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**The Rediscovery of  
America & Europe  
1992:**

**SOCIO-CULTURAL, PHILOSOPHICAL & SPIRITUAL ROOTS**

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**DEMOCRATIZATION  
IN THE COMMUNIST WORLD:  
PROMISE & REALITY**

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**"Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them."  
*Matthew 7: 20***

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## THE RISE AND FALL OF COMMUNISM IN NICARAGUA

Alfred G. Cuzán  
University of West Florida

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*Communism was imposed in Nicaragua in stages, just as in Eastern Europe. Unlike Eastern Europe, however, communism was never consolidated in Nicaragua. Like their East European analogues, the Sandinistas stripped the state of valuable assets before turning the presidency over to the winner of the 1990 election. The Sandinistas outdid their East European counterparts in retaining greater control of the police and military under the new government. The thesis of this essay is that Nicaragua is unique among post-communist polities in that it voted communism out before it had consolidated itself and while a civil war still raged. These two conditions will probably make it more difficult to solidify democracy in Nicaragua than in Eastern Europe.*

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### NICARAGUA AND EASTERN EUROPE COMPARED

The year the Sandinistas celebrated the tenth anniversary of the revolution that catapulted them to power in Nicaragua, an article appeared in the *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* (Cuzán 1989). The author concluded that the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (FSLN or *Frente*) had welded Marxism-Leninism, an elite party, and a coercive apparatus into a revolutionary regime which had not, however, reached the final stage of mature totalitarianism delineated by Friedrich and Brzezinski (1965). On 25 February 1990, under pressure from armed and unarmed domestic opponents, their Central American neighbors, the United States, and the European Community, the Sandinista government held early elections, which they lost in a landslide. Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, the standard-bearer of a 14-party coalition, the *Unión Nacional Opositora* (UNO), outpolled Sandinista President Daniel Ortega 55 to 41 percent. UNO candidates also swept legislative and local races across the country.

Since then, Ortega, who as President "had met and embraced the Marxist leaders of Poland, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania" (Kinzer 1991: 386-87), not to mention the Soviet Union and

Cuba, has seen his former allies (except Fidel Castro) suffer the same fate. Although what happened in Nicaragua is to some extent *sui generis*--an offshoot of the country's history and political culture--the rise and fall of communism there cannot be understood without reference to similar developments in Eastern Europe. Our thesis is that Nicaragua is unique among post-communist polities in that it voted communism out before it had consolidated itself and while a civil war still raged. These two conditions will probably make it more difficult to consolidate democracy in Nicaragua than in Eastern Europe.

The Sovietization of Eastern Europe passed through three stages: (1) genuine coalition; (2) bogus coalition; and (3) consolidation of a monolithic regime. In the first stage, the communists take control of the "levers of power," that is, the police and military, leaving leaders of non-communist parties at the head of other parts of the government. During this period, there is a good deal of freedom of speech, press, and association. In the second stage, peasant and bourgeois parties are driven into opposition. Censorship is imposed. Non-communists are retained in the cabinet, but exercise no power. "Opposition meetings are broken up by lorryloads of communist toughs, while the police 'objectively' take no action against aggressors or aggressed" (Seton-Watson 1956: 170). In the third stage:

There is a single communist-managed "front," with one hierarchy, one centralised discipline and one organization. An important feature of this stage is the enforced fusion of the well-purged social democrats with the communists in a United Workers' Party . . . . In the third stage all open opposition is suppressed, and its leaders either escape abroad or are arrested as "spies of the Western imperialists" and either executed or sentenced to long prison terms (Seton-Watson 1956: 171).

In Eastern Europe, the entire process took from one to four years. Whether as a result of a conscious plan or the natural development of totalitarianism, the Sandinista seizure of Nicaragua followed a similar path through the first two stages of a classic communist take-over. The FSLN, until the late 1970s an obscure and marginalized small group of professional revolutionaries imbued with Marxist-Leninist ideology and great admiration for Fidel Castro, rode a revolutionary wave of anti-Somoza sentiment to power in July 1979 (Nolan 1984: 1, 18-22).

Like most of Eastern Europe before World War II (Schöpflin 1991: 236), Nicaragua had both a history of authoritarianism, which was dominant,

and of democratic or reform elements. The revolution against Somoza was driven in large part by the frustrated democratic aspirations of the Nicaraguan middle class (Farhi 1988: 240). To seize control, the Sandinistas had to commit themselves to "holding free elections as soon as possible," as the Organization of American States requested in an unprecedented resolution calling for the resignation of President Anastasio Somoza (Pastor 1987: 149). If the FSLN had not pledged to hold elections, its allies in the revolutionary coalition, including non-communist labor unions, several political parties, middle-class professionals, wealthy businessmen, and the Roman Catholic Church, would not have trusted it with the government. Certainly, neither Alfonso Robelo, a businessman, nor Violeta Chamorro would have joined the provisional junta formed in San Jose, Costa Rica, in June 1979, for winning international recognition withdrawn from the Somoza regime (Christian 1986: 117-19).

The other three members of the original junta were Daniel Ortega, one of the nine *comandantes* of the Sandinista National Directorate, FSLN's controlling organ; Sergio Ramirez, a writer and poet then residing in Costa Rica; and Moises Hassan, an American-educated university dean, who was to break with the *Frente* in 1988 and place third in the 1990 presidential election. At the time of the junta's formation, Ramirez's and Hassan's Sandinista membership was not public knowledge. Only later did it dawn on the population that the provisional junta was dominated from the beginning by disciplined Sandinistas (Christian 1986: 118-19).

Initially, the 1979 cabinet was balanced between conservative, moderate, and leftist members (Gorman 1982: 17). Bernardino Larios, a former National Guard officer, was put in nominal control of the Ministry of Defense. But from the beginning, *comandante* Tomás Borge, the only surviving founder of the FSLN, was put at the head of the Ministry of the Interior (police), which he built up into a dreaded security force with the help of specialists from Cuba, East Germany, and Bulgaria (Child 1982: 213-14). By the end of 1979, the cabinet was realigned in favor of the FSLN National Directorate, with *comandante* Humberto Ortega displacing Larios (who was later jailed) as Defense Minister.

To the chagrin of their democratic allies, the Sandinistas soon reneged on their promise to hold early elections, prompting the resignation of Robelo and Chamorro from the junta in April 1980. In May 1980, less than a year after the revolution, the FSLN "announced the formation of the

Patriotic Front of the Revolution, a coalition of political parties including the FSLN (not yet declared an official party), the Independent Liberal Party (PLI), the Nicaraguan Socialist Party (PSN), and the Popular Social Christian Party (PPSC)" (Payne 1985: 27). Significantly, all other parties in the "Patriotic Front" would in time break with the *Frente* and join UNO.

In the summer of 1980, in response to renewed demands for elections, Humberto Ortega announced that national elections were postponed until 1985 and, in any case:

The elections we speak of are very different from the elections desired by the oligarchs and traitors, conservatives and liberals, reactionaries and imperialists . . . . Never forget that *our elections will be to perfect revolutionary power, not to hold a raffle among those who seek to hold power, because the people hold power through their vanguard--the FSLN and its National Directorate* (quoted in Payne 1985: 28).

Thus, in less than two years, the genuine coalition that had driven out Somoza had become a bogus coalition adorning the *Frente's* hegemonic power: Nicaragua was already into the second stage of a communist takeover.

#### SANDINISTAS' INCOMPLETE SOVIETIZATION OF NICARAGUA

Unlike their East European counterparts, however, the Sandinistas did not reach the monolithic stage, either because they "never had a Stalinist vocation" (Berman 1990: 312), or simply because they lacked the resources to suppress a resilient resistance. As early as September 1980, the Atlantic peoples, composed of several Indian tribes--the Miskitos being the largest and black Creoles--rose up against the introduction of Cuban technicians and soldiers into their communities. In response, the Sandinistas forcibly broke up demonstrations and imprisoned the leaders. Soon the Miskitos took up arms, and many fled across the Rio Coco into Honduras (Nietschmann 1991: 28-31).

The Miskito uprising was the beginning of what became, by the mid-1980s, a "virtual civil war" (Dunkerley 1990: 43). In the northern mountains, the central region east of the capital, and along the southern corridor to Costa Rica, peasants joined guerrilla groups by the thousands, the largest being the *Fuerza Democrática Nicaraguense* (FDN). In the following years, what had begun as autonomous nuclei of former officers in Somoza's

National Guard, on the one hand, and former Sandinistas, on the other, grew into "the largest *campesino* insurrection in Latin America since the Mexican revolution of 1910" (Pardo-Maurer 1990: 24). Aided and abetted first by Argentina and then the United States, and using bases across the border in Honduras, the *Comandos*--as they became popularly known in the Nicaraguan countryside (*NYT*, 25 April 1990: 4A)--swelled from fewer than 1,000 in mid-1981 to about 15,000 fighters by 1987 (Radu in Falcoff & Royal 1987: 426).

International support, particularly military supplies from the United States, was indispensable not so much for the survival of the *Contras* as for doing battle against the vastly superior, Soviet-supplied and Cuban-advised military forces of the regime. But that the *Contras* and Miskitos had a genuine social base born of legitimate grievances is now admitted even by former Sandinista officials. Alejandro Bendana, former secretary-general of the Foreign Ministry, recently published *A Campesino Tragedy: Testimonies of the Resistance*, which blames the civil war on Sandinista policies (*Washington Times*, 27 September 1991: 8A).

The *Contra* challenge was so serious that twice it persuaded the Sandinistas to hold elections, first in November 1984. In May 1983, *comandante* Bayardo Arce, a National Directorate member in charge of the Party's political committee, gave a speech to a closed meeting of the Nicaraguan Socialist Party. His words were surreptitiously recorded and a transcript was published in Spain in August 1983. In that speech, Arce acknowledged that "if we did not have the war situation imposed on us by the United States, the electoral problem would be totally out of place in terms of its usefulness" (Payne 1985: 92).

The 1984 elections failed to legitimize the Sandinista regime since the main opposition candidate, Arturo Cruz, who had served the revolutionary government successively as president of the central bank, in the provisional junta following the resignations of Robelo and Chamorro, and finally as Nicaraguan ambassador to the United States, pulled out of the race, alleging that "the Sandinistas had decided on a Somoza-style election" (Cruz 1988: 4-5; for different views, cf. LISA 1984; McIntire 1985). Although the *Frente* claimed to have chalked up two-thirds of the vote, no Latin American president attended Daniel Ortega's inauguration, nor did any Central American country send even a low-level delegation. Instead, "Fidel Castro dominated the ceremonies" (Leiken in Falcoff & Royal 1987: 397).

Unable to legitimate their regime, the Sandinistas tried to crush the internal opposition between 1985 and 1987. Following the imposition of a U.S. economic boycott and renewed aid to the *Contras* in 1985, a State of National Emergency--in effect since March 1981 except for a period before and after the 1984 election--was extended and tightened. Freedom of the press and assembly, freedom to strike, and the right of *habeas corpus*, were suspended. *La Prensa*, long under strict censorship, was closed. Foreign priests and a Nicaraguan bishop were expelled. The Catholic radio station, and many others, were shut down. A campaign of vilification against an ever larger number of opponents was intensified. Paul Berman describes the situation well:

Anytime that non-Sandinista movements or institutions threatened to become sufficiently active to influence events, the Sandinistas' first instinct was to denounce them as foes of the revolution. The Miskito Indians of the east coast who rejected centralization, the northern *campesinos* who rejected state agriculture, the Catholic hierarchy with their following among the poor who rejected the Sandinista-dominated church faction, the right-wing and left-wing trade unionists who struggled for trade union autonomy, the small right-wing and left-wing political parties that declined to merge with the Sandinista Front, the market women who carried canastas of nonstate tangerines into hungry Managua, the staff at *La Prensa* who published the country's most popular newspaper--all found themselves beyond the pale of Sandinista acceptability. And the vanguard of the people never noticed that the list of "CIA agents," "oligarchic elements," "Somocista National Guards," and "agents of imperialism" gradually came to resemble an entity that could only be described, except by the Sandinistas, as "the people" (1990: 311-12).

As the number of "counter-revolutionaries" continued to grow, and Nicaraguans fled the country by the hundreds of thousands, the *Frente* increasingly relied on Soviet-bloc auxiliaries and Western fellow travelers to do jobs Nicaraguans could not be trusted with. Nicaragua's eminent essayist and poet Pablo Antonio Cuadra lamented that:

The stangest spectacle of all is the wave of improbable foreigners--Vietnamese, Cambodians, North Koreans, Bulgarians, East Germans--flooding our landscape, while a contrary current of thousands of Nicaraguans, young people above all, flee into exile. We have emptied Nicaragua of human resources and replaced them with people at once strange and totally alien to our history, our customs, our culture. The Russians and the PLO kiss us on the lips. We are addressed with

endless bows by the servants of Kim Il Sung; we are advised by Cuban neo-imperialists; flocks of blond students help us, badly, to pick coffee (1989: 19).

With a huge army raised by conscription, tons of heavy weapons from the Soviet bloc, and military advisers from Cuba, the Sandinistas tried to annihilate the *Contras*. Yet, with help from the United States, Honduras, and El Salvador, and "an extensive network of civilian supporters who give them food and warn them of Sandinista troop movements" (*NYT*, 6 March 1990: 9A), the *Contras* resisted. So did the Indians in the eastern third of the country. Repeated charges of *Contra* atrocities, broadcast by the Sandinistas and published abroad, did not seem to blunt *Contra* support. This may be because Sandinista atrocities, such as forced relocations and massacres of *campesinos*, less well publicized at the time, may have been equal or greater, as the mass graves unearthed by human rights groups in Nicaragua since the 1990 elections suggest (*NYT*, 5 August 1990: 22A; Puebla Institute 1987a, 1987b). As late as April 1990, shortly before their demobilization, the *Contras* were considered "liberators" by northern Nicaraguan peasants (*NYT*, 25 April 1990: 4A; 24 February 1990: 5A).

By fall 1987, when the *Contras* "had gained the tactical advantage and were able to mount successful operations at the strategic level" (Leiken 1990: 29; cf Purcell 1987), Daniel Ortega signed on to the peace initiative of President Oscar Arias of Costa Rica. The peace agreements required the Sandinistas to open up political space to their opponents, including reopening *La Prensa* and radio stations, negotiating a peaceful settlement with the *Contras*, and holding internationally supervised elections. According to Stephen Kinzer: "All the concessions that Ortega and his government made in the months following their acceptance of the peace accord were aimed at a single end: destroying the *contras*. Ortega had finally come to understand that he could not destroy them with guns and bombs" (1991: 360). The Sandinistas had other worries as well, including a free-falling economy, declining Western aid, and Soviet reluctance to increase subsidies (Payne 1990a: 3).

In early 1988, partly as a reaction to the Iran-*Contra* affair, and partly as a gesture of support for President Arias, the U.S. House of Representatives voted by a narrow margin to end military but not humanitarian aid to the *Contras*. This forced most *Contras* to retreat to their Honduran bases by the end of 1988. Still, the Sandinistas did not feel secure. Two years of on-again, off-again negotiations culminated in the

decision to hold internationally supervised elections in exchange for a call for the demobilization of the *Contras* from both their civil opponents and Central American neighbors.

Despite their overwhelming advantage in resources, including free use of state vehicles, tarring UNO as having sold out to the United States for taking campaign contributions appropriated by Congress, plastering the country with their own electoral propaganda while defacing that of UNO, massive rallies and door-to-door campaigning, repeated harassment and intimidation of UNO candidates and arrest of UNO poll watchers, the Sandinistas lost in a landslide (LASA 1990; Leiken 1990; Payne 1990a). UNO's largest margin of victory was in the central region of the country east of Managua, where the *Contras* had widespread peasant support. In the Atlantic region, split into two electoral districts, UNO won one and a Miskito group the other. In the northern mountains, the FSLN won a narrow plurality, edging out UNO by one percent. Thus, of the three regions where the civil war was most fiercely fought--north, central, and Atlantic--two went heavily against the FSLN and the third was evenly split between the two camps. UNO also won the city of Masaya, "the cradle of the insurrection" against Somoza, including the Indian *barrio* Monimbo (*NYT*, 3 March 1990: 3A).

#### NATIONAL RECONCILIATION OR POPULIST CONFRONTATION?

After the Berlin Wall was breached in 1989, communist parties were swept from power in most of Eastern Europe. The new, post-communist regimes appear to share certain things in common. First, they emerged after the communists had suffered a "loss of self-legitimation" (Schöpflin 1991: 245). Led by old men, corrupt to the core, demoralized by criticism from intellectuals and Gorbachev's *glasnost*, unable to rely on Soviet troops to crush the opposition, East European communist regimes no longer believed in their right to rule.

Second, the new, post-communist polities inherited societies that had suffered decades of "a kind of desertification." Communism had "atomized society--it destroyed the institutions and bonds of pluralism--sweeping away ideas, values, solidarities and people and preserving only a few of these, often in distorted form, from the pre-communist past" (Schöpflin 1991: 235). Nevertheless, the destruction of civil society was not total, as the case of the Polish Catholic Church, which became a bulwark of resistance to the

communists, shows. Furthermore, while the communists were still in power, civil society emerged again in the form of dissident movements (Geremek 1992: 3). In some cases, independent worker movements were part of the resurgence of civil society, playing an important part in anti-communist revolutions. The case of Solidarity in Poland is well-known. In Bulgaria, the trade union *Podkrepa*, "which began in February 1989 as a tiny group of dissident workers and intellectuals, helped to bring down communist strongman Todor Zhivkov later that year," and in Czechoslovakia, a one-day general strike "struck the crucial blow against the communist regime" (Karatnycky 1992: 44).

Third, in every country, communists and former communists regrouped. Individually or as members of renamed organizations, they retain enough power to block or throw up obstacles in the path of reform. Thus, although changes of personnel took place at the top and legislative oversight was instituted, the military is still staffed by officers who served under the old regime (Rice 1992: 29). Similarly with the secret police, the worst case being Romania, where the *Securitate* appears to be intact, manipulating extremist movements from the shadows (Muravchik 1992: 70). Communists or ex-communists still control large labor unions: "In Bulgaria, Hungary, and Poland, the old communist unions are still larger than their democratic rivals." While democratic unions "must balance their deep commitment to the stability of free popular government with their duty to represent the interests of their members," communist unions "can freely attack established democratic governments, attempt to incite strikes and protests, and seek to exploit popular economic discontent for the purpose of undermining democracy itself" (Karatnycky 1992: 43-44).

Throughout Eastern Europe, communists and ex-communists remain encrusted in central bureaucracies and state enterprises. They are represented in Parliament. Still others have gone into business for themselves, profiting from the shift to a market economy. As communism disintegrated, these *nomenklatura* capitalists engaged in what Frederick Pryor politely calls "asset-stripping," that is, the appropriation or outright theft of state-owned resources (1991: 102).

Fourth, deep disagreements concerning what to do about communist and *nomenklatura* capitalists, along with clashes of personality and styles, have contributed to the fracturing of anti-communist fronts (Muravchik 1992: 70-71). Recent Polish legislative elections represent an extreme example,

with no party winning more than 10 percent of the vote. The underdevelopment of civil society and the fragmentation of anti-communist fronts have contributed to an excessive emphasis on individuals rather than ideas (Pfaltzgraff 1992: 34). Once elevated to office, anti-communist leaders become distant from their followers and struggle among themselves "for a share in the victory," with the consequent loss of legitimacy (Sztompka 1991: 307). Vaclav Havel, Lech Walesa, and Boris Yeltsin are the prototypes of new leaders whose meteoric rise in popularity has given way to disenchantment and criticism from old friends and allies in the struggle against communism.

Thinking about the best strategy for overcoming the residues of communism and consolidating liberal, democratic governments in Eastern Europe, Stephen Sestanovich argues that a policy of moderation, flexibility, and pragmatism is bound to fail. To sustain popular support for democracy during the difficult transition from communism, the new leaders "have to prove that a real revolution, not a halfway one, is taking place; that the country won't wake up at the end of the process to discover that the same people are still in charge" (Sestanovich 1991: 6). Instead, populist demagogues should use anti-communist rhetoric that channels popular resentments into confrontations with what remains of communist controls over the bureaucracy, military, and police. In Sestanovich's view, "liberal anticommunist demagogy" sustains popular support during the hard times that accompany the transformation of a planned into a market economy, intimidates the old guard, who may be tempted to sabotage the reforms, and helps forestall the emergence of illiberal demagogues (1991: 15). By preempting populism, liberal demagogues prevent the restoration not only of communism but, what would be more in keeping with local cultures, the resurrection of authoritarianism from the pre-communist past.

There are similarities and differences between the European and Nicaraguan post-communist experience. Communism never reached the monolithic stage in Nicaragua. Thus, civil society was never as atomized as in Eastern Europe. As in Poland, the Nicaraguan Catholic Church, under the leadership of Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo, acted as a rallying point for anti-communism. The Church had contributed to Somoza's downfall, denouncing the dynasty's human rights abuses. Initially, the Church welcomed the Sandinistas. But by 1980, the Church began to criticize human rights violations of the revolutionary regime, as well. The Sandinistas countered with a vicious campaign of slander, harassment, and *turba*

violence. As in Poland, where communists had created the Pax organization to undermine the Church, the Sandinistas tried to bring Nicaraguans into what they called the "popular church," a handful of priests loyal to the Sandinistas (West 1989: 23-24). The campaign backfired. Long-time observers of the FSLN believe that hostility toward the Catholic Church was one of the factors that contributed to the Sandinistas' downfall (Kinzer 1991: 393; LASA 1990: 41).

Apart from the Church, other institutions of civil society managed to weather the Sandinistas. Although censored during most of the Sandinista decade and shut down for over a year by order of state security, *La Prensa* managed to survive and come back, largely free of censorship, in 1987. Others were COSEP (a private enterprise association), the Nicaraguan Permanent Commission on Human Rights (an independent human rights watchdog that denounced Somoza abuses, only to find itself under attack from the Sandinistas when it continued to do its job after the revolution), opposition political parties, six of which were elected to the National Assembly in 1984, and independent labor unions. The last two groups coalesced into the Permanent Workers' Council (a forerunner of UNO), which organized a 1989 May Day opposition march through Managua (Schwartz 1992: 109, 115-18). When the Sandinistas allowed a bit of political space in order to comply with the Central American peace agreements, these organizations launched strikes, demonstrations, and protests. In response, the Sandinistas unleashed *turbas* on the protesters, arresting many of them, as at Nandaime in 1988 (Kinzer 1991: 381-86). Still, civil society survived, and the Sandinistas found practically all of it arrayed against them in the 1990 election.

Though civil society was less atomized in Nicaragua than in Eastern Europe, the FSLN, unlike communist parties in the Soviet bloc, had not lost its conviction of a historic right to rule. For one thing, Sandinista leadership consisted of younger men. Only Borge, the *Frente's* sole surviving founder, is in his fifties. Other top Sandinistas--the Ortega brothers and Arce--are in their forties. These men had founded the Sandinista state in the wake of a popular revolution which, in their eyes, had not been consummated. Their historic project had never been limited to Nicaragua, either. As Borge affirmed in 1981: "This revolution goes beyond our borders. Our revolution was always internationalist from the moment Sandino fought [his first battle]" (quoted in USDS 1985: 3). The Sandinistas were also internationalist in the sense that many of their most fervent admirers were not Nicaraguans, but

Western intellectuals, not least academics specializing in Latin America, and Hollywood movie stars (Hollander 1992: 157-58, 260; Ratliff 1989-90: 67-69). No less important was the fact that the Sandinistas viewed themselves as victors in the civil war. The *Contras* had not surrendered, but they were held back and, after the United States cut off military aid in 1988, most troops withdrew to their Honduran bases. FSLN *comandantes* could also boast of having survived their *bête noire*, Ronald Reagan, whose anti-Sandinista rhetoric matched his characterization of the Soviet Union as the "Evil Empire."

In contrast to Eastern Europe, then, the *Frente* was not about to vacate the government. No sooner had the ballots been counted and most international observers flown home than *turba* attacks against UNO activists resumed (*NYT*, 28 February 1990: 8A). Sandinistas began to supply their militants with weapons. *Comandante* Luis Carrión Cruz warned of "chaos" if the new government attempted to take away control of the military from the FSLN (*NYT*, 2 & 6 March 1990: 5A & 9A). Daniel Ortega promised his supporters that the Sandinistas would continue to "rule from below" (Uhlig 1991: 406).

In the two months between the election and the inauguration of the new government, the Sandinista-dominated National Assembly passed a series of laws designed to limit their losses. An amnesty law granted immunity for unprosecuted crimes committed since 1979, a civil service law sought to protect Sandinista managers and employees in state enterprises from dismissal, and a property law allowed the Sandinistas to acquire title to millions of dollars of what had been public property (Uhlig 1991: 407-8). Another law and associated presidential decree practically guaranteed an autonomous military beyond effective presidential control (Payne 1990b: 3-4).

The property law formalized possession of mansions, large agricultural estates, beachfront properties, vehicles, art collections, cultural artifacts, bank accounts, and other assets Sandinista leaders had appropriated during their decade in power. It also opened the door for the wholesale looting of government property, down to the emptying of inventories of state stores and the taking of furniture, computers, television cameras, and other equipment from public offices. Many low-level Sandinistas acquired title to humble dwellings and a share of farm cooperatives. But this was small change compared to what top-level Sandinistas managed to appropriate,



individually and for the FSLN (Ibarz 1991). The FSLN owns hundreds of enterprises, including import-export firms, banks, radio stations, a construction firm, and part of an airline (Payne 1990b; *Latin American Weekly Report*, 4 July 1991: 2; *NYT*, 25 June 1991: 1A, 12A). Ironically, then, one of the outcomes of the revolution was simply to transfer wealth from Somocistas to Sandinistas.

On her inauguration, Violeta Chamorro announced that General Ortega would stay on as chief of the armed forces. Also staying were former high-ranking members of the Sandinista state security, including Lenín Cerna Juárez, "accused of personally torturing members of the civilian anti-Sandinista political movements that had brought Mrs. Chamorro to office" (Uhlig 1991: 413), who simply moved to the Defense Ministry, and René Vivas, the Sandinistas' chief of police, who retained his post. Unlike Eastern Europe, where at least the top layer of the military and police was retired, in Nicaragua it was left in place.

The mere rumor that General Ortega would stay on unleashed a storm of protests: "During the pre-inaugural period, Nicaraguan radio talk shows featured indignant voters complaining that they had not risked everything to find the Sandinistas still in power" (Leiken 1990: 37). Following Chamorro's announcement, UNO's political council voted to censor the new President. Two cabinet appointees refused to take their posts in protest. Among the most vocal critics of the pact was the Vice-President, Virgilio Godoy, leader of the Liberal Party, the largest within UNO. In reprisal, he was denied office space and has been marginalized ever since. Another strong critic was Miriam Arguello, newly-elected president of the National Assembly. Her successor in that post, Alfredo Cesar, a former Sandinista turned *Contra*, who advised Chamorro during the transition, would also grow increasingly critical of her policy of conciliation.

Fearing that continued Sandinista control of the military and police would endanger their lives, the *Contras* initially balked at Chamorro's pleas to disarm. They demanded that General Ortega and other high-ranking Sandinistas resign first. When Chamorro promised them large tracts of land where they could set up colonies and police themselves, the *Contras* relented. Over 15,000 turned in their weapons by the end of June 1990. The *Contras'* Washington representative during the war was named Nicaraguan ambassador to the United States. Top *comandantes* Franklin (Israel Galeano) and Ruben (Oscar Sobalvarro Garcia) were given posts in

the administration. A Miskito Indian leader, Brooklyn Rivera, was also appointed to office. But many rank and file *Contras* remained wary and bitterly resented continued Sandinista control of the armed forces and police.

With the new President estranged from her own coalition, the *Contras* disarming, and the military and police under their control, the Sandinistas proceeded to show what they meant by "rule from below." In May 1990, members of Sandinista-controlled unions barricaded themselves inside all principal government offices and utilities, locking out government ministers. They demanded job protection, higher salaries, and other benefits. Telephone service, public transport, banking, and the international airport were paralyzed. At first, the government declared the strike "illegal and nonexistent," but then made "significant concessions on virtually every major strike demand" (Uhlig 1991: 416). Two months later, and only days after the last *Contra* had turned in his weapon, Sandinista unions did it again. This time they were reinforced by Sandinista paramilitary units which took control of key street intersections and blew up the transmission tower of the principal anti-Sandinista radio station. Armed clashes between Sandinista and anti-Sandinista militants broke out, leaving several people dead and many wounded. Once again the government made vital concessions to restore order (Uhlig 1991: 417).

Intermittent strikes continued, affecting banks, schools, the sugar industry, border crossings, and customs houses. Large farms, which had been spared confiscation when the *Frente* was in power, were overrun by Sandinista armed groups. In November 1991, following the passing of a bill in the National Assembly that sought to recover payment for properties seized by Sandinistas after the election, *turbas* took to the streets in a "daylong Sandinista rampage of burning, looting, stoning and shooting" (*NYT*, 11 November 1991: 6A), allegedly to protest the damaging of a mausoleum in memory of *Frente* founder Carlos Fonseca Amador. Police stood by and watched as dozens of trucks and cars belonging to government agencies were torched, the Managua City Hall sacked and burned, opposition radio stations blown up, and other violence visited on the capital. At the end of the day, Daniel Ortega gave a speech to thousands of followers in which he warned the government not to try to take back properties the Sandinistas had acquired before Chamorro's inauguration. Later, several UNO deputies defected and voted with the Sandinistas in the National Assembly to uphold the President's veto of the property law.

This was not the first or the last time that Chamorro managed to sustain a veto of an anti-Sandinista measure by prying a few deputies away from the UNO majority and adding their votes to the Sandinista contingent in the National Assembly. She has done it on other occasions, notably to uphold a veto of a budget that in her opinion excessively cut back appropriations for the military. With this tactic Chamorro has obtained more room for maneuver, but at the cost of alienating the very constituency that elevated her to the presidency. Rumors abound that the assemblymen were bribed to switch their votes.

In November 1990, a movement spearheaded by ex-*Contras* and 16 UNO mayors in central Nicaragua mobilized to block the road to the Atlantic until General Ortega and Lacayo were dismissed from their posts. Clashes with Sandinistas left over two dozen dead (*NYT*, 12 & 18 November 1990: 3A). In 1991, citing unfulfilled promises, Sandinista threats, and the killing of dozens of their fellows, including the mysterious murder of Enrique Bermudez, the ex-National Guard colonel and CIA protégé who had been their top commander until his removal in 1989, hundreds of *Contras* took up arms again. Known as *Re-Contras*, an American reporter noted "the obvious sympathy they enjoy in the northwest of Nicaragua" (*NYT*, 12 September 1991: 4A).

Ironically, some *Re-Contras* are making common cause with armed *Re-Compas*, ex-members of the Sandinista military, carrying out armed operations to demand land, agricultural credits, and other concessions from Managua. In spring 1992, these *Revueltos*--a Spanish pun meaning both mutineers and scrambled--seized towns, blocked highways, and threw up barricades demanding government concessions. In response, Chamorro sent high-level emissaries to negotiate with the insurgents, with the military as back-up. It seems as if the old lines separating *Contras* and Sandinistas are being redrawn, with alliances between former enemies taking place at both the top (Chamorro-Ortega) and the bottom (*Re-Contras-Re-Compas*) of the social scale.

#### CONCLUSION

From the beginning, Chamorro and her advisors opted not to make a clean break with Sandinista institutions and personnel, but to use them as bridges to a new regime. Eschewing the liberal, anti-communist rhetoric recommended by Sestanovich, Chamorro and her son-in-law Lacayo, named

Minister of the Presidency (equivalent to White House chief of staff), pursued a policy of "national reconciliation" that results in "neither victors nor vanquished," as Chamorro said in her victory statement (*NYT*, 27 February 1990: 4A). In practice, the policy boils down to making repeated concessions to the Sandinistas following acts of violence, and taking care not to disturb their control of the military and police, or their enjoyment of the spoils of a decade in power.

This policy split the anti-communist coalition soon after the 1990 election. Important UNO figures feel betrayed. The Catholic Church has also chimed in, with a pastoral letter that criticizes the government for its inability to resolve the property question, maintain public safety, or administer justice. Many exiled Nicaraguans refuse to return, citing lack of security and the government's inability to return confiscated properties. Foreign observers have also joined the chorus of criticism, arguing that Chamorro should have confronted the Sandinistas with the moral authority of her electoral victory and demanded that they surrender all power to her government (Leiken 1990; Lynch 1990; Uhlig 1991).

However, a caveat may be in order. Of all the countries where communism was voted out of office, Nicaragua is unique in that the election was held while a civil war still raged albeit at a lower level of intensity than two years before, and the regime was anything but spent. The present discontents are to some extent the aftereffects of two consecutive civil wars spanning an entire decade. It will take time for the psychology of key participants to shift from an attitude of violent conflict to one of peaceful competition, let alone cooperation. In such a situation, a strategy that postpones confrontation with the Sandinistas until they suffer a loss of self-legitimation may not be wholly mistaken.

There are signs that the *Frente* is going through some sort of crisis (Spence & Vickers 1991: 10). Some Sandinistas are disgruntled with the enrichment of their bosses and the continued domination of the Party by the same leaders. In July 1991, at the First Congress of the Party, Daniel Ortega was elected Secretary General. Other members of the directorate retained their posts. On the other hand, critics of the leadership were purged. In 1992, however, disagreements within the inner sanctum of the Party, for instance between Daniel Ortega and Arce, spilled into the pages of *Barricada*, the Sandinista organ. Another development is Ortega's decision to re-apply for full membership in the Socialist International, "which

rejected the Sandinista Front previously as undemocratic" (*NYT*, 24 March 1992: 4A). To qualify, the *Frente* would have to start taking democracy seriously. General Ortega, too, has parted ways with his Sandinista brethren on some issues. Following criticism in the Sandinista press for pinning the country's highest medal on the departing American military attaché, the General replied: "We've got to stop listening to extremists and fanatics who see the United States as Nicaragua's permanent enemy" (*Washington Times*, 21 January 1992: 7A).

A question remains: What would stop the Sandinistas from retaking Nicaragua? Suppose General Ortega decided to stage a coup. Could anything stop him? The answer is: Probably not. But then, this is true of most of Latin America, a region where the military has an ingrained habit of intervening in politics, making and unmaking governments more or less at will. Only recently, a coup was thwarted in Venezuela, a country where civilian, elected government has been the norm since 1958. If it can happen in Venezuela, what can one expect of Nicaragua, which in the last century has known nothing but war, foreign intervention, and dictatorship, but no democracy or the rule of law?

Nicaragua today may be witnessing a perverse return to "normal" in a country where traditionally politics has been characterized by pacts among elites, nepotism, cronyism, military strongmen, and armed uprisings. It is possible that just like Anastasio Somoza Garcia--the founder of the Somoza dynasty who overthrew an elected president left in place by the United States when it withdrew from Nicaragua in the 1930s--General Ortega may remove Chamorro and return the country to authoritarianism. Another possibility is that in the next election, scheduled for 1996, the UNO coalition may be unable to rally behind a single leader. Since the constitution does not provide for a run-off, the Sandinista candidate could win the presidency with a simple plurality. Either way, a Sandinista return to the presidency would meet violent resistance, and Nicaragua's cycle of war and dictatorship would start anew.

What seems unlikely, however, is that General Ortega or any other Sandinista would attempt another Sovietization of Nicaragua. The Soviet Union is no longer. Russia and Ukraine dispute over the division of the Soviet military. As an ideology and an international movement, communism, if not dead--witness regimes in China, Cuba, North Korea, Laos, and Vietnam, and guerrillas such as Peru's Shining Path--is bereft of

international momentum or dynamism. Who would subsidize the revival of communism in Nicaragua? In part, it was Moscow's balking at bankrolling the Sandinistas which forced them to seek resources in Western Europe, which held up new aid pending free elections. With the election, the Sandinistas lost the myth that they represented Nicaragua's poor and downtrodden. Subsequent revelations concerning their enrichment in office have further discredited the Sandinistas, making it unlikely that they would again attract the adulation among Western intellectuals they once did. In brief, there is little reason to fear a return of communism in Nicaragua.

Will democracy be consolidated, then, as Chamorro promises and hopes? Or, will Sestanovich's prediction that a policy of conciliation is bound to fail, meant for Eastern Europe, be proven true in Nicaragua? The new government is unstable. It is divided three ways: a military and police inherited from the old regime which has power but no legitimacy; an elected President with constitutional authority but little power; and an elected legislature, itself divided between Sandinista loyalists and an anti-communist majority which feels betrayed by their own President. Charges of corruption and venality are rampant. There is great insecurity of lives and property. It is unlikely that this situation can last indefinitely in the face of intense pressures from right, left, and from "below." The most likely outcome is that democracy will not survive and Nicaragua will revert back to authoritarianism and another cycle of repression and resistance which have characterized the last one hundred years of its history. However, a pessimistic conclusion seems premature. Only time will tell which strategy--liberal populism or national conciliation--proves most effective in rescuing a country from the ravages of totalitarianism and putting it on a firm democratic footing.

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Alfred G. Cuzán chairs the Political Science Department at the University of West Florida, Pensacola, FL 32514.

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