

COMMENT

FSNL, 1979 and today: Nicaragua's compromised revolution

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Memories of the 1979 Sandinista revolution remain strong in Nicaragua, but today's FSLN is a very different organization, reports Jonah Walters from Managua.

ON JULY 19, hundreds of thousands of Nicaraguans gathered in the capital city of Managua to celebrate the anniversary of the revolution that toppled the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza 37 years before.

The 1979 revolution inaugurated a process of radical social transformation in Nicaragua—one of the poorest nations in the world—and catapulted the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) to international prominence.

This year's anniversary celebration took place in an especially charged context: Daniel Ortega, the head of the FSLN and Nicaragua's current president, is up for reelection in November, having two years ago pushed a constitutional amendment through the National Assembly that abolished presidential term limits.

Ortega enjoys overwhelming popularity in Nicaragua and is supported by Venezuela, Cuba and other countries that are part of the Bolivarian Alliance for the People of Our Americas (ALBA). He will almost certainly win the presidency for a fourth time in November and go on to serve a third consecutive five-year term.

But the FSLN of today is not like the Sandinistas who led the left-wing government for a decade after the revolution, with Ortega at its head then, too.

After enduring a decade of economic strangulation and counterrevolutionary military attacks by the contra armies, the Sandinistas lost power to the U.S.-backed right-wing opposition in 1990.

Since then, the FSLN leadership has restricted internal democracy, colluded with the corrupt conservative governments that succeeded them and sought power again through cynical backroom deals. Its political stances became more and more moderate, if not downright conservative—in 2006, on the eve of Ortega winning the presidency again, the Sandinistas endorsed a law that banned all abortions in Nicaragua.

The Sandinistas once represented a vital revolutionary force—an inspiration to leftist movements all over Latin America and the world. But how should we make sense of the FSLN in the current moment, after decades of degeneration and behind-the-scenes maneuvering have compromised the organization?

PRESIDENT ORTEGA, known in Nicaragua as Comandante Daniel, addressed an enthusiastic crowd

of supporters at the anniversary celebration on July 19—as many as 600,000 according to some reports, bused in from cities all over the country.

He was joined onstage by international figures such as Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro and former Honduran President Manuel Zelaya, who was deposed in 2009 by a coup supported by the U.S. government, particularly the State Department headed by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

But other figures were notably absent—namely, the revolutionary leaders who once made up the core of the anti-Somoza insurgency and FSLN political organization.

Ortega may be a product of Nicaragua's radical socialist tradition, but he long ago left that tradition behind.

Just before the revolutionary triumph in 1979, the FSLN formed a National Directorate comprised of nine political leaders. The directorate brought together the three main political tendencies in the organization—the Prolonged People's War tendency, the FSLN-Proletarian tendency and the Tercerista tendency that included Ortega.

Of the eight commanders who served on the National Directorate alongside Ortega, only one now participates in his government. Two are dead, two (including Ortega's brother Humberto) have distanced themselves from the president, and three are active critics of the FSLN's current incarnation.

The conspicuous absence of former allies wasn't lost on the president on Tuesday. Speaking from the stage, he seized the opportunity to denounce his former comrades who now form part of the opposition.

He accused Sandinista dissidents of abandoning the party after its first electoral loss in 1990, comparing them to "rats fleeing a ship":

"Upon leaving, they began to criticize the Sandinista Front...Now they're looking for a way to ingratiate themselves with the bourgeoisie, with the oligarchy, with the imperial United States..."

"After having given the most radical speeches, after having taken the most extreme positions, now we see them walking arm-in-arm with the opposition, visiting the Yankee [U.S.] embassy, visiting Washington, invited by the Yankees to be companions in the fight against the revolutionary struggle."

If Ortega was talking about the Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS), the most visible group of Sandinista defectors, his remarks weren't far from the truth.

The MRS, which enjoys a level of international prominence disproportionate to its marginal support among Nicaraguan voters, splintered from the FSLN following the disastrous events of "la piñata," when Sandinista officials appropriated formerly nationalized properties for themselves upon leaving office in 1990.

But the MRS has drifted steadily rightward since then, and today, it is hardly distinguishable from the arch-conservative opposition parties that advocate the restoration of free market orthodoxy in Nicaragua.

In fact, MRS delegates Enrique Sáenz and Edipcia Dubón recently toured the United States to muster support among expatriate Nicaraguans and prominent international institutions—a favored

strategy of the conservative opposition. While in the U.S., they even met with Luis Almagro, head of the Organization of American States (OEA), who recently made headlines by shamelessly invoking the OEA's democratic charter against the democratically elected Chavista government of Venezuela.

To make matters worse, the MRS frequently enters into electoral alliances with conservative opposition parties like the Independent Liberal Party (PLI), further distancing itself from its one-time roots among the left.

BUT NOT all of Ortega's critics have capitulated to the right wing. Some former Sandinistas continue to challenge Ortega's government from the left.

Henry Ruíz emerged from the pro-Soviet Nicaraguan Socialist Party (PSN) to become a celebrated military figure within the FSLN insurgency and a member of the party's National Directorate. An early defector from the FSLN, Ruíz also recently cut ties with the MRS over the party's collaboration with conservative elements like the PLI, going on to form the Patriotic Movement for the Republic (MPR).

Speaking to *La Prensa*, the primary opposition newspaper, the day before the July 19 celebrations, Ruíz criticized Ortega's government as a new form of dictatorship and accused the president of abandoning his revolutionary roots.

"For me," he said, "revolution is socialism...How can a 'revolutionary government' boost economic development based on an extractive model that fits directly with big capital, internal and external? How can that be revolutionary?"

Ruíz isn't alone in questioning the current FSLN government's revolutionary character.

Earlier this month, Mónica Baltodano, another left-wing critic of Sandinismo, declined to participate in July 8's replegue celebration—despite her pivotal role in the 1979 military operation it commemorated—citing her opposition to Ortega and today's FSLN.

Baltodano has continually criticized Ortega for his assaults on democratic processes within the party and in the nation at large. In 2006, her party, the Movement to Rescue Sandinismo (MpRS), briefly succeeded in pulling the MRS leftward as part of that party's electoral alliance.

But in the context of contemporary Nicaragua—where Ortega enjoys tremendously high approval ratings and the opposition is dominated by reactionary figures—left-wing opposition to FSLN hegemony remains weak and isolated.

Among the many groups and contingents to participate in Tuesday's festivities, perhaps the strangest was the delegation from the Somocista Liberal Resistance Party (PRLS), which marched behind a banner advertising the party's endorsement of Ortega's candidacy.

According to a report from Nicaragua's Channel 10 News, the party is composed primarily of demobilized contras—the counterrevolutionaries who fought the Sandinistas during the 1980s—who now praise Ortega while demanding the preferential economic support they were promised in the peace agreement.

The PRLS are something of a mystery—their politics seem to occupy a hazy middle ground between sincerity and satire. Led by José Luis Ruíz—whose supposed credentials as a former contra fighter are disputed by those who remember him as a food vendor—the party claims to support "real liberalism" and has been unambiguous in its public support for Ortega.

The party first made national headlines last year when it showed up to protest an opposition march in front of the supreme court. One of the counterprotesters who seems to have been associated with the PRLS fired a gun into the opposition demonstrators, dispersing the gathering.

BUT WHILE the PRLS's participation in Nicaraguan politics may be little more than an elaborate troll, the party's bizarre talking points highlight an uncomfortable truth about Ortega's administration.

In some ways, Ortega's policies mirror those of the former dictator Somoza—especially when it comes to consolidating executive power and courting foreign, and especially U.S., direct investment.

Despite some impressive poverty reduction programs financed by ALBA—plus an initiative encouraging the development of the so-called “Household Economy” of small producers—Ortega has yet to break definitively with the neoliberal development models he inherited, as the MPR's Henry Ruíz pointed out in *La Prensa*.

In fact, Ortega's economic policy is oriented around distributing ALBA subsidies to poor Nicaraguans with one hand while clearing the path for foreign direct investment with the other, sometimes with disastrous consequences for Nicaraguan workers.

For example, Ortega's support for the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA)—which the Sandinistas vehemently opposed when it was proposed back in the 1990s—has led to the proliferation of U.S.-controlled maquiladora factories during Ortega's presidency.

Now, Nicaragua is a key site for multinational corporations pursuing a strategy of “near-shoring”—in which companies cooperate with national governments to establish production areas exempt from labor protections and export tariffs, where they can freely exploit local labor to produce consumer goods intended for sale in the U.S. In Nicaragua, these so-called “free trade zones” accounted for \$2.4 billion in exports in 2014. During Ortega's first term, Nicaraguan exports to the U.S. grew by 71 percent.

Neoliberal ideas continue to guide Ortega's economic policies, even as ALBA-funded anti-poverty initiatives dominate the public face of his administration. Acknowledging this fact helps explain an apparent paradox: In recent years, Nicaragua has won superlative praise from both leftist governments and neoliberal institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

There's no question that ordinary Nicaraguans, who number among some of the poorest people in the world, have benefited in recent years from FSLN welfare programs, which are funded in large part by injections of cash from Venezuela. But a look at the substance of Ortega's larger economic policies shows that neoliberalism is alive and well in Nicaragua, despite the rhetoric of its “socialist” government.

Daniel Ortega is no social movement president. While he once stood at the forefront of a vibrant revolutionary movement, the FSLN of today is too compromised to deserve our support.

We join the Nicaraguan people in celebrating their 1979 triumph over dictatorship and oligarchy, and we recognize the crucial role the FSLN played in that world-historical victory. But in this moment, we must support those who continue to struggle for a left-wing alternative to FSLN rule in Nicaragua, based on genuine self-emancipation from below.

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P.S.

* <https://socialistworker.org/2016/07/25/nicaraguas-compromised-revolution>