

NICARAGUA: BETWEEN LEFT RHETORIC AND RIGHT REALITY

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In 2006 a private survey in Nicaragua questioned people on what they considered to be “Left” and whether Ortega was Left. A very high percentage answer that indeed Daniel was “very left wing”, 80% said they didn’t identify at all with the Left and just 7% considered themselves leftwing.

The general opinion was that Ortega is left wing and therefore they see the Left as negative. And that sums up the problem of the Left in Nicaragua—Ortega is giving it a bad name in a period where in other parts of Latin America the Left seems to be making a come-back. The force that “dare not speak its name” let alone—hence the need to call it Populist, lest electoral majorities disprove the end of history. Populists being those whose own opinion is different from their own and does not presumably rise to their level of sophisticated political behavior.¹

So the title of this talk can either be why the Ortega Government is not Left or, for a Washington audience, why it is not Populist. I, for one, prefer the former because many of us happen to believe that the Sandinista Party ceased to be Left, that is Sandinista, some time ago, although we have to wage an uphill battle to convince a majority of Nicaraguans of this fact.

Labelling of course poses a problem. Perhaps Karen Kampwirth sums it up best in a recent issue of NACLA discussing the resurgence and reorganization of the Right in Latin America. She narrates how evangelical and Catholic activists have converged in Nicaragua to form a powerful anti-feminist movement, whose first major victory came in 2006, when abortion was outlawed without exception—with the crucial votes of Sandinistas. She describes this as “shift to cynicism,” rather than to the right, on the part of the FSLN. “Though we tend to speak of

¹ On The Economist’s use of the word populist, one irate reader asked: “exactly when did “populism” enter your style guide as the preferred al- purpose pejorative (Lexington, Dec 9th) Given that neither John Edwards nor Mike Huckabee have come anywhere near winning their parties’ nomination, is it far from clear that they are even “popular” , let alone “populist”?...Even assuming that they are popular, what is the objective characteristic (with the emphasis on objective) that would transmute them from being good, wholesome popular candidates into nasty wicked populist ones? In the absence of an objective definition, “populist” seems to be nothing more that a hollow term of abuse that The Economist hurls at anyone whose own opinion is at odds with its own. . May I suggest that in the future you simply describe people as “evil”. It is easier to pronounce than populist and uses less ink...” (Letter to the Editor, Stephen Morris, *The Economist*, February 23rd, 2008, p22.)

movements as left- or right-wing, liberal or conservative," she writes, "they may in fact be all of these things at once—simultaneously resisting imperialism, rejecting dictatorship, and promoting gender inequality."

Fortunately however over the course of the last year evidence we have mounting evidence that Nicaragua is not shifting Leftward, or indeed following in the footsteps of Ecuador, Venezuela and Bolivia. Nicaragua is not part of that process of State-supported changes aimed at achieving social equity, overcoming political inequalities and cultural exclusions through the promotion of new forms of participation and the construction of genuine citizenship.

Obviously the Right will not pursue such a path, while Social Democracies may limit themselves to policies that limit themselves to compensating the negative socio-economic effects of an unchallenged economic model. For that we in Nicaragua would require a born-again Sandinista movement and party.

Why Washington is not Worried

Its been over a year since Mr. Ortega came to office. Enough time to pass form an serious opinion on the political nature and the public style of the new government.

History tells us that if there were genuine societal and economic shifts in Central America underway then the US would be concerned--the understatement of the year--. To our knowledge there has been no ideological or historical reconversion in Washington that would make it a friend of Left governments embarked on new schemes of redistributive economics and politics. Yet, as officials on both sides admit, Washington has acceptable relations with the Ortega government. Conclusion: the government in Managua is doing something "Right".

A number of bilateral issues could be cited: the negotiation of the SAM missiles, allowing the DEA greater operational space in Nicaragua, sending Nicaraguan troops to the School of the Americas, and others. But the US interests in Central American reach a lot deeper than simply security ones. "Good relations" demand an ideological, economic and political alignment with Washington's proclaimed predilection for "market based democracies". That is with an economic growth model predicated on so-called free trade, liberalization and allegiance to IMF economics. US Commerce Under Secretary Christopher Padilla probably had it right when he said in Managua two weeks ago that the US was willing to have relations with any country in the region, independently

of its political orientation, as long as that government continues to be committed to democracy and free markets. And he left Managua a happy man.

The continued Nicaraguan official alignment with the Washington Consensus helps explain the deep political understanding between the present Nicaragua government and Nicaragua's mega-capitalists who are not uncomfortable with Ortega. Indeed their belief is, increasingly proved by governmental policy, is that national and international banking and investors are being well served by the government that can talk Left but act Right. And as long as the talk does not scare off too many investors, and the US magnanimously pretends to be deaf to nostalgic rhetoric, then Mr Ortega can keep his revolutionary pretenses and have his cake or oil if you will, and eat it too. According to the January/February 2008 *Envío* magazine, "the financial groups and the economic groups linked to exports and imports have been the major beneficiaries of Nicaragua's limited economic growth since 1990, and the Ortega government has not touched that logic. FSLN leaders now belong to that group and are busy consolidating themselves there with the advantages offered by their party's five years in office."

If structural change were afoot we would have gotten some indication reading the budget presented by the government to the Legislature. We would have seen a new tax regime affecting the rich, greater spending on education and health. Yet you look at the budget submitted by the Ortega Administration to the National Assembly and you will be hard-pressed to find substantive differences from that submitted by the Bolaños government. Continued allegiance to IMF economics and macro-economic fundamentalism means that there is a virtual freeze on public sector wages. Take for example the figures on education spending per student in Central America:

- Costa Rica spends 757 USD per high school student, 509 primary, and 101 pre-school
- Guatemala 341 high schools, 197 primary, 128 pre-school
- El Salvador 222 dollars high school, 228 in primary (to prepare the new generation of maquila workers), and 192 pre-school.
- Honduras 275 dollars, 179 in primary and 198 pre-school
- Nicaragua 51 dollars secondary, 127 primary

Or look at teacher salaries—a teacher in El Salvador earns an average of 242 USD en Guatemala, 261 in Honduras, 329 in El Salvador, 445 in Costa Rica, but only 196 in Nicaragua. These are 2005 averages.

Now it could be one could claim "the IMF made me do it". But the Ortega government claims that for the first time in recent times it has been the government and not the IMF that has set the tone for the economic program including the budget. Well that contention seals our argument since it reveals how far IMF thinking Sandinista government officials. The IMF does not have to impose anything that the government had already assume and proposed! And if one looks at the process by which it was approved, the total absence of consultation (let alone participation) the closed nature of policy-making stands out prominently. At least the Bolaños government pretended to consult civil society organizations on matters of public policy, but the new government can't be bothered to go through the motions.

Even the FSLN unions are grumbling over wage gains that barely cover inflation and devaluation effects. And many within his own camp, let alone many of us outside it, are furious over the decision of the government to honor an odious, illegal and illegitimate debt to Nicaraguan bankers and their allies that took the form of Central Bank emissions, which even the Comptroller's office holds to have been issued illegally and at outrageously high interest rates.

There have been, on the other hand, important programs to alleviate hunger and to deprivatize education, but traditional social compensation schemes are no substitute for the more radical undertakings that are required by the country. The character of governmental institutions is not being changed, nor is there an interest in their being changed by those in power, unless it entailed securing a constitutional change allowing for Ortega's re-election. Not rocking the boat is the name of the game in order to consolidate the strategic alliance hat Ortega has made with sectors of the Right, seeking to keep it divided while stifling dissent within the Party itself. As a result we witness a dangerous growth of a cultural and political disconnect developing between the upper classes and the marginalized sectors of society.

Oil and Democracy

Conceivably the Ortega government could have followed the lead of South American left governments mobilizing the people in support of a Constituent Assembly to clear and insure the legal path towards

expanded political participation and opening new forms of political representation. The government however lacks a parliamentary majority –let alone the electoral one. Where there is a will there could be a way and one could have conceived of sustained popular mobilization greatly facilitated by the Venezuela oil sale support scheme that could help counter the budgetary and even social constraints on the government.

But there is little evidence that a Venezuelan-assisted political reorientation of the Ortega government is taking place. Instead government policy suffers from a bipolar condition. As the US Embassy knows quite well, and as the Vice President likes to remind Conservative backers, heed what Ortega does and not what he says. He praises ALBA but pledges allegiance to CAFTA, accepts Venezuelan subsidies and then submits them to IMF scrutiny, he proclaims support for a Bolivarian Army but sends Nicaraguan soldiers to be trained at the old School of the Americas, he denounces US military threats against Venezuela but he invites the DEA to help patrol Nicaraguan coastline. He repeats Pope John Paul II condemnation of “savage capitalism” but is all smiles with visiting Mexican billionaire Carlos Slim, praises the Millennium Challenge Account, and caters to Taiwanese sweat-shop owners.

He presents ALBA as the new alternative for Latin American economic independence, but then insures that the Esso-Exxon gets a tidy profit from the processing of Venezuelan crude, using proceeds to keep the Spanish multinational Union Fenosa in business in Nicaragua providing state payment guarantees to Union Fenosa creditors.

When one adds all this to the fact that the government is dead set against channeling the fuel sales proceeds through the national budget with accountability to the Nicaraguan legislature and civil society, we arrive at an aid privatization scheme that would make the pro-private enterprise USAID blush. All this would seem inexplicable unless one remembers that the US, CAFTA and the Nicaraguan business elite have more influence over the Ortega government than Venezuela, ALBA or the Nicaraguan working class. Or that the some 400 million in Venezuelan assistance to Nicaragua is still less than the 550 million allotted by Western traditional aid agencies.

In all, a far cry from Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela.

18th or 21st century Democracy?

Under these circumstances the politics and the debate about democracy in Nicaragua is not moving into the 21st century. In fact we are back in the 18th century have to demand the separation between Church and State, and defense of the right to live, inasmuch as the far-from-progressive Ortega and party continues to support a ban a abortions to save a mother's life, with legislation that puts us in the grand company of El Salvador and Chile.

It's a travesty therefore to even consider Nicaragua among a group of countries that are experiment in with new forms of democracy, citizen participation and a new socialism. The FSLN's launching of the Consejos de Participacion Ciudadana is fine in theory or in rhetoric—indeed the more people organized themselves the better—but we would be talking about self-organization, independent organization, organization from below, and not from the top, for the outside, on behalf of an existing political structure, that is not, and this is the crucial difference, does not hold a majority.

One perceives the need felt by the Sandinista Party to transform its electoral minority into a social majority, and that conceivably could take place gradually and assisted with Venezuelan facilitated resources. But the way it is being undertaken now is simply wrong and narrow, bound to create more conflicts. This is a Left perspective, because from a Right one, the CPCs should not exist and endanger the liberal institutions which has done so much for a few and virtually nothing for the many.

These experience are answering the question of what political representations for with a new model of representation. This is one that, after the struggles against dictatorship or extreme forms of corruption and oligarchic rule, takes elections and representative democracy seriously, not as a sufficient definition of democracy but rather as one part of a strategy for more radical democratic—including economic—transformation. Ortega and cohorts are really not interested in changing the model of representation, but rather consolidating the present bipartisan one symbolized by the power-sharing deal with Aleman and the Liberal Party.

As Hillary Wainwright and others have argued, Left oriented transformative politics has been made possible in much of Latin America by what of strong highly political conscious forms of popular democracy or non-state sources of democratic power—it is really not

coming from Political Parities—but from neighborhood associations, movements of the landless and indigenous people, and radical trade union organizations. But this was not the case in Nicaragua and will not come from any existing Political Party there, which differs this country from Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela.

A radical left party, in the best of cases, would seek to redistribute power and stimulate new institutions of popular organizations so that they may control state power—and transform political parties in the process. It is a difficult task of utilizing political institutions but also work against them to allow for the emergence of new sources of power. This requires working with autonomous movements so that the institutions can become effectively democratized—encouraging non-State and non-Party sources of democratic power in order to achieve the necessary transformations. The struggle for democracy entails building democratic power to challenge and transform institutions that however liberal in theory are contested by private profit and bureaucratic self-interest where conventional mechanisms of accountability are more rhetoric than reality.

I agree with Wainwright, that “that the strengthening of these grassroots-base forms of democratic power, including their connection and exchange of ideas and organizations lessons with each other, is essential to the idea of anew transformative model of political representation along the lines exemplified in LA. This political organization at the base is a priority on which many of us could agree whether we are members of a party or not”.

Without an active, conscious, organized and mobilized majority there is no transformation. That majority simply does not exist in Nicaragua – one cannot expect renewed revolution from the Ortega government when there is no social basis to sustain that change. Where the FSLN was successful was in mobilizing the minimal necessary electoral percentage to win the elections, in part by cutting an unethical deal to lower the threshold, and in part by turning the party into an electoral machine . That is its strength but also its weakness. Another traditional political party, another power group contributing to the same sort of discontent with traditional structures that helped bring Chavez, Correa and Morales to power.

Discontent is one thing, having an organized basis for social transformation quite another. In Nicaragua there is no significant organizational basis for transformation, and civic participation structures are very weak. Which does not mean that there aren't

grassroots sectors and many individuals who are fighting for another country and another world. As a social left we have our work cut out, but a start has been made that will in time help substitute electoral cynicism with genuine political consciousness, genuine participation and genuine democracy.