



## PROCEEDINGS

### Twenty-five Years after the Nicaraguan Revolution

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The title of this forum reads “A Sandinista Story: Lessons for the Philippines.” Perhaps then we should enumerate some lessons. Lesson one: there are no lessons. Every country and every historical movement is unique. We can learn from each other but we really do not imitate. Lesson two: draw your own lessons at your own peril. Lesson three: my PhD in history does not make me an expert on historical interpretation.

A Chinese leader, once asked to interpret the French Revolution, replied, “It was too soon to draw judgment.” What I can offer are personal interpretations but not isolated ones because others increasingly share them in Nicaragua. The perspective is that of someone who joined the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (FSLN) or the Sandinista National Liberation Front 30 years ago this year and formally left the party seven years ago.

I left the party but not the cause. As others, we consider ourselves Sandinistas whether inside or outside the formal structure of the FSLN. That is to say, people who continue to believe in the cause inspired by one man, General Augusto Sandino, who resisted United States (US) military occupation between 1927 and 1933. We believe in his thought, coupled with his example—anti-imperialist, nationalist, patriot, Latin Americanist, but also, we would say now, globalist.

Sandino resisted and fought back until he was killed in 1934 by the founder of the Somoza dynasty, which was installed by the US Marines. Forty-five years later, in July 1979, Sandino marched into Managua. We are actually celebrating that twenty-fifth anniversary. Some would say that Sandino might have marched out of Managua in

1990 when the Sandinista Front lost the election. But that might not necessarily be the case. In short, the story is one of a person who feels privileged to have formed part of a nationality, of a generation. Few generations in history had the opportunity to start a new nation, a new state, a new political culture lock, stock and barrel.

It was a revolution that did away with not only a presidency but institutions—army, military, bureaucracy, police. It was a revolution that wiped the whole slate clean. A social revolution, perhaps the last one in the twentieth century, which in the course of a couple of years made its extraordinary strides. Infant mortality rates were drastically reduced and health levels increased not in decades or years but in a matter of months. In education, illiteracy rate was reduced from 52 percent to 12 percent in one year.

Perhaps the greatest achievement was being able to resist and confront US's historical dominance over our country—telling Washington straight to its face, “You will no longer determine the future of our country.” Twenty-five years later, we look back and the illiteracy rates are creeping back to the levels of 1979. The health crisis is, in much sense, worse. The levels of poverty are graver or deeper than they were in the 1970s. We, Sandinistas, must reexamine our strategy, our historical premises, not for the sake of historians but for the sake of the future. To look back not only with pride but also to look back with a greater critical sense, with greater humility.

We even have to ask ourselves who or what came to power in 1979. How much did the way we took power—a full-pledged military insurrection—influence the way we exercised power? And by the way, what is power? Is it simply the “capture” of the state? What was our conception of power? Or maybe, we were never really in power. If so, can you lose something that you never had? These are questions being repeated and I will just share with you some ongoing Nicaraguan attempts to come up with answers, or perhaps new questions. For the sake of interpretation let us pose three stages: the Power of the Myth, the Myth of Power and the Reconstruction of the Myth and Power.

## POWER OF THE MYTH

The Power of the Myth was that phenomenon which explains why an organization with less than 400 or 500 full-time militants was able to overthrow a dictatorship. The FSLN had been fighting since 1961. Most of its leaders were killed. It defined itself as a political-military

organization. But of course, in armed resistance, it was definitely more military than political. Yet in 1979 and in the months preceding the final July insurrection, it was a force that gathered the sympathy of hundreds, including armed support by the thousands. To be more specific, teenaged boys and girls picked up weapons—hunting rifles, pistols, whatever—and charged against the Somoza dictatorship in three successive, fundamentally urban protests.

The final onslaught was decisive. Somoza fled the country, and contrary to everyone's expectations including our own, the National Guard collapsed and the United States found it politically impossible to intervene. Until that day, many of us thought we would never live to see the turnover. No one was more shocked than the leadership of the FSLN itself at this turn of events. A bunch of kids in their twenties laughing at each other at the new titles of Mr. Minister and Mr. Ambassador and finding it difficult to define what running a government was all about. Of course, an older generation started saying, "Very good youngsters, why don't you just take a scholarship and go study abroad somewhere and we'll take the business of running the government." That invitation was politely or sometimes arrogantly declined. Within a few months the FSLN made it clear that it was in full and unshared control of the state.

We had captured power, according to the textbooks, and we proceeded to build the instruments of state power—a Sandinista army, a Sandinista police, and yes, a Sandinista judiciary and a Sandinista legislature too. We felt that without those instruments, there could be no power. Although today we are not quite sure. Longstanding political parties (except Somoza's) were allowed to function—just barely. But what was *a* party or *the* party? In the first stage, taking our cue from "Eastern" quarters, the party was to be a group of select militants. All others were "sympathizers," with more duties than rights.

## MYTH OF POWER

The Myth of Power begins to materialize as the cadre-oriented party takes up the principal positions in power and assumes the task, along with the party, of building something called "peoples' power." The assumption was that the FSLN, the political and military organization, would go on to establish a party-oriented government. But in retrospect, we were less guilty of building that party-dominated government (as the US and others charged) than of becoming a government-dominated

party. The party went to work for the government and got swallowed in the process.

It is not an uncommon dilemma. Witness the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa or the Worker's Party in Brazil. During the war, we claimed to have "mass organizations" but given the nature of the battlefield, most of the work took the form of channeling support for the war or the resistance efforts. After 1979, you had the same organizations channeling support for the state. The party was there but it was slowly relegated into the background. People referred jokingly to the party as the "ministry of political mobilization"—not much of an exaggeration because it is impossible to explain the mass education and health campaign in the absence of a full-scale social mobilization directed by party organs.

Another pre-1979 feature—authoritarianism—maintained itself after the victory. In time, it may have proven necessary to confront the US-backed *contra* war of the eighties. But the authoritarian trends also enveloped political (governmental and party) methods in general, particularly dealings with non-Sandinista organizations. Party democracy existed on paper but not in practice. The FSLN National Directorate placed itself at the head of government.

But contradictions did not disappear; rather these were heightened in many sectors. Of course, a revolution generates contradiction because otherwise, it would not be a revolution. There has never been a revolution without a counterrevolution. And in the history of Latin America, there has never been a counterrevolution without the participation of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). To this very day, the debate remains open as to whether the revolution could have tackled the contradictions in a nonviolent manner had it not been for the US government onslaught beginning in 1982. Did the Nicaraguan revolution have to make the same mistake of other twentieth-century revolutions—that is, taking on the small farmers? Was it necessary to take on the Nicaraguan "*kulaks*" in a violent fashion? The clash could not be solely attributed to the US government which armed and trained many of the small proprietors and their families. There was an ideological element present—a notion of how land should or should not be held or distributed. Could that key contradiction have been in a less confrontational manner? We will never know because by the early 1980s, CIA-established camps on the other side of the border welcomed dissatisfied farmers and peasants with open arms, exploiting their discontent, and then proceeding to arm and train them in order to form the *contra* army. A peasant tragedy—the product, in part, of

mistaken policies that allowed imperialism to create its own social base.

With war and militarism came accentuated centralization, intolerance and arrogance often generating more contradictions—again some of them necessary and others not. Also came the decision, both ideologically and strategically explained, to provide military support to the guerrillas in El Salvador and, to a lesser extent, Guatemala, generating even greater United States fury. Thus when it comes to evaluating the Nicaraguan revolution, the first thing to remember is that out of the 11 years of power, eight were conditioned by war. The question then becomes: How much can you advance with a social change agenda in the midst of a war?

The Sandinista army was never defeated, yet the contraction and collapse of Soviet support (beginning with *perestroika*), along with the collapse of the economy that in 1988 spelled a 32,000 percent inflation rate, forced the Sandinista government to negotiate and prepare for new elections. The Sandinista Party lost the elections. It succeeded in avoiding a military defeat, but at the cost perhaps of enduring a political-electoral one, with a drastic overestimation of its popularity or of the capacity of people to endure greater privation. In the 1990 elections, about 40 percent of the electorate voted for more privation; to continue fighting in full knowledge that if the Sandinistas won the election, Washington would continue to fight declaring the election a sham.

Thus on February 26, 1990, the day after election, the Sandinista Party woke up to discover that, for the first time in its history, it had become a legal opposition party—with no idea of what this meant, especially for a revolutionary movement. Where was the power now? If control of the state equaled power, then there was a serious political and conceptual problem. Some asked, “What is power and can it be practiced from below, as Daniel Ortega promised?” After all, the bureaucracy, the security forces and a good bit of the economy still belonged to the Sandinistas, and the new government of Violeta Chamorro was beholden to a Sandinista-drafted Constitution (to which she swore allegiance).

But in light of the subsequent fifteen years, it became clear that the power once in the hands of the party had been lost in favor of government. Many claimed that the biggest mistake was the failure of the party to develop and sustain an independent basis of popular power—a base that could survive the loss of state power. Because state power and political party power had been fused into one, it seemed

unnecessary to disentangle the two, until the electoral loss forced the process. Even institutions created and developed by the Revolution slowly escaped the party hold because, constitutionally, they were national institutions at the service of the executive power. Survival for them was a question of learning how to take orders and cut their links to the party apparatus.

At the level of base supporters, the token attention given to political education now came back to haunt the party. Popular power turned out to be little more than a slogan. Perhaps it was overambitious to believe that the rather primitive political culture of a country could be overturned in ten years. In the course of the past decade we have witnessed, not without pain, how many of the more regressive features of the political practices reappear in the country, beginning with the return of many of Somoza's old cohorts and worse, the adoption of some of those same practices (personalist or *caudillo* politics) within the Sandinista electorate and the party itself. The person of Daniel Ortega was projected over and above that of the historic FSLN, which now evolved into an age-old political machinery determined to get any vote at any price. A cult of personality held that if an Ortega-led FSLN came back to office, the deteriorating socioeconomic situation would be reversed.

## RECONSTRUCTING MYTH AND POWER

The achievements of the Nicaraguan Revolution should be neither exaggerated nor overestimated: the first truly national army, the first peaceful transfer of government, the alternation of parties in office, electoral pluralism—not simply the pluralism between right and center that Nicaragua had as Central America had only known, the right to walk the streets and organize and not get killed in the process. Quite positive in Central American historical terms, but in global terms the interpretation may be different. Are we not speaking of classical nineteenth-century liberal accomplishments? So what will be written on our gravesite? “Here lay twentieth-century Marxist movement that brought you a nineteenth-century liberal revolution”? Even that may be generous when the Sandinista themselves must admit that much of the oligarchy is back in office and in control of the economy, firmly “integrated” into the neoliberal global economy.

The right did not move to the center, but the left did—and in the process becoming right itself. As in El Salvador, the FSLN like the

*Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional* (FMLN) became part of the political establishment—a conservative one at that. The once “revolutionary” parties demanded their share of the legislature and the judiciary, along with business deals. Fatigues gave way to business suits and mobile phones replaced the Kalashnikovs. The “left” enters the political game at its own risk but some argued that it is senseless not to occupy political spaces before others do. The debate remains open, but one must also have indicators that tell us who is advancing in what direction. Is there or can there be a genuine power sharing? Who is fooling who? Are leaderships untouchable? The FSLN as a party has had to pay the moral and political cost of the *piñata* (the 1990 postelectoral transfer of state assets into private Sandinista leaders’ hands), the cutting of crude political deals with traditional politicians, and the personal abuses including sexual ones by Daniel Ortega.

How should the inspiration that must feed a strategy be recovered? In much of Central America, we must go back to square one and redefine who the social subject is of the political transformation we require. Classically, one looked to the working class and to violent methods. Today, the subject and the methods must be different. Unions, in general, have suffered enormous setbacks in our region (perhaps the public sector union in Costa Rica stands as the key exemption that proves the role). But new social movements seem to be capturing and channeling popular consciousness and discontent. The issues are basic yet global. For example, today, strong consumer movements are in the forefront of struggles against the privatization of water and the abuses of privatized utilities. Those movements are making the global connections in a way that the parties have not. But the connections to the political parties are strained. Ironically, it is in countries such as Nicaragua and El Salvador where you find the strongest political “left” parties, and the difficult experience of social movements in organizing themselves having to compete with traditional party-driven mobilization and “monopolization” of key struggles. On the other hand, in Guatemala, Honduras and Costa Rica where there is little left representation in the legislature, movements have developed much more quickly, as if better placed to fill the political (and ideological) vacuum. In Nicaragua, and to a lesser extent, El Salvador, we have to fight not only neoliberalism but also the pretense of the Old Left to monopolize social mobilization and street action.

The movements have had their ups and downs, as any social struggle will experience. Over the past three years in Central America,

there is an “up” underway. It is increasingly a question not of confronting the parties but of incorporating some of the more positive legacies (and myths) and leaving behind some of the regressive and negative ones, including authoritarianism. A key mobilization element is the social forum process. One of the important rallying and stimulating forces then was precisely the social reform process. We see how more people on the ground feel part of the global movement—be it against the war, in support of the Iraqi resistance, or against privatization of water, wherever these take place—along with the construction of alliances across Central America borders. The regional and the global strengthen (and not substitute) the local organizational dynamics and the levels of commitment. Examples of these are the creation of the Central American Popular Block and the Mesoamerican Forums taking place every year.

Parties are not necessarily excluded but the terms of their participation have suffered changes. When doctors and health-based workers launched the biggest strike against the government on health privatization in El Salvador, the FMLN came around and indicated its intention to join. The answer of course was, “You can, but get in the back of the line, because we are autonomous and we are the ones who have built and are leading these protest movements.” It is not movement autonomy for the sake of autonomy. But it is autonomy for the sake of constructing base-level political power. The movement then might be in a better negotiating position to build its own party or to save the existing one. The historical reversal of the Leninist top-down transmission belts concept.

A strategy and struggle cannot be reduced to how to get the vote, but rather of how to sustain resistance and build alternatives, particularly in these global neoliberal times, no matter who wins or who is in power—a challenge recognized, for example, within and outside of the ruling Workers’ Party in Brazil or the ANC in South Africa. To build counterhegemonic, anticapitalist power, but this time giving due weight to the indigenous, gender and environmental causes and demands. To recognize the importance of cultural resistance and in the process build the alternatives. To build the new myth and the new power. ❁

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