunteer army, the Sandinistas turned to conscription, and lost more support, some opponent going over to the *Contras*.

After a decade of war, though not defeated, the population was exhausted and demoralized. Daniel Ortega, who had been elected president in the first post-revolutionary elections in 1985, was challenged in 1990 by Violeta Chamorro, widow of a popular newspaper publisher who had been assassinated by Somoza. With a broad opposition from Communists to the far right, but principally running against the war with lots of help from the United States, Chamorro won and became president.

Daniel Ortaga Turns to Politics, the Church, and Business

Chamorro's coalition fell apart immediately after her election, while the Nicaraguan National Assembly was dominated by her opponent Ortega's FSLN. Antonio Lacayo, the power behind Chamorro's throne, secretly entered into a relationship with Ortega, still head of the FSLN, and his brother Humberto Ortega, and together the triumvirs ran Nicaragua. Ortega and the FSLN transferred real estate and other wealth from the government to themselves—the famous *piñata*—for sake keeping the explained at the beginning. And began to enter into relationships with former Somoza figures and the old landlord class. Ortega and his girlfriend, Rosario, married in the Catholic Church, and proclaimed themselves believers.

Ortega's complicated involvement in corrupt politics and crooked business deals, which I have discussed at greater length elsewhere, is too complicated to go into here, but suffice it to say that through such machinations he continued to be a king-maker and king-breaker from 1996 to 2006 under presidents Arnoldo Alemán and Enrique Bolaños. During those years Ortega and Murillo took absolute control of the FSLN and transformed it into a political machine, led by old Sandinista cadres and filled with a post-revolutionary rank and file, apolitical but willing to get out the vote for cap and a t-shirt, for a handout and a few meals.

Today Ortega controls not only the presidency, but also the National Assembly, and the Supreme Court. Like a monarch—and like Donald Trump—he has bestowed great power on his wife and his children.

Ortega has had a lot of "left cover" as he has become a thoroughly reactionary dictator. Over the last couple of decades, Ortega can be found in smiling photographs with Fidel and Raúl Castro in Cuba, or alongside Evo Morales of Bolivia or Hugo Chávez of Venezuela. ALBA (*Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra Améric*), a financial alliance created by Castro and Chávez, provided millions of dollars to Nicaragua, money personally controlled by Ortega. The Foro de São Paulo, the regular congress of Latin America's leftwing political parties, which I attended in the summer of 2016, treats the Sandinistas as if they were a socialist government. And in the United States the Alliance for Global Justice, which publishes *NicaNotes,* has until now been uncritical of the Sandinista government. It's time the left quit providing covering for a dictator.

Ortega has attributed his country's problems to unidentified political enemies. At the moment the Cuban government argues that the upheaval in Nicaragua is an attempt at regime change by the Nicaraguan business class and the U.S. government.

Today Ortega and his friends and family own a variety of businesses, control most of the country's television stations, and cut deals with the old bourgeoisie. Nicaraguan workers in maquiladoras or in agriculture have no real unions to defend them, and resistance can lead to being fired. Hundreds of thousands of Nicaraguans have had to go abroad to find employment in other Latin American nations and in the United States. For years the country's intellectuals have compared Ortega to the Somozas. Now the people are doing so as well.

When I finished my book *What Went Wrong?* in 2016, I speculated about the prospects of Nicaragua's small and beleaguered opposition movement. I predicted that one day a new opposition would arise to challenge Ortega's corrupt regime. I had not expected the opposition to rise as powerfully and as quickly as it has. But now Nicaragua has put the dictator on notice. Nothing frightens a dictator more than their slogan: "We are not afraid."

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