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The Run-Up to Nicaragua's 2021 Elections: Part One



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There is no socialist country on this planet that isn't subject to international political interference. Such is the case with Nicaragua.

In 1979, the people of Nicaragua famously rose up against the US-dictatorship overseen by the dynastic

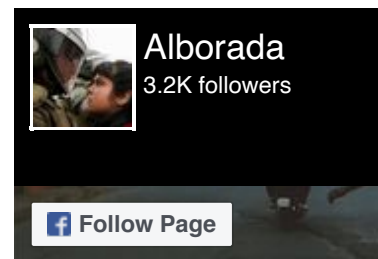
Somoza family. The *Sandinista* revolution - led by the socialist vanguard party *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (Sandinista National Liberation Front, FSLN) - inspired people across the world as it introduced free education, free healthcare, land reforms and other fundamental human rights to the country for the first time. Unfortunately, after a decade of bombing, blockades, disinformation and assassinations orchestrated by the US government, the people of Nicaragua were forced to surrender to a US-puppet regime in 1990, this time fronted by Violeta Barrios de Chamorro of the *Union Nacional Opositora* (National Opposition Union, UNO). There followed 16 years of neoliberal rule which oversaw a stringent programme of austerity and privatisation, reversing many of the social gains introduced by the *Sandinistas*.

However, *Sandinismo* was never eradicated and the FSLN were triumphantly voted back into power in 2007, with *Sandinista* revolutionary Daniel Ortega at the helm. Since then, the country has once again embarked on a mission to uplift the poorest sections of society, including programmes of poverty eradication, total literacy, food sovereignty, universal healthcare, free education, decent housing, agroecology, green energy, labour rights, gender equality and indigenous autonomy. 58 per cent of the 2021 budget has been allocated for social spending, with health, education, housing and equality regarded as human rights.

In this two-part article, we'll be looking at the potential problems facing the country ahead of the crucial election on 7 November this year.

The 2018 failed coup and its repercussions

With its radical plan for democratic equality, the FLSN has attracted the attention of many countries in the international community. Its mixed economic model of state planning with controlled free-market elements has helped to maintain national sovereignty since 2007. It has put the people of Nicaragua at the forefront and refused to become a neo-colony of its former occupier or any other country. But from the days of the **Monroe Doctrine**



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to **Operation Condor** to **contemporary imperialism**, the US has often seen Latin America as its backyard: a site for resource extraction, cheap labour and balmy vacations. Ideological or economic independence is therefore not tolerated. Thus, in 2018, after another decade of *Sandinista* rule, the US attempted another coup. As in the 1980s, it did this through a series of what we might call new *contra* forces - paid domestic and international opposition groups who initiated the street violence and media disinformation needed to force regime change.

The financial and ideological connections between the 2018 *contra* forces and the US government have been expertly documented in English by Ben Norton at **The Grayzone**, Stephen Sefton at **Tortilla con Sal** and **John Perry** in various places. The primary funders of the failed coup were USAID and the National Endowment for Democracy, both of which operate as well-known covert (and overt) arms of the CIA, as well as the US State Department. Rick Sterling has also **revealed** the influence of The Gates, Rockefeller, Ford and Howard Buffet Foundations on the 2018 coup attempt, all of whom used various research institutes, NGOs and think tanks to discreetly funnel resources to the coup-mongers.

Such is the loyalty to *Sandinismo* among sufficient numbers of the population that the so-called 'popular protests' initiated by the new US-*contras* forces did not gain near enough support to overthrow the FSLN government. The violence committed by the new *contras* - who included **criminal gangs**, some that had travelled in from other Central American countries - both frightened and repulsed many in the population, who were cut off from town and cities by road blockades. At these *contra* road blockades, violence and intimidation were commonplace and many incidents of murder, kidnapping and rape occurred. *Sandinistas* and loyal trade unionists were targets of house raids and assassinations. On witnessing the protests, President Ortega **initially ordered the police to stay in their quarters**, not wanting to appear undemocratic and authoritarian. Yet as the violence escalated, the people appealed for help and the police stepped in. Police then became targets for US-inspired *contra* violence.

The events were significantly (and deliberately) misrepresented by the Western press, which blamed the government for the violence and labelled Ortega a dictator. Naturally, many of the local news sources for the 2018 events were Nicaraguan opposition media, like the newspapers *La Prensa* and *Confidencial*, who receive funding from the US. Of course, none of this same press gave column inches to explore the financial and ideological links between the 2018 *contras* and the US State and private industry. Nor did they highlight the unpopularity of the protests or the achievements of the FLSN.

The failed 2018 coup has led to the international isolation of Nicaragua by Western governments and their allies. This is not just evident at governmental level, but even further down the political pyramid. Some on the left in Britain and the US have entirely abandoned the *Sandinista* project. However, none of this has deterred the FSLN, whose popularity is unabated. Recent polls have indicated approximately 60 per cent support for the FLSN ahead of November's election, with just under 20 per cent support for opposition parties and 20 per cent either undecided or abstaining.

While the 2018 failed coup attempt successfully damaged the FSLN's image abroad, it appears to have bolstered support for them at home. What many *Sandinistas* will be concerned about is another violent US-coup attempt this year (as we saw in Bolivia in 2019). In fact, the groundwork is already being laid. The Biden administration has intensified US meddling with further sanctions to destabilise Nicaragua's economy and US-media attempts to discredit the November elections.

Sanctions kill, disinformation too

US sanctions against Nicaragua began in 2018 with the Nicaragua Investment Conditionality Act (NICA), 'the purpose of which', states the Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign Action Group, 'was to cut Nicaragua off from loans by multilateral lending institutions such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) and Central America

Bank for Economic Integration (CABEI)'. The objective was to create a funding shortfall in Nicaragua, inducing poverty and dissent. The act also ring-fenced funding for anti-FLSN media and civil society groups in Nicaragua, it placed sanctions on individuals in the country and even implemented limits on travel visas from Nicaragua to the US. Similar measures were introduced against socialist Venezuela.

Following then-president Donald Trump's lead, the European Union also implemented sanctions, encompassing asset freezes and travel bans on targeted Nicaraguan individuals. The United Kingdom soon followed suit. In defiance of this true Troika of Tyranny, the United Nations **condemned** outright these types of sanctions as unfair and punitive during the pandemic, as have the nations comprising the **Non-Aligned Movement**.

This hasn't dissuaded the true Troika, however, who have persisted with their sanctions throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, limiting Nicaragua's access to financial aid during this tumultuous period. The US has gone even further and at the beginning of 2021 introduced yet another sanctions bill, clearly wanting to speed up destabilisation efforts. Named *Reinforcing Nicaragua's Adherence to Conditions for Electoral Reform (RENACER Act)*, the bill aims to double down on current sanctions to ensure: 'free, fair, and transparent elections in Nicaragua and to reaffirm the commitment of the United States to protect the fundamental freedoms and human rights of the people of Nicaragua'. Quite how sanctions are supposed to ensure any of this is never stated. Neither does RENACER question why the US thinks it has any role to play in another sovereign country's elections. As we will address in part two of this article, Nicaragua has introduced broad electoral reforms in 2021 that have improved upon an already strong, transparent electoral system that arguably is more democratic than many other Western nations.

Sanctions are just one aspect of this hybrid war against Nicaraguan sovereignty. Disinformation, as was evident in the failed 2018 coup, is an integral aspect of US foreign policy. In August 2020, Ben Norton brought our attention

to a new ‘task order’ published by USAID entitled **RAIN** - Responsive Assistance in Nicaragua (yes, the banality of these names is acutely exhausting). RAIN’s stated mission is to assist Nicaragua’s ‘transition to a rules-based market economy’, that offers ‘protection of private property rights’. Furthermore, Norton **notes**:

The document concludes by calling for the future US-installed regime in Nicaragua to “rebuild institutions” and “re-establish” the military and police; to “dismantle parallel institutions” that support the Sandinista Front; and to persecute FSLN leaders through “transitional justice measures” - in other words, a thorough purge of the Sandinista movement to prevent it from ever returning to power.

Firstly, the idea that Nicaragua isn’t already a ‘rules-based market economy’ belies the fact that Nicaragua does indeed have a rules-based market economy. It is even party to a free-trade agreement between the Central American countries and the US, and another with the European Union. As aforementioned, Nicaragua runs a blended economic model, at once providing extensive free social programmes for citizens and controlled central planning over macroeconomics, while simultaneously allowing free-market elements to thrive. Nicaragua houses powerful multinational companies like Cargill and Syngenta, so the very idea that it is hostile to the free market is a fallacy. Secondly, private property rights also exist normally in Nicaragua, yet unlike purely capitalist countries, there are greater checks and balances, land rights for indigenous peoples and communal-cooperative ownership. What the US aims to achieve with RAIN - as Norton rightfully points about - is simply to dissolve all socialist elements and institutions within society that embody the *Sandinista* movement.

Are these sanctions working? That’s a difficult question to answer. The effect of sanctions is always felt first and foremost by the working class and there aren’t clear statistics from the last few years that pertain to ‘quality of life’. Regardless, it would be hard to say whether such figures could isolate the consequence of sanctions from Covid-19 and two huge hurricanes (Eta and Iota) that have

also recently impacted the country. And yet, on purely fiscal terms, Nicaragua isn't fairing as badly as one might expect. After contracting for two years straight as a result of the failed coup and then the pandemic, GDP is set to grow in 2021 by 1.5-3.5 per cent. The FLSN's popularity in recent polls further indicates that they clearly have weathered the coup attempt, sanctions, hurricanes and Covid with relative finesse. Camila Escalante also [reminds us that](#):

During the past 14 years, Nicaragua has dramatically reduced poverty from 48.3% to 24.9% and extreme poverty from 17.5% to 6.9%, while drastically reducing its illiteracy rate to under 5%. International organizations like the World Economic Forum have recognized Nicaragua for leading gender equity (5th in the world) and material and infant mortality have been reduced by more than half since 2007.

That is to say that, the people of Nicaragua can look beyond a challenging few years to see the bigger achievements of the FSLN since 2007.

In the second part of this piece, we will cover the recent electoral reforms introduced in Nicaragua, the so-called 'clampdown' of the FLSN's opposition, and how Covid-19 may affect the elections.

This was produced in collaboration with the Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign Action Group. For more information about NSCAG, [click here](#). With thanks to John Perry for his suggestions.

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