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Survey

Central America in the 21st Century

- IV Online magazine - 2009 - IV409 - February 2009 -

Publication date: Saturday 14 February 2009

From the 1970s to the â€˜90s three out of the five countries that comprise Central Americaâ€”El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaraguaâ€”were involved in civil wars and a fourth, Honduras, was turned into a staging group for the U.S.-backed contras. These countries suffered tremendous displacement, caused by war and poverty. Many were forced into exile for economic and/or political reasons, and most fled north, to Mexico, the United States and Canada. (Panama is often added, but is not considered part of Central America.)

[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/Daniel_Ortega_2008.jpg]
Daniel Ortega: leads an authoritarian regime that instigates violence while claiming to embody the heritage of Sandino.

As Kim Moody noted in his two-part article in ATC 127 and 128 (March/April and May/June 2007), U.S. immigration had declined in the 1950s and remained stagnant in the next decade, but between 1970 and 2004 the foreign-born population rose from 9.7 million to 34.2 million. Of the 34.2 million, 21 million were not citizens. It is estimated that of the 20 million immigrants employed or looking for work in 2004, almost 12 million were not citizens. By 1984, something like a half-million Salvadorans made it to the United States, the majority settling in the Los Angeles area.

The immigration explosion occurred in the 1980s, when those coming from Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean were “fleeing from the wreckage of globalization.” In the case of the Central American countries, U.S. military intervention was the foremost cause, but a secondary cause (and the primary cause for Mexico and the Caribbean) was the promotion of loans to Third World countries that led these countries to “open up” their economies. Restrictions on foreign investment and tariffs were reduced or eliminated, wages were frozen while prices rose and productive enterprises were privatized. U.S. investment in agribusiness and plantation farming drove millions off the land, Free Trade Zones were set up in the Caribbean and Mexico.

According to the Inter-American Development Bank, Central Americans living in the United States were able to send home $12.16 billion in 2007:

El Salvador $2.7 billion

Guatemala $4.1 billion

Honduras $2.7 billion

Nicaragua $900 million

(Immigrants from the richer countries of Central America remitted $590 million to Costa Rica and $320 million to Panama.)

These remittances are worth between 9.4% and 25.5% of these countries’ respective Gross Domestic Product. For Guatemala they account for six times the amount of direct foreign investment, for El Salvador seven times, for Honduras three times and for Nicaragua it is double. But while this money is vital to aid the individual receiving families, it also decreases demands upon those states to provide public services ranging from funding education and health to unemployment benefits and old-age pensions. Depressed wages encourage migration, and remittances are the grease that allow the state’s withdrawal of social investment. Remittances represent the home country’s social

safety value. Jose Luis Rocha, a Nicaraguan researcher and member of the monthly magazine, envio, concludes that “The redistributive effect of remittances is, therefore, a poisoned gift, because they benefit many families, but represent a dislocated, de-ideologized and atomized strategy, making them more likely to be coopted in a strategy of the elites….” (“Remittances Are Far More Than A Development Panacea,” envio (volume 27, #320, March 2008, 59).

In the second part of this two-part article, Rocha examines the nature of the cooptation: Remittances allow the families in the countries of origin to buy cell phones and other consumer items, thus expanding markets. This growth strategy, however, has no productive backing or “a long-term development vision that considers, among other things, the physical problem of the relation between inhabitants and availability of water, or the capacity to provide food and energy services to the rapidly growing urban masses.” (volume 27, #31, April 2008, 48)

Ideal Immigration

From the point of view of U.S. business, the ideal immigration pattern is “circular.” That is, the country of destination needs labor and a “temporary worker program” can regulate the labor market. Such a program channels workers to jobs and returns them when they are no longer needed. Thus unregulated and especially “undocumented” immigrants are a problem: they move, they change jobs, they band together with other workers to improve their wages and working conditions, they may not even go home (or have a home to go to) when they are not “needed.”

Between 1990 and 2007, the U.S. government deported 24 million immigrantsâ€”some as they attempted to enter the country, others picked up by immigration officials, and still others deported after they have been convicted of a crime. After the 1992 Rodney King riots, California implemented anti-gang laws and prosecutors began to charge young gang members as adults, sending hundreds to jail on felonies. With the passage in 1996 of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act, non-U.S. citizens sentenced to a year or more in prison were to be repatriated to their country of origin. As a consequence, between 1998 and 2005 U.S. Immigration deported 46,000 convicts back to Central America. Over 90% were deported to El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. Many had immigrated to the United States as children and some didn’t even know Spanish. Instead of dealing with the problems of poverty, the United States has found a cheap way to export some of its social problems.

Of all those deported in 2007, 98.56% are from Latin America: 88.92% from Mexico, 7.76% from Central American, with the remaining 1.9% from Latin America and the Caribbean. On the other hand, for Latin Americans who obtained permanent U.S. residence in 2007, Mexicans were 19% and Central Americans 5%.

But an ever large number of Central American immigrants are deported from Mexico. Between 2001 and 2007, while the U.S. deported 472,956 Guatemalan, Salvadoran, Honduran and Nicaraguan immigrants, Mexico deported 1,128,256.

CAFTA vs. Fair Trade

The four Central American countries being discussed are primarily agricultural countries that have raised particular products for import into the United States. Traditionally these have been “dessert” foods: bananas, coffee, sugar, but have also included cotton and beef. More recently, they include niche items, from flowers to snow peas. Two years after passage of the Central American Free Trade Agreement (DR-CAFTAâ€”the Dominican Republic also signed on), the treaty’s promises of development have not been realized in any of four countries. Frequently a lack of infrastructure prevents the rural farmer from being able to participate in international trade. For example, in Nicaragua

only 10% of the roads are paved. While electricity doubles the farmers' productive capacity, only half of Nicaragua has electricity. Another disadvantage for the Nicaraguan farmer is the inability to complete the paperwork and buy the licenses necessary to carry out trade across borders.

Just as DR-CAFTA was implemented the cost of inputs increased dramatically, while the price of the agricultural product did not. Between January 2006 and March 2008, food prices rose 68%, the price of rice doubled, corn rose 128% and wheat rose 168%. Most small- and medium-sized Central American farmers were unable to obtain credit. On the other hand, U.S. agriculture was able to move into these countries' markets with corn, rice, meat, wheat and dairy products, thus undermining local production. Employment did not expand, although the larger foreign corporations did employ more people; generally these workers came from rural and urban areas where farms and business were unable to make a living. Thus jobs may be created, but they are frequently low paying. Migration out of each country hasn't been halted either.

Intellectual property under DR-CAFTA extended any U.S. patent on drugs for twenty years, thus staving off a country's ability to produce generic drugs. Lastly, DR-CAFTA has opened the door to foreign-owned companies setting up megaprojects such as large-scale mining and hydroelectric dams. Most often these lead to kicking people, particularly indigenous communities, off their land or threatening to poison the water, air and land surrounding their farms. ("DR-CAFTA: Effects and Alternatives," The Stop CAFTA Coalition's Third Annual Report)

DR-CAFTA meshes well with the $10 billion, Plan Puebla-Panama development project. Mexico and the Central American countries have agreed to create an integrated transport and industrial corridor that will link up with the United States and Canada. This system of agricultural modernization, production and trade means that particularly the rural, indigenous population will be displaced in order that the countries' natural resources can be accessed, exploited and transported. These include oil, minerals, lumber and electricity. In the case of Guatemala, many local communities have organized and mobilized to oppose the construction of these projects, thus disrupting the "deal" that the Guatemalan government has arranged with various international corporations, most specifically U.S. and Canadian companies. They are not against development. For example, they would like to meet their energy needs through decentralized, publicly owned and renewable energy sources such as solar panels or small-scale hydroelectric project rather than through the construction of large dams that would destroy their land. (See articles by Cyril Mychalejko in ATC 117 and 119.)

Two Central American countries, Honduras and Nicaragua, have also signed on to the Latin American Bolivarian Alternative (ALBA), an initiative proposed and, to a large extent, underwritten by Venezuela. ALBA is seen as an alternative to DR-CAFTA. It is based on the concept of sharing each nation's cooperative advantages thus creating a dimension of solidarity. The idea is that the creation of regional compensation funds will mean a differentiated treatment in order to achieve social and economic objectives. A number of institutions have been created to facilitate this, including Petroalba, Albagas, Albaelectric. This is to facilitate access to oil well below market prices with payments over a longer period. Albacom, Telesur and ALBATV are the parallel institutions to develop communication while ALLBA-Medicines is for the importation of generic drugs and ALBA-Food for accessing agricultural and industrial supplies. Each state would be in charge of implementing these projects but in practice they are being implemented by public-private links.

But in both Honduras and Nicaragua ALBA was signed without any involvement or consultation from civil society. While most organizations agree with the social, distributive, educational, food security and poverty reduction objectives of ALBA, the lack of information about how these can be implemented indicates a troubling lack of transparency. How should the aid be distributed? What technical criteria will be applied? How can the most vulnerable groups within the rural sector be prioritized? Will there be favoritism that will simply reproduce or reinforce existing inequalities?

One other factor that is important in looking at Central America is the amount of U.S. interest in remilitarizing the region, through Washington's "war on drugs" compounded with its "war on terror." This is most clearly demonstrated by looking a little further south, to Colombia. Since 2000 Washington has spent more than $5 billion in military and counter-narcotics assistance to the county. U.S.-based corporations (Chiquita Brands International, Drummond Co. and Coca-Cola) have been accused of colluding with paramilitary forces.

In June 2008 President Bush signed "Plan Mexico," which could allocate up to $1.6 billion to Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean countries to design and carry out counter-narcotics, counter-terrorism and border security measures. Within the month Amnesty International called for an investigation into why a U.S.-based private security company was teaching techniques such as "holding a detainee down in a pit full of excrement and rats and forcing water up the nostrils of the detainee in order to secure information" to Mexican police. And despite the escalating violence in Mexico and Central America, Washington signed a $2.6 million aid package to El Salvador in October 2008 to fight gangs.

Let's look at the condition of Central American countries today. What is the situation that those who are deported, or voluntarily return for one or another reason, find themselves facing when they go back to their country of origin? What is the political and economic situation for those who never left, or have returned?

Guatemala

During the 36-year civil war (1960 to the signing of the Peace Accords of 1996) more than 200,000 people were killed. In the early 1980s the army, military police and "civil defense patrols" they organized carried out massacres in 450 Mayan communities scattered across the rural highlands. Thousands fled into the mountains where troops pursued them, destroying crops and bombing their camps. Some Guatemalans were able to cross the Mexican border, where refugee camps were set up. Over the course of the civil war, one million Guatemalans became internal or external refugees. For those who remained in the villages, daily life was strictly controlled by the military. Kidnapping, rape, torture and disappearance was the way the army terrorized the population. It has subsequently been established that during the civil war the military or its paramilitary face committed 93% of all human rights violations and 99% of all the sexual violence against women.

In his January 2008 inauguration speech President Alvaro Colom Caballeros committed his government to "a social democratic government, a government with a social focus." However he also spoke of his election as "a political miracle," indicating how fragile the country's civilian system remains.

As part of the peace process refugees living in camps across the border organized their return under difficult circumstances and, accompanied by international observers, received some compensation and land. Today 12 million people live in the country. It has the lowest literacy level of all the Central American countries (70%) and the highest percentage of indigenous people. It also has the most unequal land distribution in the Western Hemisphere, with 2% owning 70% of the productive lands.

In violation of the Peace Accords that were signed 11 years ago, the military has grown and is deployed in urban and rural areas to carry out internal security functions. Given that there are more than 5,000 killings a year, citizens are not safer now that the civil war is a closed chapter. More than 50 candidates and political activists were murdered during the last election cycle and 500-600 women are murdered each year, but the police, army and judicial system are not committed to investigating, pursuing or punishing crimes against women, or other civilians. In a country with high unemployment and underemployment, youth are criminalized. "Plan Escoba" ("Operation Broomsweep") was implemented five years ago in order to deploy 4,000 reserve army troops to the capital and to treat minors picked up

for criminal behavior to be treated as adults.

Another provision of the Peace Accords that has not been met is the requirement to open up and declassify the archives of the security forces, and to locate the bodies of those murdered and disappeared. The violence expressed in the murders of women, political activists and trade unionists exists because of clandestine and armed groups that depend on corrupt politicians to facilitate international drug trafficking (often in collaboration with Colombian cartels) and to keep the population under control. These groups, dependent on politicians and former military officers, also engage in “social cleansing” that targets gangs and women.

Conflicts are solved by violent escalation: Since 2006 in the town of Coatepeque, in Quetzaltenango department, municipal authorities have attempted to displace traditional markets by forcibly moving them to a mega market, constructed with money from the Inter-American Bank, on the outskirts of town. This market is close to a garbage dump and two cemeteries, but charges more rent for vendor stands that the centrally located markets. Evictions began at the end of 2007; martial law was imposed a year later. Just before Christmas, 2008 Armando Sanchez, a lawyer advising the vendors, was shot and killed. On January 13, 2008 Amando Corozon Monzon was murdered while opening his market stand.

In 2008 the last unionized Guatemalan maquila, Choishin, closed without paying full back benefits, including government-mandated severance pay. Some of the work force are holding out for their severance pay as well as relocation rights and no blacklisting. While this might remind us of the Republic Windows’ workers and their successful sit-in, the situation in Guatemala will not have such a united and triumphant ending.

There are still a few unions in the county, including the Union of Izabal Banana Workers (SITRABI), one of six unions filing a complaint (joined by the AFL-CIO) under CAFTA’s provisions, charging that the Guatemalan government is not upholding labor laws or prosecuting crimes against union members. Days later, one of its members was assassinated on the grounds of Del Monte’s Guatemalan subsidiary. Being a union activist is dangerous in Guatemala. In the first five months of 2008 there had been eight murders, one attempted murder, two drive-by shootings and the kidnapping and gang rape of a top union official’s daughter.

According to the Guatemalan Office of Human Rights Ombudsman, during the first three months of 2008 U.S. deportations to Guatemala increased by 20%. Most were indigenous people rounded up in mass factory sweeps.

El Salvador

The country is the smallest in Central America, but the most densely populated (seven million). Its economy is the third largest in the region (after Costa Rico and Panama). Unlike Guatemala’s majority indigenous population, the indigenous population was finished off in a 1932 massacre. Since then the traditional dominant class of coffee growers has vied for power with the armed forces, which provided the oligarchy with an iron fist, enriched its top officers and jockeyed for governmental power. An insurgency in the later part of the 1970s led to the overthrow of the traditional oligarchy in 1980, but the Christian Democrats, the most moderate of the insurgent forces, almost immediately took power for itself, and found itself in an alliance with the military. This led to a new civil war (1980-92), in which 180,000 died.

During the course of the civil war several important Catholics murdered killed by state security. Most famous was the 1980 murder of Monsignor Oscar Arnulfo Romero, killed as he was saying Sunday mass. In 1989 six Jesuits, intellectual and political activists, and their housekeeper and her daughter were brutally murdered. In another case, three U.S. nuns were stopped at an army checkpoint, raped and murdered. The army attempted to blame the

guerrillas for the crimes.

A 1993 report issued by members of the Truth Commission concluded that former Major Roberto D'Aubuisson gave the order to kill Romero, with precise instructions to his security service, which functioned as a "death squad." The commission named names, and pointed out subsequent cover-ups by state agents, thus ensuring impunity for some of the assassins. Five days later the legislature passed a general amnesty law that seemingly closed the case on any further punishment for human rights violators.

The Archdiocese of San Salvador's Legal Protection office took the case to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, which ruled, in 2000, that the Salvadoran state was responsible for the denial of justice and issued three recommendations: complete an investigation and punish all direct violators, make reparations of all those violated and nullify the amnesty law. Almost a decade later the state has not moved to implement these recommendations.

In fact, the governing party, the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA), although led by powerful businessmen from banking, import, telecommunications and agro-industrial sectors, continues to glorify the role of the military. On the other hand, ARENA attempts to de-legitimatize the FMLNâ€"the main opposition party, which emerged out of the guerrilla movementâ€"by blaming it for all the violence of the civil war and linking it to terrorism, violence and chaos today.

In September 2006 the legislature passed a Special Anti-Terrorism Law over the opposition of the social movement, the Christian Democrats and the FMLN, all of which argued that the bill was more a legal instrument of social control than an attempt to block possible acts of terrorism. That law seems to have been act 1 in ARENA's plan to punish forward its stalled privatization plans.

Throughout the 1990s El Salvador was the region's neoliberal model. It implemented a structural adjustment program, deregulated the basic basket of essential goods, promoted the sale of cooperative agrarian reform lands and deregulated the banks. Pushing through a tax reform that eliminated taxes on coffee and sugar exports, it scrapped capital wealth tax and implemented a regressive value-added tax. Most of the state's economic activities were privatized including the airport, telephone and electricity distribution services, and the Urban Housing Institute. By 2001 it dollarized the economy. Still to come is the privatization of the water and health systems and much of the education.

The massive mobilization against the privatization of the health system, led by the health sector unions and health workers who occupied the streets in 2002-04, was successful in stopping this right-wing project. Hundreds of thousands of Salvadorans participated, but also put the government on notice that it would have to resort to firmer hand to stop the social movement from destabilizing the neoliberal project.

In launching a new and controversial plan to decentralize public water service, the government chose to begin in the Suchitoto municipality, which has been governed by the FMLN since 1994, and carefully prepared to police and army forces in the most provocative way. On July 2, 2007 community organizations organized a Water Forum in the main square and invited social organizations from all over the country to attend. According to the Archbishopric's Legal Tutelage Office, by 7AM a contingent of riot police, elite police assault units and the military, equipped with semi-tanks mounted with heavy-caliber machine guns arrived. An army platoon leader told residents who had set up a roadblock nine kilometers away that he had presidential orders to repress any highway protest. When residents requested to stay for three-hours, he gave them five minutes. The residents grouped together, waiting for police action, but then the platoon, backed up by two helicopters, fired rubber bullets.

Over the course of the day two communities were attacked by armed forces, 14 people were arrested and 62 injured. The 14 were charged in a newly created Special Instruction Court that had been inaugurated a few months before. These courts, which many legal experts consider unconstitutional, were created to treat cases involving organized crime and kidnapping. The 14 were charged with causing aggravated damage and acts of terrorism against public officials.

El Salvador has high rates of crime and human rights violations that are presumably linked to drug trafficking and squads of hired killers. As a result, El Salvador has declared “a war on gangs.” In July 2003 the legislature passed a “mano dura” (“strong hand”) law that advocated immediate imprisonment for 2-5 years for youth 12 or older simply for having gang-related tattoos or flashing gang signs. By August 2004 a total of 20,000 gang members were arrested, although 95% were released once the Supreme Court declared the law violated the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In 2004 a new “mano super dura” was pushed through the legislature. While evidence is necessary in order to charge youth with gang membershipâ€”thus formally respecting the UN Conventionâ€”the new law stiffened penalties (2-5 years in prison for members, 9 years for gang leaders). Over the last five years the prison population has risen from 6,000 to 12,000, with 40% being gang members. Yet crime rates have risen.

More than 16 community activists, trade unionists and FMLN activists have been murdered over the last two years but authorities tend to discard any political motivation for the killings and these killings remain unsolved. For example, Miguel Angel Vasquez, leader of the Electrical Workers’ Union was dispatched with two bullets in his head, in the style of assassinations committed during the civil war.

The Penal Code was since been modified to create a special category for “aggravated public disorder,” with increased penalties for public protests. The popular movement continues, however, particularly around the path of Plan Puebla-Panama with opposition to megaprojects such as a thermoelectric plant or a container port that will destroy both family and commercial fishing.

Elections are slated for early 2009, first the municipal elections, then the presidential one. While the party in power has the advantage of controlling the apparatus and using the media to spread fear, the FMLN is by all accounts in the lead. President Antonio Saca announced a salary increase for public employees (1.84% of the population) and package of 19 measures dubbed “Alliance with the Family,” designed for the electoral battle, not for social investment. With only 6-7% GDP going to basic social programs such as education and health, El Salvador has the lowest per-capita social investment in the region. (The Latin American average is 13%.) The decline in the living standards and a reactivation of social movements even in the face of intimidation puts the FMLN, for all its problems, in the most favorable position it has enjoyed.

By the end of 2007 it was estimated that 740 Salvadorans leave their country for the United States every day.

Honduras

Although Honduras did not suffer through a civil war, in the 1980s it became a staging ground for contra training camps and U.S. air bases. The state took care of its left by quietly arranging extra-judicial killings.

This nation of 7.4 million has more than one out of every four workers unemployed. It has a history of corrupt politicians who used their office as a way of acquiring property and slavishly supported U.S. policy in the region. Last

spring a 38-day hunger strike by a group of young public prosecutors forced a review of cases documenting corruption by the most prestigious businessmen and politicians. Then in September, one of the most militant of the strike initiators, Luis Javier Santos was shot nine times. Although he survived the attack, his kidney and gall bladder were destroyed; his liver, bladder, intestines and a lung were perforated. Hondurans are demanding an investigation wide enough to see if any in the Attorney General's office or on the Supreme Court are responsible.

Similar to the "get tough" measures instituted in El Salvador and Guatemala, Honduras adopted its "Zero Tolerance" policy in August 2003, inspired by New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani's policies. In addition to a 12-year sentence for gang membership (later lengthened to 30 years), the law allowed police and army collaboration on patrolling urban areas.

In Honduras gangs responded to the repressive measures by escalating the violence and demanding the law's repeal. Attacks on buses, killing and wounding riders, were launched over the following year, usually in response to the extrajudicial killing of a gang member. In each case, messages addressed to the President were left. However horrific gang murders have become, gangs have become convenient scapegoatsâ€"as if crackdowns on them will solve the country's problems with drugs, murders, violence and the perpetuation of an unjust society.

Although President Mel Zelaya has signed on to Hugo Chavez's Latin American Bolivarian Alternative (ALBA), it has caused neither an outcry from the U.S. Embassy nor led Zelaya to abandon neoliberal policies. One reporter called it pure "theater." However Zelaya, dubbed by Chavez as the "Cowboy Commander," can use his embrace of ALBA to disorient the grassroots. Honduras began receiving Venezuelan oil under favorable conditions and there is talk of prospecting for oil in Honduras' Caribbean region or constructing a hydroelectric plant. Yet Zelaya is at the end of his presidential term; in 2009 Honduras will have a national election.

Nicaragua

With 5.5 million, Nicaragua is the least densely populated of the Central American countries. The July 1979 Sandinista Revolution drove the Somoza dictatorship from power and set up a broad-based government whose political leadership was the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). They began by launching a massive and enormously successful literacy program. Over the course of the 1980s the government found the country under siege by the Reagan administration. Even the International Court's condemnation of Washington's mining of the Nicaraguan harbor, ordering reparations, did not deter the Reagan administration's attempts to bring down the government. In the first post-Somoza election, held in 1984, the opposition boycotted and Daniel Ortega was elected president. A united opposition, well-funded by Washington, ran in the second election.

When it was clear that the FSLN lost the 1990 elections, the leadership prepared itself for the transfer of power to the incoming president, Violeta Chamorro. Daniel Ortega declared that the FSLN would govern from below, that is, the FSLN would work with its mass organizations to prevent the revolutionary processes of the 1980s from being turned back. Most importantly had been the expropriations of Somoza's vast holdings and those of the elite, mass literacy and the construction of a democratic government. This included a police force responsible to the citizenry and a fourth department of government, the Supreme Electoral Council, mandated to carry out a transparent election process.

The 1990 election loss was attributed to the U.S. political and financial support to the opposition and to the country's exhaustion from a contra war heavily financed and armed through illegal Washington deals. An additional factor is a series of mistakes the FSLN government made: a one-model agrarian reform unsuited to the peasants or the country's level of development and a misunderstanding of the aspirations of the indigenous people on the Atlantic

Coast. These errors fueled a base of contra supporters.

Marring the FSLN departure from office was the “piÃ±ata,” a process in which the FSLN transferred what had been governmental property to the property of the party or its highest-ranking officials. While in power, the FSLN leaders had never contemplated loosing office, and did not distinguish between governmental property and party resources. Many FSLN officials at the time explained that they had devoted their lives to the revolution, and now had nothing to show for it. They saw themselves as thus entitled to secure their future.

Underlying all the FSLN miscalculations is the reality that the FSLN was a military formation to take power. It had never undertaken a reassessment of its role once the Somoza regime had been toppled. The military nature of the FSLN led to a hierarchical organizational culture not easily transformed into one more suited to the more multifaceted tasks of cooperative reorganizing social, political and economic structures. At the 1990 defeat and the questioning and discussion that opened up inside the party, it seemed that the FSLN was willing to discuss and evaluate its mistakes, and then adjust itself. But one sign that the discussion was only superficial was the reality that its ethics commission never evaluated the “piÃ±ata.” (In 1998, when Ortega’s stepdaughter and FSLN member, Zoilamerica Narvaez, charged him with sexual abuse, the FSLN ethics commission proved unable to investigate the charge. Ten years later she finally withdrew her case in the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.)

That internal FSLN dialogue never produced a collective and institutional party. Instead the Daniel Ortega grouping increasingly came to be the FSLN, crowding out and then expelling those who offered a different perspective. After the electoral defeat the mass organizations founded and led by the FSLN, whether created before or after the 1979 Revolution, took steps toward autonomy, with the women’s movement achieving the clearest success. But following the 1994 split in the FSLN, in which leaders such as Dora Maria Tellez and Sergio Ramirez left to found a party that is today known as the Movement for the Renovation of Sandino (MRS), many of these organizations were pulled back into the party’s fold.

In preparation for the 1996 presidential election, the party chose Ortega as their candidate once more, and lost to the conservative and corrupt Arnoldo Aleman. However the FSLN still had a significant bloc of members in the legislature and just as in the early days of Chamorro’s regime was able to lead the mass organizations of students, trade unionists and farmers into the streets for to oppose governmental policies. Aleman needed to buy social peace in order to stabilize his government and the FSLN needed to recover a presence in the state institutions, thus laying the ground for a return to power. After more than 30 secret meetings, the pact was forged; it led to the demobilization of the grassroots organizations so that a neoliberal climate could take hold. In 1999 the FSLN had only one magistrate in the Supreme Electoral Council and only one or two justices on the Supreme Court. More positions were created in the Comptroller General’s Office, in the CSE and in the Supreme Court and Aleman and Ortega filled them with their loyalists.

This pact provided Aleman, Ortega and their circle unfair advantage when the privatization of public services and the selling off of state-owned assets took place. When the national banks went under in 2000-01, that grouping gained millions as compensation packages were dolled out.

During the course of the pact, Ortega has gained power to Aleman’s disadvantage. Although Ortega lost the election of 2000 to Enrique Bolanos, vice president under Aleman, once BolaÃ±os saw indicted Aleman for corruption, Ortega was able to consolidate institutional control over the judicial and electoral branches. With Aleman sentenced to 20 years, it is Ortega-appointed judges who have allowed him to serve most of his time while living in comfort on his hacienda.

The Aleman-Ortega pact, has since become a three-way deal with the addition of Cardinal Obando y Bravo and a sector of the conservative Catholic hierarchy. The big payoff came only a week before the 2006 presidential

elections, when FSLN legislators voted to pass a law that repealed a late 19th-century therapeutic abortion statute. Now Nicaragua joins El Salvador and Chile as one of the few countries where abortion under no circumstance is legal. During the first year at least 80 Nicaraguan women died because they could not obtain an abortion. These deaths were primarily the result of miscarriages.

Because of the timing of the election some commentators feel the FSLN was forced into taking an anti-abortion position, but both Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo, his wife and campaign manager, have defended the party position. (After being partners for more than a quarter century, Ortega and Murillo were married by Obando in 2005.)

The pact also allowed for two important revisions in the electoral law. First, eliminating the chance that local parties or alliances could run, thus driving the system toward a two-party model. Second, striking the provision that the presidential candidate does not have to win 50%+1 but only a plurality, if the top vote getter is separated from the second-highest candidate by at least 5%. Without these two revisions Ortega, who won with 38% of the vote in a three-way race, could not have become president.

Even before the 2006 election, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez offered his political and economic support to Ortega. He promised to provide Nicaragua with oil at favorable prices as well as to build a refinery, a petro-chemical plant, a highway to unite Bilwi (on the Atlantic Coast) with the Pacific area and the funding for a rural credit program. However the Ortega government has resisted including these contributions in the national budget, which would mean being under the control of the National Assembly. Civil society, the opposition parties, the media and even the IMF all demand that the contribution be managed transparently.

Since Ortega’s election, many have placed his victory alongside that of Evo Morales in Bolivia, Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, and Correa in Equator. Although there are differences even within this short list, Daniel Ortega is a far more compromised president than any of them. He has maintained his pact with Aleman, deepened his collaboration with the conservative Catholic hierarchy, failed to use his first year in office to force the IMF to accept a Nicaraguan budget that prioritized social spending and waged a war in order to avoid financial transparency. No one seems to know exactly how much money Venezuela contributed to Nicaragua in 2007. President Ortega first announced $520 million, a month later he reported half that; the Central Bank totaled the amount at $184.9 million.

Although Nicaragua has signed on to ALBA, there are no available details about how it will be implemented and there is the fear that the FSLN will use its position to reward its base. The National Federation of Agricultural and Agroindustrial Cooperatives (FENACOOP) questioned the way the government would distribute Venezuelan fertilizer and were told this would be done according to “urgency.” Yet they discovered three different prices: “the price for party members, the price for leaders of some associations and the price for those who don’t belong to either group.”

Upon taking office, Ortega created the Councils of Citizens’ Power (CPC) as a “direct democracy” model, with Murillo as its head. The CPCs are to be the mechanisms through which state-related tasks, including education, housing and health, will be carried out. Beneficiaries of the Zero Hunger and Zero Usury programs (administered by Murillo and financed by Venezuelan money) are also chosen by local CPCs. However Nicaragua already had a history of civic organization. The Local Democracy and Development Network weaves together citizen committees at rural, district and municipal levels. It is independent of any political party. Its municipal committees fought for public discussion of the municipal budget, which is now recognized by several laws. The network is independent of any political party. Nonetheless the Ortega government devoted energy to establishing a competing organization, the CPCs. His government willingly clashed with opposition parties about their status, used the courts to do an end-run around the legislature and built a loyal base through unaccounted Venezuelan money. Last spring Daniel Ortega expressed his determination to give constitutional rank to the CPCs. In preparation for the 2008 municipal elections he demanded all FSLN candidates sign that, if elected, they would “obey” the CPCs.

At the same time, the Ortega government singled out 17 of the 300 NGOs operating in Nicaragua, accusing twoâ€”Oxfam Great Britain and Forum Syd of Swedenâ€”of illegally passing funds to the Autonomous Women's Movement. Here again, it seems that the government wants to regulate social movements in order, as Carlos Fernando Chamorro, himself the victim of government attack, remarked, to have "a model of civil society that does not deliberate, but keeps quiet and simply obeys." (He has been the editor of the FSLN newspaper, Barricada, back in the 1980s.)

Commissioner Mercedes Ampie, director of the National Police's Women's Police Stations, noted that 40% of all crimes committed in 2007 were related to physical abuse or sexual violence against women and children in the home. The director of Managua's La Women's Hospital reported that 4 out of 10 of their hospital's deliveries are to mothers under the age of 15. Some are already in their second pregnancy. Given the violence against women, why is feminist organization under attack? First, it is the most autonomous of all Nicaragua's grassroots organizations, and, second, it consistently defends women's sexual and reproductive rights. It speaks out about the country's high level of domestic violence and fights for systematic change. Yet the Ortega government denies the very existence of these issues.

During September and October 2008 a government offensive used the official media to attack the well-known feminist writer and activist, Sofia Montenegro, and the umbrella Autonomous Women's Movement. Just as the CPCs are an attempt to replace civic organizations not under the control of the FSLN, the party created the Sandinista Women's Movement (MMS) on September 22, 2008. Its gender perspective is to provide access to health care, credits, education and training through the government.

Since the Luisa Amanda Espinoza Nicaraguan Women's Association (AMNLAE) is an organization founded by Sandinista women, they were pressured to join the MMS. Just in case they didn't quite understand the invitation, two of their Managua centers were taken over by force. But once AMNLAE, with its 60 centers, joined, the movement then demanded the resignation of its president, Dora Zeledon (a former FSLN National Assembly representative). Zeledon's resignation letter outlined the blackmail and threats to destroy AMNLAE's autonomy and work. Under new leadership presumably AMNLAE will be re-educated about what work is appropriate for the women's movement. Clearly that will not involve fighting to recover the right to therapeutic abortion. The President himself proclaimed that "Herod is in Nicaragua looking for children to kill."

The level of animosity generated by the government's campaign against the NGOs was, it turns out, a warm-up for the 2008 municipal elections. The Supreme Electoral Council (CSE) moved up the calendar for registering electoral alliances and candidate lists, cancelled elections in seven municipalities in the northern Caribbean region, then having accepted and certified the candidates lists for the Conservative Party and the Sandinista Renovation Movement, cancelled their legal status. It annulled Eduardo Montealegre's right to run as a candidate for the party he founded, the Nicaraguan Liberal Alliance (ALN) and awarded his position to a member close to the FSLN. The CSE also refused to accredit observer teams.

Pre-election day violence occurred in Leon and Managua, with FSLN members and sympathizers attacked opponents in the streets. In Managua's most the most populated communities, groups of CPC members, wearing FSLN T-shirts, went house to house, creating a tense situation when interviewing residents about who they intended to vote for and writing down their answers.

The only observers allowed at the polls on election day were party monitors. Since three of the five parties on the ballot were the FSLN or supporting parties, the atmosphere was often intimidating. Initial results were announced that evening and although the FSLN candidate was considered the underdog, he was leading.

The morning after the elections the country learned that the computer center in Managua was militarized, with only

technicians from the governing party inside. The third, preliminary account the CSE announced reported the FSLN winning in over 90 municipalities, but offered percentages, not the number of votes cast.

Distrust grew as the independent media documented the mounting evidence of fraud, ranging from discovering partially burned ballots in garbage dumps to finding a batch of voter ID cards that had not been distributed. Two days after the election, nine bishops in the Nicaraguan Episcopal Conference issued a statement that noted problems with the election and called for monitors to work with the CSE to review the process. Ethnics & Transparency monitors (the Nicaraguan chapter of Transparency International) who had not been allowed observer status nonetheless issued a preliminary report in which they outlined nine serious irregularities.

In Managua, CSE results showed FSLN Alex Arguello beating out Eduardo Montealegre (who had run as a Liberal) by 20,000 votes. But Montealegre insisted he beat Arguello by 29,000 votes and had the proof. Given mounting national and international pressure, the CSE agreed to a quick recount, but minus the presence of independent observers Montealegre didn't agree to a review. Instead he went public, posting copies of the tallies from most of the city's polling places on a newly created web page (www.voto2008.org) and releasing the information to La Prensa. Interestingly enough Aleman backed Montealegre in his challenge. The PLC refused to recognize the election results and ordered its representatives and justices not to go to work. A crack has opened up in the PLC, with Aleman's leadership in decline and Montealegre's rising.

Groups of vandals roamed the streets of the capital, terrorizing people. Attorney General Hernan Estrada, responding to the report that public employees were spending hours on street corners waving FSLN flags, told a number of journalists that "if the head of state and political leader of the FSLN, Daniel Ortega, decided to call out all his supporters onto the streets, not a stone would be left standing in this country, or in any television channel or other medium that opposes him. He needs to be thanked for not having done it, due to the wisdom and serenity of the man who is governing us."

Over the last decade Nicaraguan gangs have decided in violent confrontation, in contrast to the growing violence of Salvadoran, Honduran and Guatemalan gangs. The society as a whole laid down their weapons at the end of the civil war. But now the violence is being nourished. In a recent La Prensa article 80 former gang members now associated with Youth for Peace charged that political agitators had been recruited and provided with hoods, pistols, clubs, mortars and brand new machetes along with lunch, bus fares and money (between $5-30). These are the vandals that encircled the opposition and prevented them from protesting the fraudulent elections. Days later they were held up as symbols of the revolutionary struggle by no less than Rosario Murillo.

Why, given the public questioning, didn't the FSLN back off and allow the Supreme Electoral Council clear up the most blatant cases in order to help legitimate the process?

First, the FSLN projected winning 100 mayoral seats. The bar was set high because the party must project itself as a majority party when it isn't. The FSLN must use all the tools it can in order to cut the opposition down. This includes using the state apparatus for the needs of the party; it also includes using intimidation and violence to enforce its power. This campaign, as the attorney general noted, is clearly directed from the top.

Second, having "won" 105 mayoralties including Managua, the FSLN mayors have signed an agreement to obey the mandates of the CPCs, a structure run by party personnel and directed by Rosario Murillo. Thus the mayors are trapped into a framework answerable to the Ortega-Murillo team and the vice of control tightens. (The PLC was credited with winning 37 mayoral offices, with only four going to the pro-Montealegre forces within the party.)

Where are the independent forces capable of opposing this consolidation of power? Once the CSEs had legitimacy,

but they have been corrupted through the Aleman-Ortega pact.

The police are bound by the Constitution to obey the president. In the violent pre-election confrontation in Leon, the police offered a divided response. But there is evidence that Ortega is moving to increase the number of general commissioners, promoting his supporters and retiring those with the most experienced.

The two institutions that are still independent are the legislature and the media. The intimidation that was unleashed against the NGOS and during the election campaign combined with the desertification of opposition parties and candidates has resulted in further consolidation of both a two-party system and a state-party-family rule.

The FSLN has indicated its interest in further constitutional “reform.” Currently presidents cannot succeed themselves; Ortega would like to change that. Another variant might be Rosario Murillo running for president in 2011. Daniel Ortega has also indicated he wants to write the CPCs into the constitution, whether replacing the legislature or as an additional branch of government is not clear. Another possible constitutional change would be to move toward a more parliamentary system, in which the winning party selects the prime minister. Even if the FSLN is the stronger partner in the pact, it still needs Aleman and the PLC. It needs at least nine PLC legislators for two consecutive legislative sessions in order to pass the constitutional reforms. Yet in the light of the fraudulent election, Aleman may not be able to hold up his end of the bargain and help push through constitutional changes.

The elections immediately led to a legislative crisis and the 2009 budget was not approved on schedule. In the aftermath of the fraud the European Union froze its disbursements (roughly 80% of the government’s public investment budget) and so did the United States (approximately $85 million, which was also linked to a $130 million loan). Daniel Ortega announced on December 1, however, that any “holes” in the budget by the freezing or withdrawal of international aid would be replaced by Venezuela money.

All this preoccupation with power is beside the point for the majority of Nicaraguans, for whom the daily grind of poverty is overwhelming. Although Ortega talks about the revival of “social democracy” and denounces U.S. imperialism and European colonialism, the Ortega government’s preoccupation in its first budget continued the neoliberal agenda of paying down the (illicit) domestic debt. Chavez has provided money, but Ortega doles it out as if it was his own pocket money, thus deepening the country’s culture of corruption.

The Ortega-Murillo team is an authoritarian regime that instigates violence while claiming to embody the heritage of Sandino. It combines a left face with a sharp fist.

Resources

My main sources are:

* envio, a monthly magazine that covers Central America, but focuses on Nicaragua. It is printed in English and Spanish and is published in Managua. Its Spanish-language website is www.envio.org.ni.

* NACLA Report on the Americas, a bimonthly magazine covering Latin America. The scandal about the FSLN’s destruction of a therapeutic abortion law that had been on the books from more than a century has been widely covered in the mainstream U.S. press. See “Neither Left nor Right: Sandinismo in the Anti-Feminist Era,” by Karen Kampwirth in the Jan.-Feb. 2008 issue, vol. 41, #1.

* Also important are the websites for the Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala and the Committee in Support of the People of El Salvador.

* "DR-CAFTA: Effects and Alternatives," The Stop CAFTA Coalition's Third Annual Report. Very useful 40-page report.