

Nicaragua in Pain

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Writing about Nicaragua is as painful and sad as it is indispensable. Memories of the Sandinista Revolution are still alive for the generation that lived through it. To remain silent would be an affront to those who took part in that memorable insurrection against Somoza.

Events of recent months leave little room for doubt. A series of social protests has been brutally repressed. Some 350 from only one side have died at the hands of police or paramilitary forces. In all cases there was gunfire against unarmed demonstrators, who responded to or escaped from the onslaught as best they could.

Information from numerous sources concur in describing an escalating barrage of gunshots at point-blank range, producing at first a handful of deaths and then nearly 60 by the end of April. This tragedy was not interrupted when negotiations began. To the contrary, the dialogue was marked by a further 225 such crimes.

There is no justifying such savagery. Official statements (and the voices raised in their support) provide no proof of the “terrorist actions” that they impute to the victims. Nor have there been any significant losses on the government side, and no evidence of the use of firearms on the part of the opposition.

These events have not only been denounced by supporters of the fallen. A vast range of witnesses and a broad gamut of journalists have corroborated the accounts. But most important are the authorized voices of former Sandinista commanders and leaders, who have verified what has happened with on-the-scene reports. Their denunciations have great credibility and coincide with the outlook of foreign participants in the revolution. Their judgments have added importance in light of their deep knowledge of the actors in conflict.

The bloodshed unleashed by Ortega’s government parallels the reaction of any right-wing president. It has been the typical state violence against the discontented. In face of such atrocious behavior, a movement that had begun with some basic demands was quickly transformed into democratic resistance to repression. The original demands about social-security reforms were sidetracked in face of the Dantesque spectacle of hundreds gunned down by the regime’s gendarmes.

To raise one’s voice against this crime and demand an immediate end to the repression and the prosecution of those responsible is the first duty in face of these events.

Endless Involution

The initial protests against a social-security tax increase found great support among the population. This reaction pointed up the discontent brewing in diverse sectors. People were becoming annoyed at how official policies were diverging from the government’s revolutionary past.

Orteguismo (“Ortega-ism”) bears not the least affinity with its origins in the Sandinista movement. Ortega has made strategic alliances with the business class, adopted economic measures demanded

by the IMF, and strengthened ties with the Church after imposing an outright ban on abortion. He has consolidated his bureaucratic hold over business enterprises that originated in the appropriation of public goods.

Under Ortega's direction a clientelist electoral system has been put in place. Continued use of old Sandinista emblems and discourse obscures this qualitative change, which reproduces the involution that other such progressive processes have undergone.

Long before its evolution into a simple network of gangsters, the Mexican PRI had already buried its legacy of agrarian transformation and nationalist traditions. The same occurred with the MNR in Bolivia, which for many years behaved as a reactionary party despite its origins. Such examples of political regression - now reprised by Ortega - extend to other Latin American parties that have completely discarded their original socialist or anti-imperialist aspirations.

But repression consummates a still more irreversible turn. It transforms a bourgeoisified formation into an outright enemy of the left. Cold-blooded killings by its police apparatus mark the final break with any progressive outlook. Such a regression has occurred in Nicaragua in the last few months.

There are significant differences with the Venezuelan case, which is rooted in the persistence of a Bolivarian process that confronts the right wing and defends sovereignty in a context of unheard-of adversity. Facing an interminable succession of guarimbas, [1] Chavismo has done battle against coup attempts, paramilitary incursions, and provocations by groups trained by the CIA. It has committed many injustices and harassed certain popular fighters, but its principal problem has been the destabilization promoted and financed by imperialism.

What is happening in Nicaragua is quite different. The protests were not stage-managed from Washington but arose from below against reforms demanded by the IMF and took shape thereafter in a spontaneous way to defend rights that were under attack. Nor did the principal conservative figures - who have forged any number of pacts with the regime - provoke the rebellion. The demonstrations have gathered up a wide gamut of the discontented, under the guidance of students and the Church. The various currents among the latter are not following a uniform playbook, and the students are grouped in a number of different factions, some led by the left and others by the right.

This movement originated with a low level of politicization but began to adopt clearer positions in face of the repressive attacks. Its positions were solidified upon the collapse of the dialog that the government first accepted verbally and then boycotted in practice.

Seeing the Whole Picture

Among all the statements distributed in recent weeks, the approach adopted by Manuel Cabieses Donoso, a well-known Chilean revolutionary leader, has some unique merits.

Cabieses Donoso upholds the legitimacy of the protests, denounces Ortega's betrayal, and challenges the complicit silence on the part of many progressive currents in face of the repression. But he calls attention as well to the way right-wing forces are trying to utilize the protests and points out that the United States will take advantage of the conflict to undermine the Ortega regime. He affirms as well that a section of the population continues to support the government, and therefore calls for a peaceful solution in order that the local bourgeoisie and its imperialist master not be the beneficiaries of Ortega's eventual downfall. [2]

This approach synthesizes quite well moral outrage at the massacres with recognition of the complex situation that has arisen in the country. While Ortega has not hesitated to make pacts with all the reactionary forces, the United States still seeks his ouster. It cannot tolerate the autonomy

Nicaragua has maintained in its foreign policy. The country not only belongs to ALBA and has close ties to the Venezuela government. It has also sought to build an inter-oceanic canal with Chinese financing – right in the “backyard” of the region’s principal imperialist power.

As shown during the coup against Zelaya in Honduras, and more recently in Guatemala, the United States treats the small Central American countries as second-class colonies. It won’t accept the slightest indiscipline from these nations. For that reason it has already begun reaching out to coopt the leaders of the protests and line them up behind a future imperialist puppet that would replace Ortega. The meetings that several student leaders had in Washington with ultra-right anti-Castro legislators (along with similar meetings in El Salvador) mark the most visible episodes of Trump’s latest operation.

Failure to recognize the preparations for aggression would amount to inadmissible naivete. The same Ortega who is brutally attacking the people is viewed by the State Department as an adversary to be buried. Such contradictions have been frequent in history and need to be taken seriously by the left when it comes to taking a position. It is vital to avoid joining the campaigns of the OAS or Vargas Llosa’s calls to involve the US Southern Command.

Dangers and Definitions

That Ortega’s FSLN still enjoys the support of a section of the population is evident from the results of the last election. But Cabieses Donoso does not base his argument for a peaceful solution on that fact alone. Negotiations would make it possible to avoid transforming the current revolt into a wider confrontation, with terrible consequences in the number of victims as well as on the national and geopolitical level.

Events in two Middle Eastern countries provide grounds to fear such an outcome. In both Libya and Syria governments were in power that had progressive origins but had degenerated to the point of unleashing repression against militants and their populations. Qaddafi jailed Palestinians and Assad fired on his people indiscriminately. In each case the prospects for extending the Arab Spring ended in major tragedies. The Libyan state practically disintegrated amid greedy disputes between rival clans. Syria had a still more dramatic outcome in that first the protests were co-opted by Jihadists and then the country suffered the worst humanitarian disaster in recent decades.

The historical realities and the political situation in the Middle East and Central America are quite different. But imperialism acts with the same objectives of domination in both regions. It destroys societies and dismantles countries without a second thought. Had it won the contest in Venezuela, the country would be a cemetery comparable to Iraq, and the oil wealth would be in the hands of the big US energy companies.

For these reasons it is crucial to not forget at any moment who is the principal enemy. A peaceful solution in Nicaragua is the best way to avert the danger that the imperialists will make use of the conflict. The mechanism for such an outcome is quite available in the calls for dialog and negotiation of early elections. This approach avoids equating the government with a dictatorship and demanding its fall.

In recent weeks tensions seem to have diminished, not because of steps forward in the negotiations but rather due to deepening repression. Ortega has managed to achieve a respite by means of the whip. But his conduct has created an unbridgeable gulf with the rebellious youth. His divorce from the left is definitive. The revolutionary traditions of Sandinismo will rise again, but on the side opposite from Orteguismo.

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Footnotes

[1] Disruptive street actions by right-wing crowds. See www.counterpunch.org/2013/04/17/the-venezuelan-guarimba/

[2] Manuel Cabieses Donoso, "La lección de Nicaragua", July 17, 2018. www.nodal.am/2018/07/