

Nicaraguan election: Ortega's victory and the dead-end of Sandinismo

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Daniel Ortega, the long-time head of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) of Nicaragua, won the country's presidency in a general election November 5. Ortega received 38 percent of the total vote, about nine percent more than his nearest opponent, the US-backed conservative Eduardo Montealegre of the National Liberal Alliance (ALN), who received 29 percent.

A second right-wing candidate, José Rizo of the Liberal Constitutionalist Party (PLC), took 26 percent of the vote, while Edmundo Jarquin of the Sandinista Renovation Movement, a split-off from the FSLN, received 6 percent, and the Sandinista-turned-contra, Eden Pastora, polled less than 1 percent. The 90-member unicameral legislature will be divided roughly along the same proportions as the presidential vote, with the result that no party will have a majority.

Ortega won despite receiving one of the lowest totals in his five campaigns for the Nicaraguan presidency. The Sandinista leader won by an overwhelming margin in 1984, five years after the FSLN took power with the armed overthrow of the right-wing Somoza dictatorship. Ortega lost in 1990 to Violeta de Chamorro, receiving 42 percent of the vote in the election, held under heavy US economic and military pressure, which ended Sandinista rule. Ortega had slightly lower totals in subsequent election defeats, losing to right-wing candidate Arnoldo Alemán in 1996 and the current conservative president Ernesto Bolaños in 2001.

The FSLN has moved steadily to the right during the 16 years since it gave up the presidency. The Sandinistas have never been entirely excluded from power, retaining influence in the armed forces and controlling a large minority of seats in the legislature, as well as accumulating sizeable property holdings in the hands of top Sandinista leaders such as Ortega.

For the last seven years, Nicaraguan politics has been dominated by a coalition of Ortega's followers and those of former president Alemán, who reached an agreement with the Sandinistas in 1999, dubbed "El Pacto," under which Alemán and Ortega received permanent seats in the legislature, giving each lifetime immunity from prosecution on corruption charges.

A constitutional amendment adopted as part of the agreement between the PLC and the FSLN lowered the threshold for victory in the presidential election from 45 percent to 35 percent, provided the winning candidate had at least a five percent margin over the nearest rival. These criteria were tailored to Ortega's proven electoral base and made possible his victory November 5.

"El Pacto" ultimately led to a split in the right-wing camp, with Alemán's supporters retaining control of the PLC apparatus and nominating Rizo, while a breakaway faction, opposed to continuing the deal with the Sandinistas, put forward Montealegre as its presidential candidate, with the open backing of the Bush administration.

The 2006 campaign marked an even sharper swing to the right on the part of Ortega and the FSLN. Going beyond the alliance with the Alemán camp, Ortega reached agreement with elements of the former contras, the

guerrilla force armed and trained by the CIA to launch terrorist attacks on Nicaraguan towns and villages during the 1980s.

One former contra, Jaime Morales Carazo, is Ortega's running mate and will take office as vice president. If anything happens to the 60-year-old Ortega, his successor will be the former chief public spokesman of the contras (and a man whose confiscated family home Ortega currently occupies). Carazo is a close associate of former president Alemán and godfather to his children.

Another former right-wing guerilla, Salvador Talavera, formed the Nicaraguan Resistance Party to voice the grievances of ex-contra soldiers, many of them poor peasants and Miskito Indians, who have not received the land grants they were promised in return for their services to the US-backed insurgency. In September, Talavera, known as "Little Jackal" during the contra war, signed a "peace pact" with the Sandinistas, eventually appearing in campaign commercials for Ortega which flooded the airways during the final weeks before the vote.

FSLN woos Church, big business

As part of his embrace of the right, Ortega has made his peace with the two most powerful bastions of social reaction in Nicaragua: the Catholic Church and the business establishment.

In 2005, Ortega made a public obeisance before the Catholic hierarchy, marrying his long-time companion Rosario Murillo in a church wedding presided over by the primate of the Nicaraguan church, Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo. He also publicly "confessed" to Obando y Bravo for the alleged sins of the Sandinista regime in the 1980s, with the result that the cardinal made television appearances during the election campaign suggesting that Catholics could in good conscience vote for Ortega.

The rapprochement with the Church reached its low point last month, when Sandinista deputies, the largest faction in the legislature, voted without opposition for a vicious anti-abortion law, the strictest in the hemisphere, which provides sentences of six to 30 years in prison for women who receive abortions and the doctors who perform them.

There are no exceptions in the law for rape, incest or the health or even life of the mother. The existing laws are already so restrictive that only 24 legal abortions have been performed in Nicaragua over the past three years, compared to an estimated 32,000 illegal procedures.

Ortega's return to the presidency has thus been purchased at a grisly price that is already being paid by Nicaraguan women. The first recorded death under the new law came within days of the presidential vote, when 18-year-old Jazmina Bojorge died of complications of a pregnancy that she was seeking unsuccessfully to terminate for health reasons. The five-month-old fetus also died.

In relation to big business, Ortega and the FSLN have long sought a

good relationship. The FSLN, despite its radical rhetoric, was always a bourgeois-nationalist movement that advocated the development of a Nicaraguan capitalist economy less subservient to US imperialism, not the replacement of capitalism by socialism.

During the presidential campaign, Ortega was at pains to reassure both domestic Nicaraguan capitalists and foreign investors that their property would be secure under a new Sandinista government. On September 29, he met with more than 100 American investors and real estate developers and pledged to them, "Confiscations are not even being considered." Later he signed a "governability pact" drafted by the Nicaraguan Chamber of Commerce in which he promised to respect "free" markets and property rights if elected.

Two days after his election victory, Ortega met with former US president Jimmy Carter, who headed a massive election monitoring operation, and gave him assurances that the new government would respect property rights, "free enterprise" and the free trade agreement with the United States. The *New York Times* reported, "Business leaders said they were confident Mr. Ortega would not roll back the free-market reforms in the Nicaraguan government since 1990," which includes the privatization of more than 360 state-owned businesses.

Ortega has also indicated that he will reappoint members of outgoing President Bolaños' pro-market economic team. On November 16, he declared his "absolute agreement" with stringent conditions being imposed by the International Monetary Fund for a new loan. Those conditions are designed to place constraints on government spending and taxation, severely limiting the government's ability to redistribute income and spend money on social programs and infrastructure.

Satisfied by Ortega's statement, IMF officials announced that a negotiating team was being sent to Managua. The IMF, the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), and the World Bank have pledged to help the future government with \$200 million in loans and aid.

The response of Washington

The return of the FSLN leader to the presidential palace has produced predictable gnashing of teeth in the Bush administration and the US ultra-right. Many of the top personnel in the US national security apparatus first came to prominence during the Reagan administration campaign to destroy the Sandinista regime in the 1980s.

Robert Gates, Bush's nominee to succeed Donald Rumsfeld at the Pentagon, was deputy director of the CIA in the 1980s and deeply involved in the illegal war against Nicaragua. John Negroponte, now director of national intelligence, was then US Ambassador to Honduras, the neighboring country where the contra army was trained, armed and largely based. Elliott Abrams, currently Middle East director for the National Security Council, was the State Department official directly responsible for the contras. In the Iran-Contra scandal of the late 1980s, he pled guilty to perjury before a congressional committee and was later pardoned by the first president Bush.

The fall election campaign produced a virtual reunion in Managua of fascistic American sponsors of the contras, all warning in apocalyptic tones that Ortega's election would transform Nicaragua into a base of international terrorism, just as they portrayed the Sandinista regime of the 1980s as an agency of "international communism."

Oliver North, the retired Marine lieutenant colonel who became the public face of the Iran-Contra scandal, appeared in Managua, followed by Jeane Kirkpatrick, former ambassador to the United Nations in the Reagan administration. They could not agree on an alternative candidate however, with North supporting Rizo and Kirkpatrick backing Montealegre.

Other US visitors on the anti-Ortega bandwagon included Otto Reich, a former State Department sponsor of the contras and head of Latin American policy in the first years of the current Bush administration, outgoing Florida Governor Jeb Bush, the US president's brother, and Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemispheric Affairs Tom Shannon.

Erstwhile congressional sponsors of the contras also weighed in. Republican congressmen Dana Rohrabacher, Tom Tancredo and Dan Burton called for the US government to consider shutting off the flow of remittances from Nicaraguan immigrants living in the United States, who send an estimated \$850 million a year back to their families in Nicaragua. "If Daniel Ortega, who has declared himself as an enemy of the United States, takes back control of Nicaragua, you can expect the US government to respond accordingly," they declared in a joint statement. "We will not permit a hostile, anti-American government to reap the same economic benefits" as a pro-US regime.

Congressman Peter Hoekstra, outgoing chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, addressed a public letter to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice calling for the Bush administration to "fully re-evaluate relations with Nicaragua" in the event of an Ortega victory. US Secretary of Commerce Carlos Gutierrez warned that more than \$220 million in aid and even more in capital investments were at risk.

The election itself took on the aspect of a US-controlled exercise, with the Bush administration pouring in funds and manpower in an all-out effort to deny victory to Ortega and the FSLN. The US Agency for International Development, the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute and the International Foundation for Election Systems spent a total of \$15 million to train tens of thousands of election observers and poll officials—nearly as much as the estimated \$17 million spent by all the presidential candidates and their parties.

An even more ominous tone was set by the announcement that the US Army Southern Command would send 2,000 reservists to the Nicaraguan department of Carazo, allegedly on a humanitarian exercise "to build schools and clinics and provide medical services." The US troops will be in Nicaragua from January 1 to May 15, coinciding with the initial months of the new presidency.

It was notable, however, that local US businessmen expressed far less concern than Washington about the dangers of an Ortega administration. A letter to its members from the Nicaragua Association of Investors and Developers, reported by the *Los Angeles Times*, said: "Mr. Ortega stated that he is fully committed to promoting foreign investment and tourism, realizing that it was the future of the country's economic growth. We believe he is serious." The American developer of the first Marriott beach resort in Nicaragua, Mike Cobb, president of Gran Pacifica development, said he plans to "move ahead with all due speed" and "stick to the path we have established."

The leading ally of the Bush administration in the region, Colombian President Alvaro Uribe, congratulated Ortega and offered to act as go-between in negotiations with international lending agencies. After more than a week of relative silence, US Ambassador Paul Trivelli announced November 16 that the Bush administration would recognize the election result and work with Ortega. Trivelli had publicly supported Montealegre during the campaign.

A balance sheet of Sandinismo

The integration of Ortega and his clique into the Nicaraguan elite and their efforts to effect a rapprochement with American imperialism confirm the analysis of the class nature of the Sandinistas made by the world

Trotskyist movement after the FSLN came to power in 1979. The FSLN publicly embraced Castroism and the struggle against US imperialism and even paid lip service to socialism. It was, however, never a working class or socialist political party, but rather a bourgeois-nationalist movement seeking to use support from Cuba and the Soviet Union to provide it with room to maneuver in a region dominated by Yankee imperialism.

The US government under President Reagan responded to the Sandinista regime by financing a CIA-organized proxy force, the contras, which conducted a decade-long war of sabotage and terror against the people of Nicaragua, in which more than 50,000 died. The conflict dragged on until the crisis of the Stalinist regime in the USSR put an end to Soviet support for the Sandinistas, and Ortega and his associates agreed to a deal with Washington that led to their 1990 election defeat.

The last 16 years have seen the rapid liquidation of the limited social gains in education and medical care made under the Sandinistas in the 1980s. One million school-aged children do not attend school, and the rate of literacy has dropped from nearly 90 percent in 1990 to only 67.5 percent today. Only 29 percent of children complete elementary school. More than half the population has no access to basic medical services.

Both the FSLN and its conservative political opponents have embraced “free market” policies. But contrary to the claims that Nicaragua would revive economically on the basis of free trade, a massive disinvestment took place. Capital flowed freely out of the country, which became dependent on loans from international financial institutions.

This period has been one of economic disaster for the vast majority of Nicaraguans, and a vast bonanza for the wealthy: the top 10 percent of the population receives 45 percent of the nation’s income. Officially, 22 percent of the labor force is unemployed and another 40 percent is underemployed; annual growth rates of 1.4 percent guarantee increasing unemployment. Hunger is endemic; more than 20 percent of the population faces malnutrition, and nearly a million live at the very edge of starvation.

Nicaragua remains the second-poorest nation in Latin America, after Haiti, with a poverty rate of 45 percent. On average, the price-adjusted per-capita income adds up to a paltry \$790 per year, with a distribution so skewed that 80 percent of the population earns less than two dollars per day. An increasing number of Nicaraguan workers emigrate to Costa Rica and the United States to find jobs.

Child labor is rampant, with an estimated 167,000 children forced to work every day. Maternal mortality stands at 150 deaths per 100,000 live births. (The figure is twice as high on the impoverished Atlantic Coast). There are tens of thousands of land mines left over from the CIA contra war, which continue to maim children and adolescents.

The social infrastructure is disintegrating. Only two main roads are usable; the country’s railroad was dismantled in 1990; Nicaragua no longer has a fishing fleet and its ports are in such disrepair that its exports and imports flow through Honduran and Costa Rican ports. Failed “free market” policies have made basic services such as electricity and clean water unavailable for hundreds of thousands. At the same time, rising fuel prices have raised the cost of public transportation.

Throughout this period, the Sandinista Party has held seats in the National Assembly and was party to the introduction of “free market” reforms. While the people suffered, the Nicaraguan elite, including Ortega and other FSLN leaders, enriched themselves on the basis of the pro-market policies and a wave of corruption that swept the country, particularly in the wake of Hurricane Mitch, which killed thousands in Nicaragua in 1998.

Ortega’s response to the deepening social calamity is to embrace policies that will remove remaining barriers to investment and insure that Nicaragua remains a low-wage platform for transnational corporations, expanding the so-called free trade zones that now employ tens of thousands of Nicaraguans in slave-like conditions for hunger wages.

The Sandinista leader will assume the presidency under conditions in which Nicaragua and Central America are fast approaching a social breaking point. In the last year, Nicaraguan workers have repeatedly repudiated the FSLN and PLC’s pro-business policies. This year alone has seen strikes by thousands of transport workers, teachers and public health workers against government austerity policies and the collapse of basic living standards. Free trade zone workers are increasingly demanding collective bargaining rights and decent conditions. They have been joined by strikes and protests on the part of agricultural workers and the unemployed.

In response to this mounting crisis, Ortega has been placed in charge by the very oligarchy that was once his enemy, alongside a contra vice president. The FSLN, a movement that began as a guerrilla army claiming to represent the poor and the oppressed against the Somoza dictatorship, is entrusted with safeguarding Nicaraguan capitalism, fully committed to the defense of profits for big business and the repression of the working class and poor.

In the American media, Ortega’s return to power in Nicaragua will be categorized as part of the broader shift to the left in Latin America, which has seen social democrats, former anti-American guerrillas or trade union leaders like Lula in Brazil come to power in most countries. Ortega’s presidential campaign reportedly received direct financial subsidies from Venezuela, and Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has promised cheap oil supplies in the event of renewed US pressure against Nicaragua.

In the final analysis, however, the emergence of these regimes represents not the coming to power of popular or working class forces, but the last line of defense for the Latin American capitalist class and its imperialist patrons in Washington.

The strategic problem facing the working class of Latin America, as in all the backward and oppressed countries, remains that elaborated by Leon Trotsky in his theory of Permanent Revolution: the construction of revolutionary parties that will establish the political independence of the working class from the national bourgeoisie and unite the oppressed in the “third world” with the working class in the advanced countries in a common struggle for socialism.



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