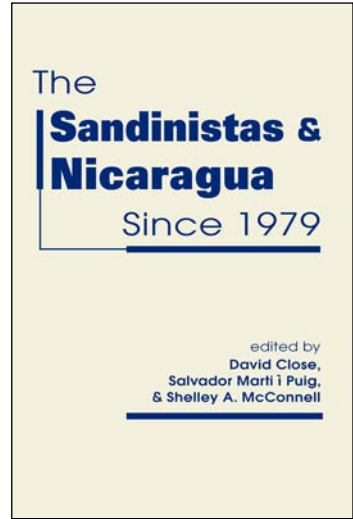


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The Sandinistas and Nicaragua Since 1979

edited by
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and Shelley A. McConnell

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1

The Sandinistas and Nicaragua Since 1979

David Close and Salvador Martí i Puig

THIS BOOK IS ABOUT THE SANDINISTA NATIONAL LIBERATION Front (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional, or FSLN) and how it has affected Nicaragua since the party's founding in 1961.¹ Although the guerrilla front-turned-political party has governed the country for just over a quarter of its fifty-year existence, from 1979 to 1990 and since January 2007, the Sandinistas have influenced their country's evolution and general well-being far more than their relatively short time in office would suggest. The reasons are manifold.

They start with the determination of the United States throughout the 1980s to destroy the Sandinista Revolution, even if that meant destroying Nicaragua, too. Clearly the FSLN government had no control over US policy toward it, short of saying "uncle" and disbanding. Nevertheless, a revolutionary regime that began promisingly in 1979 ended in 1990 with a mixed record: significant social achievements, the institutionalization of electoral democracy, and a democratized political culture on the one hand; but a polarized and war-torn society, a ravaged economy, and a set of lame-duck laws that tarnished the FSLN's reputation on the other.

During its years out of power (1990–2007), the party repeatedly struck deals with the governments of the day that served the Sandinistas' short-term objectives perhaps more than the longer-term interests of the nation. Obviously, the three administrations with which the Sandinistas dealt—those of Presidents Violeta Chamorro, Arnoldo Alemán, and Enrique Bolaños—shared their opponents' self-interested perspective and thus share the responsibility for Nicaragua's fate since 1990. Presumably, any party that had either governed a country or been the biggest opposition party for over thirty years would have to defend a similar record. However, the FSLN was not just any party, and Nicaragua's history shaped what it is.

Nicaraguan History: A Primer

Since independence in 1821, Nicaragua has traveled a troubled political road.² Although none of the five Central American republics has had an uneventful past (no nation anywhere has), Nicaragua's has been notably violent and unstable. Its first four decades of independence were marked by nearly continuous civil war between Liberals from León and Conservatives from Granada. That cycle of violence ended only in 1858, after a dictatorship imposed by William Walker, a US mercenary brought in by the Liberals to aid their cause, was defeated by the massed armies of the other Central American states. Then came Nicaragua's golden age, when it was known as the Switzerland of Central America. The *treinteno* (thirty years of Conservative rule) brought stability to the country through a pact among regional elites, but it also carried with it a certain political and economic stasis. As often happens in pacted political systems, the emerging elite of *cafeteleros* (coffee growers from around Managua and from the mountains in the country's center), who wanted a share of political power commensurate with their economic importance, needed a revolution to get it.

José Santos Zelaya was a Liberal caudillo who ruled from 1893 to 1909 and returned Nicaragua to strongman rule. Not only did he dominate national politics, but like his predecessors in other countries, he sought to make himself the suzerain of all Central America. This naturally disquieted Washington, especially when Zelaya, having failed to win the interoceanic canal for Nicaragua, offered German and Japanese interests the rights to develop a competitor to Panama. The result was a US-backed revolution mounted by the Conservatives. Zelaya fell, but Nicaragua entered another cycle of civil warfare that lasted until 1927. Further, from 1910 to 1934, the United States maintained a contingent of marines in Nicaragua, almost continuously. It was to fight this frankly imperial presence that Augusto César Sandino, a Liberal general in the civil war, refused a peace brokered by Washington and took to the hills to wage guerrilla war.³

From 1927 until 1934, when the United States withdrew its troops, Sandino fought the marines and the Nicaraguan National Guard, a new national military force that the United States had established in Nicaragua as a way to put an end to party-based civil wars. In 1934, Sandino was invited to Managua to meet with then-president Juan Bautista Sacasa. However, the national guard intercepted the guerrilla leader and executed him, supposedly on the orders of the guard's commander, Anastasio Somoza García. By 1936, Somoza had ousted Sacasa, his wife's uncle, and then succeeded in being elected president. Thus began forty-three years of family dictatorship that ended only when another guerrilla force bearing Sandino's name brought down the Somoza dynasty.

The new Sandinistas, the FSLN, began as a guerrilla organization. Formed by Carlos Fonseca, German Pomares, and Tomás Borge in 1961, the Sandinistas were one of a larger class of revolutionary organizations that drew their inspiration from the success of Fidel Castro's Cuban guerrillas. Like their model, the Sandinistas adopted the *foco* theory that Che Guevara propounded, based on his experience in the Cuban Revolution.⁴ *Foquismo* held that armed struggle waged by small groups of committed revolutionary guerrillas, operating in rural areas, would build support among the people and lead to the conquest of power. Although this modified version of Mao Zedong's strategy of people's war had astounding success in Cuba, bringing the *fidelistas* to power in less than three years, it failed elsewhere. Even the Sandinistas, the only other revolutionary guerrilla movement to take power in Latin America, had to move beyond the *foco* theory to ensure their revolution's triumph.

From 1961 to 1979, the Sandinistas fought the Somoza family dictatorship. That the Somozas had created an intergenerational dictatorship (the father and his two sons ruled Nicaragua for forty-three years) demonstrated both the dictators' political skill and the inability of Nicaraguans to displace the family. Although there were attempts to unseat the Somozas, they were repelled.⁵ Until 1974, the FSLN had no better luck than its predecessors. However, that year the guerrillas staged a magnificent *coup de théâtre*, raiding a Christmas party at the house of one of Somoza's cousins, netting a bundle of high-profile hostages that just missed including the US ambassador, and setting the scene for negotiations that saw the guerrillas leave unhindered and wealthier.

This high note, however, was soon followed by a very low one. In 1975 the organization split into three factions, or tendencies, as they became known. The oldest, and the one that purged the others, was the Prolonged People's War (GPP), whose members were Bayardo Arce, Tomás Borge, and Henry Ruiz. GPP emphasized the "patient accumulation of forces" and focused on rural guerrilla warfare. The second faction was the Proletarian Tendency (TP, or *proles*), whose members were Luis Carrión, Carlos Nuñez, and Jaime Wheelock. It favored an urban guerrilla strategy and stressed organizing in factories and poor neighborhoods. Last to form were the Insurrectionary Tendency (the Terceristas, or the third group), whose members were Daniel Ortega, Humberto Ortega, and Victor Tirado. They sought a multiclass alliance that would make possible a massive insurrection and rapid overthrow of the dictatorship.

Schisms along ideological and strategic lines are not uncommon among radical movements. Failing to take power or secure important objectives leads to a search for better alternatives that can cause a movement to fracture or even destroy it. However, the Sandinistas were lucky enough to have

had Fidel Castro mediate a resolution among the three tendencies that saw each group naming three of its *comandantes guerrilleros* (guerrilla commanders) to a nine-person National Directorate that became the Frente Sandinista's governing body in 1979 and coordinated the guerrillas' efforts, albeit for only a few months before the dictatorship fell.

Despite being divided, the Frente remained very active. The January 1978 assassination of anti-Somoza newspaper publisher Pedro Joaquín Chamorro produced spontaneous rioting and was in many ways the spark that set in motion the insurrectional stage of the Nicaraguan Revolution. In August of that year, the Sandinistas staged a raid on Nicaragua's Congress that netted the revolutionaries tremendous publicity, the release of prisoners, money, the reading of their manifesto over the radio, and unimpeded transport out of the country. June 1979 saw the FSLN declare the beginning of its final offensive, a drive that ended with the flight of the Somozas and the seizure of power by the Sandinistas on July 19, 1979.

The First Sandinista Government, 1979–1990

Revolutionary regimes, whatever the character of their revolution, all have certain traits in common. First, they have vision of what the society they want to build should look like, and they have a road map that they believe will get them there. Second, revolutionaries are not patient. They want to set to work immediately to take apart the old and lay the foundations for the new. Further, their impatience generally inclines them to be intolerant of those who do not share their aspirations, although some revolutionaries seem more disposed than others to persuade and convert rather than coerce. Finally, there are few revolutionaries who want piecemeal changes; the norm, in fact, is to remake humanity or at least cure it of its current depravity.

We acknowledge that the foregoing is rather broad and that every revolution will have its own traits, yet we believe that it captures the essence of what a movement set up to revolutionize society, to alter radically its structure of power and prestige, wants to do. It is in regard to that revolutionizing society that the FSLN found itself in a rather different situation than other revolutionaries. During the last few years of guerrilla struggle, the Frente, especially the Terceristas, recruited all manner of anti-Somocista forces into their insurrectionary coalition. This extended to the radical Christians, inspired by liberation theology, and even to the bourgeoisie. Unconventional behavior for any Marxist-leaning, revolutionary organization, these pacts may have been produced by pragmatic calculation, but they left the revolutionary state with non-Marxist and anti-Marxist allies.

Further, the FSLN promised to deliver greater political pluralism and a mixed economy to Nicaraguans. In the revolution's initial phase, pluralism—the existence of centers of political power that are independent of the state—was limited by the Frente's vanguardist outlook. Revolutionary vanguards normally take control of the state as part of the spoils of victory and then claim to monopolize the right to govern by arguing that only they know how to build the revolution. What results is a tutelary regime of the left that shares with its rightist counterparts a reluctance to let citizens choose their own political futures. The Sandinistas, however, had a more moderate position, accepting that allies could share in governing but could not actually govern. Of course, the revolutionary government abandoned this stand forever before the 1984 elections.

The FSLN's moderation extended to economic policy. Instead of preaching root-and-branch socialism, which eliminates all manifestations of private enterprise, the revolutionaries proposed a mixed economy.⁶ To be sure, the public sector would dominate and direct economic development, but even large private firms could keep operating and make money. And the *pulperías*, the mom-and-pop stores that sell almost everything, also kept operating.

Nevertheless, the FSLN set to work quickly to consolidate its hold on power. Within a year, on the Governing Junta of National Reconstruction (JGRN), the official executive and most senior administrative positions (e.g., ministers and directors) were held by Sandinistas. In addition, the composition of the Council of State, a weak, unelected representative body, was changed to give the revolutionaries more seats than a pre-triumph agreement had granted them. Yet this attempt to monopolize state power halted and went into reverse after only three years.

Although the Sandinistas resisted holding elections until 1984, they changed their position on elections dramatically in 1982 with the introduction of a law governing the formation and functions of political parties (see Chapter 6). These laws, found in many countries, set the criteria a party must meet to be recognized as an official party with the right to run in elections, receive state funding for its campaigns, and so on. As introduced into the Council of State, the Sandinistas' law was typically Leninist: it allowed other parties to run for office as long as they did not promote the return of Somocismo. But they would never be allowed to govern. That right was reserved for the vanguard, the FSLN.

However, the version of the law that passed gave any registered party the right to govern if it could win. Because the FSLN controlled the council, we can presume that it was the government's will. What changed the revolutionaries' view of elections was probably a combination of factors. One was

pressure from European social democrats, who were important aid donors. Another was the government's need to boost its conventional democratic credentials in the face of an increasingly bloody, US-financed counterrevolutionary war. Finally, the Sandinistas doubtlessly believed that they were unbeatable and could maintain themselves as Nicaragua's natural governors. Naming two JGRN members to head the FSLN's ticket—Comandante Daniel Ortega as the party's presidential candidate and Sergio Ramírez as his running mate—suggested that the Sandinistas were comfortable running on their record.

Deciding to put power at stake in open and what proved to be honestly run elections marked a turning point for the revolutionary regime. Regimes define the bases of a system's legitimacy, and in Nicaragua after 1984 the latter would no longer be based on the revolutionary triumph of the FSLN but on winning elections. In addition, the revolutionaries henceforth would be accountable to an electorate of all citizens, not just to history or the revolutionary classes of workers and peasants. These changes would necessarily alter the operational style of the revolutionary party, which would have to adapt to the exigencies of electoral competition. The party would not, however, have to abandon its vertical, top-down style because there was no reason to open the organization's structures to permit greater participation by the grass roots.

The results of the first elections held under a Sandinista government confirmed their popularity: the party romped home with two-thirds of the vote in both the presidential and National Assembly races.⁷ Even better from the revolutionaries' point of view, the electoral system was weighted to benefit small parties; thus the FSLN saw all six parties that ran against it gain seats in the new legislature, presenting a real but manageable opposition.⁸ This set the stage for what the Sandinistas called "the institutionalization of the revolution," which meant borrowing much of the machinery of liberal democracy and using it to achieve social transformation. In practice this took the form of a president-centered system that gave Daniel Ortega substantially greater power than the other members of the National Directorate of the FSLN.

In the end, the seemingly endless counterinsurgency campaign Managua had to wage against the counterrevolutionaries (formally called the Nicaraguan Resistance, but more usually just the Contra or contras) took an estimated 30,000 lives on both sides, wrecked the economy, and left Nicaraguans skeptical about the Ortega administration's ability to set things right, mainly because the US government showed no signs that it would cease harassing a reelected Sandinista administration. Thus on election day, February 25, 1990, Daniel Ortega and his Sandinistas saw Nicaraguans hand

a 13-point (54 percent to 41 percent) victory to Violeta Chamorro and the National Union of the Opposition (Union Nacional Opositora, or UNO). Although the Sandinistas recognized their defeat, becoming only the second party to do so in Nicaraguan history, Ortega promised to fight on and to “govern from below.”

Despite being rejected by the voters, the FSLN made at least four notable contributions to Nicaraguan democracy. To begin with, they overthrew four decades of dictatorship and personal rule. Second, although the Sandinistas’ array of social and economic reforms—to agriculture and land tenure, housing, health, and education—did not survive long after the change of governments, they were important first steps toward greater social and economic equality. Harder to measure but plausibly more important in the long run was the revolutionary government’s empowerment of ordinary Nicaraguans as it pursued the “logic of the majority.” The political culture became less deferential, and men and women of humble origin began taking their places among the governors of their country. Finally, the Sandinistas abided by the constitution they drafted and adopted in 1987 and handed over power when they lost the 1990 elections. Although their successor, Violeta Chamorro, was the president who made the construction of an *estado de derecho* (a political system operating under the rule of law) a central part of her discourse, it was the revolutionaries who first acted in accordance with the rule of law’s key principle that no one, not even the state, is above the law.⁹

The Right Regnant, 1990–2006

From the Sandinistas’ revolutionary triumph until at least 2006, Nicaraguan politics aligned itself into two blocs: Sandinistas and anti-Sandinistas. Further, during the first few years of the swing to the right after 1990, both groups housed two distinct factions, one accommodationist and the other maximalist. The accommodationists accepted working within the limits that the context placed on them. Among the anti-Sandinistas, this meant acknowledging that the FSLN was a significant political force that was not going to disappear overnight and that attempting to hasten its demise through persecution would produce violence and instability. On the Sandinista side, accommodationists believed that the days of heroic transformational politics had ended for the foreseeable future and that the FSLN should fulfill its duty to Nicaragua’s poor majority through institutional changes that protected gains already won.

Maximalists naturally saw things differently. In the anti-Sandinista camp, they were inclined to take their electoral victory as their license to

turn all the forces of the state against their antagonists and annihilate them. Politics for maximalists is always a zero-sum game, but in Nicaragua, as in too many other countries in Latin America and the Third World generally, all politics had this winner-take-all quality. As viewed from the opposition's side, maximalism had different qualities. Sandinistas of this persuasion wanted to maintain the FSLN's top-down, Leninist structure, strengthen the hand of the party leader, and ensure that the nation's president remained unfettered by accountability and transparency. In fact, maximalists of both partisan schools shared the last two objectives.

In the end, the maximalists captured both groups. Daniel Ortega and his followers drove from the party ranks the accommodating reformers aligned with Sergio Ramírez in 1994; others have since joined the Sandinista political diaspora. Arnoldo Alemán, president of the republic from 1996 to 2001, applied the same iron grip to his party, the Constitutionalist Liberal Party (Partido Liberal Constitucionalista, PLC), but he did not pursue his one-time jailers with the zeal many expected. Rather he found a way to collaborate with Ortega by forging an agreement (the Pact) between their parties that aimed to give them unshakeable control of the Nicaraguan state.¹⁰ So strong has this Pact proven, even if for reasons unforeseen when it was formed, that it effectively hobbled Alemán's successor, Enrique Bolaños (2001–2006), also of the PLC, and has survived Ortega's return as chief executive. Although the Sandinistas lost three straight electoral battles, they kept fighting the political war and then returned to power.

The Administration of Doña Violeta Chamorro, 1990–1996

Her full name is Doña Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, but she has always been known by her married name, Chamorro, or more commonly simply as Doña Violeta, in keeping with the Nicaraguan custom of referring to presidents by their first name. Before routing the FSLN in 1990 and becoming president, she was not a politician. Her fame derived from the fact that she was the widow of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, the anti-Somoza newspaper publisher who was murdered by the dictator's thugs in 1978. Mrs. Chamorro served briefly as a member of the first JGRN and then withdrew from public life until she was recruited to head the UNO's ticket. Chamorro won this honor because she was uncontroversial and not abrasive, and thus a figure around whom a majority of Nicaraguans could rally.

Chamorro's administration was marked by managing a triple transition: from a revolutionary to an orthodox democracy; from a statist, transformational political economy to an equally transformational neoliberal one; and from a polarized society to one that was more united. Although she fell short

of total success on all counts, Doña Violeta came closer with the first and second than with the third. Perhaps her greatest accomplishment, however, was to show Nicaraguans that it was possible to govern without proposing pharaonic projects or harassing your opponents too much.

The Sandinistas used those six years to shake off the effects of an unexpected electoral drubbing, reassert the party's traditional identity as a revolutionary organization, and develop an oppositional style they would use until they regained power. The essence of that style was to stage contentious, disruptive, extraparlimentary movement politics (protest, at times accompanied by violence) while making deals with the government. This worked with the Chamorro administration because the president did not have majority backing in the National Assembly. When dealing with the Alemán government, it was more a matter of the two leaders—who were both electoral caudillos and thus practitioners of boss-style politics—seeing eye-to-eye on basic issues like the need for extensive, unaccountable presidential power. Only President Bolaños was unable to benefit from deals with the FSLN, though that was mainly the result of Washington discouraging the president from dealing with the White House's historic enemies.

The Administration of Arnoldo Alemán Lacayo, 1996–2001

Arnoldo Alemán was the perfect adaptation of classical Latin American caudillo politics to the demands of electoral democracy. He made the PLC his personal machine, ignored or revised the law when it constrained him, and made a deal with Daniel Ortega in 2000 that has shaped Nicaraguan politics ever since. Alemán grew up in the old Somocista Nationalist Liberal Party (PLN) (Partido Liberal Nacionalista) and was jailed by the Sandinista government in the late 1980s for opposing the government too vigorously. His entry onto the national scene came in 1990, when he was elected mayor of Managua. As the capital's chief executive, Alemán drew national attention for his “can do” attitude, shown mostly in his constant work on the city's roads. He became part of the PLC's rebuilding project and emerged as the party's standard-bearer in 1996. Like Chamorro before him, Alemán comfortably beat Daniel Ortega, who is still the only person to have topped an FSLN ticket, although it took a nearly direct endorsement from Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo, archbishop of Managua, to ensure the Liberals' victory.

Although Alemán had been a committed anti-Sandinista, he quickly found ways to work with his old nemesis Daniel Ortega. The first installment in this project involved settling a property law concerning the disposition of land and houses expropriated by the revolutionary government.

But the crowning glory of the Alemán-Ortega/Liberal-Sandinista venture was the Pact.

Begun in 1999 and concluded a year later, the Pact was the latest installment in a long-running Nicaraguan political melodrama. In a pact, a government offers its principal opposition party a deal in which the latter accepts its subordinate status in return for “quotas of power,” which in practice has meant access to public sector jobs. The logic behind pacts was always that the opposition knew that the government would win elections by fraud, so the smart thing to do was take the jobs, use them for your supporters, and keep your party alive. However, the advent of a relatively clean electoral process changed the nature of pacting. Now there would be competition during elections, whose outcome would determine not only which party controlled government but also the relative weight of the Sandinistas and Liberals in appointed posts. These two dominant parties would collude to exclude others. Between elections, decisionmaking often would take place outside formal institutions, through negotiation between the two caudillos, Ortega and Alemán.

The content of the 2000 Pact included constitutional amendments and changes to ordinary statutes. In both cases, the reforms aimed to strengthen the executive at the expense of other parts of government, reducing presidential accountability, turning nonpartisan administrative agencies into party strongholds, and reshaping the electoral system to make the PLC and FSLN Nicaragua’s only significant parties in perpetuity. Although the jury is still out on the last count, the Pact achieved its other objectives.

The Administration of Enrique Bolaños Geyer, 2001–2006

President Bolaños began his term on a high note. He charged his predecessor with defrauding the Nicaraguan state of over \$100 million. Even more, his government was able to secure a conviction that handed former president Alemán a twenty-year sentence. After that, however, things fell apart. By the time he left office, Bolaños faced a political system increasingly responding to the influence of Daniel Ortega, whose official role was limited to the assembly seat he received for again being the presidential runner-up.¹¹

Things could have turned out differently. At first, Ortega and the FSLN supported the administration in its pursuit of the Sandinistas’ Pact partner: it was a Sandinista judge, named to the case by a Sandinista member of the Supreme Court of Justice (CSJ), who presided over Alemán’s trial. However, after a visit from the US secretary of state in 2003, the president began turning away from the one-time revolutionaries. Shortly thereafter, in 2004, the National Assembly approved a constitutional amendment that radically

reduced presidential powers. Bolaños refused to publish the amendments, required for them to have the force of law, which led the assembly to investigate the president for alleged violation of campaign finance laws. In the end, an agreement was reached that saw the amendments approved but not enacted until after Bolaños completed his term.¹²

While the president was running the gauntlet set up by the Sandinistas and the PLC, which remained in Alemán's control, Nicaragua's party system began showing signs of change. In 2005, what had been for fifteen years a stable two-party system (Sandinista versus anti-Sandinista) suddenly saw the two main parties split, offering the chance for a four-way race. Combining this new pattern of competition with a Pact-based amendment to the electoral law that allowed a candidate to be elected president with 35 percent of the vote, providing there was at least a 5-point edge over the second-place candidate, was enough to bring Daniel Ortega the presidency again after a sixteen-year absence.

The Second Sandinista Administration

This is necessarily a brief and tentative treatment. It sketches how Ortega and the FSLN broke their electoral losing streak at three and retook the reins of government by winning 38 percent of the vote in the 2006 general elections. Then it offers what we believe is a sufficient overview of the Ortega administration's first years back in power to give a sense of the path it is laying out for the country. In particular, it notes the president's governing style, the direction of the administration's domestic policy, and the cut of its foreign affairs.

Regaining Office

Because Shelley McConnell examines the 2006 elections systematically in Chapter 6, we will just highlight two major themes. First, those elections produced an at least temporary realignment of the Nicaraguan party system. Two new contenders for national power emerged—the Sandinista Renewal Movement (Movimiento Renovador Sandinista, or MRS) on the left¹³ and the Nicaraguan Liberal Alliance (Alianza Liberal Nicaragüense, or ALN) on the right. Each abandoned the old structure of Sandinistas versus anti-Sandinistas to protest the Alemán-Ortega Pact and thus gave Nicaraguan politics a different dimension. For one election, anyway, questions of probity, accountability, and governing style would compete with attitudes toward the Sandinista Revolution in defining people's votes.

Second, the Pact wrought an electoral modification (another structural factor). Although Nicaragua's politics have been resolutely two-party since independence, third parties have been part of the mix. Though none had ever drawn enough support to deny the winning presidential candidate a majority of votes cast, in 1996 the presence of other parties in the race had translated into a plurality legislative victory for the winning Liberals instead of a majority. Thus some provision for a presidential runoff was prudent. The provision adopted in 2000, however, was unusual: it set 40 percent, or 35 percent with a 5-point margin over the runner-up, as the thresholds for avoiding a second round of elections.¹⁴ The latter of these was sought by the FSLN, whose share of the vote seemed set at around 40 percent. Although the amendment looked pointless when approved, it decided the 2006 election in Daniel Ortega's favor.

Part of what gave the Frente a chance was a change in Nicaragua's party system that put at least a temporary end to the polarized dynamic that had pitted the FSLN against the anti-Sandinistas. That system had produced landslide victories for the right in 1990, 1996, and 2001. The party realignment in 2006 saw four competitors seeking the public's support: the FSLN, two Liberal parties—the PLC of Arnoldo Alemán, whose standard-bearer was José Rizo, and the anti-Alemán ALN led by Eduardo Montealegre—and the anti-Ortega but progressive MRS that had formed from a sizable FSLN splinter group.¹⁵ This produced three possible breakdowns: (1) the FSLN against all others, which would be a tweaking of the old bipolar system to let in the MRS on the anti-Sandinista side; (2) the left, meaning the two Sandinista parties FSLN and MRS, versus the right, meaning the two Liberal groups PLC and ALN; or (3) the pro-Pact parties, FSLN and PLC, against the anti-Pact ALN and MRS.

In Nicaragua's first serious four-way electoral campaign, the FSLN adopted a cautious stance. It appeared to have banked on doing nothing either to alienate its loyalists or to frighten undecideds into turning out and voting to ensure the Sandinistas' defeat. To this end, Ortega skipped the candidates' debate, spoke in generalities about the grave problems of poverty facing Nicaragua but said little about how he proposed to fix them, and, to neutralize the Catholic Church hierarchy that had opposed him in past elections, ordered the FSLN contingent in the National Assembly to support a bill criminalizing even therapeutic abortion (see Chapter 8). Moreover, as in the two previous campaigns, the Sandinista Hymn, which has the line, "We fight against the Yankee, the enemy of humanity," was dropped in favor of gentler tunes; this time they chose John Lennon's "Give Peace a Chance." This reflected the influence of Ortega's wife, Rosario Murillo, a well-known poet, who was his *de facto* campaign manager. Her strategy worked.

The final count of Nicaragua's 2006 election showed Daniel Ortega winning the presidency with 38 percent of the vote. The two Liberal parties divided 55 percent almost evenly between them, and the MRS trailed with 6 percent. Viewed from the first perspective above, the FSLN versus everyone else, the vote went 3 to 2 against Ortega. He won but could expect an uphill fight that would require careful compromises on his part to get his program approved. If the angle is left versus right, the outcome is 45 percent for the two Sandinista parties to 55 percent for the Liberals, giving Ortega a larger minority. However, if the Alemán-Ortega Pact is the focus, thus viewing the results in terms of how a party has governed and proposes to govern, Ortega is much more comfortable: 66 percent of the vote went to the candidates of parties committed to unaccountable hyper-presidentialism. In this view, that is, Nicaraguans voted 2 to 1 for top-down, personalistic politics. The first four years of the Ortega administration suggest that this latter perspective is the most accurate, though on some issues Ortega has faced a united opposition in the legislature.

Daniel Ortega Returns to the Presidency

After being inaugurated in January 2007, Daniel Ortega followed the path laid by George W. Bush six years earlier, abandoning conciliation and beginning to govern as if he were the landslide winner instead of a minority president. In each case, brazenness worked. Both presidents gathered around them a cadre of personal loyalists, Ortega outdoing Bush by making his wife Rosario Murillo, who had managed Daniel's campaign, his prime minister in all but name. Actually, the Nicaraguan president may have surpassed the former US leader in his efforts to construct a firewall around himself and his administration. Each president increasingly concentrated power in his office and became increasingly unresponsive to criticism from outside his administration. However, Ortega may have outdone Bush when he arguably resorted to fraud to let the FSLN win Nicaragua's 2008 municipal elections by a massive margin and then put young toughs onto the street in party colors—no longer red and black but a deliciously bright pink—to repress those who protested the results.

One should bear in mind that Ortega's second government is part of a broader movement that is led by President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela and that takes its name—Bolivarian—from the revolutionary regime he is endeavoring to build. Besides Chávez and Ortega, Bolivia's Evo Morales and Ecuador's Raphael Correa are also Bolivarians. Ortega, Morales, and Correa all received assistance, direct or indirect, for their election wins from Chávez. The four share, first, an outlook. They are radical democrats, seeking a

peaceful transition to a socialism that offers a significant place for private enterprise, rather like the Sandinista model of the 1980s. In addition, they share a model for governing that includes an extremely strong president with a populist approach who deals directly with his supporters. It is personalist rule adapted to the requirements of electoral democracy. It is also a format well suited to a government seeking thorough and rapid political change, drawing comparisons (both nervous and supportive) to the transformative agenda and governance style practiced by the revolutionary Sandinista government of the 1980s.

Yet Ortega differs from the other Bolivarians in three important respects. First, the other three promised big changes and spelled out what those changes would be in their campaigns, whereas Ortega waffled through the 2006 race. Second, Ortega is very much a plurality president, and one might call him a minority president to stress that five out of every eight Nicaraguans voted against him; Chávez, Correa, and Morales won big majorities and then gained similar majorities in later votes as well.¹⁶ Finally, Ortega must count on the Pact and Arnoldo Alemán; without those he would be in a 3 to 2 minority in the National Assembly and unable to pass legislation.

In the first four years of his second administration, President Daniel Ortega has changed Nicaragua's political trajectory. Never an ideal liberal constitutional democracy, between 1984 and 2007 Nicaragua was nevertheless a functioning electoral democracy. Although the nation's electoral machinery did not always work smoothly, published election results were broadly accepted as reflecting the actual distribution of voters' preferences. More importantly, after 1990 violence figured far less prominently as a political instrument than it had in the past (see Chapter 3). One could reasonably be optimistic about Nicaragua's chances to become a political system in which the rule of law (a government of laws, not of people) prevailed and political tolerance reigned. In 2011 such prospects seem more distant, due in no small measure to how President Ortega has ruled.

Since assuming the presidency in January 2007, Ortega has both broken new ground and continued old practices in his approaches to governing (organizing and applying state power) and governance (coordinating the state's actions with those of nonstate groups—parties, interest groups, civil society, and the citizenry). In itself this is unexceptional: every president and prime minister does the same. From the past, Ortega carries forward the president-centered, highly partisan politics seen in his first administration and in the Alemán government. In addition, the current president's foreign policy continues the practice of allying with a greater power that can offer material aid. In the past this great ally was either Washington or Moscow, but now it is Caracas (see Chapters 11 and 12). Finally, the second

Ortega government follows the economic policy path blazed by its conservative predecessors by adhering to the strictures required to qualify for loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Yet what is new, at least what deviates from the path laid down between 1984 and 2006, matters more. Here the most significant break with the past is the Ortega government's rediscovery of actively redistributive social policy (outlined in Chapters 9 and 10). Less positive but perhaps even more important for Nicaragua's future are the administration's return to using violence and intimidation as instruments of rule, seen after the 2008 municipal elections, and its taking constitutional manipulation to unprecedented heights. Since its adoption in 1987, Nicaragua's constitution has undergone three sets of significant amendments that substantially changed the relationships between the branches of government or between state and citizen. This by itself suggests that there is either serious and continuing conflict over the nature of the constitution, and hence over the Nicaraguan state itself, or that sitting governments amend the constitution to meet short-term needs; and the two are not mutually exclusive. However, when in 2009 the Nicaraguan Supreme Court's Constitutional Division issued an injunction declaring that the no-immediate-reelection clause of the country's constitution (Article 147a) did not apply to Daniel Ortega (see Chapter 5), it may have signaled the end of constitutional government in Nicaragua, at least for the time being.

Conclusion

In just over three decades since the 1979 Revolution, the Sandinistas, Nicaragua, and indeed the world have all changed greatly. The FSLN has matured as a political institution, having governed, known electoral defeat and life as a parliamentary opposition, and then regained the reins of power. Most importantly, the one-time movement, now a party, has come to be dominated by its leader Daniel Ortega to a degree unimaginable in 1979. Moreover, the second Ortega administration shows signs of concentrating power in the executive and governing heedless of its opponents, who outnumber it three to two, reflecting either a shrewd strategy or a reckless gamble.

It is worth noting that the Sandinistas' return to office corresponds with the waning of the Washington Consensus, the neoliberal economic policy prescription regnant through most of the party's time in opposition. Further, it occurred when Washington's foreign policy was oriented elsewhere and it was content to give even its old Sandinista foe a bit of space, which was definitely not the case in 1979. And it came at a time when Venezuela's

President Hugo Chávez had money to spend to support his allies abroad, among whose number one counts Daniel Ortega. The stars were aligned much more favorably for Ortega and the FSLN in the first decade of the twenty-first century than they were in the eighth decade of the twentieth. And now in 2011, it appears that Daniel Ortega is well positioned to win a third term in office, even though it is constitutionally prohibited. That is the reality the contributors to this book seek to explain.

Organization of the Book

Following this introductory chapter, Chapters 2, 3, and 4 provide historical context and introduce some of the key political actors. Chapter 2, by Salvador Martí i Puig, considers the trajectory of the FLSN from its founding to the present. Martí argues that the party never outgrew its clandestine, revolutionary roots, preserving a top-down command structure that both limited its policymaking capacity and facilitated the concentration of power in the hands of Daniel Ortega, its historic leader. In Chapter 3, David Close takes a similar look at the anti-Sandinistas—the various groupings, civil or violent, parties or other organizations, that have been the FSLN’s adversaries over the years—to give a sense of how the politics of opposition work in Nicaragua. He concludes that between 1990 and 2008, the use of violence against political opponents nearly disappeared; electoral success became the only legitimate road to power.

Chapter 4 is a treatment of Nicaraguan political culture by Andrés Pérez Baltodano. Pérez takes the position that Nicaraguan political culture is best defined as “resigned pragmatism,” the perspective on politics that says that the desirable must always be subordinated to the immediately possible. He then suggests that this helps explain the contradictions that often appear in Daniel Ortega’s policies in his second administration, such as denouncing neoliberalism while following neoliberal policies.

The next three chapters focus on institutions. In Chapter 5, Elena Martínez Barahona addresses the judiciary and finds that Nicaraguan courts, above all the Supreme Court, are partisan instruments. The Sandinistas and Liberals not only divide the places on the Court among themselves, but Sandinista and Liberal magistrates often make their decisions on partisan grounds rather than legal ones. Elections and electoral law are the subjects of Chapter 6 by Shelley A. McConnell. She describes each national election since the Sandinista Revolution (1984, 1990, 1996, 2001, and 2006) in detail. McConnell also analyzes the politics surrounding electoral system reform in Nicaragua. She concludes that Nicaragua’s democratic weaknesses

indicate that competitive elections do not, by themselves, guarantee democratic accountability.

In Chapter 7, Miguel González and Dolores Figueroa consider the complex question of regional autonomy for Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast. In 1987 the Sandinista government enacted an Autonomy Statute for the Coast, which is ethnically and culturally distinct from the western regions of Nicaragua. Since then, years of neoliberal economic policy and the challenges of building an operating model of multiethnic government have made the achievement of meaningful political autonomy difficult. Their chapter combines institutional analysis with a description of the evolution of Managua's policy toward the Caribbean Coast, something only the FSLN has taken at all seriously, thus making it a natural bridge to the section on public policy.

Public policy is the focus of Chapters 8, 9, and 10, which look at policy questions in Nicaragua. Although all present an overview of the Sandinista period, each gives special attention to policies emerging under the Ortega administration that won election in 2006. In Chapter 8, Karen Kampwirth concentrates on gender politics, especially what she describes as the unintended consequences of the revolution. Although Sandinista efforts to mobilize women in the 1970s and 1980s produced Central America's most significant feminist movement, Kampwirth details the antifeminist countermovement that grew in the 1990s and the friction that developed then between the women's movement and the FSLN. Perhaps the most striking part of this chapter is her examination of the repeal of a century-old law permitting therapeutic abortion (performed only to save a woman's life) that was adopted in 2006 thanks to Sandinista votes.

In Chapter 9, Rose J. Spalding addresses the socioeconomic impact of economic policy. She traces the evolution of Nicaraguan economic policy as it passed from revolutionary socialist to orthodox neoliberal. Spalding argues that the effects of these neoliberal policies have been especially costly in health, education, and rural poverty. Rural issues are the theme of the final policy-related chapter, Chapter 10, in which Eduardo Baumeister considers agricultural reform and counterreform. Baumeister's focus is the correlation between Nicaragua's evolving sociopolitical environment and the country's agrarian structure. The last part of his chapter evaluates the changes to agricultural policy that are being implemented by the current Sandinista government.

Hector Perla addresses an often overlooked element of Sandinista history in Chapter 11, namely the role of international solidarity movements, focusing on the Central American Peace and Solidarity Movement. With particular reference to the United States, he argues that the movement in the United States was especially successful in limiting the Reagan administration's

scope of action in its attempts to overthrow the FSLN government. Perla then sketches how international solidarity works today, noting the extent to which relations with such like-minded states as Venezuela have assumed the roles formerly played by solidarity organizations.

In Chapter 12, Martí and Close ask if the transformation seen in the FSLN and Sandinismo since 1979 is exceptional. Their assessment stresses the continuity of the FSLN's structures and leadership, on the one hand, while pointing to the dramatic changes that have occurred in its environment on the other.

Notes

1. Throughout this chapter, indeed throughout the book, "FSLN," "Sandinistas," and "Frente" are used effectively interchangeably. When necessary for clarity, as when describing conflicts between former FSLN members, who still consider themselves Sandinistas, and the official party, headed, in practical terms, by Daniel Ortega since 1984, alternative formulations are used.

2. This section really is a primer, intended for those who are only now learning about Nicaragua. There are several newer books that would be of interest both to individuals discovering Nicaragua and those more conversant with its history. Among them are Luciano Baracco, *Nicaragua: The Imagining of a Nation from Nineteenth-Century Liberals to Twentieth-Century Sandinistas* (New York: Algora, 2005); Consuelo Cruz, *Political Culture and Institutional Development in Costa Rica and Nicaragua: World-Making in the Tropics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Michel Gobat, *Confronting the American Dream: Nicaragua Under US Imperial Rule* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); and Mauricio Solaún, *US Intervention and Regime Change in Nicaragua* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005).

3. Generals in these civil wars were usually not career officers. Rather, they were caudillo-style leaders who amassed enough men and arms to be given a commander's responsibilities. Some, like Sandino, were naturally gifted military leaders and had substantial success.

4. Ernesto Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare* (Melbourne: Ocean, 2006).

5. One attempt came from inside the system in 1947, when Leonardo Argüello, Anastasio Somoza's designated placeholder, tried to usurp power. Another came from outside the regime in 1956, when oppositionists, including newspaper publisher Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, attempted a coup. Both ended disastrously for the perpetrators.

6. Phil Ryan, in *The Fall and Rise of the Market in Sandinista Nicaragua* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), sets out the FSLN's economic thinking and policy in detail.

7. The 1984 Electoral Law not only set up the electoral system, defined the constituencies, and set the election date; it also defined the offices to be elected. In so doing, it structured the executive and legislative branches of the new, electoral Sandinista regime. It was a case of constitution making by stealth.

8. There was a seventh, unofficial, undeclared, but very real participant: the Nicaraguan Democratic Coordinator (CDN). Led by Arturo Cruz, who had once been a member of the JGRN and then Managua's ambassador to Washington, the CDN campaigned even though it declared it would not run. Less than a month before the vote, the CDN pulled out definitively.

9. Not everything about the FSLN's government was edifying, however. In a lame-duck period after losing power, when the Sandinistas moved to regularize the titles of properties that had been transferred under agrarian reform or had been allocated to house the urban poor, they also ensured that the party's leaders secured the mansions they had seized from fleeing, wealthy, Somoza sympathizers. This episode became known as the piñata, after the swagbag game played at children's parties.

10. David Close and Kalowatie Deonandan, eds., *Undoing Democracy: The Politics of Electoral Caudillismo* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005). The Pact, habitually capitalized, figures prominently in most of the chapters of this book, too.

11. Article 133 of the Nicaraguan Constitution provides for this.

12. The amendments were not enacted. In 2008, Nicaragua's Supreme Court, with eight justices named by the FSLN and the other eight by the PLC, thanks to the Pact, declared the legislation unconstitutional.

13. The party was founded by Herty Lewites and is often called the Alliance for Herty-Sandinista Renewal Movement. In this book, we refer to the party simply as the Sandinista Renewal Movement or MRS.

14. See, Article 145, *Ley Electoral*, www.bcn.gob.ni/.

15. The MRS lost its first candidate when Herty Lewites died of a heart attack in July 2006. Lewites was a well-known politician, a popular former mayor of Managua, and a talented campaigner. His replacement, Edmundo Jarquín, was more of a technocrat who lacked Lewites's panache. With Lewites's death, the chances for the MRS to play a decisive role in the race also perished.

16. Although Correa's first majority came in a runoff, he was reelected in 2009 with 52 percent of the vote.