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Nicaragua

A critical left approach

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The world has been surprised by an impressive popular mobilization in Nicaragua, mainly of youth, which began in opposition to reforms to the social security system, but which has evolved to demand the resignation of the government. Its cost is tragic: dozens of dead, injured and detained, study and work centres destroyed, and a semi-paralysis of economic activity.

These events require an explanation. And in this regard, there are three explanations placed on the table: that of the right and the gringo empire, that of the Nicaraguan government, and that coming from the critical left.

The explanation of the right and the empire is that this is a “socialist” or “left” government which by its very nature is dictatorial and an enemy of democracy. But if that were the case, ownership would be collective, and it is not; private capitalist ownership is omnipresent, and the country is as neoliberal as many others in Latin America, so this argument does not help us to understand anything.

The government's explanation portrays the movement of young Nicaraguans as a conspiracy by the CIA. In his speech on April 21, 2018, Daniel Ortega accused the youth of being “small groups of the extreme right” who wanted to “destroy the peace enjoyed by Nicaragua.” As a result, his government would be the “victim” of a well-orchestrated offensive, similar to that of the “guarimbas” of Venezuela.

My explanation does not share anything with the previous ones.

In my opinion what we see is the outbreak of a very deep social discontent, accumulated over a decade, which is based on a set of contradictions between the government and the people, incubated in Nicaraguan capitalism, hand in hand with the unpopular decisions and the dictatorial and authoritarian attitudes of the duo Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo.

I will cite only ten of these contradictions between the government and the people:

First, the approval of the building the interoceanic canal by a Chinese company at a very high economic and social cost (US \$50 billion), has generated a strong discontent because it involves destroying many rural communities, obviously against their will, and giving up territorial sovereignty to the said company for a century. From this there has emerged a broad peasant movement and citizen opposition, which is repressed and vilified by the government, but which remains to this day.

Second, extractive activity, in particular mining, has almost doubled in terms of the area devoted to it in this period (from 12% to 22%), generating strong conflicts in rural areas and with environmental movements, which are also repressed.

Third, the pressure on land exerted by industrial monocultures such as African palm and sugar, as well as the great increase in livestock activity, leaves less land available for peasants.

Fourth, environmental neglect, whose last manifestation was the government's neglect of the reserve fire in Indio Maíz, has mobilized youth sectors in protest. [\[1\]](#)

Fifth, an authoritarian attitude to non-governmental organizations, especially human rights and feminists, who do not forgive arbitrariness, repression and accusations of sexual abuse, have led to high tension in governmental relations with the world of so-called “civil society”.

Sixth, the presidential re-election, prohibited by the Constitution, which was imposed using the same mechanism that Juan Orlando Hernández used: a Supreme Court ruling, which looked authoritarian. [2]

Seventh: The accusations of electoral fraud in the last two presidential elections, where the Ortegaista ticket was victorious.

Eighth: The Vice President Rosario Murillo, Ortega’s wife, exercises a strong control over the media that is resented by independent media, and has tried to control social media networks.

Ninth: The widespread corruption of public officials, who become millionaires overnight, while the people are experiencing economic difficulties, causes much discomfort. Starting with the same presidential couple, who are questioned for having accumulated resources from the “piñata” (the term used in Nicaragua to refer to the pillage of state assets). agreed with Arnoldo Aleman, and for managing around 4 billion dollars of ALBA resources, without accounting for their fate; also, there are cases such as that of Orlando Castillo Guerrero, an airport manager who embezzled millions.

Tenth: After several years of good relations with the government, a part of the Nicaraguan business community (affiliated with the powerful COSEP) has begun to doubt the convenience of continuing the marriage that it has maintained for a decade with Ortega-Murillo, a period in which it has benefited all along the line, for fear of losing the favour of the empire, after Donald Trump had the Nica-Act enacted and began to apply sanctions to Nicaraguan officials.

Despite this, Nicaragua has a good reputation for its cheap labour and the absence of crime. Maquilas flock there precisely because wages are among the lowest in Central America and in these conditions capitalist companies feel themselves to be in paradise. [3] The absence of crime, which goes hand in hand with employment is effectively Nicaragua’s best competitive advantage. Therefore, Nicaragua is a country which has had a significant if inequitable capitalist growth, in which strong economic and social contradictions have accumulated.

INSS, the detonating conflict

In this context, there was the conflict over the reform of the INSS (Nicaraguan Social Security Institute) demanded by the International Monetary Fund. It was not the first time that a reform was attempted (in 2013 there was one that failed), but this time it occurred when discontent for the causes indicated was at its maximum, especially among the youth who were born after the revolution of 1979. The protests began with those directly affected, the pensioners, and they were followed by the students and then other sectors of the population. Finally, the employers, who had previously broken off negotiations on this issue in the Tripartite Commission, joined in.

Therefore, the current crisis did not fall like lightning from a clear sky, but is explained by its background, structural and conjunctural problems which are difficult to resolve for a closed, authoritarian and repressive presidential couple.

The irrationality of the official argument

Therefore, saying that social demonstrations are a “conspiracy” to destabilize the government from small groups of the “ultra-right”, is a claim of a dictatorial government, unable to give the rational answers necessary to the problems raised, which insults the intelligence of the public.

Even the most uninformed observer would see that it is impossible for the CIA to have so many agents infiltrated and paid for throughout the country, retirees, workers and an army of young people enrolled as university students, to, at the appropriate time, “destabilize” the government. But it is understandable: the government, accustomed to prevailing all the time, never expected such a strong social reaction and has not been able to string together a “better” explanation.

It is the classic strategy of a “progressive” government that feels cornered by its people: they manipulate the anti-imperialist sentiment of the people, who feel deep respect for the 1979 Sandinista Revolution (including he who writes these lines), so that any argument is created, under the authority of the “leader”, Daniel Ortega. Arguments that reach the absurd; for example, that university students are destroying their own universities, that as snipers they shoot their own classmates, that they torture themselves and disappear; they are burning public buildings to attract social repudiation towards themselves and so on. A scenario which seems more like one written by an advisor to Juan Orlando Hernández or the Honduran Military Police.

They do not say that the violence was initially unleashed by motorized gangs of the government's youth clientele, used as a shock group and cannon fodder against other young people. Everything in the sight of and tolerated by the police authorities. And when young people defend themselves from these groups, or when they unleash their indignation on symbols of the government, then the ruling party proclaims the “demonstration” of their accusations. Do they think we are idiots? Fortunately, the diffusion of cellular technology has made it possible to film when the government shock groups have been protagonists of such events.

Some comrades tend to make simplistic comparisons. They say it's a script similar to the one used by the gringos in Venezuela. If we were talking about Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, Ortega's explanation would make sense because, in Venezuela, the “guarimbas” were organized by a far-right party (Voluntad Popular, the party of Leopoldo López) to destabilize that government. But it is **not** the case in Nicaragua. In this country, the movement was self-convened by progressive sectors of student youth. The analysis to be objective, has to be based on reality.

Seeing things from this perspective allows us to explain several “strange” things about the Nicaraguan government: is it not strange that Ortega was the first government to recognize Juan Orlando Hernández and that he never questioned the criminal repression of the latter against the Honduran people? Is not it strange that the US government during the last eleven years did not “bother” Ortega with any serious attempt at “destabilization”? In comparison, the empire promoted coups in Venezuela, Honduras, Paraguay and Ecuador in that period. Although Nicaragua is a much weaker country than those, during that time, it was left “quiet”.

This is explained by the eleven-year-old honeymoon that he sustained benefiting private, national and international companies, with which he cultivated juicy business deals, including the putschist governments of Pepe Lobo (another Honduran president) and Juan Orlando Hernández, and with the reactionary Nicaraguan Catholic Church (hence his slogan of “Christian Socialism and Solidarity”).

Now those times are past. The Ortega-Murillo presidential couple now faces the hostility of the empire, which seeks to domesticate its government, through economic boycott actions; there is also the divorce with national private business or a significant sector of it; and it is actively repudiated by a good part of the people. The direction that the

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country will take will depend, on the one hand, on the response of the government to the protest movement launched by its youth and other popular sectors, as well as the capacity of this movement to conquer better democratic and social standards. The coin is in spin and it is still premature to say what will happen. But there is no doubt that, with the social mobilization of recent weeks, whether it advances or retreats, a new era begins, in which a new historic subject has arisen without fear of speaking out and deciding its fate.

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[1] The biological reserve Indio Maíz is the second biggest extent of protected rain forest in Nicaragua. Since April 2018, a forest fire has burned more than 3,855 hectares of the reserve, which is on the border with Costa Rica. The Nicaraguan government has rejected offers of aid from Costa Rica.

[2] Hernández is the fraudulently elected President of Honduras.

[3] *Maquilas*, an abbreviation of *Maquiladoras* are factories benefitting from tax and custom duty exemptions as well as generally not being obliged to respect employment law.