

Nicaragua: Where Is The Rebellion Going?

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The popular rebellion against the dictatorial government of Daniel Ortega, four-time president of Nicaragua, has been going on now for more than a month. And the Ortega government has continued its violent repression. In the last 47 days, it is reported that 104 people have been killed, while some have been arrested or tortured and others have gone missing. In one of the most atrocious events, government snipers fired on the May 30 “Mothers March” led by mothers mourning the murder of their children. Fifteen marchers were killed and scores wounded.



While students throughout the country have played the leading role in the rebellion, farmers, environmentalists, and women’s organizations have also been involved. Protest marches by the Nicaraguan people demanding “Peace and Justice”—defined as an end to government violence against the students and the resignation of Ortega—have reached huge proportions, from tens of thousands on numerous occasions to some 500,000—the largest demonstration in Central American history—for the Mothers March. Several groups have now taken up the call for a *paro*, a national civic strike.

As I have explained in my book *What Went Wrong? The Nicaraguan Revolution: A Marxist Analysis* (summarized in a recent article), Daniel Ortega began forming alliances with the Nicaraguan business class and with conservative and corrupt politicians after he was voted out of power in 1990. He formed alliance with rightwing governments and eventually succeeded in returning to power as president. Over the next nearly thirty years he became a dictator, making his wife his vice-president and controlling all branches of the government. Now there is a massive popular rebellion against the Ortega dictatorship. I ask here now: What is this rebellion and where is it going? What should be our attitude toward it as Americans on the left?

A Popular Uprising

The current protest movement in Nicaragua clearly has the characteristics of a popular uprising. The movement has its origins in 2012 when Nicaraguan indigenous peoples, farmers, and environmentalists brought lawsuits against the government’s plan to build a transoceanic canal, a project that could have devastating ecological consequences. When the lawsuits failed, those groups began to organize peaceful protests in both urban and rural areas. While most of these numbered in the hundreds, they sometimes involved thousands. Ortega’s police and sometimes his Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) party and its youth group’s violent armed gangs called *turbas* attacked the peaceful demonstrators.

When in mid-April the Ortega government announced an increase in taxes for workers’ pensions accompanied by a cut in pension benefits, there was a widespread reaction against the reforms. Students at the country’s major universities protested, but when attacked returned to their campuses and occupied them. All of the major universities—UNA, UCA, UNI, UPOLI, and UNAN, which enroll some about 100,000 altogether—were shut down and occupied. When the students again marched out to protest peacefully, police and *turbas* attacked the students while sharpshooters in strategic locations shot and killed some of the protestors. Such government-ordered killings, documented by Nicaraguan and international human rights groups, by the

country's newspapers, and by social media - have gone on day after day in Managua and in other cities and towns.[1]

The killings horrified the Nicaraguan people, and a protest movement spread throughout the country. The Catholic Church, business organizations, and some of the students called for negotiations between Ortega and the opposition, but Ortega failed to bargain in good faith and the opposition became increasingly intransigent in its demand for his resignation. With the suspension of the dialogue, protests resumed and so did government violence. The Church then organized marches calling for Peace and Justice that were joined by tens of thousands, but they brought neither of those objectives.

At the moment, things are extremely tense. The protestors have established nearly 60 roadblocks throughout the country that have virtually stopped the national economy. In Managua, there is a kind of defacto curfew of 6 p.m. to 6 a.m., because of fear of the FSLN youth group and its thugs. Jesuit Father José Alberto Idiáquez, the rector of the Central American University (UCA) in Managua, who had supported the student protestors, has received death threats for his participation in the dialogue.[2] Monseñor Silvio José Báez, the auxiliary bishop of Managua, who has joined the protest movement's marches, has been the victim of a campaign of vilification because of his criticism of the Ortega government's violent repression. The cities of Masaya and of Granada have been assaulted by the police and by armed gangs, public buildings and markets have been burned. The police and gangsters continue to murder students.

Government Claims of Anti-Imperialism and Foreign Intervention

The Ortega government has declared that the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency is behind the protests, working with the Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS), a dissident group that split from the Sandinistas in 1994. This narrative has been taken up by the Cuban government, Venezuelan teleSur news, and by Russian Television (RT). While Latin Americans have every reason to be suspicious of and to fear U.S. intervention in their countries, the popular revolt grew up in Nicaragua among ordinary people concerned about their farms and environment, the social welfare system and women's rights, as well as other issues, and became an anti-government rebellion only when confronted by violent repression against peaceful protestors. This was not a foreign-instigated movement, despite the usual charges of meddling by outside agitators. There is no doubt that the U.S. government will attempt to take advantage of the situation to promote its own agenda, but that does not undermine in any way what began as and continues to be an independent movement.

We should note that while the Ortega government has been an ally of Cuba, Venezuela, and Bolivia and has portrayed itself as anti-imperialist, there has been little or nothing that is truly anti-imperialist about its policies and practices. Ortega's Nicaragua has been deeply involved with the United States government and U.S. business for decades and has cooperated with the United States in many areas: economic, political, and even in terms of policing and the military. Economic domination is, of course, at the heart of the theory of imperialism. As the U.S. State Department's "Nicaragua Page" notes: "The United States is the dominant economic partner for Nicaragua, buying 51 percent of Nicaraguan exports, supplying 32 percent of its imports, providing 20 percent of investment, sending 54 percent of its remittances, and being the origin of 19 percent of its tourists, according to 2017 figures." [3]

One could argue that such trade is inevitable, given Nicaragua's small size and location and the dominant role of the United States in North America and throughout the hemisphere. Be that as it may, trade and investment are essential features of imperialism. Ortega has certainly encouraged U.S. investment, including promotion of Free Trade Zones and maquiladora plants that represent a substantial part of the country's exports, based on workers' low wages. Ortega has worked to

prevent strikes and to block the organization of independent labor unions. U.S. and other foreign direct investment currently amounts to 6 percent of GDP.

The law to promote foreign investment (*Ley de Promoción de Inversiones Extranjeras*), in force since 2000, allows foreign investors in all sectors to hold 100% of capital in businesses. It guarantees the repatriation of capital and profits at any time, as well as fast and efficient compensations if the investor's property is expropriated on the grounds of public interest. The same law also allows investors to choose their arbitration tribunal in case of conflict.[4]

Because of laws like these both the Nicaragua capitalist class and U.S. and other foreign investors have been quite satisfied with Daniel Ortega since he came to power.

U.S. trade has been complemented by U.S. aid. Nicaragua has long been dependent on the United States for economic assistance, receiving billions in economic aid over the last several decades.[5] The U.S. has also provided medical aid at times.[6] The Nicaraguan government has entered into relations with U.S. police agencies as well. The US Drug Enforcement Agency opened an office in Managua in 1997 and the DEA has for many years regularly met with Nicaraguan military and police agencies. Just in March of this year there was a meeting between the Nicaraguan Army and the DEA to discuss their common strategy. The U.S. government has also provided millions of dollars in aid to the Nicaraguan Navy for drug interdiction,[7] and millions in general military aid as well until 2005.[8] When U.S. military aid ceased, Ortega's government turned to the Russian dictator Vladimir Putin for military assistance, and got it.[9] For Ortega, one imperial power is as good as another as long as he stays in power. (One has to find it ironic that the government of a small nation like Nicaragua, which for so long had to resist U.S. imperialism, would ally with Russia, which seized the Crimea and has intervened in the Eastern Ukraine and Syria.)

The point is that there was not and is not anything "anti-imperialist" about Ortega's government, which despite its rhetoric has maintained strong economic and police ties to the United States. Far from being anti-imperialist or anti-United States, Nicaragua has never stopped being part of the American imperial system in Latin America.

Who Leads the Opposition Movement?

We should not be surprised that in a country that effectively has had one-party rule by the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN), which retained considerable prestige for leading the overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship in 1979, and where that party has controlled social organizations and labor unions, that there has been little opportunity for an effective left opposition to arise. To this should be added the government's long-standing practice of harassing and sometimes physically attacking rival political parties during election periods. The combination of political monopoly and repression created an atmosphere that has inhibited a healthy, democratic political life and especially made difficult the creation of strong opposition groups on the left.

There are a variety of political parties in Nicaragua, but those on the left have failed to find a base, while those on the right have long been utterly corrupt. Two splits from the FSLN, the Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS), and the Movement for the Rescue of Sandinismo (MPRS), did attempt to build a left opposition. The novelist Sergio Ramírez and the former *comandante* Dora María Tellez created the social democratic MRS in 1994, supported by virtually all of the FSLN's legislators at the time. The MRS, however, never succeeded in building a mass base among the country's working people. In 2005, Herty Lewites ran for president and gained significant support, but died suddenly of a heart attack in 2006. The party that Lewites and Victor Tirado had established in 2005, the MPRS, failed to take off and became marginal. Both MRS and MPRS continued throughout the 2000s and 2010s to criticize Ortega and the FSLN government, but they never grew into significant

organizations. The Christian Alternative, inspired by the Theology of Liberation, also failed. Other small left parties, Communist, Trotskyist, and Maoist, had small followings and no impact.

Nicaragua's two major conservative opposition parties—the Constitutional Liberal Party and the Independeont Liberal Party—proved capable of building a following and winning elections, but only because they had made political deals with Ortega. However, over time Ortega's FSLN became the dominant conservative party and won support from Nicaragua's bankers and business owners and the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. The Nicaraguan bourgeoisie, finding that Ortega supported its agenda, felt no need to throw its support to opposition political parties. So as this crisis has emerged and developed, there is no political party on the left to provide leadership to the movement, and the remnants of the surviving conservative parties have been utterly corrupted by Ortega and the FSLN as well as their own avarice and lack of scruples.

The Dominant Social Forces under Ortega

Ortega and the FSLN have long had a policy of dominating or destroying the country's popular social organizations. In the revolutionary period of the 1980s the FSLN had created organizations for workers and farmers, students and women, and kept control of most of them for decades. After Ortega and the FSLN lost the 1990 election, the FSLN women's organization AMNLAE broke up, as dissident women created their own feminist movement and a variety of small women's organizations. Ortega and especially his wife and now vice-president Rosario Murillo, who had formed an alliance with the conservative Catholic Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo, launched a ferocious legal and media attack on feminists who supported abortion rights, accusing them of being criminal abortionists inspired by foreign imperialists. Social movements could not flourish in such an atmosphere.

While the social movements languished, various sorts of non-government organizations prospered for a time. Ortega and some other FSLN leaders, when they lost governmental power after 1990, went off and formed NGOs, often launching them with resources that they had simply taken from their former government offices. Most used their NGOs to further their own political and business projects, though some took a genuine interest in social issues. Many U.S. and European foundations and NGOs supported work in Nicaragua around issues of poverty, hunger, homelessness, children's and women's health care, and environmental issues.[10] While these organizations, both religious and secular, often expressed high ideals, fundamentally—with the exception of some of the women's NGOs—they engaged in charity, eschewing any social or political activity for fear of losing the government's permission for their work.

The best-organized and most important social organizations in Nicaraguan then have been the business class and the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church has a complicated history in Nicaragua. Allied for centuries with the landowning class and its political parties, it reached a *modus vivendi* with the Somoza dictatorship and later with the Ortega dictatorship. At the same time the Theology of Liberation of the 1960s and 1970s that called upon the church to take progressive social positions and to maintain a "preferential option for the poor," won over many among the Jesuit order and many other Catholics both religious and lay. Catholic priests joined the FSLN during its heroic struggle against the Somoza dictatorship and continued to support the FSLN through its struggle against the U.S.-backed *Contras*. But by the 1990s, the Catholic left began to leave the FSLN, critical of Ortega and the party's lack of democracy and diminishing social consciousness. Some formed the political movement called the Christian Alternative, but it was not successful. The priests and professors who continued to believe in the Theology of Liberation often taught in the country's universities, and no doubt their ideals have had some impact on the current generation of students. At the moment, Pope Francis and the Nicaraguan Catholic Church are calling for an end to the violence and for peace and a dialogue between Ortega and the opposition.[11]

The most important social organization in Nicaragua is COSEP (*Consejo Superior de la Empresa Privada*), the Superior Council for Private Enterprise, an umbrella organization made up of 27 chambers of particular industries. Closely allied with COSEP is AmCham, the American Chamber of Commerce of Nicaragua, part of the American Chambers of Commerce throughout Latin America that promote U.S. investment and trade. COSEP represents the rich and powerful Nicaraguan capitalist class. When the Sandinistas took power in the 1979 revolution, the landowning and industrial capitalist class split into three different groups: 1) some, like Carlos Pellas, today a billionaire, the richest man in Nicaragua, and a friend of Daniel Ortega, remained in Nicaragua; 2) others left Nicaragua, moved to other Central American and Caribbean countries, or moved to Florida, continuing their business operations or entering into new fields; 3) some of those in group #2 supported or even joined the *Contras*. While in exile, many in the Nicaraguan bourgeoisie actually got richer, since they were forced to expand their business networks, creating new ties to other banks and corporations.

When Ortega and the FSLN lost power in 1990, the bourgeoisie in exile returned and through the government of President Violeta Chamorro and her son-in-law advisor Antonio Lacayo they gradually recovered most of the property that the government had taken from them. They were back in business. Through the famous *piñatas*, that is, the FSLN government's two distributions of properties to Ortega and other FSLN leaders, a number of the latter became small time players in the Nicaraguan bourgeoisie. By the 2000s, Ortega and the FSLN had become not only junior partners in the capitalist economy, but also political partners sponsoring pro-business policies in the legislature and through government decrees. There is no doubt that as the crisis began a little more than a month ago, COSEP represented the most significant organized group in the country. When Ortega proposed the social security reform that detonated the rebellion, COSEP was among the first organizations to oppose changes because they would mean higher taxes on business as well as workers.

The students, who took the lead in street protests using social media, have attempted to form a national student council to provide organization and leadership, but this has proven difficult because of the government's violent attacks and the general chaos that exists in much of the country where neighborhoods have barricaded themselves, highways have been blocked, and FSLN gangsters and plain clothes police, together with sharpshooters, arrest, torture, and murder student activists. Some of the students have declared that what is taking place is "a revolution." [12] But while the students have been the heroic leaders of the movement, given the country's history and the current conditions, is it not surprising that they have failed to put forward a political program. So far the demands of the movement remain centered on the resignation of Ortega and Murillo, the restoration of democratic institutions, and social justice. There are no actual proposals for what to do with government institutions, the FSLN party and its leaders, the army and the police, or the economy.

So Where Are Things Now?

We can say that facing off against the government there are now three major forces in Nicaragua: the movement of students, farmers, women and others; COSEP; and the Catholic Church. The Church, now headed by Cardinal Leopoldo Brenes, archbishop of Managua, continues to call for peace and dialogue, and despite the massacres has not yet called upon Ortega to resign.

Nicaragua's richest man, Carlos Pellas, and others such as Roberto Zamora of LaFise, one of the country's most important financial institutions, have called for holding early elections. [13] Clearly the bourgeoisie would like a smooth transition to their continued economic dominance of the country.

The recently created *Articulación de Movimientos Sociales y Organizaciones de la Sociedad Civil*, or

the Coordinating Committee of Social Movements, and Organizations of Civil Society, has issued a call for a *paro*, a National Civic Citizens Strike, with the intention of paralyzing the country and forcing Ortega from office. With the country's streets and highways already blocked and the economy disordered by the events, the *paro* would represent added pressure, though whether it could force Ortega to resign is an open question.

The United States, which sees an opportunity to impose a still more openly pro-business and pro-United States government on Nicaragua, has via its ambassador Carlos Trujillo declared its opposition to the Ortega dictatorship and called for a date for new elections.[14] Its position is very close to that of COSEP. The U.S. too would like a smooth transition to a new, conservative capitalist government.

The Challenge Facing the Nicaraguan Democratic Movement

The challenge facing the Nicaraguan popular rebellion and the democratic movement at its core is to elaborate a program calling for political democracy and also for social justice in very explicit terms. Parliamentary democracy should be defended, but it must be cleansed of its pervasive corruption, and democracy must be extended to everyday life, to the barrios and to the workplaces where FSLN organizations have repressed people on a daily basis.

A social justice program must include the rejection of the transatlantic canal, the protection of the rural peoples' and indigenous peoples' land, and new agricultural programs to lift the standard of living in the countryside. Workers must have the right to organize independent labor unions and to strike for higher wages, and in the meantime a new democratic government should dramatically raise wages. National property and cooperative property should be protected and more institutions should be collectivized.

Women's rights, children's rights, and the rights of the indigenous, the Black Nicaraguans of the Caribbean coast, and all other groups must be protected and enhanced. The fight for the moment in Nicaragua is for programs of democracy and for social justice, but it is important that the new activists adopt a revolutionary attitude toward capitalism and the capitalist government and become advocates of a genuine socialist society. A program of democracy and social justice could inspire, unite, and advance the movement.

If the current Nicaraguan movement is to be successful, COSEP must be stopped from taking control of the reform process and the United States must be kept from intervening in any way. We in the United States can demand that our government keep its hands off of Nicaragua and we can in every moral and material way possible offer our support to the democratic movement. The future lies with the young Nicaraguans who have so heroically led this rebellion, and we must be their allies.

[1] Amnesty International's report here:

<https://www.amnestyusa.org/reports/shoot-to-kill-nicaraguas-strategy-to-suppress-protest/> Find the reports of El Centro Nicaragüense de Derechos Humanos (CENIDH) here: <https://www.cenidh.org/> The country's major newspapers are *La Prensa* <https://www.laprensa.com.ni/> and *El Nuevo Diario* <https://www.elnuevodiario.com.ni/> and the digital *Confidencial* <https://confidencial.com.ni/> and all have carried detail reports on the violence that clearly indicate the government's responsibility.

[2]

<https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2018/06/05/jesuits-denounce-threats-seek-protection-nicaraguan-bishop>

[3] <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/1850.htm>

[4] <https://en.portal.santandertrade.com/establish-overseas/nicaragua/investing-3>

[5] See reports such as these from the GAO in the 1990s

<https://www.gao.gov/products/NSIAD-92-203> and from USAID in 2013

<https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1862/USAID%20NICARAGUA%20FINAL%20PUBLIC%203.11.14.pdf>

[6]

<http://www.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/129773/us-military-gives-medical-equipment-to-nicaragua/>

[7] See reports such as these from various publications:

http://articles.latimes.com/1997-03-05/news/mn-35051_1_drug-traffickers and

<https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/nicaraguan-navy-little-known-partner-in-us-drug-war/>

[8] <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/21/world/americas/us-suspends-military-aid-to-nicaragua.html>

[9]

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/politics/russia-again-plants-its-flag-in-nicaragua-stirring-fears-in-us-a7676781.html>

[10] See for example: <http://www.nicaragua-guide.com/helping-out.html>

[11] <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2018-06/pope-francis-nicaragua-peace-appeal.html>

[12]

<https://www.laprensa.com.ni/2018/06/03/suplemento/la-prensa-domingo/2428873-enrieth-martinez-de-la-coalicion-universitaria-esta-es-una-revolucion>

[13]

<https://www.laprensa.com.ni/2018/05/30/politica/2427376-carlos-pellas-solucion-a-crisis-de-nicaragua-pasa-por-adelanto-de-elecciones>

[14] <https://www.laprensa.com.ni/tag/carlos-trujillo>