

Nicaragua: an election under scrutiny

by Rob Giczey

On February 25, Nicaraguans will cast their votes in the most carefully and widely observed elections in the world.

The government promises free and fair elections and, to oversee that promise, over 3,000 international observers from 30 delegations will watch over the election process. These groups include the Organization of American States (OAS), the United Nations and Jimmy Carter's Centre for Democratically Elected Heads of State (a collection of former presidents which now may also include an additional 12 U.S. congressmen).

Despite Contra activity, a remarkable 80 per cent of eligible voters, or 1.5 million people, have registered to vote. Proportionately, this represents a greater turn out than in El Salvador or the United States.

A recent poll conducted by the U.S. firm Greenberg-Lake shows that, of the nine parties and one coalition running, the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN) is in the lead — ahead of its closest rival, the National Opposition Union (UNO), by 17 points. An ECO opinion poll shows the FSLN with an even greater lead.

For the Sandinistas, these elections must be won on an international as well as national level. The effort is evident in the campaigning style of the FSLN: a large billboard of President Daniel Ortega in front of a colourful sunrise, cheek-to-cheek with his youngest daughter, is pulled off in blatant North American fashion. Blaring through speakers at FSLN rallies is a pop song — again boasting of Nicaragua's leader. Less evident, is the grass roots level campaigning that the campesinos (peasant land owners) on the coffee farms can better relate to.



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If the FSLN is confident it can win the votes of the Nicaraguans, then the next logical step would be to win the approval of the international community — specifically that of the U.S. The U.S. insisted the 1984 elections were illegitimate despite approval by several observer groups.

Much of the same can be expected on the 25th. Indeed, the Bush administration has taken upon itself to illegally and indirectly fund the UNO Coalition. William Robinson from the Nicaraguan News Agency and former CIA analyst David MacMichael report in *Covert Action* that millions of dollars have entered Nicaragua without being registered with the Central Bank. This money is being laundered through the National Endowment for Democracy, a supposedly non-partisan group, and then given to the UNO coalition.

The U.S. has also promised to not end an economic embargo, which for five years has plagued the country, until the Sandinistas lose power.

By the election's end, UNO anticipates it will receive a total of \$9 million — about as much as the government has to run the entire electoral process. By law, financial donations over \$20,000 to any party running in the elections must be split equally between the party and the Supreme Electoral Council (CSE). The CSE consists of various party affiliated members (including both the FSLN and UNO) which set the guidelines and regulations of the electoral process. Received monies should be put toward the cost of the process.

Thus far, the CSE has not yet seen any portion of the \$9 million. On top of the amount UNO receives, the Sandinistas must contend with the added millions the Contras obtain, either through U.S. Congress or covertly (i.e. Iran-Contra affairs). Since April, \$67 million has reached the Contras through Congress and, as a result, Contra raids have escalated in the months nearing the elec-

tions. On four consecutive Sundays in October, 25 vote registration posts were attacked by Contras, killing 19, wounding six, and causing the posts to close.

Attracting national attention recently, two nuns died in an ambush on the Atlantic coast. Despite the Contras' denial of involvement and the UNO accusation of Sandinista guilt, eyewitness reports and an investigation by "America's Watch" (a Washington-based group monitoring human rights violations in Latin America) links the murders to the Contras. In spite of this, the government continues to grant amnesty to Contras who turn in their arms. Just two weeks ago (Feb. 7) the government freed 1,190 Contras, collaborators and National Guardsmen from prison.

The Spirit of Sandino

U.S. interference in Nicaragua is nothing new. Intervention dates back to the 1850s when U.S. marines landed to resolve a dispute between a U.S. transit company and Nicaraguan authorities. Naturally, the verdict was in favour of U.S. business. This was only the first of 11 interventions to come.

In 1927, a peasant general, named Augusto Cesar Sandino led a fight for national liberation and self determination. Against 6,000 marines, with the help of his 100-man guerilla unit (the Army for the Defence of Nicaraguan National Sovereignty), Sandino forced the government to negotiate. By 1934, a seemingly productive set of talks with civilian president Secessa (who had been installed by the National Guard and held little real power) brought Sandino to the Presidential Palace to discuss outstanding issues. Later that night, Sandino was greeted at the gate by the National Guard, commanded by Anastasio Somoza Garcia. Sandino was assassinated.

Today in Nicaragua, through graffiti on the walls of every barrio, the spirit of Sandino lives.

Somoza and the FSLN

In 1936 Somoza forced Secessa out of the office and arranged for his own election. With the National Guard at his disposal, Somoza ruled Nicaragua with brute force. Washington's attitude toward him can be summarized by Franklin Roosevelt's words, "Somoza may be a son of a bitch, but he's our son of a bitch."

The elder Somoza was succeeded by his son Luis and then by his other son Anastasio Somoza Debayle. By the time the latter took power, he controlled one third of the nation's arable land, the meat packing industry, the fishing industry, the national airlines, the only TV station, the radio stations, the banks and more. His economic monopoly discouraged many foreign investors from doing business in Nicaragua.

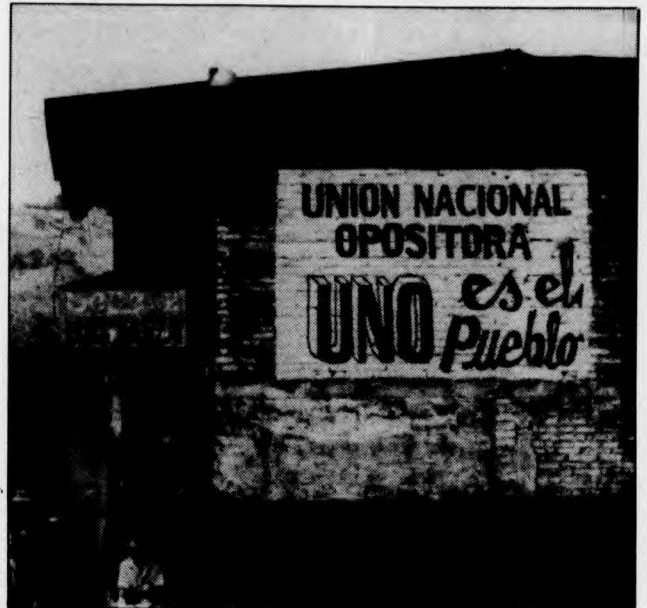
In 1961, three students, Carlos Fonseca, Silvio Mayora and Tomas Borge, founded the FSLN, a guerilla group which gained popular support within the country — especially in the northern parts.

Dissent came from students and campesinos, but also from a disgruntled upper and middle class. The beginning of the end for Somoza came in December 1972, when an earthquake devastated the country. When millions of dollars in international aid poured into Nicaragua, the money was funnelled right into Somoza's bank account, where much of it stayed.

This further outraged the population at all levels. Even the U.S. could no longer defend such shameless actions.

Washington — Somoza's base of power — began to slip out from under him. It became evident he

could not hold onto power much longer. Although the U.S. welcomed an overthrow of Somoza at this point, the Sandinistas did not have Washington's blessing. Because the Sandinistas were the strongest force against the dictator's 42-year rule,



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the Americans anticipated the FSLN would do all the dirty work of ousting Somoza, and then a government of Washington's choice could be installed. When the insurrection finally shattered the dynasty, Washington called an emergency meeting with the OAS.

Then Secretary of State Cyrus Vance proposed to send a "peace keeping force" to Nicaragua. The U.S. plan was to keep the FSLN from taking total control of the country. This plan failed and, on July 19, 1979, the revolution was victorious. Somoza escaped to Miami, robbing the National Treasury and leaving the country with a massive foreign debt — a debt the new government honours to this day.

The revolution had immediate implications:

- The death penalty was abolished at once.
- The National Literacy Crusade in 1980 reduced illiteracy from 50 per cent to 13 per cent.
- The Agrarian Reform of 1981 provided benefits to 100,000 families.

In 1984 a sufficiently stable Nicaragua saw its first elections since the dictator's overthrow. The 1984 elections, as well as the upcoming February elections, are indicative of Nicaragua's commitment to pluralism. Changes to the election policy include:

- The CSE, which controls electoral mechanisms, consisting of members associated with various political parties.
- A new clause, as a result of youth lobbying, now allows those 16 years of age or older to vote.
- Legislative representation, favouring smaller parties through a system of proportional representation. In the 1984 elections, although the FSLN received 67 per cent of the vote for the National Assembly, it received only 63 per cent of the seats. In Canada, the Progressive Conservatives took 57 per cent of the seats in parliament with only 43 per cent of the popular vote.

Currently, the government offers free medical care and education, but these have their limitations because of the war. Over 50 per cent of the national budget goes to defence. Due to the war, farms and schools are being destroyed and must be built and rebuilt time and time again. The areas to the north, near the border of Honduras, are especially vulnerable to attack.

In explaining the current situation, President Ortega remarks "[The Contras] only chance, as they see it, is to step up attacks on civilians, forcing the government to impose necessary security measures. The government's reaction is then to be presented to the world as evidence of its hostilities to democratic elections."

With the victory of the revolution came national sovereignty and self determination. However, eight years of Contra aggression, leaving 50,000 dead since 1982 along with continued U.S. hostilities, is the cost every family in Nicaragua has paid.