

The agony of Nicaragua

by James Guy

Revolution is very much a catchword in Latin America, although few of the republics have actually experienced one. In an area of the world where political violence is one of the only means of accelerating progress towards modernity, frequent *golpes de estado* (coups) are often erroneously considered as revolutionary. In most cases these *golpes* and *cuartelazos* (barracks revolts) merely shift power from one elite to another without affecting the daily lives of the peasants and urban dwellers. However, Nicaragua's painful 1979 upheaval has all the indications of a real revolution: the political, social and economic fabric of Nicaraguan society appears to have been irrevocably altered. Out of this revolutionary holocaust, which rendered all "Nicas" equally superfluous, emerged a Nicaragua that will never be the same again. Indeed the violent and chaotic events that led to the exile of Anastasio ("Tachito") Somoza Debrayle and members of his family in July have traumatized this nation far beyond any other experience in its history and will continue to do so for many years to come.

The immediate human costs are enormous, with approximately 15,000 people killed, 600,000 forced to flee their homes, the destruction of villages, towns, and cities, and the termination and ruin of many businesses. In spite of the victory of the Sandinistas, political nihilism is rampant in this largest of Central American republics. People have witnessed and experienced the mass execution of infants, children, peasants and soldiers, the brutal torture of political prisoners, arbitrary murder, detentions and the denial of civil liberties. All of these atrocities have left an indelible mark on the collective psyche of a nation that has moved from a ruthless personalistic authoritarianism to an amorphous totalitarianism. It may be some time before any positive attributes of this transition can be isolated and analyzed. But what is certain is that Nicaragua has not developed the institutions and traditions of democratic rule since it achieved independence as a separate state in 1838. Until recently the only detectable characteristic of "political stability" in the Nicaraguan political system was the mere fact that one family had been able to maintain control for more than four decades. The

important question now is what institutions, if any, will emerge to fill the political vacuum left by the demise of the Somoza family.

The Dynasty

United States Marines intermittently occupied Nicaragua for about 19 years between 1912 and 1933 in order to "restore order" and "protect American lives and property". Six years before the final departure of the Marines the U.S. created the National Guard and approached a jovial pro-American Liberal, Anastasio "Tacho" Somoza Garcia to take charge. One of "Tacho's" first acts in consolidating his command of the guard would prove to sow the seeds of destruction for himself and for his son "Tachito" some 45 years later. On February 21, 1934, he ordered the execution of the charismatic Augusto Cesar Sandino who led peasant troops against the Marines during the second occupation. More than 20 years later, on September 21, 1956, a young Nicaraguan poet and follower of Sandino, Rigoberto Lopez Perez, assassinated Somoza Sr. during his fourth bid for re-election as president. After another 20-odd years the Marxist guerrilla movement which formed the major ground swell of opposition to "Tachito" Somoza also took its inspiration from Sandino and rallied around the Sandinist Front of National Liberation (FSLN) which had been formed in 1962.

The decade after the death of "Tacho" saw his two sons, Luis and Anastasio, run Nicaragua. Luis had been president of the Congress and constitutionally designated to fill the presidency at the time of his father's death. He had received his formal education at the Universities of California, Louisiana State and Maryland; his democratic reformism irritated his younger brother, Anastasio, a graduate of West Point, by nature a tough-minded authoritarian, who feared the ramifications of Luis' liberal politics. As com-

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