

Nicaragua needs a new revolution

written by Dawn Marie Paley | December 23, 2024



Nicaraguan Revolution 1979

Mónica Baltodano was a guerrilla commander in Nicaragua's Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) and participated in the country's 1979 Revolution. She has a powerful presence and a gentle demeanor, she speaks quietly and with conviction. She describes herself as "in love with popular power."

Baltodano joined the FSLN in 1972 and, in 1974, she went underground and participated clandestinely in the armed struggle. Five years later, when the Sandinistas triumphed over dictator Anastasio Somoza, she was named a "guerrilla commander" of the FSLN. She worked on building the revolutionary state in the 1980s and won election to Managua's city council in 1990 and to congress in 1994. She also wrote a four-volume history of the Sandinista struggle.

Voters ousted the Sandinistas from government in 1990. For Baltodano, this was less a consequence of the failures of the young militants then running for office than of Ronald Reagan's support for the Contras, the right-wing opposition. But scandals, such as the Piñata Sandinista affair in which party leaders—including Daniel Ortega—took for themselves properties and goods acquired through expropriation when they left office, created a legitimacy crisis for the FSLN.

"When Eduardo Galeano learned about all of that, he said that he was surprised that young people who had once been willing to die for the cause now lived in terror of losing what they'd acquired," Baltodano told me over lunch in Quito, Ecuador in October. By the 1990s, Ortega, she said, was using social organizations focused on land reclamation to consolidate his power and wealth, creating what she calls a "red and black bourgeoisie" (these are the colors of Sandinismo).

She participated in the massive uprisings in 2018, during which police and paramilitaries killed at least 355 people. Over the following years, smaller protests have continued despite the fact that authorities have annulled the freedom of speech and assembly. Baltodano fled Nicaragua clandestinely in August 2021.

Her commitment to her ideals has never wavered and she continues fighting for her country, though today she does so from exile in Costa Rica. She is one of nearly 500 Nicaraguans whom the Ortega regime formally stripped of their nationality.

This fall I had the chance to sit down with Baltodano in a café bursting with leafy plants. Our conversation has been translated and edited for length and clarity.

DMP: I'd like to start with the Sandinista Revolution and the Contra war against it.

MB: We began the struggle convinced that Nicaragua as we knew it had to change. Nicaragua had an extreme concentration of wealth and land, it was the second poorest country in Latin America, with high illiteracy rates. The early years of the Revolution focused on that. I would say that we were a happy generation, being able to realize dreams that we had fought for with weapon in hand.

The revolution captured the imagination of the global left because we were not copying examples from actually existing socialism at the time. We supported a mixed economy, political pluralism and non-alignment. We would often say "social property and private property must coexist," with limits, of course. We did not want a single party or to align with one of the blocs in the Cold War. Unfortunately the war forced us toward the socialist bloc, so that we could get weapons, wheat, and other necessities.

There was no Fidel or Raúl [Castro]. There wasn't *one* person. There were nine commanders and a Sandinista Assembly made up of around 120 members. All the guerrilla commanders participated and we made decisions together. It became more of a consultative body in the 1980s, but it still had a lot of influence.

Unfortunately, our revolution triumphed just as Ronald Reagan took office in the US. He came with the Santa Fe Committee, which aimed to destroy any possible advance of socialism. We faced an army made up of as many as 20,000 soldiers fighting for the counterrevolution and armed by the United States. They filled the ports with landmines. They really blockaded us.

After the [electoral] defeat in 1990, Daniel Ortega began to take control of the Sandinista Front, undermining shared leadership and building a path for himself to the top of the party as a caudillo with unilateral power.

DMP: Can you tell us more about when the Sandinistas returned to power in 2007, this time with Ortega at the helm?

MB: Two very important events occurred in 1998. First, Zoilamérica [Ortega's stepdaughter and the child of his wife, Rosario Murillo, who is currently co-president] declared that Ortega had raped her when she was a child. Murillo took Ortega's side and that marked the beginning of her rise to power.

Second, there was a [Sandinista] congress in which Daniel Ortega achieved total control. At that same congress, he unilaterally announced negotiations for an agreement with then-President Arnoldo Alemán, one of the most corrupt presidents that Nicaragua has ever had. This was essentially a bipartisan power sharing agreement.

When Ortega returned to power [in 2007], there was no longer a transformative project. Their message was completely vacuous: they called for "love, peace and reconciliation." There was absolutely nothing about the economy.

Ortega began to govern through clientelistic networks and to orient the economy toward big capital, especially financial capital, and to consolidate his own fortune. There are studies showing that capital has never done better in Nicaragua than under Daniel Ortega. Then came the surrender of territory for the inter-oceanic canal, for mining concessions, and all of that.

DMP: And what happened in 2018?

MB: Nobody could have predicted what was going to happen. There were two catalysts: the first was

a forest fire. There was a degree of environmental awareness among students and, when a reserve called Indio Maíz began to burn, they demanded that the government react. At almost the same time, legislators passed a law cutting Social Security.

But it was the killings that fueled the uprising. Before that, during protests, the government would send shock troops to beat us, but this time they also shot at us. They killed two on the first day, 20 on the third and 30 the fourth day. On the fifth day, people began to set up barricades.

The massacre set the country on fire. There were dozens of barricades, in all the departments. Ortega called for dialogue but only to buy time so that he could organize paramilitary groups with the police to regain control. They killed over 300 people.

Since then, the government has outlawed organizing. It has suspended all of our constitutional guarantees—all of them. You can't express your opinion or mobilize or meet. There is no independent media. Nothing!

DMP: And many people were incarcerated, even the leaders of the revolution, including Ortega's former comrades.

MB: How can it be that they jailed the heroes of the struggle against the Somoza dictatorship, like Hugo Torres, and left them to die in jail? Similar things have happened to Dora María Téllez and Sergio Ramírez. The government stripped almost 500 people of their nationality and took it from many others *de facto* by denying them passports, birth certificates and the right to live in Nicaragua.

DMP: What's the situation in Nicaragua today?

MB: This dictatorship is worse than it was under Somoza. In 1978-1979, Somoza bombed popular insurrections, the cities and the civilian population, but he had to contend with an armed guerrilla movement. Ortega faces a totally unarmed population. When Somoza was in power, we could mobilize, we could organize to defend our rights. That's impossible now.

Today conditions have to be created in which Ortega and Murillo are removed from power and a transition process is generated that allows us to recover a minimum level of democracy.

We are in a difficult situation. We know that we're not going to displace Ortega through the construction of a leftist project or movement, because he has taken over the words, he has taken over the ideology. Being on the side of the people in the struggle against dictatorship is the main task of the left with regards to Nicaragua.

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