

## Chapter 7

### **The Sandinistas, Armed Struggle, Participation, Democracy, Verticalism and Mass Movements in Nicaragua**

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#### **Abstract**

*This chapter explores one of the most crucial tensions in the relationship between armed struggle, mass movements and democratic practices. The FSLN, or Sandinistas, who displaced the long-standing dictatorship of Somoza in Nicaragua in 1979, is the only revolutionary movement in Latin America to succeed after the Cuban revolution. It is analysed here by one of the movement's most committed critical observers. While mass mobilization was perhaps even more crucial than the armed struggle of a vanguard in the overthrow of Somoza, once in power the Sandinista government became more and more isolated from their mass base and fell into the trap of becoming an unresponsive hierarchy, as can occur in vanguard parties and movements. Opting for a form of Liberal representative democracy in the 1984 elections and after, as they fought the contras and battled pressure from Western capitalist democracies, they soon lost touch with their own base. The sad tale is told of how the Sandinista party became less revolutionary as it transformed its practice of substantive democracy and betrayed its founder Sandino's inspiration in the 1990s.*

After the Mexican and Bolshevik Revolutions, radical ideologies based on nationalism and Marxism began to inspire people and political movements throughout Latin America. In the wake of a revolution that turned Marxist – Cuba – there was a rash of revolutionary movements that thought they could seize power through armed struggle and install Marxist regimes. Yet only one Marxist movement was able to fight its way to power in Latin America -- the FSLN, or the Sandinistas, in Nicaragua. The others failed, are still struggling on in some form (the FARC and ELN in Colombia) or achieved power after they laid down their arms (the FMLN in El Salvador). In this context a study of how and why the Sandinista revolutionaries were able to harness the power of the masses and take power through armed struggle in Nicaragua would

seem justified for a systematic discussion of Marxist movements in the South.

## **The Genesis of Sandinismo**

The Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua did not emerge full blown in the politically charged atmosphere that characterised Latin America after the Cuban Revolution, but had its roots in the country's past. It relied on the ideological vehicle of Sandinismo, a popular vision of the national past based on the historic struggle of Augusto César Sandino in the late 1920s and early 1930s, that could be recaptured by the Nicaraguan masses and became a means of empowerment and mobilisation.

Sandinismo was inspired by and heavily influenced by the heroic guerrilla war of Sandino and his followers against the U.S. Marines and reactionary Nicaraguan forces, waged from 1925 to 1933, which became a popular national struggle. Sandino embraced an internationalist vision of popular revolutionary nationalism that was linked to other revolutionary movements throughout the world: 'It would not be strange for me and my army to find ourselves in any country of Latin America where the murderous invader had set his sights on conquest' (Sandino as cited in Escobar 1978, see also Fonseca Amador 1984). Sandino was not a communist, but he shared their desire to abolish exploitation and the capitalist system through a worldwide revolution of the oppressed. He was influenced by Mexico's revolutionary government, the Peruvian but Mexican-based American Popular Revolutionary Alliance (APRA), and the Communist International (Macaulay 1985: 157).

The struggle by the original Sandinistas was one of the first modern examples of what a guerrilla army with mass popular support could do against a technologically superior invader, even when the latter was supported by local quislings and the mercenary military forces at their disposal. Mobile guerrilla bands were the components of an egalitarian people's army, organising and acting politically as well as militarily, with close ties to the peasants, and, most importantly, general popular support and involvement. Such were the lessons to be learned from Sandino's

people's war against imperialism.<sup>1</sup> These lessons were not forgotten by the leadership of the FSLN as they began their struggle in the 1960s.

Carlos Fonseca, the original Sandinista leader, studied Sandino and found great inspiration in his struggle against the Marines, his strong class consciousness and internationalism. Apparently Gregorio Selser's *Sandino, General de Hombres Libres* influenced Fonseca most (Borge 1985: 22). Later Fonseca met Santos López, a veteran of the Sandino struggle who was the living link between the revolutionary generations. Although enthralled by the revolutionary actions of the Nicaraguan people, Fonseca did not limit his study to Nicaraguan history. He was becoming a Marxist and an internationalist. In 1957 Fonseca travelled to the Soviet Union and wrote *A Nicaraguan in Moscow*, a positive, almost uncritical acceptance of the Soviet model of socialism (ibid: 24). By 1959, however, he began to be disillusioned with the reformist approaches of the Moscow-oriented Marxist Leninist Party, the Nicaraguan Socialist Party (PSN), and sought a new vehicle for change based on the method of armed struggle. Fonseca's disenchantment with the PSN did not involve a rejection of Marxism but rather a belief that the PSN was abandoning the use of Marxism as a dynamic philosophy. Fonseca saw in the July 26th Movement in Cuba a playing out and renewal of the revolutionary traditions of Sandino, and Castro's triumph showed that victory was possible. Deported to Guatemala in April 1959 following student demonstrations in Leon, he went briefly to Cuba. Then, with advice from Che Guevara and practical assistance from the Cuban government, he joined up with the 'Rigoberto López Pérez' column in the Honduran border region, a group of 55 Nicaraguans, Cubans and other Latin Americans who were waging a struggle against the dictatorship of Anastacio Somoza that had emerged after the assassination of Augusto Sandino in 1933.

However, neglecting to consider carefully enough specific national conditions in Nicaragua, the column was surprised and massacred; Fonseca was wounded but made his way to Cuba for convalescence. By then Cuba was clearly becoming both the inspiration and the basis of practical assistance.

In many ways Fonseca was arriving at a broad and important theoretical break with the strategy of the PSN and with almost all Latin American Marxism at the time. The Nicaraguan PSN argued that in the absence of fully developed capitalism in Nicaragua and an industrial working class, the main task of the revolutionary party, outside of trade union work in the embryonic working class, was to seek alliances within the ‘national bourgeoisie’ in pursuit of a ‘bourgeois-democratic’ era in Nicaragua.<sup>2</sup> The way the PSN sought bourgeois allies led Fonseca to eventually break with it and the mainstream of Latin American Marxism at that time. Rejecting the sterile analysis of the PSN, Fonseca opted to return to Lenin’s theory of continuing revolution and Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution (which also had a profoundly democratic basis) that had been taken up by Che Guevara (Liss 1984: 258-259). As Lenin and Trotsky had done in Russia, Guevara and Fonseca rejected the idea that the bourgeoisie had any significant revolutionary role to play in twentieth century semi-colonial countries like Cuba and Nicaragua. Rather, they believed the key to achieving fundamental change lay in the creation of a revolution based in a working class and the peasantry committed to armed struggle. Here there is a definite convergence with the often quoted phrase from Sandino: ‘Only the workers and the peasants will go to the end, only their organized force will attain victory’ (Fonseca 1984: 99-100).

Another element crucial to the revolutionary philosophy of Fonseca and Guevara, in contrast to that of the PSN and Soviet Marxism, was its emphasis on the will and a belief that to some degree revolution could be made by creating subjective conditions. Fonseca and Guevara turned to the Peruvian Marxist José Carlos Mariátegui and the Italian Antonio Gramsci to craft a philosophy based on revolutionary action, the importance of the subjective factor in making revolution and the role of ideology in motivating the masses (Hodges 1986:182-184). Mariátegui believed that the revolution was motivated by a ‘myth’ and not any narrow personal interest -- a theme echoed often in the speeches of Guevara and Fidel. Mariátegui also believed that myth could be turned into revolutionary action through careful political education for a broad segment of the people.<sup>3</sup>

The example of the Cuban revolution had already helped to inspire some of the previously mentioned guerrilla activity in the late 1950s. As the Cuban revolutionaries responded to US pressures and threats by deepening social transformation on the island and openly adopting Marxist-Leninist ideas, their example became increasingly attractive to the young militants in Nicaragua. Like many young Latin American revolutionaries, they were much taken by Fidel Castro's 26th of July Movement and believed that guerrilla warfare – as outlined by Che Guevara (1969) – was the best method of implementing political change. Their sympathies thus moved from the Stalinist outlook of the PSN to the dynamic and revolutionary Marxism being developed by the Cuban leaders. Guevara's theory of rural guerrilla warfare had borrowed from Sandino. The Sandinistas would, in turn, borrow from the Cuban example to continue Sandino's struggle.

The effort made to create a type of Marxism in both Cuba and Nicaragua that was based on their own national conditions met with considerable resistance in Moscow. Che Guevara's ideas were labelled 'tropical communism' by Soviet ideologues and during the 1960's there was open (but virtual) warfare between the established Moscow-oriented Latin American Communist parties and the Cuban revolutionary leaders and their allies like the FSLN. When, at the end of 1959, the PSN again declared armed struggle to be premature, attacked the activities of the Rigoberto López Pérez column and reconfirmed its long-standing reformist position, Fonseca was prepared for a definitive break with it. This break came in 1960 following Fonseca's final attempt to influence the PSN's youth group, Patriotic Youth, to adopt a stance of revolutionary, armed struggle.

In July 1961 the Sandinista National Liberation Front was formally launched in Tegucigalpa, Honduras at a meeting attended by Tomás Borge, Carlos Fonseca, Silvio Mayorga and Noel Guerrero (who soon dropped out of the movement). At its foundation, the FSLN consisted of just twelve militants including Santos López, a veteran of the struggle against the U.S. Marines in the late 1920s, and Victor Tirado López, later one of the nine members of the FSLN's National Directorate, along with Tomás Borge. According to Borge's prison writings, the name of the

organisation and its clear link to Sandino was suggested and fought for by Fonseca, who realised that the full force of creative Marxist thinkers could best be brought to bear if it were concretised in the national setting. To that end, the figure of Sandino was and continued to be a significant factor in the shaping of the FSLN's political philosophy.

## **Armed Struggle**

The new generation of Sandinistas began a movement that was a continuation of the popular struggle of Augusto César Sandino's guerrilla army and of efforts by the Nicaraguan masses to assert their control. Drawing heavily on Cuba's revolutionary experience and the writings of Che Guevara and Fidel Castro, the Sandinistas had to reinterpret Sandino's original struggle in light of historic and ideological developments since his death. Even during his guerrilla war, Sandino had concluded that the Liberal and Conservative politicians were traitors and cowards and must be replaced by worker and peasant leaders (Sandino as cited in Ramírez 1982: 12). By studying their own fight for national identity and liberation in the light of similar struggles in Cuba, Vietnam, and elsewhere, the Sandinistas were able to build on Sandino's tactics and ideology and began to infuse their movement with a coherent ideology.

However, like other young Fidelistas throughout Latin America, they initially felt that launching rural guerrilla warfare was sufficient to convince the popular masses (beginning with the peasantry) to take up arms and join the guerrillas. In Nicaragua, as elsewhere in the region, this was a fundamental and very costly error. The FSLN's first attempts at guerrilla warfare (Rio Coco and Rio Bocay 1963) met with tragic defeat. The new Sandinistas had failed to do what their namesake had done so well – mobilise the local populace on the side of the guerrillas through well-planned political and organisational activity that was coordinated with and part of the armed struggle. Tomás Borge would later explain: 'We committed the error of moving into the zone without first undertaking preparatory political work, without knowing the terrain, and without creating supply lines' (Borge as cited in Waksman 1979: 21). Retiring from their guerrilla adventures in the inhospitable mountainous jungle of northern Nicaragua, most of the

remaining Sandinistas began to engage in semi-legal political work in urban areas, in uneasy cooperation with the Nicaraguan Socialist Party.

The FSLN's early operations were focused on armed struggle, guided by a revolutionary praxis modelled on the Cuban revolution. They were not firmly grounded in an adequate understanding of the socio-political conditions of the masses and did not have a clear organisational plan for them that could mobilise them in the armed struggle necessary to wrest power from the Somoza dictatorship. Thus, these early operations largely failed and resulted in a loss of many of the original cadre of the movement. One reason that the FSLN survived and most guerrilla movements in Latin America did not was that the FSLN learned more quickly than other groups the limitations of the *foco* approach because of its neglect of political organising. Immediately after its military defeats and retreat into Honduras, the FSLN concentrated its efforts in the poor neighbourhoods of Managua and other cities. Drawing on old roots and ties, this urban work was carried out in collaboration with the PSN and helped to develop deep links for the party. Yet, once again the FSLN proved incapable of resisting the superior military power of the National Guard. They had not yet fully assimilated the lessons to be learned from popular struggles for national liberation like those led by Sandino, Mao, Ho Chi Minh, and Castro.

Significantly, in Nicaragua the historic gulf between Marxist and Christian forces was bridged by the FSLN not simply through a brief tactical alliance but through the integration of progressive Christians into the revolutionary party. The result of this merger was that the political philosophy of the FSLN, and in particular its attitude towards Christianity, was innovative among Latin American revolutionary parties with Marxist origins (Girardi 1987). Popular empowerment of the masses and the mobilisation of grass roots participants through Christian base communities, liberation theology and the growing popular church also injected strong democratising tendencies and helped to introduce ideas of direct democracy and less centralist views of governance into the Sandinista movement.

Tragically, some of the FSLN's best cadres were cut off and surrounded at Pancasán in mid-1967. Most were killed as the National Guard closed their trap on the guerrillas. Like the Fidelista guerrilla currents all over Latin America (Che Guevara for instance, was killed in Bolivia the same year) they suffered a disastrous military setback. However, while this was occurring in the countryside, things were even worse in the cities. The traditional opposition forces continued to demonstrate their ineptitude. In contrast, the tenacity of the resistance waged by the FSLN focused national attention on their struggle, and helped to turn a military defeat into a political victory. Beginning with the peasants and university students, the process of merging the vanguard and a mobilised people into a unified fighting force was slowly getting underway. The popular classes and enlightened members of other classes were beginning to stir for the first time since Sandino – a national reawakening was finally beginning. But there was still much to learn before the people could be fully mobilised. Unlike many other guerrilla movements in Latin America, the Sandinistas were able to learn from the mistakes they made in Rio Bocay and Pancasán. They demonstrated considerable capacity for self-criticism and were thus able to transcend their initial mistake of isolating themselves from the masses (Tirado López 1979 1980: 7). Through painful trial and error and an increasingly astute study of Sandino's thought and tactics, and those of other revolutionary movements throughout the world, they were able to fashion a strategy that would eventually unleash the full power of the Nicaraguan people against the Somoza dictatorship. The FSLN began to establish what it called 'intermediate organisations.' This changed 'the orientation of the Front' (Borge cited in Waksman Schinca: 21).

The Sandinistas' success in rallying peasants to their cause in the mountains alarmed Somoza and the U.S. embassy. Large-scale, brutal counter-insurgency operations were launched. Peasants suspected of collaborating with the FSLN 'disappeared,' were tortured, hurled out of helicopters or simply murdered. This forced adoption of new strategies and tactics. While the Sandinistas developed their theory of mass struggle, progressive sectors within the Catholic Church became more and more concerned with the condition of the masses. Motivated by this concern and the growing 'Liberation Theology' movement, they began to intervene actively in the process of social change. The empowerment of the masses and the mobilisation of grass roots



participants through Christian Base Communities and the growing Popular Church also injected strong democratising tendencies and helped to introduce into the Sandinista movement ideas of direct participatory democracy and less centralist views of governance.

In a similar vein, José Carlos Mariátegui, writing in the context of the fervent religious beliefs held by most Latin Americans, did not see a contradiction between religion and Marxism and thought that the inspirational nature of religion was similar to the revolutionary myth that was such an important force in mobilising the masses.<sup>4</sup> Although this is just one example of the flexibility of the FSLN as a revolutionary organisation, it is one of its important contributions to the theory and practice of revolutionary organisations throughout the world. The FSLN's awareness of the need to mobilise the masses was already apparent in Carlos Fonseca Amador's landmark article of 1968, 'Nicaragua Hora Cero.' Drawing up a balance sheet on the Pancasán period, Fonseca wrote that: 'Organized mass work (student, peasant, worker) was paralyzed. On the one hand the quantity of cadres necessary for this work was lacking, and on the other, the importance this activity could have in the course of the development of the armed struggle was underrated.' To overcome this weakness, Fonseca pointed to the need 'to pay attention to the habits the capitalist parties and their hangers-on have imposed on the mass of the people ...' Many, he said, sympathised with the armed struggle but did not show this in action. 'This leads to considering the need to properly train a broad number of individuals from among the people so that they will be capable of supporting the armed struggle. To seek the people is not enough – they must be trained to participate in the revolutionary war' (Fonseca 1984b: 32-34).

Three political tendencies (Prolonged Peoples' War, Proletarian and Tercerista/Third Way) emerged in the FSLN, but after some internal struggle they finally converged around the fresh tactical and strategic questions brought to the fore by the upsurge of mass struggle that began in late 1977 (Vanden and Prevost 1993: 45-46). As the urban masses moved into action after the murder of the popular Somoza critic Pedro Joaquin Chamorro in early 1978, the trend was for all three tendencies to learn from the masses and from each other. This process was facilitated by their mature handling of unification and willingness to learn from each other and work together

even before the achievement of full unity in March 1979. All had success in mobilising and empowering segments of the people. The old divisions were then superseded by the historic victory of July 19, 1979. It was only after the armed struggle was put into a national context of political organisation and there was massive popular mobilisation that the FSLN was able to seize power.

### **Sandinistas in Power**

Once they had defeated Somoza and his National Guard, the Sandinistas wanted to maximise popular participation in economic and political processes. The three Sandinistas who were part of the five person junta that initially governed the country were, like most of the Sandinista leadership, very much aware that liberal democracy had had its drawbacks in Latin America and that in countries like Bolivia and Mexico it seemed to have helped derail their revolutions (Walker 1982: 9). Thus they were sceptical of a narrow, bourgeois definition of democracy that minimised direct popular participation and did not include a social and economic dimension. They also wanted to make sure that the form of democracy implemented did not block necessary social and economic restructuring or facilitate foreign manipulation. 'Democracy neither begins nor ends with elections...' (Ortega as cited in Ruchwarger 1987: 3-4). 'Effective democracy, like we intend to practice in Nicaragua, consists of ample popular participation; a permanent dynamic of the people's participation in a variety of political and social tasks...' (Sergio Ramírez as cited in Ruchwarger 1987: 4).

What they envisioned was a popular democracy that would not just allow participation by the few (or domination by the upper classes), but would build democracy from below through the construction of neighbourhood, gender or functional grass-roots and mass organisations (Walker 1982: 9-10). These new mass organisations were to become the primary mechanism for popular empowerment and for the political education and guidance that the masses would need from the FSLN until they fully understood the importance and complexity of their political role and were ready to assume their dominant class position in the revolutionary process (having achieved full

political consciousness). These organisations were also to be the direct communication link between the masses and the political leadership. They would inform the people of new political directions and channel popular demands through the party to the National Directorate of the FSLN.<sup>5</sup> To hold the victorious coalition together and transform society, some form of political representation was needed that would allow the participation of anti-Somoza elements from the upper and middle classes but would facilitate direct representation from the lower classes and the Sandinistas.

Rather than an elected assembly, an appointed assembly became the first representative institution in the new Nicaraguan state. The Council of State was to some extent a compromise between the representative and participatory conceptions of democracy. Different political and functional groups would directly designate their own representatives to a national council. This guaranteed that traditional parties would be represented and even representatives of private sector organisations were included in the eventual 51 seats. But, the mass organisations and the FSLN were even more heavily represented. Each of the seven other parties had one seat while the FSLN had six. The neighbourhood-based Sandinista Defence Committees (CDS's) had nine representatives while the Sandinista Workers Central (CST) had three and the Sandinista-linked Rural Workers Association (ATC) had two. Legislative powers were shared with the Junta, but much policy direction and initiative actually originated with the nine man Sandinista National Directorate (Booth 1986: 35-36). While some central control was exercised by the leadership of the FSLN, the mass organisations were not only engaged in grass roots democracy at the lowest level, but also had direct representation in the national policy-making process. The fact that the traditional parties and upper classes had only minimal representation in the evolving governmental structure, through the Council of State, occasioned some criticism from their leaders and led to the resignation of Alfonso Robelo from the Junta (ibid: 32). Representative democracy existed, but was infused with a form of popular democracy that provided for direct national representation. Also in place was a form of democratic centralism which guaranteed the National Directorate of the FSLN dominance in the party and a great deal of influence in government decisions.

## **Mass Organisations and Participation**

Clearly the most vibrant form of democratic participation in Nicaragua, from July 1979 to the mid-eighties, was that practiced by the mass organisations. Indeed the new political leadership was seeking a daily democracy, not just one that took place every four years. And effective democracy consisted of ample popular participation. For the new leaders, ‘democracy (was) not merely a formal model, but a continual process capable of giving the people that elect and participate in it the real possibility of transforming their living conditions; a democracy which establish(ed) justice and end(ed) exploitation’ (Ramírez as cited in Ruchwarder 1987: 4).

Like the Parisians who formed their commune in 1871, the Nicaraguan masses had taken to the barricades and driven out the remnants of the *ancien régime*. Unlike their comrades in Paris, they had spread their struggle throughout the capital Managua and the nation and had bonded with the FSLN as an armed revolutionary group capable of protecting them and destroying elements of the National Guard. It should also be noted that the leadership of the FSLN often had to catch up with radical mobilisations of the masses in the later phases of the struggle. The mobilised masses were, in the words of one Sandinista observer, ‘architects of their history’ because they had demonstrated that they were ‘the principal agents in the revolutionary transformation’ and had been ‘active and conscious agents of the revolution’ (Augustín Lara as cited in Ruchwarger 1987: 139). Having felt the exhilaration and power that resulted from their direct involvement in this process, they were ready for a meaningful say in governing the nation (Ruchwarger 1987: 289). The theoretical inspiration for their empowerment could be found in the testimony of Karl Marx who, upon witnessing the Paris Commune, was so enthralled by the possibilities of liberation and actual rule by the demos that he wrote *The Civil War in France*. It could also be found in the direct democracy practiced in Paris almost a century later in 1968. In Nicaragua, the toiling masses – if not the people generally – had been mobilised to overthrow the tyrant. They were ready to be involved in government. But unlike Paris in 1871 and 1968, a national (and not just local) revolution and national political organisations headed by the FSLN led the revolt and

made sure that the masses would continue to exercise their newfound political power. And it would be necessary for the national political leadership to deal with these new organisations in which the revolution had awakened a new consciousness. For the members of the mass organisations in particular it was the ‘beginning of a revolution that they felt was very much their own’ (Nuñez 1980: 10). The construction of these participatory organisations proved to be an excellent way of integrating thousands of isolated citizens into large collective structures (Lobel 1988: 879-880). By the mid-eighties, membership in all these mass organisations had increased dramatically.

Inside and outside the FSLN, most of the organisation that did exist had been constructed from the ground up in the late seventies and the Nicaraguan revolution had triumphed because the people had organised and fought not only at the national level, but at the neighbourhood or *barrio* level. Indeed, it was the neighbourhood uprising in the mostly Indian neighbourhood of Monimbó in February of 1978 that set off the first phase of the national uprising that later spread through much of the country in 1978 and was rekindled in 1979.<sup>6</sup> As was the case in much of the rest of the country, some of the fiercest fighting occurred at the *barrio* level as the people mobilised against the dictatorship. After the victory, revolutionary neighbourhood organisations that had grown up all over the country during the struggle soon coalesced into neighbourhood Sandinista Defence Committees. Other Sandinista-affiliated political organisations became mass organisations like the Sandinista Workers' Central (CST), the Association of Rural Workers (ATC), the Nicaraguan Association of Women Luisa Amanda Espinosa (AMNLAE), the National Union of (Small) Farmers and Ranchers (UNAG) and Sandinista Youth (Juventud Sandinista). The political mobilisation that had guaranteed the victory was now channelled into on-going participation through these organisations.

By structuring participation in such a way that the common people could meaningfully participate at the local level and be represented directly at the national level, the Sandinistas had broken new ground. They had come the closest to realising the vision of democracy that Marx glimpsed in the Paris Commune and which the most radical of the American revolutionists had

contemplated. And there were few precedents for this in Marxist or Western democratic regimes. Although some mass organisations did exist in Eastern Europe, they were almost universally completely subordinate to the Communist parties and lacked any substantial autonomy. In Eastern Europe only the workers' self-management movement in Yugoslavia could offer any basis for popular empowerment, and it was limited to the workplace. As suggested in our book *Democracy and Socialism in Sandinista Nicaragua* (Vanden and Prevost 1993), socialism had been weak in turning power over to the demos. The popular movement in Cuba came closest to granting power to the common citizens, but even here its successes were exclusively at the local level and most observers believed that the central party apparatus still exercised control over neighbourhood democracy and especially popular organisations. In the West, there were few participatory town meetings (save for those in New England) or other structures of popular empowerment (block meetings) that functioned regularly and effectively.

The project for mass organisations was in part informed by how Antonio Gramsci thought socialism would be constructed. He believed it would be achieved by a broad alliance of people from all subordinated sectors of the population (Cunningham 1987: 281). The mass organisations would give voice and power to precisely these groups: peasants and small farmers, urban workers, rural labourers, women and youth. They would enable these hitherto disenfranchised groups to participate actively and effectively in the policy-making process in the new government so that they – and not the traditional elites – could decide their own future. As with other visions of democracy, participation would be the guarantee that the people were actually exercising their power in rule (Pateman 1970: 20). Yet it could be difficult to construct such a system in Nicaragua where *the* people had been marginalised from the political process by the Somoza dictatorship and were badly under-educated (at the time of the Sandinista victory the national literacy rate was barely above 50% and was much lower for the popular classes). There was not a well-established tradition of participation or democratic involvement.

Socialists have traditionally looked to the working class to lead the people in building socialism. This would have been difficult in Nicaragua. In 1975 the urban working class was only 16-18

percent of the active population and was mostly scattered in small productive units of less than 100 workers (Ruchwarger 1987: 43). Nor was it well-organised – only 10% of the labour force was unionised. And those in unions were scattered among five different federations, one of which was controlled by Somoza (ibid: 43). If rural unions were also taken into account, there were still only 27,000 union members in the entire country in July of 1979 (1% of the population) (Pérez Flores 1989: 15). ‘At the time of the triumph, the FSLN found a union movement that was disorganised, weak, poorly developed qualitatively or quantitatively, and was eminently economist in character’ (ibid: 13). In order to empower and mobilise the urban working class, the FSLN helped develop the Sandinista Workers' Central (CST), which would serve as a sympathetic national labour federation as well as a mass organisation for urban workers. Given the lack of organisational experience and organisers, FSLN militants were often placed in key positions to ensure that the organisation functioned well and pursued an enlightened political path. A similar strategy was pursued in the development of the Association of Rural Workers (ATC).

These emerging national organisations were to provide the masses with the proper tools for assuming their place in the construction of the new Nicaraguan nation. Eventually the masses would achieve the necessary political wisdom and maturity to realise their full potential. The mass organisations, like the educational system, would contribute to the development of a new political consciousness (Gilbert 1988: 36). Once achieved, the control and guidance that the FSLN believed were necessary in an initial (less politically conscious) phase could be relaxed. Until the masses had their consciousness fully developed, the Sandinista leadership would, however, have to be very wary of how they were being manipulated by other political forces. They continued to be quite concerned that the bourgeoisie would gain control of the revolutionary process and drastically limit its scope to little more than the removal of Somoza (ibid: 37). Given the political history of Nicaragua (indeed of Central America generally), it would be very easy for Nicaragua to slip into a process of Western-style representative democracy where the elite competed for political office and the participation of the masses was limited to selecting among elite candidates every few years. As in American Federalist James Madison's view of government, the *demos* itself could not participate directly in government,

rather others -who were more capable- would decide for them. In *Direct Democracy* Thomas Cronin suggests that this view of government stems directly from (elitist) opposition to ‘widespread and public participation in the conduct of government’ (Cronin 1989: 8). Such broad participation was precisely the long-term goal of the Sandinistas, who were informed by a belief in the common people found in Sandino, Marx and Jefferson and traceable back to Rousseau's benevolent view of human nature. Once in power they were able to implement this vision in the first years of the revolution through neighbourhood organisations (Sandinista Defence Committees), popular organisations and the Council of State which incorporated representatives from a wide spectrum of groups in society. As noted below, this approach was later modified.

### **The FSLN**

Within the party, a rather traditional form of Democratic Centralism appeared to dominate. Certain tendencies need to be noted in this discussion. In fact, the internal functioning of the Sandinista Party appears to have been authoritarian and centralised. Cultural tendencies, and the influence of Soviet Leninism, were intensified initially by the guerrilla origins of the party and subsequently by the Contra War and the generalised low intensity conflict waged by the United States. The nine-man National Directorate was predominant (one observer even suggested it was the vanguard within the vanguard) (Gilbert 1977). Although a Sandinista Assembly with 104 members acted as a permanent advisory body, its function was to ‘support the National Directorate in making the Revolution's most important decisions.’ Further, ‘It was not elected directly or indirectly, rather its members were representative cadres named by the National Directorate’ (FSLN 1986). There were also base, zonal, and regional committees. But here too important positions were usually filled by appointments from above and the agenda for discussion was generally handed down. As suggested by a political slogan often voiced by Sandinista militants – ‘the national directorate orders’ – political values seemed less democratic within the party and it remains to be seen if it managed to free itself from the centralised, bureaucratic approach that had characterised many parties in the socialist world. Indeed, the lack of democratic experience in Nicaragua may have facilitated centralised decision-making



structures and ‘verticalism’. This not only meant that the party did not function democratically, but this same style of decision-making was sometimes projected onto the mass organisations and was at times employed in relations between them and the party and between the party and society.

### **The 1984 Elections: The Demise of Real Socialist Participation**

On November 4<sup>th</sup> 1984, Nicaragua experienced a unique experiment in political participation. 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 which invited the opposition parties to compete for power through the electoral process. The FSLN had succumbed to pressure from the Western democracies and similarly organised Latin American states like Venezuela to hold elections, institute representative governance and diminish the construction of direct, participatory democracy. The Sandinistas garnered 62.9% of the votes for President and Vice President and 62.3% of the National Assembly votes. The six opposition parties divided 33% of the vote, while blank or invalid ballots accounted for a little more than 6% of the votes cast. Many wondered if the interests of the masses were being served. In a 1986 paper on the real nature of democracy, the well-known Mexican political scientist Pablo González Casanova noted that democracy is only meaningful if real popular power lies below the form of representative democracy. Indeed, he asked, ‘What democracy are we speaking about, and whom does it serve’ (González Casanova as cited in Jonas and Stein 1990: 15). As the structure of the new legislative assembly was debated in the Council of State prior to the 1984 elections, the opposition parties were able to successfully remove any structures that would give the mass organisations a role in the new assembly. This ended strong direct participation of these popular organisations in the legislature and thus in the governmental structure as a whole (Lobel 1988: 868). The new political institutions facilitated and became increasingly responsive to middle class and bourgeois mobilisation as manifested in the opposition parties that gained seats in the National Assembly became less responsive to the lower-class constituencies of the mass organisations which no

longer had seats in the legislative body.

As time went on and Nicaragua moved toward a new set of elections in 1990, the FSLN tried to encourage all opposition parties to participate in the political process. Meanwhile the mass organisations became less and less powerful as the traditional political groupings played an ever more important role in decision-making.

### **The 1990 Elections or How Capitalism and Western Democracy Stopped the Revolution**

In 1990, the revolutionary, participatory, grassroots democracy that had been initially envisioned as part of the Sandinista programme rushed faster toward a system of representative democracy that the dominant group in the Sandinista leadership hoped would satisfy the United States and its capitalist allies. From 1982 on, the United States had used military, diplomatic and economic means to try to impose its will on the Sandinista government.

Nicaragua experienced a contra war that cost 30,000 lives and in excess of 12 billion dollars in economic losses, a total U.S. economic embargo from 1985 on and a continual threat of direct US invasion. Responding to such pressures and the Central American Peace Process, the Nicaraguan government not only decided to go ahead with the elections previously scheduled for November 1990, it advanced the time table to February 1990. The Nicaraguan leadership also hoped to show definitively that Nicaragua could satisfy the most stringent Western (capitalist) standards for democracy and could hold a squeaky clean election that would satisfy even its most strident critics. There was also a desire to demonstrate that Western-style democracy could exist within a state guided by a Marxist party.

Although only six opposition parties had opposed the FSLN in the 1984 election, by the beginning of 1988 there were 14 of them plus a few opposition political groupings. The Reagan Administration had pushed for the military side of low-intensity conflict and discouraged parties from participating in 1984. As Bush took office, US policy began to emphasise an electoral

challenge to the Sandinistas. With the support of the United States, the opposition parties pushed very hard for modifications in the electoral laws that would ensure maximum political space and political manoeuvrability for them. The Sandinistas made a large number of concessions to achieve widespread party participation. Realising the strength of traditional Nicaraguan political factionalism, the Bush administration pushed for a unified opposing coalition and strongly encouraged the selection of fresh opposition candidates who could serve as a symbol around which the opposition could rally. Although lacking political experience, Violeta Chamorro, the widow of a martyred opposition leader to Somoza, Pedro Joaquín Chamoro, filled this role very well and became the United Nicaraguan Opposition (UNO) candidate. The UNO coalition she headed was composed of 14 opposition parties, including two Communist parties – the Nicaraguan Socialist Party (PSN) and the Communist Party of Nicaragua (PC de N) (See Party Table in Vanden and Prevost 1993: 134-136).

In order to compete successfully against the US-supported UNO coalition, the Sandinista leadership had to devote its organisational and human resources to an expensive electoral contest that ate up more than 7 million dollars of already scarce funds. The Supreme Electoral Council alone, the independent governmental body responsible for overseeing and running the election, spent in excess of 15 million dollars (Estevez interview 1990).<sup>7</sup> Many at the base level felt they were being crucified on an economic cross wrought from the US-sponsored contra war, the trade embargo, lack of economic and administrative expertise on the part of the Nicaraguan government and international economic conditions that had driven most Latin American states to desperation and governmental change.

The Sandinista leadership knew that conditions were bad, but thought the base could endure a little longer while they employed the human and material resources at their disposal to win the election. They were no longer well-connected to their mass base and refused to grasp the message of discontent that was being widely voiced. Some use of government resources by the FSLN was also reported. The Sandinistas reasoned that such extravagant spending was necessary to win the election in order to secure their position and legitimise their political system in the

eyes of the West. Down to the eve of the election most opinion polls suggested that the Nicaraguan people would ratify the socialist, mixed economy experiment and continue with Sandinista democracy. However, the Sandinistas' stunning defeat at the hands of the United Nicaraguan Opposition (UNO) suggested that the demos was not satisfied with Sandinista rule or the type of socialist democracy that was developing in Nicaragua (Vanden and Prevost 1993: 143-146).

After years of Somocismo, the civil war, followed by the contra war and the economic embargo, the masses just did not have anything more to give. Indeed the neighbourhood-based Sandinista Defence Committees (CDS) had stopped functioning for all practical purposes (La Ramée and Polakoff 1990). Furthermore, many felt that the Sandinista leaders were isolated from the hardship of the masses, and that their political position facilitated access to goods that the poor could no longer afford. Many were also angered by what they perceived as increasing bureaucratisation in government offices. They saw the formation of a bureaucratic class that was not particularly sympathetic to popular needs and benefitted from a disproportionate share of scarce resources. This created a considerable amount of resentment. Thus it seemed to many that the Vanguard Party had lost contact with the very people it was supposed to represent and consequently was not responding to their needs and feelings. Rather it had become an institution ruled from the top down ('the National Directorate commands') and had established a set of interests that was not the same as those of the people. Nor were party leaders or cadres always open to criticism or opinions that contradicted their own. And after a while, some Nicaraguans felt they could no longer express contrary views.

As the election results trickled in, it soon became apparent that – believing they had been abandoned by the Sandinistas – the residents of many working class neighbourhoods in the capital (Julio Bultrago, Las Brisas and San Judas among them) had given UNO a majority. This was also the case in other urban areas as well as in much of the countryside. UNO gained 54.7% of the vote while the Sandinistas received only 40.8% (most polls had predicted a substantial Sandinista victory, the ABC/Washington Post Poll predicted 48% to 32%). For the FSLN,

convinced that it would win easily, this was a particularly stunning defeat. Since it had been so strongly committed to the election, it would have been difficult and contradictory not to accept its outcome. As Nicaragua slipped back into traditional elite rule with the parties representing the interests of the bourgeoisie at the expense of the masses, the Sandinista party became ever less revolutionary and soon became largely controlled by the strong political leader (*caudillo*) and former Sandinista President, Daniel Ortega. A much less radical FSLN was not able to take control of the government again until 2006, and then only after making a devil's pact with the corrupt former president Arnaldo Alemán, leader of the traditional bourgeois Constitutional Liberal Party (PLC).

## **Conclusion**

The experiment with radical revolution and socialist participatory democracy in Nicaragua succeeded for a while and would have continued if the FSLN had remained true to its base and continued to trust in the participatory avenues of democracy that were developed immediately after the revolutionaries took power in 1979. Heeding how the masses were mobilising, political ideas empowering them and defining their role as agents of change were introduced into the current mix of Latin American politics and in varying degrees became part of political practice in Nicaragua and elsewhere in Latin America. If the popular participation (mass mobilisations) that cemented the popular victory could be carried forward, new structures to accommodate this participation might be constructed.

When a small revolutionary group engaged in armed struggle, as in the Sandinista case, a Gramscian consensus could be created among large segments of the masses proving that revolutionary struggle was practically the only remaining road to end political oppression, making it possible to guide and sometimes direct the power of the people. If the revolutionaries could organise, encourage and support this direct participation of the masses after the revolutionary triumph, they would move closer to the vision of participatory democracy envisioned by Marx and other radical thinkers. By empowering wide segments of the population

in this way, these sectors (segments) solidified their power and guaranteed that their views would be heard and heeded. In turn, the revolutionary leadership would have a mobilised, effective base to support its radical vision of social and economic change in a post-revolutionary society. The revolutionary movement would not have to subordinate itself to conservative national sectors or to the influence of powerful capitalist states preaching the virtues of a representative democracy that disenfranchised more than it empowered the people. The same principles of political education and mass involvement that guided the revolutionary struggle could shape the construction of a revolutionary society and the on-going empowerment and involvement of the people.

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***Emancipatory Politics: A Critique***  
edited by Stephan Feuchtwang and Alpa Shah

Open Anthropology Cooperative Press, 2015  
ISBN-13:978-1518885501 / ISBN-10:1518885500

*The Undermining of the Sandinista Revolution*, (Gary Prevost co-editor); *Inter-American Relations in an Era of Globalization: Beyond Unilateralism?* (Jorge Nef co-editor); *Latin American Social Movements in the Twenty-First Century*, (Richard Stahler-Sholk and Glen Kuecker co-editors); *Latin America: An Introduction* (with Gary Prevost); *José Carlos Mariátegui: An Anthology of His Writings*, (with Marc Becker); *Social Movements and Leftists Governments in Latin America*, (Gary Prevost and Carlos Oliva coeditors); *U.S. National Security Concerns in Latin America and the Caribbean: the Concept of Ungoverned Spaces and Sovereignty*, (Gary Prevost, Luis Fernando Ayerbe, and Carlos Oliva co-editors); and *Rethinking Latin American Social Movements, Radical Action from Below*, (Richard Stahler-Sholk and Marc Becker co-editors). His e-mail address is [vanden@usf.edu](mailto:vanden@usf.edu).

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1 Macaulay underlines the close ties Sandino's guerrilla fighters had with the local populace and notes that Sandino's tactics 'essentially were the same as the tactics of the People's Liberation Army in China, the National Liberation Front in Algeria, the 26th of July Movement in Cuba and the Viet Minh and Viet Cong in Vietnam' (1985: 10). All these struggles were premised on mass involvement in the armed struggle and looked to well-developed political awareness and very close organisational ties to the masses as essential ways of achieving such essential popular involvement and participation.

2 The PSN was founded in 1944 while Nicaragua was an ally of the Soviet Union as part of the Allied war effort. Thus the party initially enjoyed the tolerance of the government.

3 For a fuller treatment of the ideas of José Carlos Mariátegui, see Vanden (1986) and Mariátegui (2011).

4 Mariátegui's thought in this regard was instrumental in providing an intellectual basis for the development of liberation theology. Gustavo Gutiérrez used and cited Mariátegui in his ground breaking work, *Theology of Liberation*.

5 See Gilbert (1988), particularly Chapter 3, 'The Party in the State and Mass Organizations.'

6 In February of 1978, this tightly knit, lower-class and mostly Indian community on the outskirts of Masaya took over the neighbourhoods and held off the National Guard for more than a week. They had few weapons that they had not manufactured themselves and only some Sandinista support several days into the uprising. Interviews by Harry E. Vanden with several Monimbó families, Monimbó, July 1980.

7 Dr. Mariano Fiallos (1990), the President of the Supreme Electoral Council, indicated that it would be difficult to estimate the total cost of running the election, but his organisation had a budget of \$18 million.