

NICARAGUA, FROM REVOLUTION TO A NEW DICTATORSHIP.

REASONS BEHIND AND PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE

Sergio Ramirez

The revolution that wasn't.

The Sandinista revolution that triumphed in 1979 in Nicaragua was part of the transformative ideal of a generation, that of the sixties of the last century, a generation forged in the struggles against racial discrimination, colonialism, the Vietnam War, military dictatorships and social injustice.

But barely a year after the entry of the guerrilla columns into Managua, a romantic image that recalled the triumph of the Cuban revolution in 1979, the internal alliances that made possible the overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship had been broken, and the government of national unity, in which different economic and social sectors were represented, came to an end.

The initial proclamation of the revolution was based on international non-alignment, a mixed economy and political pluralism, and the first aim of the new government was to achieve a deep land reform, and to abate illiteracy through a national campaign that mobilized thousands of young students to the countryside to teach peasants to read and write.

But very soon, the military-political leadership of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) opted to advance towards a one party regime, inspired by that of Cuba, and chose the Soviet Union as a strategic ally; and while it sought to prevent the existence of political parties of other ideologies, and advanced in the

confiscations of farms and private companies, it developed an erroneous agrarian reform policy, which denied ownership of the land promised to the peasants.

In this way, a climate of rebellion was created in the countryside, increased by the expropriations of large farms, which produced fear and insecurity among medium and small landowners and led many to take up arms in the Nicaraguan Resistance, the counterrevolution organized by the Reagan administration, which was initially led by former officers from Somoza's army.

The civil war, which lasted a decade, caused thousands of deaths, hundreds of thousands of refugees, economic ruin, inflation and shortages, and Nicaragua was transformed into a field of Cold War confrontation. In an attempt to defuse the confrontation, the FSLN called for presidential elections in 1984, where Daniel Ortega was the winner, and also to elect a Constituent Assembly to vote on a new constitution, promulgated in 1987; but still the war did not stop.

After a series of negotiations that culminated in the signing of the Esquipulas Accords between the Central American presidents in 1987, new elections were called in 1990, which resulted in the defeat of Ortega against the candidate of the Opposition Union (UNO), Violeta de Chamorro.

This was not simply an electoral defeat, but the defeat of a system that had been articulated around the FSLN - the state institutions, the justice system, the army, the police and the state security apparatus, as well as the popular organizations and the trade unions.

The FSLN disappeared as a bureaucratic entity, unable to sustain itself without state resources. It lost control of the state institutions, and the army and police sought the protection of the Constitution approved in 1987 to survive.

The FSLN National Directorate with its nine commanders was practically dissolved, and Daniel Ortega maneuvered to impose himself on what was left of the party apparatus, which he then, over the years, rebuilt to suit his own interests, while promoting strikes and riots.

Democracy, a ladder to go up, but not to go down.

Ortega also continued to compete in the national elections, which he lost twice, in 1996 against Arnoldo Alemán, and in 2002 against Enrique Bolaños, both candidates of the Liberal Party. Each time he only used the elections as a ladder in search of ascending, determined never to lose again when he managed to win, as it is now demonstrated.

His return to power in 2006 was not because he managed to restore the electoral majority lost in 1990, but because he made a political deal with the right-wing president Arnoldo Alemán, through which he obtained a constitutional reform, completed in 2000, which reduced the proportion of votes required to win the presidential elections in the first round to only 35%.

A political deal with the right, plus another deal with his old adversary, Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo, archbishop of Managua; plus, the riots and disorders promoted by his mobs, which convinced the country's businessmen that it was better to have him in power than on the barricades.

In 2009, the Supreme Court of Justice, already under his control, decided that the ban on presidential re-election, established in the Constitution, was unconstitutional. He thus won the 2011 elections by 66% of the votes, counted by a Supreme Electoral Council also under his control, and in 2014, the National

Assembly, also under his control, voted for a constitutional reform that allowed him the right to indefinite re-election and to win without the need to gain a certain percentage of the votes.

Already at the end of his first term he had managed to subdue all the branches of powers, regain the fidelity of the army and the police and, in addition, counted on the favor of the hierarchy of the Catholic Church and the main evangelical churches. And, through another deal, he assured the support of big business.

Together with COSEP, the leading business chamber in Nicaragua, he established an “alliance of dialogue and public-private consensus”; in this way, the business community representatives were empowered to participate in key decisions about economic and fiscal policies, while they kept their hands off political affairs.

Ortega continued to consolidate his family regime in the long term, now that, upon being re-elected for the third time in 2017, he had taken his wife, Rosario Murillo, as vice president, and placed his children as presidential advisors and at the head of the official media.

His absolute power no longer depended on electoral results, but on political, economic and social control. And, importantly, he counted for years on the unlimited financial support of President Hugo Chávez, more than 5 billion dollars in soft oil credits.

But after the death of Chávez in 2013, and the deep economic crisis in Venezuela, that support began to diminish, until it became null, just as exports also

became null. Instead, he has now forged close alliances with Russia, Iran and lately China.

During the visit of the Secretary of the Russian Security Council, Nikolai Patrushev, to Nicaragua in February 2024, agreements were signed between Moscow and Managua on security and intelligence matters. And in the diplomatic arena, Ortega is aligned with the international policies of Russia, supporting the invasion of Ukraine and extending diplomatic recognition to the Russian occupied territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

A storm in summer sky.

Venezuelan petrodollars had allowed Ortega to expand the bases of the FSLN towards a clientelist dimension, now with “citizen committees” in the neighborhoods and rural areas, in charge of establishing social and political control, and thus seeking submission and silence. While police repression grew. But in April 2018 everything suddenly blew up.

When Ortega came back to power in 2006, the Social Security Institute had a large surplus. Now it was in deficit due to the plundering of its resources.

Complying with recommendations of the International Monetary Fund Ortega signed a decree in April 2018, authorizing an increase in the contributions of all people affiliated; and also charged a 5% tax on the pensions of the insured workers.

On April 18, a march of retirees in the city of León was violently broken up by the mobs, and other demonstrations immediately took place in Managua and

other cities, now with the participation of university students, and the support of the COSEP, which also called for protests.

Soon the streets were invaded by gigantic demonstrations of repudiation. The trees of life, esoteric symbols of the power of the president's wife, began to be torn down, while police and paramilitaries shot live ammunition at the protesters, causing dozens of deaths and injuries.

In less than a week, Ortega had lost the support of the businessmen, and had turned against him also the bishops and clergy of the Catholic Church, the small and medium-size producers, civil society, the students, the people of the neighborhoods and the peasants. In addition, the international isolation of the regime was growing at a fast pace.

And, above all, people had lost their fear. “They have taken so much from us that they have even taken away our fear” read one of the banners in the marches that now openly demanded his resignation from power. According to a Cid Gallup survey published on May 16, 2018, 70% of the population demanded Ortega's departure.

The protests were brutally repressed throughout the four months they lasted. According to the report of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, there were 355 deaths and 4,000 injured.

Overwhelmed by the events, Ortega called in the same month of April for a national dialogue, mediated by the hierarchy of the Catholic Church; but faced with the demand for his resignation, he decided to deepen the repression, and turned to the paramilitaries.

And along with the police and parapolice offensive, which put an end to any form of protest, the media were radically repressed. TV and radio stations, and newspapers facilities were militarily occupied, destroyed or confiscated. Hundreds of journalists fled the country in the face of persecution. Today, all real information is transmitted through social networks, most of it from abroad.

Shot of grace to democracy.

Until that point in time Ortega had been able to manipulate the elections and give them some semblance of credibility, even if the results were falsified. But by November 2021, knowing that he faced a general climate of rejection, he did not want to take any risks.

He imprisoned all those who presented themselves as possible presidential candidates, accused them of the most extravagant crimes, from treason and activities "undermining national sovereignty" to money laundering. Also directors of COSEP, including its president, were put in jail, as well as priests and hierarchs of the Catholic Church, such as the bishop of Matagalpa, Monsignor Rolando Álvarez.

The Supreme Electoral Tribunal, made up of FSLN militants, awarded Ortega and his wife 76% of the votes, and 75 seats in the 90-member National Assembly. According to the *Urnas Abiertas* observatory, voter abstention reached more than 80%.

In January 2023, 222 political prisoners, including presidential candidates, were expelled to the United States, and stripped of their nationality, along with 57 more Nicaraguans who were already in exile.

In the November 2022 municipal elections, the FSLN won all 155 mayoralities in the country, without contenders, and with an abstention of 83% according to *Urnas Abiertas*.

All state universities, despite their constitutionally guaranteed autonomy, are now under the political control of the regime. More than 20 private universities have been outlawed and their assets and facilities awarded to the state, including the Polytechnic University, belonging to the Baptist church, and the Central American University, belonging to the Jesuits.

More than 3,000 non-governmental organizations have been outlawed, from the International Red Cross, the Missionaries of Charity of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, and the Boy Scouts, to Christian churches of different denominations, women's organizations and environmental associations

The persecution against the Catholic Church involves the prohibition of processions, police surveillance of churches, the expulsion of religious orders, and the exile of almost a hundred priests and religious, including now three bishops.

The rule of law abolished, the single party in place.

Nicaragua is living through a methodical and calculated plan to extinguish the rule of law, with all institutions converted into instruments of a single political will. A typical police state.

One of the consequences is the massive emigration, mainly to the United States, Costa Rica and Spain, which since 2018 has reached more than 800 thousand people, 13% of the country's total population. In 2022 alone, more than

180,000 Nicaraguans entered the United States, according to Customs and Border Protection, 60 times more than two years ago.

Future perspective: from dictatorship to democracy.

A Cid Gallup poll from June 2023 showed that only 13% of the population supported the FSLN, and 61% disapproved of Ortega; while 75% did not identify with any political party.

It may be said that a regime without popular support, articulated through an organic system of corruption and privileges, without a basis of legitimacy or international credibility, cannot be sustained for a long term. But it must also be noted that, according to the aforementioned poll, there is no political alternative in front of the eyes of the population.

And it depends on the ability of the opposition, most of its leadership now dispersed in exile, to unite and articulate a coherent program of democratic restoration, without putting ideological distances and disputes ahead, and under the premise of a broad concertation.

This would be the first opportunity for Nicaragua to emerge from a dictatorship without having to go through a war and the repetition of the fatal cycle of the triumphant armed movement that engenders, in turn, a new dictatorship.

The February 28, 2024 report of the United Nations-appointed Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua states in one of its conclusions:

“The human rights situation in Nicaragua has deteriorated to such an extent that it will take many years – and resources – to establish a situation governed by the rule of law and respect for human rights.”

A democratic transition government, constituted in a pluralist manner, without political exclusions, should:

1. Open the doors for the return of all political exiles, and the restoration of the nationality rights to all those who have been deprived of them.

2. Revoke all repressive laws, immediately restore the freedom of expression, and return confiscated assets and facilities to the media.

3. Establish a Truth Commission to investigate human rights violations and establish criminal and civil responsibilities for those accountable for these violations.

4. Free the judicial system from all political servitude, and guarantee the independence of judges and prosecutors.

5. Reestablish the professional character of the army and the police, subjecting both institutions to civilian control, and preventing them from being used as partisan instruments of political repression.

6. Establish control mechanisms that prevent acts of corruption in the state, and in the state's relationship with individuals.

7. Repeal all treaties harmful to national sovereignty, the first being the 2017 Interoceanic Canal Treaty.

8. Call for the election of a constituent assembly, to approve a new political constitution of the country, which should reflect the democratic consensus, and contain sufficient rules to prevent the establishment of a new tyranny.

9. The new Constitution must guarantee the participation of all economic and business forces in national development, as well as freedom of association, safeguarding natural resources, environmental protection, and food sovereignty.

10. Likewise, enshrine in it a social state of law, under principles of equity and justice.

Along with Haiti, Nicaragua remains the poorest country in Latin America, with a high rate of informal employment (80% of the workforce), with low access to electricity, drinking water and sanitation services, and a high deficit of housing. And today it depends on remittances from emigrants, the main export product, close to 4 billion dollars a year, corresponding to 30% of the GDP.

And a last word about the international community. The transition towards a democratic status in Nicaragua should be a pacific one. There is no room for violence and any kind of armed struggle to depose the present dictatorship would be the worst we can think of. A civil war would only mean death and ruin.

Democratic countries should stand clearly on the side of democratic change in Nicaragua, and should seize every opportunity to repudiate the family dictatorship that currently is oppressing Nicaragua, and that pretend to establish itself as a dynasty, inheriting power from parents to sons.

Nicaragua should be a permanent case of attention on the part of the European Union and the European Parliament, and must remain in the agenda of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights.

The recent G7 Foreign Ministers Declaration issued in Italy on April 19, is a good example of what I mean:

“We call on the Nicaraguan government to end its human rights violations as well as widespread repression and related violations and abuses against civil society, Indigenous Peoples, academics, students, the independent press, and political and religious actors...

...We further call on the Nicaraguan Government to hold free and fair elections, allowing the members of the opposition to exercise their rights to the freedom of assembly, and to free speech.”

Be sure, as I am, that democracy will be achieved in Nicaragua, sooner rather than later.

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