

Political Culture

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32. They were called the National Convergence (Convergencia Nacional) in 2001 and the United Nicaragua Will Triumph Alliance (Alianza Unida Nicaragua Triunfa), in 2006.

33. The Pact is analyzed thoroughly in David Close and Kalowatie Deonadan, eds., *Undoing Democracy: The Politics of Electoral Caudillismo* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004).

34. Government of Nicaragua, *Reforma parcial de la constitucion politica de la Republica de Nicaragua*, February 18, 2005, Political Database of the Americas, pdba.georgetown.edu/.

35. Government of Nicaragua, *Ley Marco para la estabilidad y gobernabilidad del pais*, October 20, 2005, Political Database of the Americas, pdba.georgetown.edu/. In December 2006, the first indications appeared that the FSLN would not let the amendments take effect. See Ludwin Loáisiga López, "FSLN: Ley Marco es negociable," *La Prensa*, December 14, 2006, www.laprensa.com.ni/. The law was declared unconstitutional in 2008; see Chapters 6 and 13 for details.

36. The figure is from the United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report, 2006* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 228.

37. For an overview of US activities in the 2006 presidential campaign, see Nicaragua Network, *List of Interventions by the United States Government in Nicaragua's Democratic Process* (Washington, DC: Nicaragua Network, 2006).

38. With respect to Washington's views regarding the PLC, see M. J. Uriarte, "Fisk: Olvidense de Alemán," *La Prensa*, November 17, 2004, www.laprensa.com.ni; see also Ludwin Loáisiga López, "Los liberales desilusionan a Estados Unidos," *La Prensa*, September 29, 2005, www.laprensa.com.ni. This continued throughout the 2006 campaign as Ambassador Paul Trivelli pushed the theme vigorously. For a good summary, see Nicaragua Network, "Ambassador Trivelli Tries Again for Right-Wing Unity While Momentum Shifts to the FSLN," *Nicaragua News Hotline*, September 5, 2006, www.nicanet.org/. Both Managua dailies, *El Nuevo Diario* (www.elnuevodiario.com.ni) and *La Prensa* (www.laprensa.com.ni), have extensive, free online archives where the 2006 campaign can be followed.

39. Bernard Crick, *In Defence of Politics* (London: Weidenfield and Nicholson, 1963).

40. See Rory Carroll, "Oxfam Targeted as Nicaragua Attacks 'Trojan Horse' NGOs," *Guardian*, October 14, 2008, www.guardian.co.uk/; and Blake Schmidt, "US-Nicaragua Relations Chill as Ortega Faces Domestic Tests," *World Politics Review*, September 19, 2008, www.worldpoliticsreview.com/. This point is considered again in Chapter 12.

41. See Lourdes Arroliga, "La ruta del fraude en Managua," *Confidencial* 610, November 16–22, 2008, www.confidencial.com.ni/; and Tim Rogers, "Why Nicaragua's Capital Is in Flames," *Time*, November 14, 2008, www.time.com/.

AFTER ITS ELECTORAL DEFEAT IN 1990, THE SANDINISTA NATIONAL Liberation Front (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional, or FSLN) adopted a position of resigned pragmatism toward both neoliberalism and the power structures the Sandinista Revolution had sought to dismantle during the 1980s. Resigned pragmatism is a view of politics and power that induces the members of an organization or a society to assume that the politically desirable must be subordinated to what is possible under existing circumstances.¹ From the perspective of resigned pragmatism, the reality of power defines what is socially possible and politically desirable. Politics, in other words, is about adjusting to reality.

Resigned pragmatism finds one of its principal roots in providentialism: divine providence. This theological concept views history as a process controlled, organized, and administered by God.² Providentialism forms part of the dominant religious cosmovision in Nicaragua and acts as a cultural force that has inclined Nicaraguan society to accept, pragmatically and resignedly, history as a process determined by forces that transcend the country's political will. Like resigned pragmatism, providentialism is deeply rooted in Nicaraguan political culture, the bedrock political values and beliefs of a people. Sandinismo sought to change that political culture, but now it too has yielded to resigned pragmatism.

Political expressions of resigned pragmatism vary with the power of the groups that form Nicaraguan society. Among the dominant sectors, it takes the form of indifference toward poverty and social marginalization. Among the marginalized, it is expressed as fatalism toward their own misery.

This chapter was translated by David Close.

Both the indifference of the elites and the fatalism of the masses reflect a sense of irresponsibility before history. Both attitudes assume that power and poverty are determined by forces beyond the control of Nicaraguans. In this view, the historical limitations imposed by the reality of the moment are accepted as the fundamental influence over human action. Thus, from the perspective of pragmatic resignation, politics becomes the ability to adapt to the reality of actually existing power, especially that of international forces that shape the nation's options. This perspective has severely limited the transformative power of dominant political ideologies throughout Nicaraguan history.

The pragmatic resignation that marks the political thought of Nicaraguan conservatism has simply expressed an instinctive tendency to defend an "order" rooted in particular and narrow traditional interests. In turn, the normative voluntarism of Nicaraguan liberalism has expressed an anti-oligarchic position, but not one capable of articulating a democratic philosophy that expresses and integrates the interests and hopes of the different sectors of Nicaraguan society. Finally, socialism tried to represent the interests of the masses without being able to articulate a body of thought that made explicit the values that unite the diverse social, ethnic, and cultural groups who make up the socially marginalized in Nicaragua.

Nicaraguan conservatism, liberalism, and socialism all adopted, superficially and uncritically, the principles and conceptual vocabulary of European political thought. The discursive expressions of this imported thought do not constitute an authentic representation of the thoughts and sentiments of Nicaraguans but are rather a falsification. For this reason, the revolutionary and reformist efforts that mark Nicaragua's history have been crushed by the weight of a reality that, by remaining pre-theorized, also remains independent of Nicaraguans' political will. Further, in the absence of political thinking, Nicaraguan elites—including those in the FSLN—end up internalizing the ideology and culture imposed by the structures of national and international power that have historically affected development in the country.

The Revolutionary Decade

In 1979, the FSLN succeeded, at least temporarily, in breaking with the attitude of resigned pragmatism that has characterized the political practice of Nicaraguan elites. If *Somocismo* was, as Edgardo Buitrago asserts, simply a *praxis* stripped of historical vision, Sandinismo was a vision of Nicaraguan society based on values that challenged and transcended the limits of the then-existing reality.³ Confronting the external dependency of a country conditioned

by constant foreign intervention, Sandinismo aspired to construct a sovereign nation. And faced with the reality of poverty and social inequality, the Sandinista Revolution sought to construct a society organized in accordance with the "logic of the majority."

However, Sandinismo never developed the capacity for political reflection necessary to give institutional expression to its fundamental values. The FSLN adopted a mechanical and imitative Marxism that gave rise to distorted interpretations of both Nicaragua's domestic reality and the international context within which the country operated. In turn, these erroneous interpretations produced an ambiguous and contradictory political practice that ended in confusion.

The theoretical poverty of the FSLN led the organization to value "revolutionary conviction" over understanding the problems the revolution faced. Public declarations of faith in Marxist socialism and the Leninist model—central planning, the revolutionary vanguard, and democratic centralism—became the scale the FSLN used to gauge the revolutionary commitment of its members. "Any voice of moderation within the party," observed Sergio Ramírez in his memoirs, "was seen as more than suspicious." He continues: "Immersing ourselves in the shimmering old waters of ideological orthodoxy, we obtained our certificate of virtue."⁴

To the theoretical weaknesses of the FSLN were added the practical difficulties of managing the politics of alliances promoted by the FSLN to let it take power. In an attempt to hide the incongruities between its thinking and the ideas and values of its allies, the FSLN chose to combine, in a confused and contradictory way, the Marxist-Leninist conceptual vocabulary that was part of its political discourse and thought and the markedly social democratic conceptual language contained in the program of the government of national reconstruction. Ramírez confirms that the political game of the FSLN consisted in "denying before both, allies and enemies, its identity as a Marxist-Leninist party."⁵

Divorcing Sandinista discourse from political practice eventually became a divorce between the FSLN's thinking and revolutionary action. Sandinista thought and its discursive expressions remained frozen in a theoretical scheme deprived of the enriching sustenance of experience. At the same time, the revolutionary experience degenerated into a political activism lacking the theoretical reference that the revolution required to make clear the framework of historical limitations and opportunities within which the country was operating. Eventually, the revolutionary activism of the FSLN deteriorated first into pragmatism and later into resignation when it confronted the weight of national problems that remained pre-theorized and immune to the constitutive and ordering force of ideas.

Thus Sandinista political thought, like that of José Santos Zelaya in 1893, fell before the force of reality that the FSLN was unable to make comprehensible, let alone domesticate. With the Frente's electoral defeat in 1990, Nicaragua's political development again set its course within a resigned, pragmatic vision of history, which perceived the future as determined by forces outside the nation's control.

From Revolutionary Sandinismo to Resigned Pragmatism, 1990–2006

The electoral victory of Violeta Barrios de Chamorro in 1990 initiated Nicaragua's transition to neoliberalism. On the political level, the change meant a legal and institutional reform that aimed to consolidate an electoral democracy. It would replace the verticalist model, a schizophrenic blend of democratic centralism and pluralism the FSLN used in the 1980s. The neoliberal transition's economic side sought to institutionalize a market economy to replace the mixed and planned economy of the Sandinista regime. Economic competitiveness would become the independent variable that would drive the rest of the social equation (employment, wages, social programs, etc.). Finally, the social objective of the new regime was a significant reduction in the state's social role. Concretely, this showed itself as the elimination of the principles of universality, free access, and public participation that guided the Sandinista's social policy.

The rationale and the objectives of the Nicaraguan neoliberal transition came from three international financial institutions (IFIs)—the World Bank (WB), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB)—and the US Agency for International Development (USAID). They shared an economic outlook and a social vision. This convergence of values and norms generated the Washington Consensus, which dominated official thinking about economic development throughout the 1990s.

Chamorro's victory and the reforms undertaken by her administration took place within a national context characterized by political fragmentation, economic backwardness, and a weakening of the bonds of social solidarity among Nicaraguans. By 1989, as the result of errors by the Sandinista leaders, the complexity of the revolutionary process, and aggression by the United States, the country's gross domestic product (GDP) had fallen to 42 percent of its 1977 level. Worse, in 1989 Nicaragua's per capita foreign debt was the highest in Latin America: \$3,000, or 33 times the value of its exports.⁶

Besides political polarization and economic collapse, in 1990 Nicaragua also faced the torn social fabric left by its civil war. That war pitted Sandinismo against an armed counterrevolutionary movement financed by the United States. Paul Oquist described the human impact of the conflict:

The 61,884 victims of the war represent 1.72 percent of the population of Nicaragua, roughly 3.6 million persons. The 30,865 deaths represent 0.86 percent of the population. If we apply this same percentage to the population of the United States, approximately 250 million, it would leave 2,125,000 dead, which almost equals the number of all American deaths in all the wars fought by the United States throughout its history.⁷

How was the FSLN to confront the neoliberal project imposed by the IFIs, welcomed by an important sector of the Nicaraguan economic elite, and enacted by the Chamorro government? That was what millions of Nicaraguans asked themselves after Daniel Ortega accepted electoral defeat in 1990. Two days after the election, on February 27, Ortega offered an enigmatic response. Before thousands of Sandinistas gathered in the Plaza de los No Alineados "Omar Torrijos" to receive directions from their leaders, Ortega said: "We were not born on top, we were born on the bottom, and we're going to govern from below. Now there is a people's power [*poder popular*], so we're in much better conditions to return, in a short time, and govern this country from above."⁸

Ortega's warning was not an empty threat. The FSLN was still the strongest political party in the country. It had been defeated by the National Union of the Opposition (Unión Nacional Opositora, or UNO), a coalition of parties that, with assistance and pressure from the United States, united only around the common objective of defeating the Sandinistas. Yet despite the population's war-weariness and the economic pressures caused by the war, the FSLN remained a considerable political force. In 1990, the FSLN took 38 of 91 National Assembly seats and 30 of 131 municipalities.⁹ On the Atlantic Coast, the Sandinistas won 22 out of 48 regional council seats in the North Atlantic Autonomous Region (Región Autónoma Atlántico Norte, or RAAN) and 19 of 47 in the South Atlantic Autonomous Region (Región Autónoma Atlántico Sur, or RAAS).¹⁰

Moreover, the FSLN now enjoyed the legitimacy that comes with having accepted the public's verdict in the elections. Thus *Envío*, a magazine of news and commentary published by the Jesuit Central American University (Universidad Centroamericana, or UCA) in Managua, declared the Sandinista electoral defeat an "ideological victory" against the Reagan administration, which had for years labeled Sandinismo "totalitarian." *Envío* stated:

The heroic solidity of the vote of 41 percent of Nicaraguans will have to be assessed with great responsibility and integrity alongside its other crucial component: President Daniel Ortega, who is widely recognized today as a symbol of the struggle against the dictatorship, the defense of [national] sovereignty, and the construction of pluralism and democracy. In these accomplishments lies the paradox of the FSLN's defeat. By [the Sandinistas'] political defeat, the revolutionary process of the small, heroic, worthy Nicaraguan people won the ideological battle with US imperialism, the brutality of Reagan, and the subtle, bipartisan pragmatism of Bush, because the project of Sandino lives on in Nicaragua.¹¹

During the first two years of the new government, the "project of Sandino" indeed seemed to remain in force. Throughout that period, the FSLN maintained its revolutionary posture and discourse. In 1991, Daniel Ortega made this comment:

In Nicaragua those who think that the capitalist and imperialist option is the best have twenty-three parties that they can join. Our option is still the revolutionary one, to which we now add discussion and dialogue as a new expression of internal democracy. For the first time in its history, the Frente is discussing its statutes and principles. The elections themselves are a new element, an instrument to *reaffirm* our political and ideological positions, to modernize how we work, and to confront capitalism, which remains our enemy.¹² (emphasis in original)

Behind Ortega's public discourse, however, the FSLN had begun to suffer serious internal divisions. They arose from the electoral defeat and the different interpretations the Sandinista membership gave to that defeat, as well as to the different proposals for how best to face challenges that were coming from within the party. It was under these conditions that the group closest to Daniel Ortega, the party's secretary-general, closed ranks around Ortega's leadership to defend the organizational unity of the FSLN. As Erik Aguirre observed, "the existence of [competing] lines of thought was proscribed and Ortega's hegemony guaranteed."¹³

By 1993, the political and ideological tensions within Sandinismo were evident. In that year, a group of intellectuals affiliated with the FSLN stated publicly that the party suffered from "the lack of a clear identity, failing to have redefined the program and strategy of the FSLN, a crisis of leadership at all levels, and facing these crises with an organizational structure that had become dysfunctional or even the source of the problems."¹⁴ Little by little, the revolutionary meaning attached to Sandinismo was fading in the midst of an accelerated process of institutionalizing the neoliberal values promoted by the IFIs and Nicaragua's government. Social conditions in Nicaragua were also being transformed to permit a resurgence of the old social structures

that produced inequality, the same structures Sandinismo had sought to dismantle.

But not everything was marching back to the past. In these postrevolutionary conditions, the leadership of the FSLN became part of the economic elite pushing the neoliberal transition in the country. What made those Sandinistas rich was *La Piñata* (the Piñata).¹⁵ That was the name Nicaraguans gave to the massive transfer of state property to the Sandinista elite during the FSLN's two-month lame-duck period. Ernesto Cardenal, who was minister of culture in the 1980s, lays out the dynamic of the Piñata:

There was the theft of state properties undertaken by the leaders to give them to the Frente Sandinista, as well as the theft of state properties by the leaders to assign them to themselves; later they would take for themselves the properties they had first stolen for the Frente Sandinista. This was how the majority of the members of the National Directorate (though not all of them) and other party elites or top government officials and labor leaders got bank accounts, houses, cars, businesses, supermarkets, coffee haciendas and cattle ranches, sugar mills, banana plantations, restaurants, televisions, radios, firms that market meat or bananas, and financial institutions and banks. The people were left out of all this.¹⁶

The Piñata was one of the causes of the split in the FSLN. In 1995, Sergio Ramírez, Dora María Téllez, and many other leading thinkers left the FSLN to form the Sandinista Renewal Movement (Movimiento Renovador Sandinista, or MRS). The rise of the MRS was, as a former Sandinista activist observed, "just one part of a deeper fissure, a consequence of the loss of leadership and credibility by the party's National Directorate, as well as of the violent behavior and politics [characteristic of the FSLN] that an overwhelming majority of Nicaraguans now reject."¹⁷ Since the formation of the MRS, other individuals and groups have taken up the fight to renew the ideology and policies of the party. However, the faction of the FSLN organized around Daniel Ortega—in which the new Sandinista tycoons play a prominent role—has been able to neutralize dissent and stifle open and democratic debate about the party's social outlook, political ideas, general strategy, and organization, especially concerning participation in decisionmaking.

The 1996 Elections: A Political Defeat Degenerates into a Moral Defeat

According to the reports issued by the Supreme Electoral Council (Consejo Supremo Electoral, or CSE), Nicaragua's electoral authority, twenty-three parties and political alliances ran in the 1996 campaign. Yet it was the Liberal

Alliance (Alianza Liberal), led by the right-wing former mayor of Managua, Arnoldo Alemán Lacayo, and the FSLN, led by Daniel Ortega, that captured the public's attention. The Alemán campaign succeeded in capitalizing on "the declining political authority of President Chamorro's government, while maintaining intact the anti-Sandinista coalition that had carried the [UNO] to power."¹⁸ For its part, the FSLN presented a new image to the electorate. Here is a description of the metamorphosis of the Sandinista leader at one campaign rally:

For the first time in the history of the celebrations of the 19th of July, Daniel appeared with his wife Rosario Murillo and several of their children. The Sandinista Comandantes—including Humberto Ortega—abandoned their olive drab and the chants recalling the FSLN's guerrilla past. Daniel called the United States "our great neighbor," with whom the FSLN "is ready to continue working within a framework of respect, equality, and justice." There were white shirts and caps, and doves, and flowers tossed in the air. In his speech, Ortega called for "national unity" against what he styled the "Somocista Liberal project" of Arnoldo Alemán. And he proposed that Cardinal Obando [the archenemy of the Sandinistas] be the guarantor of a pact on campaign ethics that included the promise to accept October's electoral results.¹⁹

In that same rally Ortega explained to the crowd how the position assigned the FSLN in the middle of the ballot paper was a "providential" sign that confirmed the "centrist" position that, in his view, the FSLN occupied in the Nicaraguan political spectrum. The magazine *Envío* described the scene this way:

"Here," said Daniel during the rally, "all the other parties have been searching for the center. But Providence gave the center to the Frente Sandinista." He meant that the FSLN had drawn slot 12 of 24 in the lottery to assign places on the ballot. "We are," said Daniel, "the point of convergence, which means we will get the votes of all Nicaraguans. As Sandino said: 'Neither the far right nor the far left. The Only Front is our slogan.' And the Only Front is the slogan of the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional."²⁰

Daniel Ortega's new image and message, however, convinced neither the Catholic Church nor the United States. Washington certainly made its distaste clear, but the church went further. On October 17, 1996, during the period when campaigning was to have stopped, Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo celebrated Mass in Managua's cathedral with Liberal presidential candidate Arnoldo Alemán present. The cardinal was wearing red vestments, the Liberals' color, even though the liturgical calendar called for green. During his

sermon, moreover, Cardinal Obando invented a biblical passage to warn the public against the wickedness and snares of "vipers"; Alemán coincidentally had called Ortega a "snake" during the campaign. Then, to make sure that the church's message got through, on election day the anti-Sandinista dailies, *La Prensa* and *La Tribuna*, published a color photo of Cardinal Obando literally giving his blessing to Arnoldo Alemán and his vice presidential candidate, Enrique Bolaños.

Washington and the church won. The results showed the Liberal Alliance with 51.03 percent of the votes and the FSLN with 37.75 percent. The remaining twenty-one parties split the rest, with nineteen of them unable to garner the support of even 1 percent of the voters. On the municipal level, the Liberal Alliance won 92 of 143 localities, including Managua; the FSLN captured 51.²¹ In elections held two years earlier, in 1994, for regional councils in Nicaragua's two autonomous regions on the Atlantic Coast, the FSLN had captured 20 of 48 seats in the RAAN and 15 of 47 in the RAAS. In 1998, it had less success, taking 15 of 48 seats in the RAAN and 12 of 47 in the RAAS.²² Nonetheless, the Frente clearly remained Nicaragua's second party.

While neoliberal democracy in Nicaragua was being refined in the 1990 and 1996 elections, the popular organizations that had arisen during the 1980s were weakening gradually due to the ideological bankruptcy of the FSLN and its entry into the new Nicaraguan social order. The crisis besetting these organizations was described by the Sandinista sociologist Oscar René Vargas in 1997.

The figures and images that habitually served as points of reference for people's political orientations have faded rapidly from Nicaragua's fractured political and ideological scene. Gone are the coordinates, even the maps, established under the influence of "real socialism." So too is the thirst for social justice and equality that characterized several generations of activists and intellectuals of the broad left. All that remains on the horizon is a sense of emptiness, the feeling that something is missing from the national political scene that today cannot be found anywhere.²³

What had disappeared was revolutionary Sandinismo. After the electoral defeat and the Pinata in 1990, the FSLN neglected its organizational work and began activating and deactivating popular organizations to serve its pursuit of quotas of power in the new order. Then in 1998, the FSLN began negotiating the Pact with the Liberals, making it clear that it brought all the organizations linked to the Frente into the deal as well.

The Pact between the FSLN and the Constitutionalist Liberal Party (PLC) led by Arnoldo Alemán aimed to give those parties total control of

Nicaragua's political system and state institutions. Through this deal, the two parties gave themselves key positions on the Supreme Court of Justice and the Supreme Electoral Council and in the controller's office, the attorney general's office, and the office of the superintendent of banks. But the Pact did not stop there. Hoping to perpetuate the dominance of the PLC and FSLN, it set serious obstacles to the formation of new parties. Moreover, it amended the property law in the FSLN's favor, thereby resolving legal questions lingering since the Piñata. And it left the way open for a constituent assembly to enshrine the Pact in a new constitution.

A key aspect of the Pact was its insistence on establishing a system of immunity from prosecution for the two party leaders. Daniel Ortega used this protection when, shielded by parliamentary immunity and counting on the support of the Sandinista and Liberal benches, he avoided charges of sexual abuse of a minor brought by his stepdaughter Zoilamérica Narvaez. For his part, Arnoldo Alemán got an automatic National Assembly seat via the Pact and thus diplomatic immunity from charges of corruption, though ultimately the legislature would strip him of that protection and permit his prosecution.

Dora María Téllez of the MRS offered this view of the significance of the Pact and its longer-term implications:

One of Arnoldo Alemán's major objectives in the pact with the FSLN was to buy off the organized opposition. He correctly calculated that only the FSLN could put up any organized opposition to him in a crisis. The FSLN sold out to Alemán through the pact, and it sold out cheap. With the organized opposition in his pocket, Alemán has reduced his internal problems. The rest of the opposition is less organized and one of the pact's aims is to make it even harder for it to get organized. Now the Liberal government has only to face a dispersed opposition, one concealed within the conscience of the people.²⁴

Because of the Pact, the popular organizations of Nicaraguan civil society were practically demobilized, creating conditions for the growth of corruption that became endemic in Alemán's administration, which some analysts estimate cost Nicaragua roughly \$100 million between 1996 and 2000.²⁵ Further, during Alemán's presidency there were several fraudulent bankruptcies of private banks that some estimate cost the state the equivalent of five times the annual education budget or twenty-five times what government spends annually on medicine.²⁶ Losses from the failure of just one of those banks, Interbank, which had been "the deal-making center for Sandinista capital derived from the La Piñata of the '90s," amounted to \$300 million.²⁷

The attitude of the Catholic Church toward this corruption was scandalous. Statements by the bishops recognized the existence of corruption but treated it as a moral problem that called for spiritual solutions. The ambiguous and evasive language of the Conferencia Episcopal, the assembly of the country's Catholic bishops, contributed to the institutionalization of social values that saw abuses of power and impunity for bureaucrats involved in corruption become parts of the country's daily life.

This ambiguous, even complicit stance taken by the Catholic Church on the question of corruption is explained by the relationship of mutual convenience it maintained with the Alemán government. The church had backed Alemán's candidacy and contributed to legitimizing his power. His administration then supported the church's positions in education and reproductive health. Further, the Alemán government assisted the church economically.

In sum, Arnoldo Alemán's term in office was marked by five political characteristics: (1) corruption, (2) antidemocratic practices created by the FSLN-PLC Pact, (3) collaboration between the Catholic Church and the PLC, (4) loss of legitimacy by public institutions, and (5) serious poverty affecting the majority of the population.

A statistical view of his administration's economic management is similarly unimpressive. By 2001, GDP per capita was barely \$30 higher than the \$454 average of 1990. Unemployment rose from 7.6 percent in 1990 to 11.5 percent in 2001. Underemployment, which was 37.2 percent in 1990, remained high at 38.2 percent in 2001.²⁸ The social consequences of the economic situation were dramatic. According to a 2002 study by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, 31 percent of the 5.2 million Nicaraguans suffered from malnutrition, making Nicaragua the most ill-nourished country in the Americas.²⁹

This was the background for Nicaragua's 2001 general elections. The FSLN competed in these elections, employing a discourse based on a managerial view of government. Its platform contained a long list of promises: peace and security for all Nicaraguans; anticorruption measures; the promotion of participatory governance; programs to improve the status of women and children; respect for private property; promotion of investment and heightened production; antipoverty measures; programs for sustainable development; extensive public works projects, including the Dry Inter-oceanic Canal; full application of the Statute of Autonomy for the Regions of Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast covering Nicaragua's Caribbean Coast; and respect for freedom of religion, free speech, a free press, human rights, and the right to life.³⁰

Thus by 2001, the FSLN viewed governing as implementing development projects within the limits set by the national power structure and consistent with neoliberal guidelines of the IFIs. The revolutionary spirit of the Sandinistas had disappeared.

The 2001 Elections

The resigned pragmatism of the FSLN showed itself clearly in the quest for alliances in the 2001 elections. To take power, the FSLN was ready to ally with anyone who, for whatever reason, could help them defeat the PLC candidate, Enrique Bolaños. As a result, the FSLN came to head the National Convergence (Convergencia Nacional). In that coalition coexisted—without ever discussing their contrasting visions of how society should work—Sandinistas from the FSLN, dissident Sandinistas from the MRS, evangelical Christians, social Christians (from the Partido Social Cristiano), a sector of the Nicaraguan Resistance (the *contras* who fought the FSLN in the 1980s), as well as political personalities and sports stars recruited for their names. The pragmatism behind the National Convergence was confirmed by the Sandinista historian Aldo Díaz Lacayo.

[The 2001 presidential elections were] an eminently political event in which the important thing is getting into power, literally capturing power, because that at least creates the possibility that some things can be done, and that's enough. Negotiate or accept the economic policies imposed by the international financial institutions without so much as questioning them.³¹

Instead of vision and critical thought, the FSLN offered a mystical discourse that revealed the depth of providentialism in the country's political culture. *For the Highest Ideals* (*Por los ideales más altos*), a letter signed by Daniel Ortega and his running mate Agustín Jarquín, was practically a prayer:

Nicaraguan brothers and sisters: We beseech God to guide us in the Way of Hope, where each of us is ready, as His Instrument, of His Will, His Peace, and His Love, to serve this country which, through our combined efforts, we shall move forward! We dedicate ourselves to organize and operate a government for all, without exception. We swear to serve all Nicaraguans with honesty, transparency, austerity, and efficiency. We shall promote peace, understanding and harmony among all Nicaraguans and between Nicaragua and the whole world, based on the principles of respect and cooperation. These times in which we live demand women and men full of strength and Love, and ready to work strenuously. And in this

way, working together, we can make ourselves better and enjoy the blessings that Life offers us. The shades of a difficult past will not take from Nicaraguans the possibilities and the certainties of a future built on experience and on the sense of justice and responsibility. We beseech God to illuminate our consciences, so that we may choose "the highest ideals." We ask that His Will permits us to show that we represent those highest ideals. We beseech Him to let us realize those ideals for you, calling on us all, together, to create in peace, decent conditions of work, education, culture, and progress for every Nicaraguan family. To vote for the party in Box 2 on your ballot [the Convergencia] is to vote with hearts willing to fill every corner of our country with joy and hope, confidence and tranquility, and general betterment! Nicaragua United is great. Nicaragua United promises Peace. Nicaragua United is . . . the Promised Land.³²

The religious turn in Sandinista thinking was also evident during the celebration of the twenty-third anniversary of the revolution. On that occasion, Daniel Ortega gave thanks to "God and the Revolution" for the electoral democracy that had been consolidated in the country since 1990: "We had to throw out the Somocista dictatorship at gunpoint but now, thanks to God and the Revolution, governments change peacefully, through the vote, and this coming November 4th we will hold elections."³³ In the same speech, Ortega invited people to "conquer the fear" produced by the memories of war and of the economic hardship of the 1980s and thus reach "the Promised Land":

It's the same fear people felt when they went with Moses. We all remember the story when they came to the sea and all of a sudden it opened up. Well, naturally, Moses and everyone with him were afraid to cross, because, what might happen? If they were crossing and the sea suddenly shut around them they would all drown. This is the same fear that some Nicaraguans have now. They ask themselves, what if the Frente Sandinista wins. They're afraid to cross the sea, the sea that's open this coming 4th of November. But I'm sure, because I believe that this country will vanquish its fear, that the ordinary people will conquer their fear and will pass through the sea and reach the Promised Land.³⁴

At the same event, Laureano Ortega, Daniel's son, sang "Ave Maria." Rosario Murillo, Daniel's wife, went before the crowd to affirm her support for the Sandinista candidate and to reject, implicitly, the accusations of sexual abuse that Zoilamérica Narvaez had leveled against her stepfather in 1998. Murillo used language that highlighted the new spiritualism of the FSLN: "I am here with my heart full, with nothing to hide, my breast bared, to tell you, Daniel, that we, your family, those closest to you, we offer Nicaragua the broadest horizon." She added that "nothing really changes

unless the heart changes," that "there are no certainties, on searching and paths," and that the moment had come to "move from the shadows and let the Light of Nicaragua shine through."³⁵

The mystical and religious tone was highlighted by *Envío* when it reported that the FSLN's platform had appeared "as blurry as the utopian horizon of the *Promised Land*, the central theme of the Sandinista campaign." It continued: "Asking for God's forgiveness and love, the FSLN diluted history, principles, style, and programs to embark on a pseudo-religious campaign that tries to paint over not just the difficult history of the eighties but also the real problems the country faces in the twenty-first century and the inability of the FSLN of the nineties to face those problems."³⁶

Despite the efforts the FSLN made remaking its image and presenting itself as a nonrevolutionary organization—one adapted to the country's social and political realities—the Catholic Church again tilted the electoral process toward the PLC. In its *Exhortación on ocasión de las Elecciones Generales de 2001* (*Exhortation on the Occasion of the 2001 General Elections*), the church preached the need to distrust changes in candidates' style and the content of their speeches. Nicaraguans understood very well that this referred to Ortega and his attempt to project a more moderate and pious image.³⁷

Come election day, the PLC captured 56.3 percent of the votes, whereas the Frente got 42.3 percent. The year before (2000), in municipal elections that were held separately from the national contest as specified by a 1995 constitutional amendment, the FSLN had won as many localities (52) as in 1996 and accounting for 60 percent of Nicaragua's population, with Managua among them.³⁸ Herty Lewites, who won Managua for the Frente, would in six years (in the presidential elections of 2006) be leading a strong Sandinista dissident movement, challenging Daniel Ortega for the presidency. In the Atlantic Coast elections of 2002, the party improved on its 1998 results, taking 18 of 48 seats in the RAA and 14 of 47 in the RAAS.³⁹

In the first months of Enrique Bolaños's Liberal government, the FSLN acted cautiously to see how relations between Bolaños and Alemán developed. The Sandinistas knew that ties between the two were fragile. Bolaños wanted to govern. Alemán, however, was not about to give up power and could control the government's agenda as president of the National Assembly as well as through his dominance of the PLC. The FSLN knew that a split between Bolaños and Alemán could turn the Sandinista deputies in the National Assembly into votes that Bolaños would have to count on to survive politically.

With FSLN support, Alemán became the National Assembly's president. Though protected by legislative immunity as a member of the assembly, he soon faced corruption charges. Alemán's role as speaker and the question of

corruption soon came to dominate the Nicaraguan political agenda. Bolaños, keen to rid himself of Alemán, worked diligently to bring the former president and his principal collaborators to trial. In this, Bolaños had the support of the media and many civil society groups. The Catholic Church continued defending Alemán.

However, Bolaños's haughty bearing and inability to communicate with the people kept him from leading the popular protests that supported his anticorruption campaign. The Nicaraguan president preferred rather to use the support he received from the US embassy once Washington decided that Alemán's presence weakened the PLC and favored the FSLN.

For the FSLN, the fissure within the PLC offered an opportunity to expand its power to "govern from below." Taking advantage of its weight in the assembly and over the judiciary, the FSLN backed Bolaños and provided the votes necessary to strip Alemán of his legislative immunity. It then used its control of the judiciary to secure Alemán's conviction for corruption. An unavoidable result of the former president's conviction was the definitive break between the PLC and Enrique Bolaños, who became a traitor in Liberal eyes. Thus the president turned to the FSLN to keep governing.

Even while the FSLN was working toward Alemán's conviction, it maintained the Pact with the PLC. The Frente wanted to weaken Alemán to strengthen its hand when dealing with the Liberals, a blatant power grab. As a result, on his conviction Arnoldo Alemán became both an inmate and a prisoner of the Sandinistas, who could dictate the conditions of Alemán's imprisonment. The FSLN named the judges who controlled Alemán's fate, who approved or rejected requests that he receive house arrest instead of jail time. Whenever the FSLN needed the PLC's votes in the assembly, it threatened to send Alemán to prison. Once the Liberals accepted the Sandinistas' demands, Alemán was returned to his ranch and house arrest.

Eventually Alemán was permitted to travel throughout the department of Managua and finally to have the run of the country. Each of those changes in the conditions of Alemán's imprisonment was approved by a judiciary that received its directions from the FSLN. In this regard, it is important to recall that Alemán's freedom of movement became an important factor in the run-up to the 2006 campaign, as dissident Liberals, led by the banker Eduardo Montealegre, who were opposed to Alemán's leadership, grew stronger. The FSLN wanted Alemán able to travel freely to reinforce his leadership and avoid the unification of the Liberals.

This political opportunism of the FSLN reflected the ideological vacuum within which the organization functioned. The absence of conviction, the essential characteristic of any pragmatic position, was palpable in the party's *Program for the Twenty-First Century*. In that document, the FSLN

defined itself vaguely as "a revolutionary party that stands for a modern socialism that is solidaristic, democratic, popular, pluralist, inspired by its love of the people and the country, created to serve the citizenry." According to this ambiguous but florid document, the party's principal objective was to "secure the happiness of all Nicaraguans, building a society with democratic politics, a democratic economy, social justice, and the rule of law."⁴⁰

In fact, the FSLN had done very little to promote "the happiness of all Nicaraguans." Its pact with the PLC had benefited the organization's leaders and sold out the popular sectors. This was bitterly confirmed by the Sandinista journalist William Grigsby:

What sector of the Frente Sandinista has come out ahead as a result of its strategy of wheeling and dealing, deal making, and log rolling? Which of the many sectors within the Frente Sandinista—the workers, peasants, the unemployed, women, youth, business—has done best from the Pact and its consequences? You know who, right? The [big guys:] the Coronel Kautzes, the Bayardo Arces, the *tutti quanti* of the businessmen, the Chico Lopezes. That's who is better off. Their businesses have prospered incredibly. They have more hotels, more import houses, better *fincas* [farms], improved access to bigger loans, and control more shares in banks. They're the ones who have gotten ahead. They're the ones who benefited from the politics of the Pact, from the deal making and sellouts. It certainly hasn't been the ordinary people who belong to the Frente.⁴¹

The 2006 Elections

The FSLN began getting ready for the 2006 elections right after their 2001 loss. As part of their strategy, they sought rapprochements with all who had opposed them. In that class were the Nicaraguan economic elites who were not already linked to the Sandinistas, the Catholic Church, the counterrevolutionary organizations that the Frente faced in the 1980s, and the government of the United States. Ortega's flirtation with Washington is best represented by a photo, dominated by the Nicaraguan and US flags, which shows the Sandinista leader entering the Plaza La Fe on horseback to celebrate the anniversary of the Sandinista Revolution.⁴² The Frente also stopped using the Sandinista Hymn, which refers to the United States as "the enemy of humanity," at its rallies. Finally, it minimized the use of the colors of the Sandinista flag, red and black, substituting pink. Washington, however, remained intransigent.

Nicaraguan capitalists remained neutral toward Ortega. Their preferred candidate was the conservative Eduardo Montealegre, but they did not fear

an Ortega administration. For many of them, it was clear that the FSLN had lost its ideology and become a party controlled by a business-oriented elite. A member of this elite, onetime member of the FSLN national directorate Bayardo Arce, declared during the campaign that the FSLN's economic policy would follow that of the neoliberal governments of Presidents Chamorro, Alemán, and Bolaños. When asked if he thought a Sandinista win would provoke capital flight, Arce responded: "If I look at what Carlos Pellas, Ramiro Ortiz, Roberto Zamora, and Ernesto Fernandez Hollman [all leading Nicaraguan capitalists] have said, none of them thinks that changing the government will change the rules."⁴³

By 2006, the FSLN had converted itself into a confessional party that collaborated with the most conservative sectors of the Catholic Church and constantly invoked God's name in its speeches. To underline this religiosity, Daniel Ortega and his wife Rosario Murillo, who was also his campaign manager, renewed their vows before Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo. The media also captured the couple praying in Managua's cathedral and receiving communion. The growing closeness of the FSLN and the Catholic hierarchy reached its peak when the Sandinista Assembly caucus voted to criminalize therapeutic abortion, fully implementing the Church's position.⁴⁴ Rosario Murillo explained the action this way:

Precisely because we have faith, we have religion. It is because we are believers, because we love God above all things that we have been able to endure so many torments without worry. We have learned from each difficulty the lesson that the Lord has wanted us to learn. This is also why we defend ourselves and fully agree with the Catholic Church and other churches that abortion principally affects women: because we can never get over the pain and trauma that an abortion produces. No woman who has ever had an abortion is ever again whole.⁴⁵

Cuban author Celia Hart responded to Murillo with a letter decrying the behavior of the FSLN. Hart wrote indignantly: "No, Sra. Murillo! What we women can't get over is not being able to decide what to do with our own bodies or to determine our own priorities. What we can't get over is a girl there's no way she can look after it by herself." Hart then turned to the shameless opportunism of the FSLN, concluding by quoting Martí: "Politics is a dishonorable occupation when it covers itself in shame, beneath a layer of wrongful activities, of patent misery and despair, the great misery and despair of the people that the arrogant and slow-witted habitually see instead of their own timidity and complacency."⁴⁶

The complacency of the FSLN in the face of neoliberal and ultraconservative Nicaraguan politics found new expression in the theme of "love and reconciliation" on which the party campaigned. Keeping to this theme, neither Murillo nor Ortega spoke of class struggle or even social conflict. For Murillo, social cleavages and tensions were reducible to resentment and hatred that can be overcome with love and reconciliation. Love and reconciliation legitimated another coalition, which brought in individuals and political movements from even the extreme right. For example, Ortega's running mate was Jaime Morales Carazo, who in the 1980s was a civilian director of the counterrevolutionary forces. Alluding to this, Ernesto Cardenal declared that the "united Nicaragua" of which Ortega spoke was not a revolutionary Nicaragua. Cardenal also asked what kind of a union the FSLN proposed: "A union of exploiters and exploited? One with thieves? With Somocistas? With criminals? The rich embracing the poor, with the rich staying rich and the poor staying poor? Is this the revolution? Is this Sandinismo? The peace they propose is treason."⁴⁷

Celia Hart also commented on the alliances the FSLN justified in terms of love and reconciliation:

Daniel Ortega has openly allied himself with Arnoldo Alemán, perhaps the most corrupt politician Nicaragua has ever known, and, even more, has chosen as his vice president one of the Contras who, with the backing of Ronald Reagan and the CIA, killed hundreds of young Sandinistas who were trying to save the Sandinista revolution. . . . And as a finishing touch for this new, misnamed Sandinismo, those who once raised the Red and Black flag are now rubbing shoulders with the Church and the right who worked together to destroy the revolution.⁴⁸

The FSLN campaign's message of reconciliation and love was congruent with the vision of consensual politics promoted by the IFIs and international aid agencies. From their perspective, class conflicts disappeared in this era of globalization. Thus any social conflicts that still exist are marginal and can be settled through dialogue among civil society actors interested in building democratic governability. By taking social conflict from the realm of the politically legitimate, this consensual view of politics treats conflict as a moral question. In doing so, it makes the status quo and its defenders the representatives of the good, because any challenge to this order must come from the forces of evil.

The nonconflictive view of politics adopted by the Sandinistas during the electoral campaign did not prevent their leaders from demonizing any who would challenge the presidential aspirations of Daniel Ortega. Note

how Rosario Murillo reacted to the former Sandinista mayor of Managua, Herty Lewites, when he decided to run against her husband:

Herty Lewites is a coward, an obscene manipulator, a walking swamp. He is a servile instrument of purid interests, the aberrant and perfidious interests of the empire and its servants; of the snakes and bloodsuckers who live by slithering before this empire and from sucking the innocent and heroic blood of all Nicaraguans. I accuse that gelatinous star of imposture, that vile, twisted, mediocre figure who saturates our TV screens, with the biggest media circus we've had to suffer in recent years.⁴⁹

There are several old and discredited anti-Semitic slurs that make their way into the FSLN's attack. Referring to Lewites's Jewish background, Rosario Murillo, Tomás Borge, and Daniel Ortega himself all warned against the "danger of the Lewites" and spoke of Judas to discredit their adversary.⁵⁰ Daniel Ortega went so far as to warn that a "Judas could end up hanged." The "Lewites phenomenon" was celebrated by progressives hoping for the democratization of the FSLN. It was also well received by the Nicaraguan right, who understood that a split Sandinista vote could help its favorite, Eduardo Montealegre. Nevertheless, from the moment he became a presidential candidate, no one heard Herty Lewites present a leftist vision for Nicaragua. During the struggle against Somoza, Lewites was the Frente's treasurer. During the 1980s, he gained fame as the administrator of the diplomatic stores that were opened in Nicaragua to earn dollars. He was also minister of tourism. He was a good mayor of Managua, but many were surprised by his decision to lead the renewal of Sandinismo. In fact, neither Lewites nor Ortega thought about the world from a leftist perspective. Both accepted neoliberalism's rules, and each was pragmatic in his own way.

Herty Lewites did succeed in building a coalition of minor parties from the left and center-left, which took the name of Alianza-MRS. The MRS formed in 1995, when Sergio Ramírez and other Sandinista leaders left the FSLN. The alliance led by Lewites took the name of the MRS because that organization was already a legally recognized party and the alliance needed that legal status. In the end, Lewites died several months before the elections and was replaced by his running mate Edmundo Jarquín.

The Alianza-MRS was never able to specify what its "refounding of Sandinismo" actually implied. The movement was Sandinista because many Sandinista activists participated, not because it had an economic, political, and social philosophy that presented a framework for a renewed Sandinista left. This theoretical and doctrinal weakness led the Alianza-MRS to have many of the same weaknesses as the FSLN itself. Both platforms presented

the same nonconflictive vision of politics, drawn from the same international financial institutions and aid agencies. Neither addressed the social tensions found in the country, even though Nicaragua had one of the worst levels of social inequality in the Americas.

The only conflicts the platform of the Alianza-MRS identified were those that fit within the neoliberal outlook that reigns in Nicaragua. That explains why the fight against the FSLN-PLC Pact and the corruption of those parties were its main planks. However, it was possible to put an end to political corruption in Nicaragua and undo the Pact and end up with nothing but clean, efficient neoliberalism.

Similarly, the Alianza-MRS promised transparent public management but never said what it understood by the word "public." Thus, the language used by the Alianza-MRS did nothing to show the people of Nicaragua that there were different conceptions of "public," "transparent," and "efficient." One can have a transparent and efficient administration, measured by an IFI's standards, and a very different one that is inspired by socialist or humanist values. And this difference can be measured in human lives.

The FSLN took the presidency in 2006 with 38 percent of the vote, due in part to their electoral strategy but perhaps more because Nicaraguans were tired of the indifference shown them by three consecutive rightist governments. But there was also the change in the electoral law, wrought by the Pact, that let a candidate avoid a runoff with 35 percent of the vote and a 5-point lead on the runner-up. Commentators joked that Ortega won the race riding a stationary bicycle, but in fact he went backward, taking 4.25 percent fewer votes than in 2001. What happened is that the FSLN-PLC Pact had moved the goalposts closer to where Ortega could get the ball.

In addition, the Sandinista win in 2006 was helped by a strong showing in the 2004 municipal elections, in which the FSLN took 43.82 percent of the vote, winning 87 of the country's 152 municipalities, including Managua.⁵¹ The PLC received 37.7 percent of the vote and won 57 municipalities. In March 2006, elections in the two Atlantic Coast autonomous regions saw the Sandinistas take 17 of 45 seats in the RAAN and 11 of 45 in the RAAS, not greatly different from four years earlier.⁵²

Sandinista municipal governments were good governments: an evaluation of municipal government performance, done for the Association of Municipalities of Nicaragua (Asociación de Municipios de Nicaragua, or AMUNIC) by the German Society for Technical Cooperation (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit, or GTZ) in 2006, found that twelve of the fifteen best-run municipalities had Sandinista administrations.⁵³ The success of Sandinista local governments reveals the existence of a party capable of winning elections and governing effectively. However,

municipal governments in Nicaragua have limited powers: looking after roads and streets and collecting garbage are their principal tasks.⁵⁴ It is the central government and the political dynamic unfolding at the center that shape the country's destiny.

Quo Vadis FSLN? Quo Vadis Nicaragua?

The FSLN that reached power in 1979 was able to expand Nicaragua's historical horizons and present the option of a Nicaragua built around three basic values: national sovereignty, social justice, and popular democracy. In contrast, the FSLN that won the elections in 2006 was a party that had resigned itself to acting pragmatically within the traditional Nicaraguan political morality and the rules of the game set by neoliberal economics.

The profound transformation the FSLN has undergone was recognized by a leading Sandinista business executive, Ricardo Coronel Kautz, in an article published in 2005 and never disowned or criticized by any member of the party. He comments that "ethics are a bourgeois prejudice" and that Nicaraguan politics were nothing more than

a witches brew of demagoguery, manipulation, deception, the sale of illusions, traps, gamesmanship, buying and selling people's dreams, blackmail, cynicism, bribes, pacts to split spoils, nepotism, so-called corruption, influence peddling, breaking promises, half lies and half truths, and all the rest. And that is how it has to be. It is in the marrow of the system and cannot be removed. It is how the system works. It is the system.⁵⁵

Coronel Kautz noted that the Nicaraguan right criticized the FSLN because the party had learned how to operate in Nicaragua's corrupt political system. The FSLN, he explained, "has had to learn that game." He added: "For the Frente learning that poses a grave risk because it has learned something contrary to its nature that lets it achieve indispensable tactical advantages at the cost of leaving [the party] permanently disfigured. But that is what is necessary to survive. In other words, do it or disappear. So in this game . . . the end justifies the means."⁵⁶

Coronel Kautz's self-evident pragmatism explains the absence of substantive and stable political orientations and ideological principles in the political actions of the FSLN during its first months in office. This lack of direction was clear in statements made by Foreign Affairs Minister Samuel Santos during his first visit to Spain in March 2007. Meeting with sympathizers from the 1980s and representatives of the Spanish aid community, Santos could not answer questions regarding Nicaragua's relations with

Hugo Chávez or how Managua would square that relationship with its ties to Washington. Neither could he explain why the Sandinistas had changed their position on abortion.

One of those at the meeting observed that Santos would say only that Nicaragua wanted good relations with everyone. He spoke in favor of international integration but did not indicate how to achieve it. He talked a lot about the need to improve living conditions and to address the problems of illiteracy and poverty. The minister reiterated Nicaragua's friendship with the American people and acknowledged the importance of the oil received from the Venezuelan government. Finally, he affirmed that his government was committed to the IMF's program to maintain economic stability.⁵⁷

The vagueness and contradictions of the FSLN administration were also noted by *Envío* in a review of Daniel Ortega's first 100 days in office.

[Within the FSLN] criticisms of neoliberalism coexist with adherence to the neoliberal policies of the IMF. It confronts the United States but seeks its favor. It cultivates friendships with both Chinas and wants investments from both. It coexists with the ALBA [Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas] and with the FTA [Free Trade Agreement], which leads to FTAA [Free Trade Area of the Americas]. Power is "citizens' power," but it is organized by a family that arrogates power to itself. The ruling couple manages these contradictions not from the presidential residence but from their own home, which doubles as the seat of the FSLN's secretariat. The revolution those two propose is "spiritual" and promotes a cultural regression. The only thing that is clear is the Pact and permanent presence of the same individuals in the three sides of the triangle of power.⁵⁸

Despite this confused political situation, there can be no doubt that the principal factor shaping the choices of the government of Daniel Ortega is his relation with Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez. Economic aid from Venezuela is crucial for Ortega's administration. And politically, Chávez has backed Ortega publicly and unreservedly. At Ortega's inauguration, in front of Arnoldo Alemán, who was the FSLN's guest, Chávez called Ortega an essential figure of the Latin American left. In this same visit to Managua, Chávez declared on television that he was one of Cardinal Obando y Bravo's admirers.

Still, from Ortega's perspective and perhaps from Chávez's too, the relationship between the two leaders is essentially pragmatic. Just as Ortega's behavior is little affected by principles or fixed values, neither is Chávez's twenty-first-century socialism clearly laid out. Henry Petrie Bejarano, a long-time Sandinista with a profound knowledge of the internal workings of the FSLN, commented that Daniel Ortega "can talk about socialism but can't conceptualize it." For Petrie Bejarano, "the sitting president [Ortega]

is a man of action but lacks a compass; thus he often acts instinctively and focused on the day to day, the right-now." Petrie Bejarano concludes by saying that the Sandinista administration acts like "it's shooting craps: if it rolls a three and its opponent a four, it does everything it can to beat him, whatever the cost."⁵⁹

In the game of short-term openings that the FSLN is playing, there is a debate about the future of a society that desperately needs a new vision. Political corruption and impunity have become institutionalized. The society that found the voice and spirit of Sandino in the 1970s and put an end to Somocismo today appears impotent when faced with the immorality created by the abuse of power by its leaders.

To date, none of the money stolen from the state during the Alemán administration has been recovered. No one is in jail serving time for those crimes. The primary architect of that corruption, Arnoldo Alemán, has been, since January 2009, a free man.⁶⁰

The current political state of Nicaraguan society is inexplicable if one ignores the cultural context within which the struggle for power in Nicaragua unfolds. In particular, it is necessary to look to the reaffirmation of resigned pragmatism and providentialism that has taken root since the failure of the Sandinista Revolution. The consolidation of these cultural values reflects people's lowered expectations and is consistent with the country's depressed political, economic, and social conditions. The democratic experiment that began in 1990 has been turned into a quinquennial raffle for the right to act arbitrarily and with impunity. Current corruption is as bad as, if not worse than, under the Somozas. *La Piñata*, for instance, was worse than anything done by the Somozas, because it was done in the name of Sandino and of the people after a cruel war in which thousands of young Nicaraguans gave their lives to end corruption.

The Catholic Church has also lowered its ethical standards. The church collaborated with the Somozas, even though it pretended not to. It kept up appearances and tried to maintain its distance from the dictators. By way of contrast, the collaboration between the Catholic Church hierarchy and the government of Arnoldo Alemán was open and shameless. The audacity with which the hierarchy defended and participated in the corruption of that government is also an indicator of existing moral conditions in the country.

It is not madness to state that, since 1990, Nicaragua is living a nightmare more terrifying and painful than anything it experienced during the Somoza era. Somocismo was a corrupt regime, but Nicaraguan society maintained hope. Sandinismo offered hope. In those days the Catholic Church, under the influence of liberation theology, also offered hope. In

today's Nicaragua, hope has faded and life is a punishment. Any movement that promises the material recovery of the country must first let Nicaraguans again dream of a better Nicaragua.

Notes

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9. Envío, "¿Cómo votó Nicaragua?" *Envío* 102 (April 1990), www.envio.org.ni/.
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11. Envío, "¿Cómo votó Nicaragua?"
12. Daniel Ortega, "Defender nuestro derecho a la rebelión," *Barricada Internacional* 339 (July 1991), 25.
13. Erik Aguirre, "De lucha ideológica a poder contranatura," *El Nuevo Diario*, April 4, 2007, www.elnuevodiario.com.ni.
14. Instituto de Estudios Nicaraguenses (IEN), *FSLN: De vanguardismo al acuerdo nacional* (Managua: Fundación Friederich Ebert en Nicaragua, 1993), 13.
15. *La Píñata* is capitalized to distinguish the transfer of wealth effected by the FSLN's leaders from the children's party game.
16. Ernesto Cardenal, *La revolución peridada* (Managua: ANAMA, 2003), 660–661.
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18. Carlos Fernando Chamorro, "La elección del 20 de octubre y el nuevo escenario político," *Pensamiento Propio* (July–December 1996): 3.

19. Envío, "Nicaragua comienza la cuenta regresiva," *Envío* 173 (August 1996), www.envio.org.ni/.
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22. Fruhling, González, and Buvolten, *Etnicidad y Nación*, 170, 205.
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5

A Politicized Judiciary

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YEARS OF CIVIL WAR AND A LEGACY OF PERSONALISM, CORRUPTION, and endemic poverty have influenced Nicaragua's political institutions, especially its judicial institutions.¹ Most political scientists say Nicaragua is a country "that never had an easy time," that is "unpredictable," or whose democracy is "undone."² In fact, the history of Nicaragua has always been marked by civil conflict and periodic foreign intervention that re-enforce a tendency to strongman rule (caudillismo). In this context, as political analyst David Dye points out, "political-cultural proclivities interact with key institutional arrangements to perpetuate the clientelistic exercise of power by the dominant power-holders."³

Nicaragua's judicial system combines all these features. The weakness of the judiciary has resulted in high levels of politicization within its structures. Nicaragua's courts are properly styled a captive of the executive.⁴ Consequently, the Nicaraguan judiciary in general and the Supreme Court in particular have historically been tainted by partisan favoritism. Judicial positions are used as patronage, and politicians interfere in court procedures.

In recent years, this tendency has been perpetuated through a political accord reached in 2000 between the Liberal politician Arnoldo Alemán Lacayo and the Sandinista politician Daniel Ortega that most Nicaraguans call "el Pacto," or the Pact.⁵ Every March, the Pact partners must by law renew the Pact by replacing or reconfirming the occupants of top-level positions whose terms have expired.⁶ The Pact aligned the distribution of power within the National Assembly and other state institutions, including the Supreme Court. Thus, after expanding the Supreme Court of Justice (Corte Suprema de Justicia, or CSJ), the Supreme Electoral Council (Consejo Supremo Electoral, or CSE), and the office of the Comptroller General of the Republic (Contralor General de la República, or CGR), the pacting