

Nicaragua's Battle of the Airwaves

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Armand Mattelart (Ed.) *Communicating in Popular Nicaragua*
International General, New York, 1986, 140 pp.

Left with a country devastated by a revolution, the leaders of Nicaragua are once again confronted with a war financed by a much more formidable enemy than the ousted dictator, Anastasio Somoza: their giant Northern neighbor, the United States. Thus, to consolidate the gains of their revolution, the Sandinista leaders have launched a massive information and education campaign for their people. "Communicating in Popular Nicaragua" is an anthology of articles written about the problems launched under this campaign.

Mattelart, the editor, prefaces the book with his article explaining that the present Nicaraguan insurgency is just an extension of the ideological war that the Americans are waging against socialism, regardless of what form it evolves. The rest of the articles are divided into three parts: I. The Pre-insurrectional struggles till July 1979 when Somoza was overthrown; II. The Ideological Aggressions, detailing the media war supported by the United States against the new government; and III. Social Movements and Popular Participation, explaining the present government's communication and education programs involving the use of mass organizations. Most of the articles and essays herein were written by Nicaraguan officials and Western media practitioners sympathetic to their cause.

The book enables one to have a grasp of the real situation in Nicaragua, i.e., the problem of illiteracy. Only 50% of the Nicaraguans are literate and 30% and 75% in the urban areas and countryside respectively are illiterate. The objective of the book therefore is to show how the Sandinista government attempts to spread literacy to benefit the largely illiterate peasants.

A problem faced by the Nicaraguan leaders is the propaganda war waged against their country by its neighbors who are client states of the United States. This situation, coupled with the low literacy rate in the country makes the mass communication problem doubly serious.

The twelve articles in the book also debunks what one reads from American newspapers and news magazines, e.g., Time and Newsweek, that the leftist Sandinistas are solely supported by Cuba and Russia. On the contrary, the Sandinista leaders are pragmatic and receive aid from various countries regardless of their political hue.

The ruling Junta of nine commandantes also strives to accommodate all the classes in Nicaraguan society. Because of the country's pluralist society, i.e., it is composed of diverse ethnic and lingual backgrounds, e.g., the English-speaking Miskito Indians and creoles and the Mestizo Spanish, its leaders do not impose their socialist leanings on the large Christian populace. Such a political policy, which is presented in this book, is not mentioned in Western media reports.

In reading "Communicating in Popular Nicaragua", one cannot help but draw parallels from our own recent experience in overthrowing Marcos. The article of Omar Cabezas on the use of "pintas" or graffiti on street walls is reminiscent of the street slogans Filipino activists used to paint but which has now been pre-empted by both the New Armed Forces of the Philippines and the Marcos Loyalists. The Sandinista government, drawing from their revolutionary experiences, have however carried on this practice to awaken "campesinos" with their stylized painted wall scenes calling people to fight the Contras. The book has many illustrations of posters, cartoons, etc., showing the techniques used by the government for its information and education campaigns.

It is to the credit of the Sandinist government that it has used all channels of communication to reach its citizens. The Nicaraguan government has used radio, television, posters and has even established a movie industry to achieve its objectives. It has also allowed private business to operate albeit with some restriction owing to its present wartime footing. The growing achievement of the Sandinist government, as described here, is its mass education campaign, i.e., "Alfabetizacion", which is carried out by Nicaragua's high school and college students in the countryside. The literacy crusade was launched right after the Sandinistas won because the new leaders realized the importance of a literate population in nation-building as well as to combat the propaganda war launched by the Contras. With so very little resources except that fueled by revolutionary fervor, thousands of students taught as well as conscientized the peasants. Some of them were killed by the Contras in order to wage fear. This program is still being carried out by the government backed up by radio.

The lessons that can be gathered by Filipino activists and cause-oriented groups in this book are manifold. Because the Nicaraguan revolution was indeed a truly national uprising

the social movements and groups founded to resist Somoza became the core groups in which government development programs were channeled to. The Philippine government, on the contrary, was not quick enough to seize the revolutionary fervor stirred by the February 1986 incident into nation building. Now it is slowly dissipating itself into a manifestation of our "ningas-cogon" attitude.

The Nicaraguans are daily being bombarded by radio and television shows from their next-door neighbors. Oftentimes, these shows are planted disinformation by the Contras which the Sandinist government cannot even combat because of its weak communication infrastructures. Surprisingly, they have only seized the radio, TV stations and theaters owned by Somoza and his cronies in Nicaragua and retained private ownership of the rest. Even the famous La Prensa newspaper which was closed by Somoza now reappears as a virulent oppositionist to the present government. This reconciliatory stance is in keeping with the backgrounds of the new leaders despite their new ideological leanings. Thus, the Western line that there is no freedom of the media in Nicaragua should not be taken at face value. Indeed this book is an informational counter propaganda against the Western media stories about Nicaragua.

The problem of integrating the indigenous Miskito Indians forms the last article of the book. Before reading this part, this reviewer got the impression from news reports that these Indians were just pawns in the war between the Contras and the Sandinistas. The article explains that the Miskitos are not passive. A Miskito chieftain, a former Somoza henchman, for example, lead some Indians into the Contra army.

The new government's policy therefore is to evacuate the Miskitos from the war zone (where their tribal land is) in order that they will not be affected by the war. With the disparate populations living in the Atlantic and Pacific coasts, the government has no choice but to try to incorporate them into a "popular hegemony" which "implied the integration of minorities under the direction of the majority". All means of communication available are needed to achieve this, particularly because the United States, the Contras rich ally, has waged a propaganda war against the Sandinistas using powerful transmitters. This is part of their systematic undermining of the Sandinista population using communication lines. The ideological battle between the Sandinistas and the Contras are thus taking place in the airwaves. The winner will most likely be the one whose message is most acceptable to the Nicaraguan people **K**

Confronting the Irony of a Revolution

Danilo Sibal

Revolution and Intervention in Central America, edited by Marlene Dizon and Susanne Jonas: Synthesis Publications, 1983.

On two occasions in 1979, our peer group found the rare, excellent reason for inebriated celebration: the first in January, when a broad Iranian front dominated by fundamentalist Islamic clergy overthrew the authoritarian regime of the Shah. The second was in July, when the Sandinista concluded their bloody insurrection with the defeat of dictator Anastacio Somoza and his National Guard.

We greeted the Iranian event with a mixture of awe and anxiety. Here was the unusual case of a modern revolution led largely by a fundamentalist Islamic clergy winning power through predominantly unarmed means. Only the suspicious medieval rhetoric of Islamic spokesmen tempered our enthusiasm.

Our fiercest euphoria was reserved for Nicaragua. There we saw novelty of the encouraging kind. In Nicaragua, it

seemed that radical liberation theologians had achieved their first practical success. We also saw a genuine revolutionary coalition come to power. Rather too quickly, we drew the favored conclusions that with authentically distinct Marxist organizations of roughly equal strength we might see the birth of a pluralist socialism. Nicaragua was, in our imagination, going to be an implicit critique of the revolutions that came before it. The Sandinistas almost ever-generously forbade capital punishment even for the most vicious National Guardsmen. They showed a surprising tolerance for their bourgeois enemies. Nicaragua was going to realize, then the socialist vision of not abolishing "bourgeois" liberties, but of endowing them with substance and expanding their enjoyment.

In Iran, our hopes came to grief within a year. The post-Shah regime put on inquisitorial robes and turned highly intolerant, physically eliminating not only proven counter-revolutionaries and SAVAK stragglers, but even erstwhile allies like the Mujahideen and the Tudeh party. It was a