

# Et Tu, Daniel? The Sandinista Revolution Betrayed

Saturday 7 March 2009, by [BURBACH Roger](#) (Date first published: 1 February 2009).

Upon his inauguration as Nicaraguan president in January 2007, Daniel Ortega asserted that his government would represent “the second stage of the Sandinista Revolution.” His election was full of symbolic resonance, coming after 16 years of electoral failures for Ortega and the party he led, the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN). The Sandinistas’ road to power was paved with a series of previously unthinkable pacts with the old somocista and Contra opposition. The FSLN’s pact making began in earnest in 2001, when, in the run-up to that year’s presidential election, Ortega forged an alliance with Arnaldo Alemán, an official during the Somoza regime who had been elected president in 1997.

But even with Alemán’s backing, Ortega was unable to win the presidency. So, before the 2006 election, he publicly reconciled with his old nemesis, Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo, a potent symbol of the counterrevolutionary movement in the 1980s. Ortega and his longtime companion, Rosario Murillo, announced their conversion to Catholicism and were married by the cardinal. Just before his election Ortega supported a comprehensive ban on abortion, including in cases in which the mother’s life is endangered, a measure ratified by the legislature with the crucial votes of Sandinista deputies. To round out his pre-election wheeling and dealing, Ortega selected Jaime Morales, a former Contra leader, as his vice presidential candidate.

Even with these concessions to the right, Ortega won the presidency with just 37.9% of the votes. Once in power, he announced a series of policies and programs that seemed to hark back to the Sandinista years. Educational matriculation fees were abolished, an illiteracy program was launched with Cuban assistance, and an innovative Zero Hunger program established, financed from the public budget and Venezuelan aid, that distributed one cow, one pig, 10 hens, and a rooster, along with seeds, to 15,000 families during the first year. Internationally, Nicaragua joined the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA), a trade and economic cooperation pact that includes Cuba, Bolivia, and Venezuela.

But the Ortega government’s clientelistic and sectarian nature soon became evident when Ortega, by presidential decree, established Councils of Citizen Power under the control of the Sandinista party to administer and distribute much of the social spending. Even more importantly, under the rubric of ALBA, Ortega signed an accord with Venezuela that provides an estimated \$300 million to \$500 million in funds personally administered by Ortega with no public accountability.

As Mónica Baltodano, the leader of Resacte, a dissident Sandinista organization, argued in a recent article, Ortega’s fiscal and economic policies are, in fact, continuous with those of the previous governments, despite his anti-imperialist rhetoric and denunciations of neoliberalism. [1] The government has signed new accords with the International Monetary Fund that do not modify the neoliberal paradigm, while the salaries of government workers remain frozen and those of teachers and health workers are the lowest in Central America. According to the Central Bank of Nicaragua, the average salary has dropped the last two years, retrogressing to 2001 levels. [2]

Moreover, the government and the Sandinista party are harassing and repressing their opponents.

During an interview in January, Baltodano told me the right to assembly has been systematically violated during the past year, as opposition demonstrations are put down with goon squads. *“Ortega is establishing an authoritarian regime, sectarian, corrupt, and repressive, to maintain his grip on power, betraying the legacy of the Sandinista revolution,”* she said.

The core of this legacy was the revolution’s commitment to popular democracy. Seizing power in 1979 from the dictator Anastasio Somoza, the Sandinista movement comprised Nicaragua’s urban masses, peasants, artisans, workers, Christian base communities, intellectuals, and the muchachos—the youth who spearheaded the armed uprisings. The revolution transformed social relations and values, holding up a new vision of society based on social and economic justice that included the poor and dispossessed. The revolution was muticlass, multiethnic, multidoctrinal, and politically pluralistic.

While socialism was part of the public discourse, it was never proclaimed to be an objective of the revolution. It was officially designated “a popular, democratic, and anti-imperialist revolution.” Radicalized social democrats, priests, and political independents as well as Marxists and Marxist-Leninists served as cabinet ministers of the Sandinista government. Images of Sandino, Marx, Christ, Lenin, Bolívar, and Carlos Fonseca, the martyred founder of the Sandinista movement, often hung side by side in the cities and towns of Nicaragua.

A central attribute of the revolution that has made its legacy so powerful is that it was a *revolución compartida*, a revolution shared with the rest of the world. [3] As Nicaragua, a country with fewer than 3 million inhabitants, defied the wrath of the U.S. imperium, people from around the world rallied to the revolution’s support. In a manner reminiscent of the Spanish civil war half a century earlier, the Sandinista revolution came to be seen as a new political utopia, rupturing national frontiers. It marked a generation of activists around the globe who found in the revolution a reason to hope and believe.

With the deepening of the U.S.-backed counterrevolutionary war from military bases in Honduras, activists from the United States came to be the largest contingent to support the Sandinista revolution. An estimated 100,000 people from the United States visited Nicaragua in the 1980s, many as simple political tourists. Some came as part of delegations, but most of them arrived on their own. It was an experience totally different from that of Cuba, where the prohibition of U.S. travel to the island meant that only organized delegations arrived via Mexico or Canada with assigned accommodations and structured tours. But it was not just the travel arrangements that were different. Those going to Nicaragua found an “open door” society: They could talk with anyone, travel to the countryside, and stay where they pleased with no interference from the government.

The Sandinista revolution’s commitment to democracy led it down a new political path. This was not a revolutionary government conducted, in the classical sense, by a dictatorship of the proletariat. While the National Directorate of the FSLN oversaw the revolutionary process, it was not dictated by a single strongman but by nine people who reached consensus decisions with input from popular organizations. The Nicaraguan Revolution thus responded to internal and external challenges by deepening its democratic and participatory content, rather than by declaring a dictatorship.

In October 1983, when a U.S. assault appeared imminent in the aftermath of the invasion of Grenada, the National Directorate adopted the slogan “All Arms to the People” and distributed more than 200,000 weapons to the militias and popular organizations. I was there as U.S. aircraft flew over Managua, breaking the sound barrier, trying to “shock and awe” the populace. Bomb shelters and defensive trenches were hastily built as the country mobilized for war.

We may never know whether the threatened invasion was a ruse or if the popular mobilization

forestalled a U.S. attack. But it did reaffirm the revolution's commitment to democracy. In 1984, in the midst a deteriorating economy and the escalating Contra war, the country held an election in which seven candidates vied for the presidency. The election was monitored by "at least 460 accredited observers from 24 countries," who unanimously described it as fair. [4] A reported 83% of the electorate participated, and Ortega won with almost 67% of the votes. [5] The election demonstrated that a revolutionary government can solidify its hold on power in the midst of conflict, not by adopting increasingly dictatorial powers but by building mass democratic support.

The adoption of a new constitution in 1986 marked yet another step forward in the democratic process. The constitution, which established separation of powers, directly incorporated human rights declarations, and abolished the death penalty, among other measures, was drafted by constituent assembly members elected in 1984 and submitted to the country for discussion. [6] To facilitate these debates, 73 *cabildos abiertos*, or town meetings, were attended by an estimated 100,000 Nicaraguans around the country. At these meetings, about 2,500 Nicaraguans made suggestions for changes in the constitution.

But this bold Sandinista experiment in revolutionary democracy was not destined to persevere. As occurred in the Spanish civil war, the tide of history ran against the heroic people of Nicaragua, sapping their will in the late 1980s as the Contra war waged on and the economy unraveled. Often as I departed from the San Francisco airport on yet another flight to the Central American isthmus, I would look down on the Bay Area, with its population roughly the same size as Nicaragua's and an economy many times larger, and wonder how the Sandinista revolution could possibly survive a war with the most powerful nation on earth.

Perhaps the die was cast in neighboring El Salvador with the failure of the guerrillas there to seize power as the United States mounted a counterinsurgency war. The inability to advance the revolution in Central America seemed to confirm Leon Trotsky's belief that a revolution cannot survive and mature in just one nation—especially in small countries like Nicaragua with porous borders, which, unlike island Cuba, lend themselves to infiltration and repeated forays from well-provisioned military bases.

To end the debilitating war, the Sandinista leaders turned to peace negotiations. Placing their faith in democracy, they signed an accord that called for a ceasefire and elections to be held in February 1990, in which the Contras as well as the internal opposition would be allowed to participate. Once again the popular organizations mobilized for the campaign, and virtually all the polls indicated that Ortega would win a second term as president, defeating the Contra-backed candidate, Violeta Chamorro, whose campaign received generous funding from the United States.

Nicaraguans and much of the world were shocked when Chamorro defeated Ortega with 55% of the vote. Even people who were sympathetic to the Sandinistas voted for the opposition because they wanted the war to end, as the threat of more U.S.-backed violence remained looming. The day after the election, a woman vendor passed me by sobbing. I asked her what was wrong, and she said, *"Daniel will no longer be my president."* After exchanging a few more words, I asked whom she had voted for. *"Violeta,"* she said, *"because I want my son in the Sandinista army to come home alive."*

During the next 16 years, three Nicaraguan presidents backed by the United States implemented a series of neoliberal policies, gutting the social and economic policies of the Sandinista era and impoverishing the country. Ortega ran in every election, drifting increasingly to the right, while exerting an iron hand to stifle all challengers and dissenters in the Sandinista party. Surprisingly, Orlando Nuñez, with whom I wrote a book with on the revolution's democratic thrust, remained loyal to Ortega while most of the middle-level cadre and the National Directorate abandoned the party. [7] Many of these split off to form the Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS), the largest dissident

Sandinista party, founded in 1995.

When I asked Nuñez about his stance, he argued that only the Sandinista party has a mass base. *"Dissident Sandinistas and their organizations,"* he said, *"cannot recruit the poor, the peasants, the workers, nor mount a significant electoral challenge."* Nuñez, who works as an adviser on social affairs to the president's office, went on to argue that Ortega allied with Alemán not out of political cynicism, but for the sake of building an anti-oligarchic front. According to this theory, Alemán and the somocistas represent an emergent capitalist class that took on the old oligarchy, which had dominated Nicaraguan politics and the economy since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. [8] A major thrust of Ortega's rhetoric is bent on attacking the oligarchy, which is clustered in the opposition Conservative Party.

But it is also true that some of the most famous Sandinistas, many of whom are in the dissident camp today—like Ernesto Cardenal, Gioconda Belli, Carlos Fernando Chamorro, and others—are descendents of oligarchic families. Accordingly, Ortega and Murillo have accused them of being in league with conservatives in an effort to reimpose the old order on Nicaragua. While the dissident Sandinistas have yet to mount a significant electoral challenge, the Ortega administration has nonetheless gone after them with a particular vehemence. Case in point: Chamorro, the onetime director of the Sandinista party newspaper, *Barricada*. In June 2007, Chamorro aired an investigative report on *Esta Semana*, the popular news show he hosts. According to the report, which included tape-recorded conversations, FSLN functionaries tried to extort \$4 million from Armel González, a partner in a tourist development project called Arenas Bay, in exchange for a swift end to the project's legal woes, which included challenges from campesino cooperatives over land disputes.

The government's response to the bad publicity was swift and ruthless. While the district attorney buried the case, González was charged and convicted of slander. National Assembly deputy Alejandro Bolaños, who backed the denunciation, was arbitrarily removed from his legislative seat. And Chamorro was denounced in the Sandinista-controlled media as a "delinquent," a "narco-trafficker," and a "robber of peasant lands."

The harassment of Chamorro and other government critics continued during the run-up to Nicaragua's November 2008 municipal elections, which were widely viewed as a referendum on the Ortega administration. The Ministry of Government launched a probe into NGOs operating in the country, accusing the Center for Communications Research (Cinco), which is headed by Chamorro, of "diverting and laundering money" through its agreement with the Autonomous Women's Movement (MAM), which opposes the Ortega-endorsed law banning abortion. This agreement, financed by eight European governments and administered by Oxfam, aims to promote "the full citizenship of women." First lady Murillo called it "Satan's fund" and "the money of evil."

Cinco's board of directors were interrogated, and a prosecutor accompanied by the police raided the Cinco offices with a search warrant. Warned in advance of the visit, some 200 people gathered in the building in solidarity, refusing the police entry. Then as night fell, the police established a cordon around the building and, in the early morning, police broke down the door. After kicking out the protesters, the police stayed in the office for 15 hours, with supporters and onlookers gathered outside, shutting down traffic for blocks around. The police rummaged through offices, carting off files and computers. Since then, no formal charges have been filed, but Chamorro remains under official investigation.

Along with MAM, the broader women's movement in Nicaragua, which firmly opposes the Ortega government, was among the first to experience its repressive blows. In 2007 the government opened a case against nine women leaders, accusing them of conspiring "to cover up the crime of rape in

the case of a 9-year-old rape victim known as 'Rosita,' who obtained an abortion in Nicaragua in 2003." [9] In August, Ortega was unable to attend the inauguration of Paraguayan president Fernando Lugo because of protests by the country's feminist organizations; from then on, women's mobilizations have occurred in other countries Ortega has visited, including Honduras, El Salvador, Costa Rica, and Peru. [10]

Charges were levied against other former Sandinistas who dared to speak out against the Ortega government, including 84-year-old Catholic priest Ernesto Cardenal, the renowned poet who once served as minister of culture. In August, after Cardenal criticized Ortega at Lugo's inauguration, a judge revived an old, previously dismissed case involving a German citizen who sued Cardenal in 2005 for insulting him. [11]

In addition to harassing critics, the Ortega government also displayed its penchant for electoral fraud during the run-up to the November municipal balloting. Protests erupted in June, after the Ortega-stacked Supreme Electoral Council disqualified the MRS and the Conservative Party from participation. Dora Maria Tellez, a leader of the renovation movement, began a public hunger strike that led to daily demonstrations of support, often shutting down traffic in downtown Managua.

Meanwhile, bands of young Sandinista-linked thugs, claiming to be the "owners of the streets," attacked demonstrators while the police stood idly by. Then, to prevent more demonstrations, Ortega supporters set up plantones, permanent occupation posts at the rotundas on the main thoroughfare running through Managua. Those who camped out there were known as rezadores, or people praying to God that Ortega be protected and his opponents punished.

Besides the FSLN, two major political parties remained on the ballot, the Liberal Constitutionalist Party and the Nicaraguan Liberal Alliance. While independent surveys indicated that the opposition candidates would win the majority of the seats, the Supreme Electoral Council, which had prohibited international observers, ruled that the Sandinista candidates won control of 105 municipalities, the Liberal Constitutionalist Party won 37, and the Alliance won the remaining six. An independent Nicaraguan group, Ethics and Transparency, organized tens of thousands of observers but was denied accreditation, forcing them to observe the election from outside polling stations. But the group estimates that irregularities took place at a third of the polling places. Their complaints were echoed by Nicaraguan Catholic bishops, including Managua's archbishop, who said, "*People feel defrauded.*" [12]

After the election, militant demonstrations erupted in Nicaragua's two largest cities, Managua and León, and were quickly put down with violence. The European Economic Community and the U.S. government suspended funding for Nicaragua over the fraudulent elections. On January 14, before the election results were even officially published by the electoral council, Ortega swore in the new mayors at Managua's Plaza de la Revolución. He declared: "*This is the time to strengthen our institutions,*" later adding, "*We cannot go back to the road of war, to confrontation, to violence.*" Along with the regular police, Ortega stood flanked by *camisas rosadas*, or redshirts, members of his personal security force. A huge banner hung over the plaza depicting Ortega with an up-stretched arm and the slogan, "To Be With the People Is to Be With God."

*"This despotic regime is bent on destroying all that is left of the Sandinista revolution's democratic legacy,"* Chamorro told me in January. "*Standing in the way of a new dictatorship,*" he continued, "*are civil society organizations, the independent media, trade unions, opposition political parties, women's organizations, civic leaders and others—many of whom can trace their roots back to the resistance against Somoza.*"

As the Nobel-winning novelist José Saramago put it: "*Once more a revolution has been betrayed*



from within.” Nicaragua’s revolution has indeed been betrayed, perhaps not as dramatically as Trotsky depicted Stalin’s desecration of what was best in the Bolshevik revolution. But Ortega’s betrayal is a fundamental political tragedy for everyone around the world who came to believe in a popular, participatory democracy in Nicaragua.

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## P.S.

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## Footnotes

[1] Mónica Baltodano, “El ‘nuevo sandinismo’ es de la izquierda? Democracia pactada en Nicaragua,” *Le Monde diplomatique*, Southern Cone edition (December 2008): 16-17.

[2] Ibid.

[3] The concept of revolución compartida is developed in Sergio Ramírez, *Adios muchachos: una memoria de la revolución sandinista* (Mexico City: Aguilar, 1999).

[4] Rosa Marina Zelaya, “International Election Observers: Nicaragua Under a Microscope,” *Envío* 103 (February 1990), [envio.org.ni/articulo/2582](http://envio.org.ni/articulo/2582).

[5] BBC, “1984: Sandinistas Claim Election Victory,” available at [news.bbc.co.uk/onthistday](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthistday).

[6] Harry E. Vanden and Gary Prevost, *Democracy and Socialism in Sandinista Nicaragua* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1996), 84-85.

[7] Roger Burbach and Orlando Nuñez, *Fire in the Americas, Forging a Revolutionary Agenda* (Verso, 1987).

[8] Nuñez develops this argument in his book *La Oligarquía en Nicaragua* (Managua: Talleres de Grafitec, 2006). See also Nuñez, “La Agonía política de la oligarquía,” *El 19* no. 14, November 27-December 3, 2008, available at [sepres.gob.ni](http://sepres.gob.ni).

[9] Human Rights Watch, “Nicaragua: Protect Rights Advocates from Harassment and Intimidation,” October 28, 2008, available at [hrw.org](http://hrw.org).

[10] Baltodano, “El ‘nuevo sandinismo’ es de la izquierda?”

[11] CBC News, “Latin American Artists Protest Persecution of Nicaraguan Poet,” September 6, 2008, available at [cbc.ca](http://cbc.ca).

[12] “How to Steal an Election,” *The Economist*, November 13, 2008.