

Nicaragua's Authoritarian Turn is Not a Product of Leftist Politics



On July 29th, Sandinista President Daniel Ortega unseated 16 opposition members and 12 alternates from Nicaragua's legislature, eliminating one of the few remaining obstacles to one-party rule. Days later, Ortega named his wife, Rosario Murillo, as his vice presidential running mate for the November elections. Political analysts [inside](#) and [outside](#) of the country see the move as an attempt to secure a line of family succession, as Ortega, 70, enters the final years of his political career.

Both Ortega and Murillo are members of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), which overthrew the U.S.-backed Somoza family dictatorship in 1979. Ortega led the country from 1985 until the Sandinista electoral defeat in 1990, returning to power after a long hiatus in 2007. After successfully backing a [constitutional reform](#) to remove term limits, he won the presidency for a third time in 2011.

The recent events in Nicaragua have garnered attention from mainstream media outlets in the U.S., decades after international press corps flocked to the country to cover the Sandinista Revolution and the Contra War that followed. While Nicaragua has faded from public consciousness, old political narratives about the country and the Latin American Left die

hard. Nowhere is this more evident than the recent *New York Times* editorial, [‘Dynasty,’ The Nicaragua Version](#).

Authored by the *Times* editorial board, the piece tells a story that reflects U.S. political interests as well as a good deal of amnesia about our country’s history of intervention in Nicaragua. Focusing on the corruption of the Latin American Left as an explanation for rising authoritarianism, the board laments the democratic deficit that now exists in the country. The analysis, steeped in a heady dose of American exceptionalism, omits U.S. efforts to squelch democratic aspirations in Nicaragua and misses the true tragedy of events: Ortega’s betrayal of the revolutionary Left and the vision of a more just society it represented.

U.S. intervention in Nicaragua began in the 19th century, setting the stage for political instability and violence in the 20th century. Aspirations for an interoceanic canal route in Central America drove early U.S. interests in the region. After the U.S. opted for the more favorable Panamanian route, the Marines occupied Nicaragua from 1912 to 1933, in part to avert competing canal proposals that might weaken their monopoly to the south. Nicaragua’s Augusto César Sandino mounted a guerrilla opposition to the occupation in 1927. To help quash the rebellion, the U.S. armed, trained, and expanded the Nicaraguan National Guard. Anastasio Somoza García headed the organization and used its coercive power to establish one of the most enduring family dynasties in Latin America. After orchestrating Sandino’s assassination, Somoza established an expansive system of political patronage, isolating opponents and maintaining firm control over Nicaraguan civil society. His sons, Luis and Anastasio Somoza Debayle, took the reins of power after their father’s assassination in 1956.

U.S. occupation and support for the Somoza regime bestowed on Nicaragua a deep and enduring experience of political repression. It is no wonder that FSLN founder Carlos Fonseca

identified U.S. imperialism as the driving force behind authoritarianism in the country. Inspired by Sandino's struggle for national sovereignty in the 1920s, the FSLN emerged in the 1960s as a homegrown response to dictatorship and imperialism. The improbable success of the Sandinista Revolution initiated a period of political transformation, as Nicaragua attempted to forge a new society, grounded in political pluralism and democratic participation, which served the interests of its most vulnerable sectors. [Sandinista state policy](#) reflected these commitments with agrarian reform, expansions in health services, and a national literacy campaign that brought a generation of youth to the countryside to teach rural families to read. The revolution infused new social and democratic energies into political life, and popular participation in revolutionary organizations burgeoned.

The New York Times covered the destabilization campaign extensively, making the editorial board's claim that "allegations of corruption" led to the Sandinista electoral defeat appear myopic at best. No single factor explains the 1990 electoral defeat that brought the Sandinista Revolution to a close. Certainly, the fledgling Sandinista state made significant errors as it sought to remake the highly unequal society it inherited from the Somoza regime. The Sandinista's early [approach to governing indigenous and Afro-descendant communities](#) on the Caribbean coast was one of the most serious. But these missteps are overshadowed by the tremendous resources and energy the U.S. dedicated to sabotaging the revolution. As Nicaraguan poet and former Sandinista Gioconda Belli writes in her memoir of the revolutionary years, "I will never cease to be appalled at the utterly venomous, unwarranted manner in which the United States acted toward a tiny country that simply tried to do things its own way, even if this meant making its own mistakes." A massive propaganda campaign against the revolutionary state paired with diplomatic pressures to isolate the country were followed by

\$400 million USD in [aid to the Contra insurgency, the mining of Nicaraguan harbors](#), and [a debilitating U.S. trade embargo](#). The New York Times covered the destabilization campaign extensively, making the editorial board's claim that "allegations of corruption" led to the Sandinista electoral defeat appear myopic at best.

War weary and suffering scarcity and economic crisis by the late 1980s, the Nicaraguan people sought relief in the democratic process. But beyond the respite from war, the average Nicaraguan did not fare well after the revolution. U.S. intervention persisted, now through the mechanism of development and "Washington Consensus" reforms. The Sandinista government inherited \$1.6 billion USD in debt from the Somoza regime. Burdened by economic sanctions and defense spending during the war, the country's debt had grown to [\\$10.8 billion USD by the end of the revolution](#). The economy stabilized with International Monetary Fund oversight, but poverty and unemployment rates remained high and popular sectors bore the brunt of austerity, privatization, and economic adjustment policies. Meanwhile, the national economy staggered under a growing debt burden that necessitated debt relief through the [Heavily Indebted Poor Countries \(HIPC\) program](#) in the mid-2000s. This period of free market reform, sociologist William Robinson contends, resulted in a process of class restructuring that concentrated wealth in the hands of the Nicaraguan elite and multinational corporations.

It was during these difficult years that Ortega's betrayal of the revolutionary Left began in earnest, as he molded the Sandinista Party into a vehicle to advance his own interests. The transfer of power from the revolutionary state to the center-right coalition led by President Violeta Chamorro was marred by [the appropriation of public funds and properties](#) by outgoing officials, Ortega included. These acts of plunder, popularly referred to as the Piñata, paved the way for the development of a powerful Sandinista business class. Another

key moment of alienation occurred in 1998 when Murillo's daughter, Zoilamérica Narváez, [accused Ortega of sexually abusing her](#) as an adolescent. The feminist Left rallied in support of Narváez, but Murillo chose to side with Ortega, cementing her position as his second-in-command. Once it became clear that the popular vote alone would not be a viable strategy to regain the presidency, Ortega engineered his return to power by changing electoral laws, aided by [quid pro quo pacts](#) with right-wing caudillo Arnoldo Alemán. The coup de grace was Sandinista support for a [total abortion ban](#), which established Ortega's alliance with the Christian Right in the run up to the 2006 elections that returned him to power.

Despite their alliances with the Right, Ortega and Murillo, who is currently communications director for her husband's administration, continue to characterize their political project as one of popular revolutionary democracy, now rebranded with the slogan "Christian, Socialist, and in Solidarity." Their vision of direct democracy or "the presidency of the people" is administered through local Citizen Power Councils (CPCs), which have become a conduit for redistributive programs that focus on reducing hunger, poverty, and infant mortality. But even with a growing economy and [some success with poverty reduction](#), Nicaragua continues to be [one of the poorest countries](#) in Latin America and many citizens remain [dependent on remittances](#) from family living outside of the country. Moreover, [critics suggest](#) that the decision to funnel social services through party-based organizations like CPCs is part and parcel of Ortega's effort to consolidate power. The result is the politicization of redistributive programs, as CPCs become vehicles for new systems of party patronage.

Civil society, which emerged as a vibrant political sphere in the 1990s, has suffered under the Ortega administration. For instance, Ortega has targeted feminist non-governmental organizations, many of them founded by onetime Sandinistas,

with policies that monitor and limit their outside funding. These efforts have been accompanied by [a vitriolic campaign](#) in FSLN-controlled media, accusing Nicaraguan feminists of money laundering, CIA collusion, pornography, and promoting illegal abortions. Attempts by former Sandinistas to develop opposition parties like the Sandinista Renovation Movement have been met with similar responses. A cursory review of Ortega's policy positions shows that his administration no longer enacts the values that once defined the Sandinista Revolution. As Sandinista Vice President of Nicaragua from 1985 to 1990, Sergio Ramírez, writes in his memoir *Adiós Muchachos*, the party has been "entirely replaced by the personal will of Daniel himself and his wife, Rosario Murillo." What we are witnessing today is not the return of Sandinismo but the rise of Orteguismo.

Nowhere is the betrayal of the revolution more apparent than in Ortega's efforts to construct an [Interoceanic Grand Canal](#) for Nicaragua. This \$50 billion USD megaproject led by the Chinese-owned Hong Kong Nicaragua Development Group represents a high-risk bid to integrate the country into the global economy. Detractors argue that the canal would strip Nicaragua of its national sovereignty, damage the environment, increase vulnerability to climate change, displace tens of thousands of people, violate the rights of indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples, and bring scant economic benefit to popular sectors. Pushed through the Sandinista controlled-legislature with little debate and no public consultation, the canal concession, [Law 840](#), grants extraordinary power to the concessionaire. Once in operation, the state will receive a mere 1 percent of the profit share with an increase of 10 percent each decade of operation. Law 840 further grants the concessionaire the right to expropriate lands for subprojects, including a petroleum pipeline, an interoceanic railway, free trade zones, an international airport, and any other infrastructure deemed necessary.

In a stark departure from the ethos of revolutionary socialism, the canal project shifts risk from corporate backers to some of the most vulnerable sectors of Nicaraguan society. The move reflects Ortega's embrace of foreign direct investment and his close working relationship with the Nicaraguan business class, represented by the Superior Council for Private Enterprise (COSEP). If built, the canal and its subprojects would effect land reform in reverse by transferring lands held by smallholders and indigenous and Afro-descendant communities to private capitalist interests. In response, mestizo communities in the path of the canal have organized mass protests, and indigenous and Afro-descendant leaders have denounced the [state's violation of their right to free, prior, and informed consent](#) at the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

Popular resistance to the canal project reflects new and unprecedented solidarities that defy traditional political rivalries between Left and Right. Revolutionary figures from the 1970s and 1980s have come out in support of rural communities populated by former Contra combatants, while mestizo, indigenous, and Afro-descendant people living along the canal route have found new grounds for solidarity. These coalitions represent the real face of progressive politics in the region, which harbors a healthy distrust of electoral politics and politicians on both the Left and Right. As the vanguard of participatory democracy in Nicaragua, canal opponents offer a critical take on how capitalist intensification and creeping authoritarianism undermine the interests of popular sectors and the pursuit of a more just society.

What the *New York Times* editorial board misses is that the corruption and authoritarianism unfolding in Nicaragua is not a failure exclusive to the contemporary FSLN. Ortega's efforts to establish a family dynasty are distressing, but he is hardly unique. The revival of the strongman role reflects a

political tradition of *caudillismo* in Nicaragua. The Sandinista Revolution offered a short-lived challenge to that tradition. Even with the mistakes made by its leadership, the revolution's vision of popular democracy and embrace of liberation theology's preferential option for the poor created a democratic opening in the 1980s that was once unimaginable. U.S. efforts to crush this opening are a shameful product of our interventionist policy in the region.

The editorial board closes by noting dire conditions in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, which have led citizens of these countries to flee their homes for an uncertain future in the U.S. Nicaragua has been spared the worst of the violence that plagues postwar Central America, but all four countries share a crippling legacy of U.S. intervention. After the Cold War, the focus shifted to counternarcotics, and the U.S. helped to remilitarize the region to fight the drug war. At home, border militarization and the criminalization of immigration has added another layer of violence to our historical entanglement with our neighbors to the south. For the rest of the world, our interference in Latin America has had similarly destructive consequences. Historian Greg Grandin writes that the region, as a workshop for U.S. empire, has served as a testing ground for interventionist strategies and counter-insurgency tactics used in Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Middle East.

There is no mistake that we are witnessing an authoritarian turn in Nicaragua. But if we are to understand how and why this happened we cannot ignore the role of U.S. intervention. Rather than chiding the Latin American Left for its corruption or anti-democratic tendencies, we would do well to consider how the U.S. presence in the region has diminished democracy and promoted violence and suffering. Any effort to understand contemporary Central America demands an honest reckoning with this history. And while we too lament the growing authoritarianism of the Sandinista state, a critical

reexamination of U.S. policy in Central America is long overdue.

Originally posted at [NACLA](#).