

The Nicaraguan Election

TO THE EDITOR OF COMMENTARY:

I wish to congratulate Paul Hollander on his excellent article, "The Newest Political Pilgrims" [August], and to call his and your readers' attention to the Latin American Studies Association [LASA] *Report of the Delegates to Observe the Nicaraguan Election of November 1984*. The report . . . was the product of an eight-day visit to Nicaragua organized by Richard Fagen (Stanford) and Thomas Walker (Ohio University). Fagen and Walker are co-chairmen of LASA's Task Force on Scholarly Relations with Nicaragua; they also happen to be national co-sponsors of U.S. Out of Central America, the pro-Sandinista lobby noted by Mr. Hollander.

The fifteen-member delegation toured Nicaragua in a rented bus between October 28 and November 5, 1984. During their brief visit, they conducted 45 one-to-two hour interviews with 45 "key informants," a large majority of whom were Sandinista government or party officials, foreigners who have come to Nicaragua to assist or advise the Sandinistas, other employees of the Sandinista government, and leaders of Marxist micro-factions allied to the Sandinista party, the FSLN. Only seven of the interviewees were liberal, conservative, or Church critics of the regime. As luck would have it, the delegation was unable to interview anyone at *La Prensa* or the Superior Council of Private Enterprise (COSEP). The report does not mention having tried to contact the Nicaraguan Permanent Commission for Human Rights or the Nicaraguan Commission of Jurists.

No matter. In the collective judgment of the delegation, what the *New York Times* had denounced as a "sham election" was, on the contrary, "a model of probity and fairness." The delegation found the Sandinistas reasonable chaps who had made innumerable "concessions" to their domestic opposition in order to ensure a competitive election free of "fear and intimidation."

Press censorship, the report concluded, though "probably the weakest part in the Sandinistas' style of governance," was not strong enough to inhibit opponents of the regime. Those who boycotted the election did so under pressure from the Reagan administration, which,

for purely ideological reasons, had set out "to undermine the Nicaraguan electoral process and to destroy its credibility in the eyes of the world."

In the eyes of the delegation, the election pitted seven parties—three to the Left and three to the Right of the FSLN—in a competitive process "in which the Nicaraguan voter had a wide range of options on major issues—considerably wider, for example, than in recent elections in El Salvador and Guatemala."

According to the report, opposition parties were allotted money, supplies, and television time to campaign. If the Sandinistas took advantage of their being "the dominant force in the present Nicaraguan political arena," they "did little more to take advantage of incumbency than incumbent parties everywhere (including the United States) routinely do, and considerably less than ruling parties in other Latin American countries traditionally have done" (emphasis in original).

Although the Sandinistas covered 93 percent of the precincts with poll watchers and none of the other participating parties had enough "active members" to cover any more than 10 percent of the precincts, "the delegation concluded that the disparity in poll-watcher coverage was unlikely to have affected the election results to any appreciable degree."

As for the "abstentionist opposition" led by Arturo Cruz, it consisted of "several small parties, the Superior Council of Private Enterprise (COSEP), much of the Catholic Church hierarchy, the newspaper *La Prensa*, and two small trade-union federations." The report proceeded to discredit each of these in turn. The hatchet job was particularly shameful in the case of *La Prensa*, which was labeled "a virulently partisan newspaper" that "while not openly subversive, is unremittingly hostile to the incumbent government in virtually every article it publishes and which self-censors any news which reflects favorably upon the FSLN."

Even more despicable was the attempt to portray the "Church hierarchy" as being out of touch with the "grass roots," the "Christian base communities" from which liberation-theology priests and nuns serving the Sandinistas supposedly spring. In fact, these nominal clerics are mostly foreigners fi-

nanced by the World Council of Churches.

The report notes that there "were no pre-election political opinion polls to demonstrate the relative strength of opposition parties" without explaining that this was due to a Sandinista prohibition on polling. Nevertheless, so sure was the delegation of Sandinista popularity that the report concluded that, even if the abstentionists had participated, the FSLN would still have won!

The LASA report includes many more statements and observations ranging from the contemptible to the absurd. I hope that Paul Hollander will examine it next time he takes up the topic of pilgrimages to Nicaragua.

ALFRED G. CUZÁN
University of West Florida
Pensacola, Florida