
POLITICAL POLICY: THE SANDANISTA REVOLUTION AND DEMOCRATIZATION

Gary Prevost
St. John's University

Abstract

The purpose of this article will be to explore the question of the development of democracy in Nicaragua with emphasis on the period from 1979 to the present. The primary focus will be on the role of democracy within the framework of the Sandinista revolution including the eleven years of FSLN state power and the last four years during which the Sandinistas have been the primary opposition party. It will be the primary contention of the paper that a profound democratization of Nicaragua began with the rise of the FSLN to power in 1979. It will also assert that while democratization has not been definitely reversed during the conservative rule of Chamorro and Alemán it has been weakened. The article's primary conclusions will run directly against those who argue that Nicaraguan process of democratization began only with the assumption of power of the UNO coalition in April 1990.

Definitions of Democracy

A workable definition of democracy comes from my previous work co-authored with Harry Vanden.⁽¹⁾ Democracy derives from demos, the people, and kratos, the exercise of power. In its most basic sense it is as Abraham Lincoln said, a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. Unlike other types of government, it claims to allow the people themselves to rule, to make the decisions that govern their lives. The people are to decide their own destiny through their participation in the political process. There is definitely not unanimity of opinion on exactly which forms of political participation are essential for democracy or precisely which political institutions best allow the people to have a say in the governmental process. There are several visions of democracy widely touted in today's world. In the eyes of some, the only valid view is that form of representative democracy practiced in Western nations.

A concise statement of this perspective is provided in the opening editorial “Why the Journal of Democracy” by Larry Diamond and Marc Plattner.⁽²⁾ This definition includes peaceful competition for all effective positions in government through elections, independent political participation, and a high level of civil and political liberty. This definition has been widely accepted by supporters of capitalism but, socialists have long been critical of Western-style representative democracy. Lenin argued that the essence of “bourgeois” parliamentarianism was “to decide once every few years which member of the ruling class is to repress and crush the people through parliament.”⁽³⁾ Lenin and many Marxists believed that formal parliamentary institutions must be transformed into working bodies like Marx’s original vision of the Paris Commune of 1871 or the original local soviets in 1917 that allowed the people to have a direct say in the making of policy.

As we examine the meaning of democracy it is possible to find some similarities in the ways in which democracy is conceived and practiced in socialist and capitalist states. Similarities can be found in the concepts of democracy shared by Thomas Jefferson and Karl Marx. Both Jefferson and Marx trusted the people and thought they would rule wisely and justly under the right conditions. Although their modern day disciples have often found themselves in opposition, Marx and Jefferson shared a similar view of human nature and democracy. Like French Thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau both men saw an inherent goodness in all human beings. This led them to place their faith in the people and their inherent ability to control their affairs. Marx and Jefferson were unrelenting opponents of monarchy and aristocracy. Jefferson accepted representative government only reluctantly and only for large political units.⁽⁴⁾ Marx would share this ambivalence and favor the creation of institutions of direct democracy.

However, it is important to recognize theorists of democracy in both the capitalist and socialist camps tended to be marginalized by both theory and practice over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries. In the United States the ideas of Jefferson were challenged by Alexander Hamilton and James Madison who believed that the people should be represented by those who understood the true needs of the republic. John Adams wanted forms of government that stressed avoiding the excesses of pure or direct democracy. The constitutional structure adopted by the United States set in motion an emphasis on indirect forms of democracy and a de-emphasis on popular participation. Over time this has evolved in the Western countries into a system where there is less and less popular participation. In the current version of Hamilton’s thinking George Will argued that “people are not supposed to govern, they are not supposed to decide issues. They are supposed to decide who will decide.”⁽⁵⁾ The idea that only a few should govern in the United States has been played out in practice. Donald Barrett and

James Steele note how the concentration of wealth and power has derailed American democracy. They observe that the “wage and salary structure of American business is pushing the nation to a two class society.”⁽⁶⁾ Such divisions, combined with the pervasive influence of money in political campaigns, have greatly undermined the practice of democracy in the land of Jefferson.

However, the idea of a small group deciding for the many is not limited to revisionist theorists of Western democracy. The concept also was nurtured and practiced within the socialist camp. Lenin’s conception of the vanguard party as that entity that best understands the needs of the majority and it therefore is most competent to implement policy that benefits it. According to Lenin, the vanguard party was to lead the people in the socialist revolution and guide the state while the new society was being constructed. But Lenin’s ideas very much flowed from the authoritarian Russian political culture that produced his thought. There was little in Russia to instill the libertarian values that foster democracy. Rather they added to the authoritarian influences that imprinted the development of Marxism. The historic conditions in which the first experiment in socialist rule developed influenced not only Soviet Marxism but the way in which socialist thought and praxis developed elsewhere.

The first days of the Russian revolution involved a bold testing of democracy. Workers councils or Soviets took control of neighborhoods and factories much the same way the people had formed communes in Paris during the early part of the revolution in 1792 and the Paris Commune of 1871. Democracy was alive and direct in early Soviet Russia but fears of counter-revolution and foreign intervention dampened the democratic initiative. However, Lenin held out hope that democracy could be reinstated once the revolution was no longer seriously threatened. At one point Lenin stated “the victory of socialism is impossible without the realization of democracy.”⁽⁷⁾ But at the same time the structure and vanguard role of the party were fundamental for Lenin. Ironically, Lenin’s concept of democratic centralism was designed to democratize the functioning of the party, but in reality it did not permit full discussion of issues nor widespread contact between the party and the wider society. Near the end of his life in 1924 Lenin began to have doubts about the growing bureaucratization of Soviet socialism, but his successor Joseph Stalin had no such fears. Once Stalin consolidated his power the democratic thrust of Soviet socialism was gone. Popular democracy was discouraged and dissent was not tolerated on the grounds that bourgeois influence had to be resisted. As Marxist theory and practice developed in the Soviet Union and those areas of the world that were modeled after it, its democratic and participatory dimensions were generally neglected in deference to the interests of the party leadership. By the middle of the 20th century in both the

West and the East there had developed both political practice and political theory that claimed to be the essence of democracy, but in reality both had established political processes built around minority rule.

The Nicaragua Case

Despite the poverty of democratic examples in both the capitalist west and the socialist east, Nicaragua had set about the process of constructing real democracy within a socialist state following the defeat of the Somoza dictatorship in 1979. Nicaragua had been formally a republic for more than a century, but she had seen very little in the way of real democracy. Most of Nicaraguan political history consisted of the passing of power between the Conservatives and Liberals through elections in which only a small percentage of the population was permitted to participate. Nicaragua's closet brush with constitutional rule may have occurred during the increasingly dictatorial reign of José Santos Zelaya (1893-1909). But any possibility that Zelaya's rule may have evolved into constitutional or democratic government was ended when the Conservatives seized power by force with U.S. support in 1909. Conservative administrations that followed can hardly be called democratic as they governed largely through money and arms from Washington. Following the struggle of Sandino between 1926 and 1933, the Somoza dynasty was imposed on Nicaragua for the next forty-five years. While the Somozas ruled Nicaragua like a family business, numerous elections were held (seven between 1936 and 1974). The political opposition dutifully attempted to use them to remove the Somozas, but they failed totally because the elections were openly fraudulent or rigged in favor of the Somoza family's wishes. Any political forces that challenged the established political processes were forcibly repressed by the National Guard, Somoza's private army. The entire apparatus of the government—legislature, courts, and public administration—existed to serve the needs of the Somozas.⁽⁸⁾

In contrast to this lack of familiarity with formal democratic processes the Sandinista revolution unleashed the power of the masses and encouraged their active political participation. The population was mobilized in an unprecedented way to overthrow the dictatorship and the FSLN leadership sought to harness that energy into the construction of both socialism and democracy. Because of the lack of appropriate models, fully developed theoretical perspectives, and the international political realities this task proved to be especially daunting. On the one hand the Sandinista leadership was moved by the popular participation of a multiclass revolutionary alliance. On the other hand they feared that if they immediately held elections the formal institutions of Western democracy that

Somoza and other Central American leaders had manipulated to prevent real participation would be the only democracy that would be allowed to develop. The Sandinista leaders were also well acquainted with Leninist thinking on the vanguard role of the party and felt an obligation to develop political and social consciousness in the whole population. The Sandinista leadership, primarily developed as political and military clandestine group, were suspicious of the bourgeois elements in the country and the power of the United States so ultimately the National Directorate of the FSLN reserved considerable power for itself. But acting as a counter weight to the authoritarian tendencies of the FSLN leadership was the development of grass roots organizations among women, workers, and peasants often imbued with a grass roots participatory spirit that came from the developing ideology of liberation theory. Because of the complexity of these factors three forms of democracy actually developed side-by-side during the years of Sandinista power and it is in understanding the interplay between the three that the successes and failures of Nicaraguan democracy can be gleaned.

Mass Organizations

Like many previous revolutions the Sandinista revolution was marked by widespread mobilization of the population. While some mobilization was a relatively spontaneous response to the increasing repression of the Somoza dictatorship, most activities came from organized groups that were well grounded in Nicaraguan society. In the months prior to July 1979 there was a dramatic increase in organization by women, rural agricultural workers, youth and students, and industrial workers. Under the general leadership of the FSLN several political groups were formed that became the mass organizations of the immediate post-July 1979 period. The most important of these organizations were the Nicaraguan Women's Association (AMNLAE), Sandinista Youth (JS), Rural Workers Association (ATC), Sandinista Workers Central (CST), and the Sandinista Defense Committees (CDSs). The latter were neighborhood watch groups modeled after the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDRs) of the Cuban revolution. What the Sandinista leadership envisioned were popular institutions that would build democracy from below through the construction of neighborhood, gender, or functional grass roots, mass organizations. These new organizations were to be the primary mechanism for popular empowerment and the political education and guidance that the masses would need from the FSLN in the early stages of the revolution. These organizations were also to be the direct communication between the masses and the political leadership. They would inform the people of new political directions and channel popular demands to the FSLN party leadership.⁽⁹⁾

In an historic move the mass organizations were given direct representation in the new Nicaraguan state. The Council of State, created in 1979, was to a certain degree a compromise between representative and participatory conceptions of democracy. With 51 seats in all the Council gave representation to most of the countries traditional political parties but in addition the Sandinista Defense Committees had nine representatives, the CST had three, and the ATC had two. Such direct representation was unprecedented and underscored the fact that from 1979 to the mid 1980s the most vibrant form of democracy in Nicaragua was that practiced by the mass organizations. Generally the representatives of the mass organizations that served in the Council of State were chosen by election from within each organization. These organizations grew rapidly and involved large numbers of people in this time period. By 1984 some 600,000 Nicaraguans (40% of the adult population) were engaged in the civic activities of the CDSs.⁽¹⁰⁾ AMNLAE had 85,000 card-carrying members by 1985.⁽¹¹⁾ A new organization, the National Union of Farmers and Ranchers (UNAG), developed out of the ATC and by 1984 its membership had reached 75,000.⁽¹²⁾ Union membership had been extremely limited during the Somoza period with only about 10% of the workers unionized, but by the mid 1980s there were more than 2,000 workplace unions with 55% of the working population unionized.⁽¹³⁾ While participation was at a high level in the early years of the revolution, by 1987 participation and enthusiasm generally began to decline as the struggle for economic survival in the context of the contra war became paramount and as a result of tension with the other forms of democracy promoted by the revolution, the democratic centralism of the FSLN and representative institutions. By 1987 the country had been at war for five years and the economic base of Nicaragua was devastated. As a result it was inevitable that civic participation would show a decrease, but the decline can not be attributed solely to the war. In this analysis it is important to see the tensions and contradictions within the revolution itself.

Democracy often comes slowly, and authoritarian tendencies can persist, even in the midst of revolutionary change. Thus many noted that important decision making positions in the mass organizations were often occupied by Sandinistas that felt that their real role was to explain Sandinista policy and encourage the organization to adopt it, This diminished their ability to carry the messages and demands of the mass organizations back to the party and pressure for policy decisions that were consistent with them. This tension was never resolved in Sandinista practice.

Also working against the democratizing aspects of the mass organizations was the authoritarian and centralized character of the functioning of the Sandinista party. The Leninist model of party organization, intensified by the guerrilla origins of the party and reinforced by the siege mentality of the contra war, clashed with democratic tendencies of the mass organizations. Almost all power in the FLSN was concentrated in the National Directorate, a body that went unelected until 1991. The Sandinista Assembly was a larger body but it played only an advisory role and was appointed by the National Directorate. Development of the democracy within the party was also limited by the fact that the party's first democratically elected Congress did not occur until 1991.⁽¹⁴⁾ As suggested by a political slogan often voiced by Sandinista militants: "The National Directorate orders" political values seemed less democratic within the party and this same style of decision making was often projected onto the mass organizations.

Formal Democratic Processes

In addition to the democratization of Nicaraguan society brought on by the activities of the mass organizations (civil society), the FSLN oversaw the construction of formal democratic political processes in spite of their ambivalence towards such institutions. Until an elected government assumed power in 1985, Nicaragua was governed by a provisional system, established immediately after the triumph of the revolution in 1979. As would be expected in an immediate post revolutionary period, government power was concentrated in the executive branch, the Governing Junta of National Reconstruction (JGRN) which carried out all executive functions of government and shared legislative responsibility with the newly created Council of State. The Council of State began to function in May 1980 ending the brief period of total authority for the Junta. The Council was a unique political power and reflected closely the revolutionary perspective of the Sandinistas. The composition of the body was its most interesting aspect. The Junta designated which organizations were to be represented and by how many people, but the choice of actual representatives was determined by the organizations themselves. It was here that the new mass organizations gained their formal political voice.

Even before ousting Somoza the FSLN had promised electoral democracy. In August 1980 the FSLN scheduled the first elections for 1985, citing the need to give first priority to improvising social conditions, especially education. The Sandinistas prepared for the first elections in a systematic way sending delegations to various western democracies to study their election laws. Ironically, the Sandinista delegation scheduled to visit the United States was denied entry visas.

The eventual Nicaraguan electoral law was hammered out in negotiations between the Sandinistas and major opposition parties and was similar to that of many Western democratic nations. It established a unicameral National Assembly based on proportional representation and called for direct election of president and vice president.

On November 4, 1984 Nicaragua experienced a unique experiment in democracy. Guided by a nationalist ideology that was Marxist in orientation and a political movement that had incorporated some Leninist elements, the revolutionary government nonetheless held Western-style elections that invited the opposition parties to compete for power through the electoral process. It was an event rare in Nicaraguan history: an honest election. It engendered real electoral competition among seven different political parties.

However, the construction of formal representative institutions may also have had a down side. Suggestions that direct democracy be retained in the form of a second house composed of legislators who were chosen directly by the members of their mass organizations were not persuasive. Support for such a second house existed in the mass organizations, but the idea was never given serious consideration by the FSLN leadership at least in part because they were trying to create democratic institutions that would increase their legitimacy in the eyes of Western governments. Such a desire was understandable in light of the developing contra war, but in the long run this turning away from participatory democracy may well have undermined the truly democratic character of the Nicaraguan revolution. In his article on representative and participatory democracy in Nicaragua Jules Lobel argues that the representative institutions acted as a brake on the political demands that flowed from the mass movement.⁽¹⁵⁾ The new political institutions facilitated and became increasingly responsive to middle- and upper-class mobilization as manifest in opposition parties that had gained seats in the National Assembly, and retarded and became increasingly less responsive to the lower-class constituency of the mass organizations, which no longer had seats in the new legislative body.

The Sandinista era also brought Nicaragua a more democratic constitution. It was drafted beginning in 1985 using a process that attempted to directly involve the masses. Actually drafted by the National Assembly chosen in the 1984 elections there were open meetings held throughout the country where input was received from more than 100,000 people. The input did result in some significant changes especially in the area of women's rights, but the proposal to introduce greater direct representation for the mass organizations was not adopted. The final document in the words of Andrew Reding "combines the Western emphasis on

civil and political rights with a Marxist stress on social and economic rights.”⁽¹⁶⁾ The constitution established a separation of powers among four branches of government: executive, legislative, judicial, and electoral. The Supreme Electoral Council broke a certain amount of new ground while the other principles of presidential government, proportional representation, and an independent judiciary drew heavily from existing Western models. In the area of economic, social, and cultural rights the Sandinistas sought to emulate the revolutionary experience of Cuba. Rights explicitly listed in the constitution include the right to be protected from hunger, the right to decent housing, social security, health, education, and a healthy environment. On the whole, the constitution mandates that the government must step in to guarantee basic needs when normal market forces do not succeed in providing them.

In addition to the forms of political democracy discussed above the process of democratization in revolutionary Nicaragua proceeded in both social and economic forms. In the economic arena agrarian reform involved the most profound transformation. By 1990 the agrarian reform had affected more than half of the country’s arable land benefitting some 60 percent of all rural families. Also, by 1990 the majority of farms were in the hands of small and medium size producers. Initially the Sandinista land reform had concentrated on creating a significant state sector for agro-export, but beginning in 1985 much greater emphasis was placed on land distribution to individual campesinos and by 1989 the small private producers and cooperatives were responsible for 47% of all agricultural production.⁽¹⁷⁾ The campesino sector benefitted greatly from the government’s policy of easy credit terms and technical assistance along with state-run processing and storage facilities. In one of its final acts in 1990 the outgoing Sandinista-led National Assembly passed laws designed to protect agrarian reform from its possible dismantling by the Chamorro government.

During the Sandinista years a considerable transformation of the Nicaraguan economy occurred in the direction of the interests of the Nicaraguan majority poor. Through government intervention unemployment was sharply reduced, basic necessities such as food and clothing became accessible to a much greater proportion of the population, and the gap in the standard of living between the rural and urban areas was narrowed. These gains were achieved through a combination of government credit policies and a subsidization of basic necessities with export revenues. This achievement, probably more than any other, was always fragile and by 1990 the combination of the contra war and Sandinista economic policies undermined this transformation.

Social Transformation

Social transformation was also an important feature of the revolution with gains in women's rights, education, health care, and the rights of indigenous peoples. In the area of women's rights the gains of the 1980s were numerous including paid maternity leave; equal access to education; legal equality in relation to divorce, adoption, and parental responsibility; a measure of economic independence, and the inclusion of sex education in the school curriculum. Of course, these gains occurred in the context of a very traditional male orientated society and with a Sandinista government that often resisted women's demands out of deference to the Roman Catholic hierarchy. However, even with those limitations, women had emerged by 1990 as much greater players in Nicaraguan society than ever before.

In the area of education the 1980s saw significant gains, particularly in the early years. The 1980 Literacy Crusade, cited as a model campaign by the United Nations, dramatically reduced illiteracy, particularly in the rural areas. The Nicaraguan government also committed a greater share of resources to education than any previous administration. By 1989 the school population had grown from 300,000 to 1 million and the government launched a follow-up to the Literacy Crusade in the form of 17,000 education collectives providing adult education to 200,000 Nicaraguans.⁽¹⁸⁾ Education was definitely a gain undermined by the contra war as resources were diverted away to the military and schools were forced to close in areas of heavy fighting.

Provision of health care to the whole of the Nicaraguan revolution was greatly expanded, especially during the early years of the revolution. Under the Sandinistas for the first time Nicaragua gained a health system aimed at the entire population. During the Somoza era only about 15% of the population received care. Substantial expansion was achieved in both curative and preventative medicine. More than 400 new health clinics and several major hospitals were built around the country. Government expenditures on health care more than tripled.⁽¹⁹⁾

After an initial false step, the Sandinista government enacted an autonomy statute for Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast that is a significant achievement for the rights of the indigenous peoples' of the Americas. Nicaragua's eastern coast, rich in minerals and other natural resources had long been exploited with no care for the environment nor the non-Hispanic population that lived there. Initially the Pacific Coast-based Sandinistas continued the same pattern of dominant relations with the coast but after serious confrontation with CIA-sponsored Indian rebel groups in the

early 80s the government entered into dialogue with the Atlantic Coast residents. This dialogue resulted in a 1987 Autonomy Statute that guarantees the rights of the indigenous groups to their own language, culture, and communal forms of land ownership. In addition the statute recognizes the rights of the different groups in regard to the development of natural resources. Also established were regional governmental assemblies with direct representation from each ethnic group. The statute intended for the transference of considerable authority to these governments especially in the areas of taxation and resource development.

As demonstrated, above a process of profound transformation and democratization occurred in Nicaragua between 1979-1990. The process was clearly not completed because of contradictions within the revolutionary process itself and the impact of an eight-year war with the United States-backed contras. The Sandinistas were taken from power in 1990 by a stunning electoral defeat at the hands of Violeta Chamorro's National Opposition Union (UNO). What has been the effect of this change on the process of democratization begun under the Sandinistas? A review of the current status of democratic gains of the Sandinista revolution begins with agrarian reform.

Balance Sheet on the Gains

Key Sandinista leaders believe that this is the most important achievement that remains in place six years after the loss of Sandinista state power. Their view may be overly optimistic, but it is based on the fact that according to recent statistics, 68 per cent of Nicaraguan farmland remains in the hands of small and medium-sized producers. Property is still more equitably distributed in Nicaragua than before the revolution, when 52 per cent of the land in 1978 was controlled by large land holders and the number of large estates remains small, especially in comparison to other Central American states.⁽²⁰⁾

However, the agrarian reform program is under attack from the government and this achievement remains in jeopardy. Formally, the new administration was committed to respecting the land tenure arrangements of the previous government. In practice the counter-reform began almost immediately. Decrees 10-90 and 11-90 of May 1990 created a commission charged with reviewing the land confiscations of the previous government. Former landlords were given six months to petition for the return of their lands, though lands confiscated from Somoza were to be excluded. By the end of June 1990, the government approved requests by 57 former owners to rent some 86,000 acres of land on state farms.⁽²¹⁾

The large-scale return of former owners, mainly self-exiles who had developed business interests in Miami, led to many confrontations and mobilizations. These mobilizations led to the July 1990 general strike which demanded the repeal of Decrees 10-90 and 11-90. The National Workers' Federation (FNT) received assurances that no further land would be returned, but in reality the government continued its privatization and land-return policies behind the scenes. The ability of the union movement to carry out a resolute struggle against the return of lands was undermined by crosscutting interests. In some instances farm workers welcomed former landlords, hoping that their return would bring new capital into their farms. In other instances, the government's firmness in moving forward with privatization persuaded some farmers to accept what they thought was the best deal they could get.

At the end of the Sandinista period, nearly 12 per cent of the country's farmland was state-owned under the rubric of the Area of People's Property (APP). This area was declining slowly after 1985 as Sandinista agrarian policy shifted towards the distribution of individual plots, but it remained largely intact and became a key target of the Chamorro counter-reform. Many of the 70,000 workers on state farms were affiliated to the Sandinista-led Rural Workers' Association (ATC) and were seen as a significant Sandinista power base to be attacked.

Initially, the ATC sought to prevent the privatization process entirely, but retreated from this position as the result of the previously discussed division within its ranks. Eventually, the union accepted the government's policy with several stipulations. No property was to be returned to people who had close links with Somoza, and smallholders and cooperatives who had benefitted from agrarian reform would be protected. In the latter case, former owners were compensated with shares in public utility companies (water, electricity, and telecommunications). After considerable negotiation the union agreed to a formula for the privatization of the APP lands-workers (32 per cent), demobilized army personnel (17 per cent), ex-Contra (21 per cent), and former owners (30 per cent). However, the workers on many farms that were to be returned to their former owners refused to accept the agreement. They argued that they were the legitimate owners and feared the loss of their jobs, homes, and personal plots. This led to serious conflicts in which former owners tried to take possession of the disputed properties with the aid of the police and army. According to 1993 union figures, this has resulted in over 130 arrests and seven fatalities.⁽²²⁾ Many of the farms are in dispute and cases are still being fought out in the court system. The speed with which this privatization was carried out is demonstrated by the fact that by the end of 1993 the ATC reported that the agricultural APP had been 100 per cent privatized.⁽²³⁾

While it is clear that large numbers of medium- and small- sized producers retain control of their land, the long term future of this pattern of land tenure remains in doubt. In what seems to be a blatant government tactic, many peasants still do not hold the actual title to their land. Without the title, the current banking system will not grant credit to such farmers in most instances. This situation has left many farmers unable to plant their crops and facing bankruptcy and foreclosure. During 1995, many protests were staged to highlight the gravity of the situation regarding land titles. In June, more than 6,000 small farmers from throughout Nicaragua marched on President Chamorro's office, and the ATC staged long-term occupations at two sites in Managua to underscore their plight.

The problem of credit is not limited to the untitled farms. Credit cutbacks have fallen particularly hard on the rural poor. The number of campesino families served by the National Development Bank, BANADES, had expanded from 16,000 in 1978 to a peak of 102,000 in 1988 under the Sandinista government. By 1991 this was cut to 31,000 families.⁽²⁴⁾ The combination of less money allotted by the government to small producers and the tighter lending policies of the banking system have conspired to place many small producers in a precarious financial situation where they are highly vulnerable to being bought out by larger landholders.

The privatization process has not been limited to the agricultural sector; state-owned manufacturing, utility, and service industries were also targeted. Privatization reached its zenith in November 1995 when the National Assembly voted to sell the government's most profitable business, the Nicaraguan Telecommunications and Postal Service (TELCOR). As in the rural areas, the initial instinct of the union movement was total opposition to privatization, and large demonstrations, including factory occupations, occurred during the summer of 1990. However, divisions within the working class and the absolute commitment of the government led to the privatization process going forward. The union movement concentrated on winning agreements allowing all workers to purchase all or part of the privatized enterprises. This process of full and partial workers' ownership has turned out to be highly controversial and contradictory. An agreement between the government and the FSLN in 1991 established the principle that when an enterprise is privatized a minimum of 25 per cent of the value of the enterprise must be available for purchase by the employees. No provision of the agreement blocked full purchase of the enterprise if the workers could raise the capital. A good example of the complexity and difficulty of this process is the food industry where the Sandinista Workers' Federation (CST) represents 1,200 workers in 11 enterprises that were previously state-owned.

By mid-1995, five of the enterprises were 100 per cent worker-owned, and three were mixed with worker-owned shares from 25 to 50 per cent. The remaining three were completely privatized. The Secretary-General of the Food Workers' section detailed how government policies and the overall economic crisis have combined to create a very mixed picture for the workers.⁽²⁵⁾ On the positive side, the food processor Delmor has been a success. The fully worker-owned company is profitable. Having paid its debt to the government, it is now expanding to export to other Central American countries. However, even its relatively good position is threatened by low-priced foreign competition and antiquated machinery. Other worker-owned industries in the food sector are not as fortunate as Delmor. In one case, the El Mejor coffee processing plant is fully worker-owned but carried out no production for almost two years as the government directed coffee production to those processing plants that were wholly private. Production was resumed in 1994 after an agreement with a worker-owned coffee plantation, but production remains modest. Worker-owned enterprises have usually found it very difficult to obtain credit, even with formal ownership. In many cases, particularly with farmland, the government has been slow in granting formal title to the workers, thus undermining their ability to obtain credit. The unions have sought to secure financing directly from abroad, but so far this approach has had little success, in part because of the overall chaotic economic situation in the country.⁽²⁶⁾

Union leaders that were interviewed remain convinced that full and partial worker ownership represents an important achievement and a primary battleground for the union movement, but it seems to be a questionable position. By compromising their initial demand against privatization, the union movement forfeited the momentum and bargaining power that it had in 1990. When the union movement enters the arena of ownership and management, it is not playing its strongest card. In the arena of financial capital, the government and the private sector have both the money and the expertise. The unions are working hard to adjust to their new role, but it seems that the amount of time and resources devoted to privatization has come at the expense of their representation of workers in traditional owner-management situations. Even if the union movement can make some of the enterprises successful, it is estimated that these efforts can only benefit five to ten percent of the workers.⁽²⁷⁾ Any process that benefits such a small percentage only further divides the working class and ultimately weakens the union movement.

Neoliberal Economic Reforms

The overall democratization of the Nicaraguan economy that occurred in the Sandinista era has been significantly undermined by the new government's neoliberal economic model. As noted earlier, the Sandinistas themselves had retreated from a more democratic economy by 1988, but the counter-reforms of the Chamorro government have deepened the process of reconcentration of wealth in the hands of fewer people. The strategy has been 'structural adjustment', a redistribution of resources to the capitalist sector as the favored way of reactivating the post-war economy. Virtually all government controls of the economy have been lifted. Food prices are now almost entirely market-driven with all remaining government food subsidies eliminated. Supermarkets sprang up all over Managua with well-stocked shelves of primarily imported foodstuffs. However, the price of goods is comparable to North American standards and is, therefore, out of the reach of ordinary Nicaraguans. Because the stores are stocked with imported goods, local producers are not the ones to benefit from this revival of commerce. The beneficiaries are primarily the private commercial intermediaries who have re-emerged.

The reconcentration of wealth has also occurred in other ways, particularly in changes to the banking system. Existing state-owned banks could not be privatized because of constitutional provisions. As a result, the government encouraged the establishment of a parallel private system and by 1995 ten private banks were in existence. To prop up the new banks the government assigned most of the foreign financing to these institutions. Also, to undermine the viability of the state banks, a sharp reduction in personnel was carried out. The progressive lending policies of the state banks that supported agrarian reform through generous loans to poor peasants have been eliminated. The National Development Bank now operates on strictly commercial criteria. The new economic policies also seek to reverse Sandinista efforts for Nicaragua to become more self-sufficient as part of a Central American common market. In 1990 Chamorro cut import duties from an average of 80 per cent to 30 per cent. As a result, there was a flood of imported textiles, shoes, and metal goods with which domestic producers could not compete. The subsequent closing of plants has only worsened the country's staggering unemployment. 50 per cent of the economically active population was underemployed in 1992 and 1993, and figures rose to nearly 52 per cent in 1994. Open unemployment also grew considerably in 1994, reaching almost 24 per cent of the labor force.⁽²⁸⁾ The job cuts in the formal sector have been dramatic. The number of people paying social security dropped 23 per cent between 1990 and 1994 in absolute terms, without even factoring in the growth of the employable

population. According to a UN study, 70 percent of the population was living in poverty, with 40 per cent in acute poverty.⁽²⁹⁾

Social Reforms

The Sandinista revolution received considerable inter-national attention and praise for its efforts in the field of education, particularly the successful 1980 National Literacy Crusade and the expansion of adult education. How has education fared in the 90s? Education policy was highly controversial under Minister of Education Humberto Belli. Within the wider context of reduced spending on education, the main feature of Chamorro's program was curriculum revision and an offensive against the Sandinista-led teachers' union, ANDEN.

The curriculum changes implemented in Nicaraguan schools sought to marginalize Sandinista influence and to promote a world view closer to the ideological outlook of Chamorro and her advisers. Belli spoke of the need to create an education system 'permeated with Christian-inspired values'. Within weeks of the government's arrival in power, thousands of new school books appeared in Nicaragua funded by USAID. By the 1991 school year, these books and the new school curriculum were well entrenched. Typical of the new curriculum is the Civic Morals text that teaches conservative values of subservience and obedience to church and state authorities.

The Ministry of Education recognized that there would be resistance to the changes because of strong Sandinista influence among the nation's 30,000 teachers primarily through ANDEN, the teachers' union. The Ministry of Education used harsh tactics to break down ANDEN's resistance to the curriculum changes. Within the first four months of the new government, ANDEN, reported that 420 teachers had either been arbitrarily dismissed or transferred to schools far from their homes.⁽³⁰⁾ ANDEN fought the government's actions and some teachers won reinstatement through the courts, but the strong-arm tactics largely succeeded in taming the resistance of the teachers. A six-week teachers' strike was conducted in early 1995, but the union was only able to win a very modest pay increase. Most teachers, including Sandinistas and their sympathizers, have been forced to implement the new curriculum in order to retain their employment in very desperate economic circumstances.⁽³¹⁾ The combined impact of the years of war and the further cutbacks in education spending have almost totally reversed any gains that were accomplished in the early 1980s. In 1979, approximately 22 per cent of those students who began primary school completed sixth grade; in 1992 the same figure was being cited by the Ministry of Education. For both years, less

than 10 per cent of rural populations completed primary school. In another telling statistic, the 1993 illiteracy rate was already equivalent to or greater than the 54 per cent rate in 1980, when the national literacy campaign took place. In absolute numbers there were approximately half a million more illiterate Nicaraguans in 1993 than in 1980.⁽³²⁾

The Nicaraguan people had made significant health gains in the first years of the revolution, but the Contra war began a process of eroding those gains that continues now under the Chamorro administration. The current regime's dismantling of the Sandinista system is again based on a privatization process. In part because of constitutional provisions requiring a public health system and in part because of resistance from well-organized health care workers, the government has not fully succeeded in implementing their privatization plans. Notwithstanding, they have definitely moved forward. The new system is clearly favoring those who have the resources to pay for health care over those that do not. At public hospitals and clinics only the visit to a doctor remains free; all other services, including diagnostic tests and medicines, involve significant charges, usually beyond the means of the majority of the population. Visits to a doctor are by no means guaranteed because the number of appointments available has been severely reduced as a result of the sharp cutback in government funding for public hospitals and clinics. The overall budget of the Ministry of Health was cut from \$130 million in 1989 to \$70 million in 1994.⁽³³⁾ As a result many medical personnel were laid off from the public health system and forced to seek work in the growing private system. The government actually subsidized the transfer of medical talent from the public to the private sector by giving doctors cash incentives to leave the public system and move into private practice. Many doctors remain committed to the public system but find it necessary to split their time between a presence at the public hospital and a private practice. This obviously limits the number of appointments available in the public system.

Other privatization tactics have also been employed. Private doctors are permitted to rent space and equipment from the public hospitals at favorable rates. In some hospitals, a certain percentage (up to 50 percent) of the beds are now reserved for private patients. Many of the pharmacies in the public facilities are now operated by private concerns who own the drugs that they sell, and therefore gain a majority of the profits.

All these cutbacks have had an impact on the health of the Nicaraguan population. According to statistics released by the Office of Nutrition of the Ministry of Health, more than 60 per cent of Nicaragua's children under the age of one year are anaemic and 4 per cent of all children under five years old suffer from

irreversible mental retardation because of malnutrition. In 1988 more than 40,000 children received nutritional attention in government daycare centers. Many of those centers are now closed and only 7,000 children are receiving the same attention. Infant mortality rates have increased from 62 deaths per 1,000 live births in 1987 to 107 in 1994.⁽³⁴⁾

Women's Rights

How have the gains in women's rights achieved in the Sandinista years fared during the last five years? On the positive side, the legal framework has largely been maintained. The UNO parties and the Catholic Church have sought to restrict the right to unilateral divorce by either party but so far the Sandinista-era law has been sustained. However, the legal framework put in place by the Sandinistas had many serious limitations for women's rights and now Nicaraguan women's organizations are seeking to strengthen their rights but are doing so in a generally unfavorable political climate. Examples of loopholes in the legal code of the revolutionary period included abortion, violence against women, democratization of the family, lack of an equal pay provision, and protection for gays and lesbians.

In spite of pressure from some women, abortion was never decriminalized. The Sandinista leadership made it clear that it was unwilling to go against the Catholic Church on this issue. However, during the 1980s abortion became widely tolerated and few prosecutions occurred. In the 1990s the Managua women's hospital stopped performing therapeutic abortions, and the procedure has been driven entirely underground. The pro-government media presented powerful anti-abortion measures, and this dovetailed with the Catholic Church's wider campaign of promoting a more traditional role for women. Nicaragua has also taken a backward step with the passage of anti-sodomy laws. Prior to this new measure, Nicaraguan law had been silent on such questions. After a heated internal debate, the Sandinista bench opposed the sodomy law in the National Assembly, but the conservative forces prevailed.

Nonetheless, the greater involvement of women in the public life of Nicaragua, an important advancement of the 1980s, remains strong. The women's movement is probably stronger today than ten years ago with the Nicaraguan Women's Association (AMNLAE) strengthened and many new organizations on the scene, including several which have clearly labeled themselves as feminist. AMNLAE operates 57 centers throughout Nicaragua that promote programs in health, economic development, gender consciousness, political involvement, the

environment, and legal rights. By the mid-90s the programs reached 108,000 women.⁽³⁶⁾ That these centers continue to function and provide services to women that were not available prior to 1979 is a significant achievement.

However, on many fronts the position of women is under strong attack in today's Nicaragua. The country's economic crisis bears heavily on women because so many are heads of households and because they bear a disproportionate burden of household production and reproduction. Desperate economic circumstances have resulted in the greater occurrence of prostitution. AMNLAE's service orientation has benefitted some women but there seems to be little defense of women's rights in the political arena. The Catholic Church and its allies in government seem to have the upper hand in implementing their anti-feminist agenda. Countering this trend are a variety of new groups organized around concrete issues such as violence against women and women's health, including abortion.

Atlantic Coast Autonomy

The autonomy process is under direct challenge from the Sandinistas successors. Basically, Managua has used flanking tactics to undermine the rights of the residents of Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast. Rather than seeking any formal reversal of the Autonomy Statute, the central government has simply ignored the law and created its own approach to the region. In April 1990, Chamorro created the Institute for the Development of the Atlantic Coast (INDERA) and appointed former Miskito Contra leader Brooklyn Rivera as its head. For four years the meager resources allotted for the coast were channeled through INDERA rather than the regional Autonomous Councils. The Managua government used INDERA to divide the different coast groups by pitting them against each other. With shifting political alliances, both regional governments passed motions rejecting INDERA in 1994, and the central government eliminated the agency and proceeded to carry out all programs for the coast through national-level ministries. This strategy was aided after 1994 by the control of the south region government by the anti-autonomy Liberal Constitutional Party (PLC) and further enhanced when the PLC took the national government in 1996.

The greatest challenges to the coast today are growing environmental destruction and the lack of control over its natural resources—fishing, forestry, and mining. According to the spirit of the autonomy law, control over the coast's resources as to be vested with the regional governmental bodies. In the last four years, the central government has either ignored this aspect of the law or used local

leaders sympathetic to the central government to conclude deals on the exploitation of resources that are detrimental to the region's interests. Virtually all the fishing rights for the coast have been placed in the hands of Oceanic, a company run by Diego Lacayo, brother of the Chamorro's presidential adviser. Oceanic did not actually carry out significant fishing operations. Rather, it subleased its rights for a significant profit to primarily US-based fishing companies who do the actual work. Because the U.S. operators have their own processing plants in Honduras and Costa Rica, the Bluefields processing facility is operating well below capacity with more than 250 people out of work.

Efforts in the National Assembly to achieve constitutional reform come from a variety of political directions and may yet prove to be an important battleground for the legal and political future of the autonomy project. The Sandinista years ended without the passage of laws to implement fully the process outlined in general principles in the 1987 statute. This failure gave the anti-autonomy forces in the Chamorro government and the National Assembly the handle with which to stall the process. Atlantic Coast National Assembly members, Mirna Cunningham and Ray Hooker of the Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS), embarked on an effort to raise the 1987 statute to the level of constitutional status but their efforts have been unsuccessful. Strong sentiment clearly continues to exist among the indigenous residents of the coast, but it is far from clear that their hopes for autonomy and sustainable resource development will be achieved.

Changes in the Police and Army

The elimination of Somoza's National Guard and the repressive police force of his rule was clearly an important achievement of the Sandinista revolution. How did this gain fare during the 90s? Maintenance of Sandinista influence in the army and the police was at the center of the transition negotiations after the February 1990 elections. Sandinista leaders were fearful that the Chamorro administration would bring former Contras directly into the government apparatus and exact revenge on their people for the military defeat that the Contras suffered at the hands of the Sandinista army. Aware of the importance of the issue to the FSLN and mindful of their considerable power even in defeat, Chamorro allowed Sandinista Humberto Ortega to remain as the head of the army. The President herself assumed the position of Minister of Defense. Chamorro argued that retaining Ortega as head of the army would maintain social peace and allow for an orderly reduction in the size of the military. The reductions have been dramatic. At the time of the elections there were about 96,000 soldiers and by mid-1994 the number stood at 17,000 and have remained at that level since then.⁽³⁷⁾ The

retirement of Humberto Ortega in early 1995 and his replacement by a less controversial Sandinista officer, General Joaquín Cuadra, was hailed by many as a further depoliticizing of the armed forces. Cuadra is from a Nicaraguan oligarchic family, and is a cousin of Antonio Lacayo. By the end of 1995 the label of Sandinista was removed from the organization.

The maintenance of the armed forces as a progressive force has met with mixed results. On the positive side up, the army has not been absorbed into the framework of US domination that is true for every other Latin American army except that of Cuba. Nicaraguan officers are not trained at the infamous School of the Americas in Georgia. US leaders clearly hope for the long-term integration of the Nicaraguan army into their sphere of influence but remain skeptical about the character of an army still dominated by Sandinistas. Nicaraguan military officials have sought full participation in Central American military maneuvers but so far they have been rebuffed.

Also on the positive side the, army has not engaged in systematic human-rights abuses so common to Nicaragua's northern neighbors in Central America. Nicaraguan citizens do not have to fear arbitrary death or detention as they did during the Somoza era. The army also remained strictly neutral during the protracted political stalemate between the executive and legislative branches in 1994 and 1995. The professionalism of the army helped to defuse the potentially volatile confrontation. However, there were also some disturbing trends that led many Sandinistas to question the leadership of Ortega and the trajectory of the army. In numerous incidents the army has been deployed in labor disputes, especially in the countryside where it has acted in support of former landowners attempting to recover their land from occupying workers. There is also a developing bitterness within the Sandinista ranks towards senior army officers who have apparently acquired considerable amounts of land.

The deterioration of the police as a progressive force occurred with considerable speed. The Ministry of Interior was renamed Ministry of Government and the Sandinista Police became the National Police. Chamorro appointee, Carlos Hurtado, became the new high official replacing Tomás Borge. New uniforms were issued, and police units in riot gear were commonly deployed in the capital, a departure from the Sandinista era. In 1992 Managua mayor Arnoldo Alemán created a new municipal police force (highly visible in the capital with their red berets). After initial hesitation, the police came to be used as strikebreakers. In the most dramatic confrontation to date, three people were killed when a force of over 600 anti-riot policemen opened fire on protesters in the Managua neighborhood of Villa Progresá during a transportation strike in May 1995.⁽³⁸⁾ In early 1996, the

annual reports of the three major Nicaraguan human rights groups declared that in 1995 the major violator of human rights in the country was the National Police.⁽³⁹⁾ During the 1980s the Sandinista Police gained a reputation for honesty and discipline. Much of that reputation is now gone. Bribery and corruption have developed on a widespread basis in the context of the desperate economic situation and low police salaries.

Democracy in the FSLN

Another aspect of democratization in contemporary Nicaragua that must be given some attention is the process of change within the structures of the FSLN. As discussed earlier, one of the three types of democracy pursued during years of Sandinista power was the democratic centralism of the FSLN. Drawing on primarily East European and Leninist models (with a touch of the Cuban revolution), the Sandinistas built a vanguard political party to carry out the clandestine, guerrilla war strategy against the Somoza dynasty. Once in power the FSLN stuck primarily with the model that it had used during the years of struggle. Resisting calls to create a mass party, the FSLN remained a cadre party after 1979 and all leadership power remained under the control of the handful of former guerrilla commanders who made up the party's National Directorate. That body basically made all of the major political decisions for the party and the state from 1979 to 1990. The formal institutions of the state were important, but more as implementors of broad policy decisions made by the National Directorate. Only after the 1990 election defeat did a self-critical look at internal party democracy begin. In June 1990 an extraordinary meeting of the Sandinista Assembly, normally an advisory body to the National Directorate, initiated a process that has led to a gradual democratization of the FSLN. The report issued by the Assembly acknowledged the excessive verticalism and lack of democracy within the party. The Assembly also called for a Party Congress, the organization's first, which was held in July 1991. For the first time in the party's history elections were held to choose party officers and the delegates to the Party Congress. However, the 1991 Party Congress demonstrated that there were limits to democratization. The National Directorate refused to stand for reelection as individuals and the discussion of the party platform was limited by the lack of a working draft before the Congress. Many party members claimed that the leadership had not learned from the electoral defeat and new divisions appeared within the organization. A bitter Special Party Congress in May 1994 exposed deep divisions within the party⁽⁴⁰⁾ and in January 1995 the FSLN split into two organizations with the formation of the Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS) under the leadership of former vice-president Sergio Ramírez. One of the stated reasons for the split was

the lack of democracy within the FSLN. However, in spite of that charge it does appear that the FSLN is slowly evolving into a more democratic political party. Evidence of this democratization was the holding of open primary elections in early 1996 to choose the party's candidates at all levels.

Mass Organizations

The mass organizations have also undergone some important changes during the last four years. Most importantly, these organizations have in many instances become stronger and asserted their independence from the FSLN.⁽⁴¹⁾ The resurgence of the mass organizations was led by the trade union movement. In the summer and fall of 1990 the union movement flexed its muscles in the face of attempts by the Chamorro Administration to rapidly roll back the gains of the revolution. These mobilizations, often directed against the process of privatization, were not fully successful but they definitely acted as a brake against the actions of the government.

Resurgent activity has not been limited to the union movement. The main organizations of the rural sector the Rural Workers Association (ATC) and the Union of Farmers and Ranchers (UNAG) have both remained highly active during the Chamorro period in pressing the government to grant agricultural credits and to stop land foreclosures. The old Sandinista Defense Committees (CDSs) have been reborn as the Community Movement and have led urban protests against government attempts to return land and homes to previous owners. The women's movement has also grown in the last four years with the revival of AMNLAE, the FSLN-led group and the appearance of Nicaragua's first openly feminist organizations. In contrast to countries like El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, where organizations of civil society are routinely driven underground by government repression, the Nicaraguan mass organizations continue to occupy important political space as they press their causes to the government. This presence of civil society, almost non-existent prior to 1979, may be Nicaragua's most important democratic achievement.

Conclusion

What is the balance sheet on the construction of democracy in contemporary Nicaragua? As stated at the beginning of the paper the answer to this question turns on the definition of democracy that is employed. Using the definition offered here stressing mass participation and including a significant recognition of social and economic rights the conclusion must be that Nicaragua is

more democratic today than it was in 1979 when the Sandinistas assumed power but that the last ten years have seen an erosion of democracy for Nicaragua's majority poor. The future of democracy in Nicaragua is very much in doubt. The FSLN party has begun a process of democratization, but strong authoritarian tendencies remain within the organization. Civil society is gaining strength in Nicaragua as the mass organizations survive and in some cases prosper in their new-found independence from the FSLN. But the ultimate strength of these organizations is limited by the country's grinding poverty and their tendency to be atomized and politically unrepresented. As demonstrated above, the democratic social and economic gains are in strong retreat with no improvement in sight. The 1996 elections represented a mixed score card for democracy. On the positive side there was the alternation of power from one ruling party, The National Opposition Union (UNO) to another The Constitutional Liberal Party (PLC) without violence. This marked the second consecutive peaceful transition, a record for Nicaragua. On the downside the election was marred by a considerable number of credible reports of voter fraud committed by the victorias PLC.

Appendix

Stuart Nagel's concept of a win-win policy has an interesting resonance in the contemporary political situation of Nicaragua that was described in the previous article. Since the FSLN had carried out programs in a variety of areas (e.g. education and health care) that had resulted in real improvements for the poorer elements of Nicaraguan society, it would have been hoped that these projects would have been maintained by the Chamorro government, even as it inevitably attacked the more controversial Sandinista programs in the areas of women's rights and foreign policy.

However, such a win-win strategy has generally not taken hold since 1990 primarily due to the Chamorro policies of counter-reform. As the article detailed, the new government moved against Sandinista programs almost across the board. The only possible example of a win-win strategy came during the transition agreements when the new government largely ratified the redistribution of land that had occurred between 1979-1990. Since the individuals who benefitted were generally small and medium size agricultural entrepreneurs, this policy fit within the ideological framework of both Chamorro and the FSLN.

Given the history of Nicaragua, the winner-take-all strategy of the Chamorro government was not surprising. 1990 represented the first legal transfer of power from one party to another without significant bloodshed. Previous transfers of power were generally marked by vindictive moves against the old holders of power by the new ones. The Sandinista revolution of 1979 had clearly continued that pattern. The 1990 transition came through the ballot box, but it was not able to overcome Nicaragua's destructive political past. As a result, the Nicaraguan people have suffered from the political elite's failure to find a win-win strategy. The vindictive attitude of the Chamorro government and its Washington allies toward the Sandinistas threatens the democratic achievements that were accomplished in the 1980s.

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