

Revolution Betrayed: Nicaragua 1979-2019 - The Sandinista Experience and the present Ortega/Murillo regime

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THE NICARAGUAN GOVERNMENT’S violent repression against demonstrators protesting its brutal neoliberal policies, resulting in more than 300 people being killed by regime forces since April 2018, is only one of the reasons why various leftist social movements have condemned the Nicaraguan regime led by President Daniel Ortega and Vice-President Rosario Murillo.

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The Left has many more reasons to denounce the policies of the regime. To understand this, we must go back to 1979. That year saw the victory of an authentic revolution in Nicaragua that combined a popular uprising, self-organization of cities and neighborhoods in rebellion, and the action of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional — FSLN), a political-military organization inspired by a Marxist-Guevarist/Castroist model.

The revolution put an end to the 42-year authoritarian rule of the Somoza dynasty, which had appropriated the state — its armed forces, administration and significant parts of its economic assets — and established a strong alliance with the United States. The Somoza dictatorship proved to be an effective bulwark against progressive political forces. Multinationals could maintain and increase their plundering of Nicaragua’s national resources in exchange for commissions that added to the increasingly important wealth of the ruling family.

The FSLN was founded in the 1960s as a leftist group opposing the government mainly through guerrilla warfare. It was not until some of its guerrillas took high-ranking members of the Nicaraguan ruling classes as hostages, in December 1974, that it was considered a potentially serious threat to the dictatorship. After the spectacular action of the Sandinista guerrillas, the regime declared a state of emergency, increased its repressive grip over Nicaraguan society and hunted down the FSLN.

Earlier that year, liberal factions of the bourgeoisie, opposing the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the Somoza ruling clique, had already formed the Democratic Union of Liberation (Unión Democrática de Liberación — UDEL) under the leadership of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro Cardenal, editor of the liberal newspaper La Prensa. They hoped to gather political momentum and

force the regime to liberalize.

The FSLN eventually split into three factions. The “prolonged people’s war” faction remained committed to the strategy of accumulating forces in remote areas until they would have enough strength to liberate entire regions of the country and launch a final assault against Somoza’s army.

The “proletarian tendency” emerged to challenge the prolonged people’s war strategy, considering it inadequate given the absence of a permanent occupying army. They argued that since the rural populations would not directly witness the imperialist endeavor, they would not join the guerrillas in massive numbers.

Furthermore, the development of capitalist production in the country with the economic development of the 1950s and 1960s had given rise to an agricultural and industrial proletariat, constituting respectively 40% and 10% of the active population by 1978. The “proletarian tendency” therefore focused on organizing mass working-class organizations in urban areas, gaining the support of industrial workers with the perspective of launching a swift insurrection when the conditions to do so would be met.

Finally, the “Terceristas,” whose main figures included Daniel Ortega and his brother Humberto, also advocated an insurrectional strategy, but were open to tactical alliances with the liberal factions of the bourgeoisie opposing Somoza. While the “proletarian tendency” stressed the need for a mass uprising and self-organization, the “Terceristas” displayed substitutionist tendencies that implied an armed insurrection led by organized guerrillas, but without a simultaneous mass uprising, would be sufficient to overthrow the regime and take power.

Eventually the regime lifted the state of emergency in 1977, thinking that the guerrilla movement was defeated and the conditions for entering negotiations with the liberal opposition were ripe. But FSLN factions were prompt to resume their armed actions in urban areas. In January 1978, the murder of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro Cardenal by regime soldiers was caught on video. It sparked tremendous anger among the liberal opposition as well as among the population.

A general strike supported by the liberal bourgeoisie was launched while FSLN groups staged armed actions against Somoza’s National Guard. In August another general strike was called. Sandinista guerrillas staged an assault against the National Palace, where a joint session of both chambers of the parliament was taking place, taking hundreds hostage. This resulted in the liberation of several political prisoners from Somoza’s jails.

More importantly, spontaneous uprisings took place against the regime, enabling the Left to gain momentum over the liberal opposition. After the FSLN called for insurrection, several urban uprisings erupted in September 1978. While these were decisively defeated by the National Guard, this scared the liberal opposition, whose representatives sought to enter negotiations with the regime that were to be mediated by the U.S.-dominated Organization of American States (OAS). The “Terceristas” denounced this turn of events and withdrew from the Front they had helped to build with the liberal opposition.

In January 1979, Somoza turned down the proposals of the liberal opposition. The momentum was then with the Sandinistas, who reunited and created, the following month, the new “Patriotic National Front” (Frente Patriótico Nacional — FPN) in which they were the politically dominant force.

As the FSLN prepared to launch a broad military offensive, they called for a general strike in June. As mass urban uprisings occurred, the armed insurrection quickly moved in to liberate areas of the

country, one after the other. Somoza's army disintegrated. When the army stronghold in the capital was finally liberated on July 19, 1979, its remnants had no choice but to flee, in particular to neighboring Honduras.

In the new FPN government, the revolutionary political forces pledged to install a democratic regime, guarantee a non-alignment of Nicaragua's foreign policy — thus putting an end to the alliance with the United States — and develop a "mixed economy." The development of cooperatives and state-owned enterprises would be encouraged while the existence of private capital would not be fundamentally threatened as long as it was perceived as "patriotic," that is, loyal to the Sandinista Revolution rather than to the overthrown Somoza regime or U.S. imperialism.

During the next two years, several developments illustrated how different Nicaragua was from other cases in which the Left had come to power through elections in Latin America. These included Chile in 1970, Venezuela in 1998-1999, Brazil in 2002-2003, Bolivia in 2005-2006 and Ecuador in 2006-2007.

Due to the destruction of Anastasio Somoza's army and the flight of the dictator, the FSLN not only assumed governmental power but also replaced the Somocista military with a new army that was put at the service of the people. It also took control over the banks and decreed a public monopoly on foreign trade.

Over the 1980s, major social progress was made in the areas of health care, education, improving housing conditions (even if they remained rudimentary), fuller rights to organize and protest, as well as access to credit for small producers (thanks to nationalization of the banking system). These represented undeniable progress.

But the FSLN government was forced to fight a decade-long war against counterrevolutionary forces known as the Contras, who were heavily supported by the United States. Unable to satisfy its ambition of direct military intervention, Washington settled for a "low-intensity" conflict that would strangle Nicaragua economically and isolate the FSLN politically. U.S. imperialism and its vassals (such as the regime of Carlos Andrés Pérez in Venezuela, and regional dictatorships as in Honduras that served as the Contras staging base) found it necessary to contain the spreading of this extraordinary experiment in social liberation and renewal of national dignity. In fact, social revolt was rampant in the region, in particular in El Salvador and Guatemala where revolutionary forces close to the Sandinistas had been active for decades.

However in 1990, the FSLN lost the general election to the Right, with Violeta Chamorro, the widow of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro Cardenal, elected president. Under Chamorro, Nicaragua was to fully embrace the neoliberal austerity promoted by the "Washington consensus." By the end of the decade Nicaragua became the second poorest country in the Americas, after Haiti.

Assessing the Sandinista Experience

In the 1990s, as a result of disappointed hopes, there were those who posited that what was needed was to try to "change society without taking power." Unfortunately, it is not possible to change society unless people take power at the level of the State. The question is rather: How to build an authentic democracy — that is, power exercised directly by the people for the purpose of emancipation?

In Nicaragua, it was necessary to overthrow the Somoza dictatorship through the combined action of a popular uprising and the intervention of a political-military organization. As such, the victory of

July 1979 remains a popular triumph worthy of celebration. Without the ingenuity and tenacity of the people during the struggle, the FSLN would not have succeeded in striking the decisive blow against the Somoza dictatorship.

Several questions arise. Did the FSLN “go too far” in the changes it made in the society? Did it take the wrong direction? Or are the disappointing subsequent developments the result of aggression by North American imperialism and its allies — in Nicaragua and elsewhere in the region?

In fact, the FSLN leadership did not go far enough in its radicalization:

First, the FSLN leadership did not go far enough in implementing radical measures to support segments of the population who were the most exploited and oppressed, beginning with the poor rural population, but also with underpaid factory, health care and education workers. It made too many concessions to agrarian and urban capitalists.

Second, the FSLN with its slogan “National Directorate — Give us your orders!” did not provide sufficient support to self-organization and worker control. It placed limits that were highly detrimental to the revolutionary process.

Of course, responsibility for the outbreak of the war lies exclusively with the enemies of the Sandinista government, which had no choice but to confront the aggression. Nevertheless errors were made in the means of waging the war: Humberto Ortega, the head of the army, formed a regular army equipped with expensive heavy tanks, unsuitable against the guerrilla methods of the Contras. Further, the mandatory conscription of the country’s youth was unpopular.

This, combined with the errors made in the area of agrarian reform, had damaging consequences. In a recent interview, Henry Ruiz, one of the nine members of the national leadership in the 1980s, pointed out: “The campesinos were not favored [in agrarian reform]; on the contrary they were affected by the war. The war waged by the contra and the war waged by us.”

Agrarian reform was seriously insufficient and the Contras took full advantage of that fact. Much more land should have been distributed to rural families, giving them title to the property. Instead, the Sandinista leadership nationalized the major Somoza estates, but spared major capitalist groups and powerful families whom certain Sandinista leaders wanted to turn into allies or fellow travelers.

Compounding this error, the FSLN wanted to quickly create a State agrarian sector and cooperatives to replace the large Somozist estates. Priority should have been given to small (and medium) private farms, distributing property titles and providing material and technical aid to the new campesino owners.

Additionally priority should have been given to support production for the domestic market. Improving and increasing the domestic and regional market would have made maximum use of organic-agriculture methods.

On the one hand the leadership of the FSLN made too many concessions to bourgeois forces who were considered allies and, on the other hand, engaged in excessive statism or artificial cooperativism. The result was not long in coming: a part of the population, disappointed by the decisions of the Sandinista government, was attracted to the Contras.

The latter had the intelligence to adopt a discourse aimed at the disillusioned campesinos, telling them that they would help them overthrow the FSLN. This would then result in a fair distribution of land and agrarian reform. It was deceitful propaganda, but widely believed in the countryside.

Certain people within the Sandinista movement conducted surveys on the ground and alerted the leadership to what was happening. These included work coordinated by Orlando Nuñez, who remained loyal to Ortega despite his initial left-wing stance.

Work done by others independent of the government and related to Liberation Theology came to the same conclusions. A number of rural organizations linked to Sandinism (UNAG, ATC, etc.) were also aware of the problems, but engaged in self-censorship. Internationalist experts specializing in the rural world also sounded the alarm.

Concessions were made to local big capital, wrongly perceived as being patriotic and an ally of the people. Wage increases were limited and the bosses received fiscal incentives in the form of lower taxation. Such an alliance should have been rejected.

At each important stage, criticism from within and outside of the FSLN emerged. The magazine *envío*, for instance, was founded in 1981 “as a publication that provided ‘critical support’ to Nicaragua’s revolutionary process from the perspective of liberation theology’s option for the poor.” But such criticism was not taken into account by the leadership, which was more and more dominated by Daniel Ortega, his brother Humberto, and Víctor Tirado López.

All three supported the “Tercerista” faction (which did not have a full understanding of the necessity of self-organization, and was inclined to alliances with the bourgeoisie). They were joined by Tomas Borge and Bayardo Arce of the “prolonged people’s war” faction. Further, the four other members of the national leadership did not form a bloc to oppose the continuation and deepening of the errors.

It is important to point out that proposals for alternative policies were formulated both inside and outside the FSLN. Constructive critical voices did not wait for the 1990 electoral failure to propose new directions, but they received only a limited hearing and remained relatively isolated.

Illegitimate and Odious Debt

The leadership of the FSLN should also have questioned repayment of the public debt inherited from the Somoza dictatorship and broken with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. As a dependent country aligned with the United States, Somoza’s Nicaragua received a massive amount of foreign lending in the 1970s. In addition to multilateral institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF there were several international private bank lenders. While the loans were officially for development, they were used to strengthen the authoritarian regime and increase the wealth of Somoza and his clique.

After the latter left the country with most of their assets, the new Sandinista government was in dire need of funding in order to implement progressive policies and encourage industrialization. Somoza’s debt would soon impede the implementation of such policies.

When the FSLN took power, the foreign debt stood at \$1.5 billion. By 1981 its servicing represented 28% of the country’s export revenue. Admittedly, it would not have been easy for the government of a country like Nicaragua to face its creditors alone. But it could have begun questioning the legitimacy of the debts from the very institutions that had financed the dictatorship. The Sandinista government could have launched an audit of these debts by calling for citizen participation and could have gained support by the broad international movement around the demand that the debts be abolished.

Agreeing to repay the debt meant defending the interests of the Nicaraguan bourgeoisie who had

invested in the debt issued by Somoza and borrowed from U.S. banks. For the Sandinista government, repayment also avoided confrontation with the World Bank and the IMF. Even with the government's efforts to maintain collaboration, these institutions decided to suspend their financial relations — demonstrating how useless it was to make the concessions.

Yet after the external debt reached seven billion dollars, the FSLN government implemented a structural adjustment plan that degraded the conditions of the poor without affecting the rich. The plan, introduced in 1988, resembled the usual conditions imposed by the IMF and World Bank — even while these institutions had still not resumed financial relations.

The FSLN government policies were leading the revolutionary process straight into a wall. This resulted in the Right's victory in the February 1990 election. In short, the government maintained an economic orientation that was compatible with the interests of Nicaragua's wealthy bourgeoisie and major private foreign corporations. It was an export-oriented economy based on low wages in order to remain competitive on the world market.

What prevented the revolution from advancing was the failure to put people at the core of the transition that followed the overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship, not overly radical policies. But this was not doomed to happen — the government should have paid more attention to the needs and aspirations of the people, in rural as well as urban areas.

To break away from the export-oriented extractivist model that depends on competitiveness on the international market, the Sandinistas could have gone against the interests of the capitalists that still dominated extractivist industry. They could have done more to gradually implement protectionist policies in favor of the small and medium-sized producers who supplied the domestic market, and limited imports. This would not have required peasants and small and medium enterprises to sacrifice for the international market.

Instead of encouraging the masses to follow orders given from the top of the FSLN, self-organization by citizens could have been promoted at all levels; with citizens given control over the public administration as well as over the accounts of private companies. The political institutions developed under the FSLN government were not fundamentally different from those of a parliamentary democracy with a strong presidency. This structure could not, and did not, provide the basis for a counter-power when the Right was elected in 1990.

Refusal to stand up to creditors that demand repayment of an illegitimate debt is generally the beginning of the abandonment of the program of change. If the burden of illegitimate debt is not denounced, people are condemned to bear that burden.

We stress the issue of illegitimate debt because, should the oppressive regime of Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo be replaced, it would be essential for a popular government to call into question debt repayment. Should the Right take leadership in the overthrow of the regime, we can be certain that it will not call the debt into question.

In 1989 the FSLN government reached an agreement with the Contras that put an end to fighting, which was of course a positive development. Yet it was a Pyrrhic victory.

When the Sandinista leadership called a general election in February 1990 it felt certain it would win. Having just negotiated a peace agreement, they expected to reap 70% of the votes in the elections; they were flabbergasted by their loss. The result struck the Sandinista leadership with an overwhelming wave of panic. The Right won partly by threatening that the war would resume with an FSLN victory. The FSLN leadership hadn't perceived the growing discontent within a large

portion of the population. (Many observers attributed the result to president Daniel Ortega's failure to abolish military conscription — ed.)

This illustrates the gap between the majority of the people and a leadership that had become used to giving orders. Many people wanted to avoid further bloodshed and thus reluctantly voted for the Right, hoping for a permanent end to war. Others were disappointed by the FSLN government's policies in the countryside (deficient agrarian reform) and in cities (negative consequences of the austerity measures enforced by the structural adjustment program begun in 1988), although Sandinista organizations could still rely on support among young people, workers and civil servants, as well as among a significant number of farm laborers.

After the stunning electoral defeat, Daniel Ortega adopted an attitude that swung back and forth between compromise with the government and confrontation. The Sandinista leadership, with Daniel and Humberto Ortega at its head, negotiated the transition with Violeta Chamorro's new government.

Humberto was still General in Chief of a starkly reduced army. The most left-wing members of the army had been dismissed. Further, on his order four Sandinista officers were imprisoned under the pretext that they supplied missiles to the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), which was attempting an uprising in El Salvador.

A few months into Violeta Chamorro's term, a movement protesting massive layoffs in the public services gathered steam. Trade unions launched a general strike and Sandinista barricades were set up in Managua and cities across the country. But the struggle was cut short with the FSLN working out a compromise with Chamorro's government.

While some austerity measures were withdrawn, others remained; part of the Sandinista grassroots were disgruntled by the terms of the settlement. This was to be the pattern: the grassroots would mobilize, the FSLN would work out a compromise, and austerity continued. The public sector in both agriculture and manufacturing was reduced, the public banking sector dismantled and the State's monopoly on foreign trade ended. Chamorro incorporated former Contras into the police force. Austerity advanced.

It must be acknowledged that after the victory of the Right, a significant part of the estates formerly expropriated from the Somocistas after the 1979 victory were appropriated by a few Sandinista leaders. Those who organized this "piñata" claimed to be securing assets for the FSLN against a government that might want to confiscate the Party's assets.

Daniel Ortega's Consolidation of Power

A grouping of Sandinista militants from the revolutionary period came to reject the leadership's orientation in the years that followed. That took time, and Daniel Ortega took advantage of the slow dawning of awareness to consolidate his influence within the FSLN, marginalizing or excluding those who defended a different orientation.

Simultaneously, he succeeded in maintaining privileged relations with a number of leaders of popular Sandinista organizations who felt that in the absence of anyone else, he was the leader most likely to defend the gains made during the 1980s. That explains in part why in 2018 the Ortega regime still retained the support of part of the population. This remained true despite his use of extremely brutal methods of repression.

Ortega's consolidation of power within the FSLN in the 1990s is best summed up by in a 2014 article by Mónica Baltodano, former guerrilla commander, former member of the FSLN leadership and now a member of the Movement for the Rescue of Sandinismo (Movimiento por el Rescate del Sandinismo — MpRS):

"The dispute within the FSLN between 1993 and 1995 [which culminated in a large number of professionals, intellectuals and others splitting away, many of them to form the Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS), which is different from Mónica Baltodano's MpRS that was founded later] persuaded Ortega and his iron circle of the importance of controlling the party apparatus. That became more concretized precisely in the FSLN's 1998 Congress, in which what remained of the National Directorate, i.e. the Sandinista Assembly and the FSLN Congress itself, were replaced with an assembly whose participants were mainly the leaders of the grassroots organizations loyal to Ortega. Little by little even that assembly stopped meeting. At that point an important rupture occurred. By then it was already evident that Ortega was increasingly distancing himself from leftist positions and centering his strategy on how to expand his power. His emphasis was power for power's sake."

Mónica Baltodano goes on to explain the building of alliances that ultimately led to Daniel Ortega's coming back to the presidential office:

"An alliance-building process started then to increase his power. The first was with President Arnaldo Alemán, which produced the constitutional reforms of 1999-2000. Ortega's central aims in that alliance were to reduce the percentage needed to win the presidential elections on the first round, divvy up between their two parties the top posts in all state institutions [such as the Electoral Council, the Court of Auditors and the Supreme Court] and guarantee security to the FSLN leaders' personal properties and businesses [acquired during and after the piñata]. In exchange, he guaranteed Alemán "governability" by putting a stop to strikes and other struggles for grassroots demands.

"The FSLN stopped opposing the neoliberal policies. In the following years, the main leaders of the party's once mass organizations became National Assembly representatives or were brought into the structures of Ortega's circle of power. With that they obviously stopped resisting and struggling for all the things they had once believed in. Those years also saw the forming of "ties" — I wouldn't call it an alliance — with the head of the Catholic Church, Cardinal Obando. The main purpose of that linkage was control of the electoral branch of government through Obando's personal, intimate relation with Roberto Rivas, who had been heading the electoral branch since 2000. It also bought Ortega increased influence with both the Catholic faithful and the church hierarchy."

After Alemán was charged with corruption and sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment, the agreement he had concluded with Ortega proved to be profitable: Ortega saw to it that the men he had placed in the judicial system arranged preferential treatment for Alemán, allowing him to serve out his sentence under house arrest.

Later, in 2009, two years after his election as president of Nicaragua, Daniel Ortega gave his support to the Supreme Court's decision to quash Alemán's conviction and release him. A few days later Alemán returned the favor by ensuring that the parliamentary group of the Liberal Party he led voted for the election of a Sandinista at the head of the National Assembly.

The constitutional reforms of 1999-2000 reduced the percentage needed to win the presidential election on the first round to 35% of the votes if the candidate has a five percent margin over the candidate coming in second. Ortega was elected with 38.07% of the votes in November 2006 and took office in January 2007. He was re-elected in November 2011 and again in November 2016. In

the 2016 election, Ortega's longtime partner Rosario Murillo ran and was elected as his vice president. (She had long been government spokesperson.)

Revolution Betrayed

Since 2007, the policies which have been implemented by Ortega and Murillo have looked more like the policies pursued by the three right-wing governments that succeeded one another between 1990 and 2007 than a continuation of the Sandinista experience from 1979-1990.

Over the past 12 years, Daniel Ortega's government did not carry out any structural reform: there was no socialization of the banks, no new agrarian reform despite the very important concentration of land in the hands of big landowners, no tax reform in favor of more social justice.

Free-trade zone regimes have been expanded. Contracting of internal and external debt has been pursued under the same conditions that favor the creditors through the interest payments they receive and that allow them to impose policies in their favor through blackmail.

In 2006, the Sandinista parliamentary group voted hand in hand with the right-wing MPs in favor of a law totally prohibiting abortion. There are no exceptions whatsoever, including cases of danger to the health or life of the pregnant woman or pregnancy resulting from rape. Under his presidency Ortega has refused to call the measure into question. In fact the prohibition was included in the new criminal code that entered into force in July 2008.

This retrograde legislation was accompanied by serious attacks on organizations defending women's rights. And over the years they have been among the most active in opposition to the Ortega government. In another very troubling development, references to the Catholic religion have been systematically used by the regime, in particular by Rosario Murillo, who has made a point of denouncing women's rights organizations and the support they receive from abroad in their struggle for the right to abortion as being "the Devil's work."

Nicaragua is still characterized by very low wages. ProNicaragua, the official agency promoting foreign investment in the country, brags of "[t]he minimum wage [being] the most competitive at the regional level, which makes Nicaragua an ideal country to set up labor-intensive operations." Over the recent years, labor insecurity starkly increased: the informal economy represented 60% of the total employment in 2009, a figure which stood at 80% by 2017.

While the number of millionaires increased, no progress was made towards a diminution of social inequalities. The growth in wealth, with the help of Daniel Ortega's government, has mainly benefitted national and international capital. Furthermore, Ortega and his family have become wealthier.

The main trigger of the social protests that started in April 2018 was the announcement by Ortega's government of neoliberal measures to be taken concerning social security, in particular pension reform. These measures were advocated by the IMF, with which Ortega has maintained excellent relations since he took office.

In a statement published in February 2018, the IMF congratulated the government for its achievements: "Economic performance in 2017 was above expectations and the 2018 outlook is favorable ... Staff recommends that the INSS [Nicaraguan Social Security Institute] reform plan secures its long-term viability and corrects the inequities within the system. Staff welcomes the authorities' efforts to alleviate INSS' financing needs."

The most unpopular measures were a five percent decrease of the pensions meant to finance medical expenses and a limitation of the annual indexation of these pensions over the inflation rate. Future pension benefits for the close to one million workers affiliated to the pension system would be based on a less favorable calculation, resulting in deep cuts in benefits.

These were the measures that sparked a mass protest movement, at first mainly composed of students and young people. Other protest movements, especially the mainly peasant- and indigenous-based movements against the construction of a transoceanic canal, quickly joined. (The canal, meant as an alternative to the Panama Canal, would, if built, endanger both the environment and livelihoods of peasants along the proposed route.)

Ortega did postpone the social security reforms but not before he initiated a spiral of repression which resulted in more than 300 protesters being killed by security forces and pro-regime militiamen.

Joining the protesters was a population horrified by the government's repressive response. The protests radicalized, demanding not only the release of those imprisoned, but demanding the fall of the regime.

While unable to provide any evidence, the government accused the protesters of being right-wing "golpistas" and "terrorists" who were working towards regime change with the support of U.S. imperialism. Furthermore, Ortega and Murillo strengthened their use of religious fundamentalist references and denounced the protesters as having "Satanic" rituals and practices, as opposed to the rest of the Nicaraguan people, "because the Nicaraguan people are God's people!"

On 19 July 2018, during the rally on the anniversary of the Sandinista revolution to try and strengthen his legitimacy, Ortega repeated these absurd "Satanic" claims and called on the Catholic bishops to exorcize the protesters and chase out the devil which supposedly had taken possession of them.

By the middle of July, the government's policy of terror regained control of the streets. Subsequently mass arrests took place and several hundred people, labelled as "terrorists" by the government, remain imprisoned, some tortured and forced to give false confessions.

By Way of Conclusion

The Sandinista Revolution started as an extraordinary experience of social liberation and renewal of national dignity in a dependent country whose status as a backyard for U.S. imperialism had been accepted by its authoritarian, dynastic rulers for decades.

The achievements of the Sandinista government between 1979 and 1990, while they allowed for significant improvements of the living conditions of most of the Nicaraguans, did not break with the export-oriented extractivist model dominated by big capital. Nor did they promote active citizen participation in the economic and political decision-making processes.

The fact that the political institutions and internal organization of the FSLN were left undeveloped allowed neoliberalism to regain a foothold. Further, there were no tools people could use to prevent the Ortega regime from corrupting the other government institutions.

This understanding of the Nicaraguan revolution and its degeneration stresses the need for revolutionaries and socialist activists to encourage the broadest possible participation of the masses in the fight for their emancipation as well as to maintain their self-organization.

A corollary is the need for revolutionaries to struggle against the bureaucratization of their organizations' leadership — beginning with building organizations that respect internal democracy. This was underestimated by the FSLN, which remained a political-military organization after it had seized power. It did not even organize its first congress as a political organization until 1991.

After the victory of the Right in 1990, the subsequent steps taken by the FSLN leadership under Daniel Ortega were clearly meant for him to return to power for power's sake. The left wing of the FSLN, which organized critical currents during the 1990s, was too timid in its opposition.

Finally, the international Left needs to have a materialist analysis of social and political processes. There is no reason to cling to fantasized ideas of "really existing socialism." The evolution of the FSLN and the policies they led in Nicaragua since 2007 should be analyzed for what they are, rather than on the basis of what Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo presumably stood for as FSLN activists during the 1970s and 1980s.

Clearly Ortega and Murillo's deepening of the neoliberal policies pursued by their right-wing predecessors, as well as their total ban on abortion, should be denounced by the international Left. Furthermore, the Left should strongly oppose the repression currently organized against the protesters and demand the immediate release of all political prisoners.

In adopting such a stance, the Left should in no way compromise itself by supporting a right-wing, pro-imperialist opposition. On the contrary, this stance should be accompanied by an effort to link with, and reinforce, the critical Sandinistas and other members of the progressive opposition to Ortega and Murillo. We need to look toward the youth who have mobilized strongly since April 2018, to the feminist movement, and to the peasant and indigenous movements who have opposed the transoceanic canal and other destructive projects linked with the export-led capitalist mode.

Eric Toussaint and Nathan Legrand

P.S.

• Against the Current n° 201; July-August 2019:
<https://solidarity-us.org/atc/201/nicaragua-at-40/>