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Nicaragua

Support the Popular Rebellion in Nicaragua – Oppose U.S. Intervention

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At this moment, the government of President Daniel Ortega and his party, the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN or Sandinistas), face a popular rebellion from below on a national scale. We look here at the origins of this rebellion, at the alternatives facing it, and at the responsibilities of those of us in the United States toward the people of Nicaragua.

Daniel Ortega and the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN or Sandinistas) led a popular revolution to overthrow the Somoza dynastic dictatorship in 1979, and, despite a U.S.-organized and U.S.-sponsored counter-revolution and subsequent civil war, they attempted to improve the lives of the Nicaraguan people. Daniel Ortega was first elected president in 1985, but lost popularity because of refusal to distribute land to the peasants, heavy-handed dealings with the indigenous, and the adoption of conscription; above all the war demoralized the Nicaraguan people who wanted peace.

Nearly Thirty Years of Accommodation to Conservatism

With the loss of the 1990 election, the Ortega government carried out the famous *piñata*, giving government property to Ortega and other FSLN leaders. Once the conservative government of President Violeta Chamorro took power, Daniel Ortega and his brother Humberto Ortega formed a relationship with her son-in-law Antonio Lacayo and began a process of accommodation to the corrupt Conservative and Liberal parties, formed relationships with the country's business class, and joined with the conservative Catholic Church under Cardinal Obando y Bravo. There followed a series of unethical political and economic arrangements that continued through the presidencies of Arnaldo Alemán and Enrique Bolaños governments over a period of 15 years.

When Ortega's won election to the presidency in 2001, he turned Nicaragua into a typical "developing" capitalist country, suppressing democracy, social movements, and the labor unions to attract U.S. and other foreign investment. The Nicaraguan economy grew rapidly, but the benefits flowed to the capitalist class. Government social programs financed by the United States or by Venezuela, failed to raise the standard of living of the people despite rapid economic growth. Ortega meanwhile gathered all power into his own hands: the presidency, the National Assembly, the Supreme Court, as well as controlling most of the TV stations and many organizations, such as the labor unions. Having changed the Nicaraguan Constitution, he was reelected in 2006, 2011, and 2016; that is, he has been president for four terms, three consecutively. In 2016 Ortega's wife Rosario Murillo was elected vice-president.

Part of the American Imperial System

While Ortega and the FSLN claimed to be "anti-imperialist," in fact they made Nicaragua an integral part of the U.S. imperial system of economic dominance, political hegemony, and military supremacy in Latin America. Under Ortega, Nicaragua adopted policies intended to attract U.S. and other foreign investment, such as suppressing independent worker movements, crushing independent labor unions, and maintaining a low-wage economy. The strategy was successful and Nicaragua sent 54 percent of its products to the United States and 8.4 percent to Canada. Ortega also worked closely with the U.S. government, being a large recipient of U.S. economic aid, engaging in collaboration with the U.S. Army and Navy, and working with the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) of the United States. While he had many photos taken with Communist and populist leaders (the Castros, Chávez, Maduro, and Evo Morales), his

government had become an integral part of the U.S. security system as well as of U.S. economic hegemony in the region.

Yet Part of the Reactionary “Axis of Resistance”

Yet it is also true that Nicaragua’s opportunistic foreign policy, however, has never been in line with that of the United States. At the time of the Nicaraguan Revolution, through the 1980s, and until the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989, Ortega and the FSL maintained strong ties to Fidel Castro’s Cuba and to the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, as well as with Kim Jong-Il’s Communist government of North Korea. Ortega and the FSLN saw themselves as part of the “socialist camp,” never raising any criticism of its undemocratic regimes. At the same time Nicaragua received aid from Mexico and other Latin American countries, as well as from Social Democratic party governments in Europe.

After the fall of Communism in Europe, Ortega reoriented Nicaragua’s foreign policy, supporting the authoritarian regimes of Muammar Gaddafi of Libya and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Iran. At the same time, he formed strong ties to the more populist and democratically elected governments of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and Evo Morales in Bolivia. Chávez of Venezuela, through the regional economic institution ALBA, provided Ortega with billions of dollars in economic aid. He has continued to be allied with Venezuela under the Maduro government.

By the 2010s we could speak of Nicaragua as part of the so-called “Axis of Resistance,” an alliance of rightwing and authoritarian governments including Iran, Syria, and Russia. Beginning in 2006, Ortega expanded relations with Russia and by 2015 strengthened military relations, opening ports to Russian Navy ships and receiving Russian military equipment, such as armored personnel carriers, aircraft and mobile rocket launchers, and T-72 tanks. While the “Axis of Resistance” is sometimes referred to as “anti-imperialist,” it is in reality several of the nations involved have their own imperial ambitions in Europe or the Middle East, most obviously in the case of Russia’s seizure of the Crimea in 2014.

The Nicaraguan government has never spoken out in favor of the democratic social movements in the authoritarian countries with which it has allied itself.

An Authoritarian Regime

Beginning with his election in 2006, Ortega used the power of the government—controlling the executive, legislative, and judicial branches—to strengthen his party to construct an authoritarian regime. For over a decade he has used not only the police but also the FSLN and Sandinista Youth and their *turbas* (thugs) to impose his political power and to attack and beat political opponents, social movement activists, labor union organizers and workers, as well as university students. Physical attacks were often preceded with and accompanied by attack from the media attempt to denigrate and discredit any opponents. Most notorious was Ortega’s and Murillo’s attack on the feminist movement that advocated a liberalization of abortion laws and other improvements for women. Murillo vilified them as agents of imperialism. The authoritarian and violent character of the Ortega regime first came to widespread public attention in 2013 and 2014 when police and thugs violently attacked farmers and environmentalists concerned about the building of a transoceanic canal.

The current popular rebellion began with protests by elderly people against the social security reform, which met with police repression. That led students to join the peaceful protests. After Ortega’s government and his party began fire

on and kill students, the entire society erupted in a popular, peaceful rebellion. The full brutal violence of the regime against its population, which went so far as to murder mourning mothers leading the Mother's Day march, killing thirteen and wounding dozens. Since then the Ortega government's police and thugs have been murdering activists involved in the movement, attacking small towns, burning public buildings and markets, and beating and torturing as they went along, the people reacted by blocking the highways (*tranques*) and barricading their towns or their neighborhoods.

After several weeks, the situation became chaotic and other actors, such as criminal gangs, have sprung up to take advantage of the situation through looting and theft, and they have also increased the violence. While this is extremely unfortunate, it does not change the fundamental political situation, which is a conflict between an authoritarian government and a popular rebellion.

The Opposition

Since the movement arose from below through social networks organizing social media, a spontaneous and grassroots movement, it has been difficult to identify leaders. The students did attempt to create leaders and various groups have attempted to create coalitions, but give the chaotic and violent situation, it has been very difficult to create very stable organizations. Outside of Ortega and the FSLN, the best organized groups in the society are COSEP, the business council, and the Catholic Church hierarchy, both fundamentally conservative organizations that had accepted and supported Ortega's government for more than a decade.

The left has virtually no organization in Nicaragua for quite understandable reasons. First, Ortega and the FSLN, who had led the 1979 revolution, had claimed to be the left, raising the slogan of "Christian, Socialist, and in Solidarity." So on the one hand, they claimed the title of being the left, but on the other hand, their authoritarian regime, with its oppressive and exploitative character, discredited the left. It is not surprising then that socialist ideas would not have much appeal to most Nicaraguans today.

Two splits from the FSLN, the Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS) and the Movement for the Rescue of Sandinismo (MPRS), formed by former Sandinista *comandantes* and political leaders, both developed a critique of the Ortega regime and a social democratic political platform. Neither, however, despite their democratic and pro-working class views, succeeded in finding a social base in the society. A Christian Alternative group, inspired by the Theology of Liberation, also failed to build a movement or a real party. These social democratic and theology of liberation ideas, however, have some resonance, and no doubt university professors and priests who espouse them have had some impact on their congregations.

The Alternatives Facing Nicaragua at the Moment

At the present moment, faced with an overwhelmingly popular rebellion, Ortega and his government are trying to keep themselves in power by attempting to discredit the opposition and to slow the movement. Ortega and his spokespersons such as Paul Oquist suggest that the United States government has organized the movement and is carrying it out through agents in Nicaragua, though they provide no evidence of such a conspiracy.

The popular rebellion has raised the slogan, *Que se vayan ya*. (Let them get out now.), that is that Ortega and his party leaders should leave office and ideally leave the country. This appears to be the sentiment throughout the

country.

The business council (COSEP) and the Catholic Church have called and been carrying out intermittently a national dialogue with Ortega aimed at seeking a peaceful resolution to the crisis that has included among other things calling early national elections. COSEP has attempted to establish ties with the U.S. government and with Congressional legislators, no doubt with the hope of U.S. support for a conservative, pro-business political outcome.

The United States government has come out strongly against Ortega, but it would clearly favor some transition that brings to power a new conservative, neoliberal, pro-United States government that can take over the existing state, that is the army and the police. No doubt that U.S. diplomats and political fixers are busy in Nicaragua attempting to construct the government they want and preparing to foist it on the Nicaraguan people.

What Can We in the United States Do?

We as Americans should give our full support to the popular rebellion and its call for a return to democracy because the elimination of the Ortega dictatorship and any increase in democracy would be a progressive outcome. If Ortega's government falls then farmers and environmentalists can work to stop the canal, women can organize for abortion rights, and workers can strike to build independent unions.

We should take a strong stand against any U.S. political or military intervention in the country. The United States government under either Democrats or Republicans has never been a friend of the Nicaraguan people, and the Trump government would certainly not be an exception. We should raise the slogan "Hands Off Nicaragua!"

We should at the same time be proponents of international solidarity among the world's peoples to support the Nicaraguan people against their oppressive government. Whenever the situation calms down, we should make personal contact with the Nicaraguan people to let them know that they support from people abroad. We should especially work to develop relations with Nicaraguan labor and social movement activists.

At present, we should support the calls for democracy, social justice, and national sovereignty, though if things were to radicalize and move to the left, we should call for not only a political but also a social revolution that would lead to a democratic socialist society.

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