Nicaragua, Forlorn

FORREST D. COLBURN

MANAGUA—There are few visible signs that Nicaragua had a traumatic Revolution 30 years ago. The ever-present soldiers with their AK-47s are gone, along with their jeeps and trucks. Gone, too, are the billboards, posters, murals, and graffiti with the revolutionary exhortations of the Sandinistas. The newspaper *Barricada* (Barricade) has vanished and so have the plethora of magazines, pamphlets, and books devoted to political and economic change. More noticeable, Nicaraguans are relaxed, at ease. There is no "mobilization," little talk of politics, and no expectation of imminent change. There is no sense, either, of danger.

ROBERT CROMA

The surprise is that otherwise, so little is different. Nicaragua has not undergone a metamorphosis. Except for being stripped of the material and emotional trappings of the Revolution, Nicaragua looks remarkably unchanged from the 1980s. While there are more people—the population has nearly doubled—Nicaraguans, too, say "nothing changes" in the country. "We are stuck in history," sighs Verónica Solís, a well-educated professional. "Reading the newspapers here makes it seem like so much is happening, but it is an illusion—the country does not change."

Solís's conclusion is harsh yet persuasive. For all of us, Nicaraguans and foreigners alike, who had hoped the Revolution would usher in progress, the ensuing decades have been disappointing. Nicaragua is a poignant case—perhaps just one of many—that there are stark limits to what politics, radical politics in particular, can accomplish in the poorer countries of the world. It is a lesson that extends to the international community. There is nothing the U.S. secretary of state can do (other than engage in diplomatic niceties) to "help" Nicaragua. The country must find its own way despite the constraints, including those deeply embedded and poorly understood in Nicaragua itself.

Solís's sober analysis echoes another Nicaraguan woman in the mid-1980s, who asked me, "How much can we Nicaraguans change if we are the same people?" At the time, she seemed cynical, but 30 years later, it's clear that the staggering weight of history, custom, and culture has taken its toll. Indeed, in too many of the truly poor countries of the world, broad-based "development" is elusive.

EXCITING TURNING POINT

In the 1980s, the Nicaraguan Revolution was widely held to be an exciting turning point in the history of Latin America. With the overthrow of a family dynasty, the Somozas, who had governed this small Central American country for 43 years, such claims seemed thoroughly justified. The Somoza government was notoriously corrupt and authoritarian. By the time the last of the ruling Somoza family fled in July 1979, they had amassed a fifth of the land under cultivation, as well as dozens of firms ranging from the Mercedes-Benz dealership to slaughterhouses to sugar refineries. The revolutionaries of the Sandinista Front for National Liberation promised a new beginning for the country—more egalitarian, more just, and able to unleash the nation's tremendous potential.

These early years were intellectually stimulating and emotionally invigorating. There was hope, but also a painful acknowledgement of the cost of political conflict. Gunshots from militia training grounds could be heard outside Managua. At mid-day, police at intersections in Managua would halt traffic so army trucks could pass, carrying the dead or wounded soldiers from the skirmishes with the American-backed counter-revolutionaries, the contras. Moreover, chaos from the attempted economic "transformation"

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was surreal. Supermarkets with an aisle filled with cheese graters had no cheese. Inflation became so bad that for a while, it was necessary to carry a bag of currency just to buy lunch.

In February 1990, the country held elections. The Sandinistas were confident they would win. They didn't. With their loss came the end of the revolution. It was a little more than a decade of an attempted radical restructuring of state and society. Still, some bold policies were implemented—agrarian reform, nationalization of the banking sector, and a host of social welfare programs. By 1990, the country was visibly exhausted from armed conflict, as well as social, economic, and rhetorical battles. It was time for peace, and the president-elect, Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, offered national reconciliation within what she called "the Nicaraguan family."

Some 45,000 Nicaraguans died in the insurrection against the Somozas. Another 30,000 died in the fighting between the Sandinistas and the contras. The economic costs of the Revolution were just as high. Nicaragua had become the second poorest nation in the Western hemisphere, ahead only of Haiti. Nicaragua's economy in 1990 was at the same level as it was in 1942.

PLANTING SEEDS

Nevertheless, some Nicaraguans, including ranking Sandinistas, believed that deep structural reforms, from property ownership to class and gender relations, had been carried out. As the Sandinista cartoonist Róger Sánchez put it, "the seeds were planted" for a new, better, more prosperous society. Nicaragua would not only rebound but flourish.

By 2012, 32 years after the Revolution, Nicaragua is no longer in the news. It was a perfect moment to focus on the long-term consequences of this revolution and suggest lessons for other, similar upheavals—across North Africa and beyond.

Fitting the lingering paradigm of the "Third World," which always had a whiff of socialism about it, the Nicaraguan revolutionaries were preoccupied with class inequity and determined to level the differences. Today, however, Nicaragua is still divided by class and an urban-rural divide. Most well-heeled families have retained their wealth, though they've often had to scramble to hold onto it. It does appear that members of the middle- and upper-classes have more respect—or at least more sensitivity—for the poor majority than they did in the past. Or maybe, as one longtime expatriate, a Harvard-educated business and public administration professor, John Ickis, says, "Members of the upper-class are just wary of the poor."

The poor majority, for its part, seems to have a sense of resignation about the presence of those more fortunate, who they called *burgués* (from bourgeois) in the 1980s. Members of the upper-class maintain a lower profile than in the past, but this change in behavior is more directly traced to the region-wide rise in crime and kidnappings than to any lesson in social conscience inherited from the Revolution. Avoiding ostentation is seen as prudent, not socially desirable. There has been progress in easing gender inequality, traceable as much to Spanish soap operas (with their depictions of "modern" social behavior) as to any revolutionary consciousness. Still, Nicaraguan society remains quite traditional with both men and women practicing modesty.

Managua is more than the political capital of Nicaragua. It is also the social,

cultural, and economic capital, but it has hardly flourished since the Revolution. The city has no "downtown." That was destroyed by an earthquake in 1972, and the rebuilt city is an impoverished version of Los Angeles. Since the Revolution there has been considerable construction, including a new cathedral, financed by the founder of Domino's Pizza, that resembles an egg carton turned upside down. It is not very accessible and stands by itself with no adjacent plaza. Instead, Nicaraguans stroll and mingle at malls. There are three large, modern malls, as well as many *centros comerciales*, and they appear collectively to be the epicenter of Managua. Metrocentro, with its two floors of shops and a food court, demonstrates how Nicaragua has evolved. Stores boast English names—Tinky Toys, Payless Shoes Source, Off Roads Sports, Quick Photo, Girl Sensation, and Radio Shack. The food court includes Go Green, Pizza Hut, Burger King, McDonald's, and Valenti's Pizza. The Cine Mark offers blockbusters from Hollywood. Most Nicaraguans cannot afford much at Metrocentro, but there are always crowds. It is perceived to be a safe, stimulating place to go and suggests the consumerism prevalent today in Nicaragua, where tastes remain shaped by the culture of the United States (just as they were before the Revolution). Most Nicaraguans seem content to be able to earn a living, raise their families, meet their basic needs, and have a little money left to buy themselves "something nice."

IT IS NOT UNUSUAL FOR BASEBALL GAMES IN THE UNITED STATES TO RECEIVE FRONT-PAGE COVERAGE.

Managua does have a grand theater, the Rubén Darío National Theater, which was built by the last Somoza (supposedly at the insistence of his wife). Offering a mix of concerts by foreign musicians and performances of indigenous dances and local theater, it attracts a smart crowd of well-educated and cultured Nicaraguans. Still, the Nicaraguan Revolution cannot be said to have led to a renaissance of the arts. Nicaragua has the region's most renowned artist, Armando Morales, but he earned his fame long ago and spent most of his career painting in Paris. For the upper class, there are DVDs; for the middle class, there is television; and for the poor, there is radio. Most of what is seen or heard comes from abroad.

Intellectually, Nicaragua today is muted. Many bookstores have closed. At the public National Autonomous University of Nicaragua, the most popular majors are law and computer science. The only posters on campus with a political bent call for recycling. The bookstore has nothing by Marx, Lenin, Keynes, or even neo-classical economists writing about economic development. There are no books that might help young intellectuals think about how Nicaragua could become a better country. Most books deal with subjects like calculus or marketing, with a smattering of well-known works of literature, including *Hamlet* and *Tom Sawyer*. At a public elementary school in the outskirts of Managua, there wasn't a single book visible of any kind. Only two newspapers publish daily, and while they cover political intrigues and share economic data, they don't offer profound analyses of the country or explore future scenarios. Indeed, it is not unusual for baseball games in the United States to receive front-page coverage.

THE WAR

Outside Managua there are even fewer signs of change, let alone growth. Provincial cities close to the capital, like Masaya, are all but unchanged since the 1980s. There has been little construction, either private or public. Most buildings date back to the 1930s or even earlier and are poorly maintained. Horse-drawn carriages are tourist magnets, but in small, impoverished cities like Rivas, they are still a normal form of public transport.

The swathes of countryside separating provincial cities are fertile, with expansive and lush fields, broken only by ramshackle houses that convey a sense not just of poverty but of estrangement. The Revolution did not usher in rural development or narrow the economic gulf between city and countryside. In parts of the north of Nicaragua—where the counter-revolution was fought—Nicaraguans do not even use the term *revolución* when referring to the decade of the 1980s. Instead, they refer solemnly to *la guerra*—the war. Most Nicaraguans in the region do not take sides or assign blame—it was just an era of conflict when, as many put it, "poor Nicaraguans killed poor Nicaraguans." And there is nothing to show for the loss of lives.

Economic data are consistent with the observable persistence of poverty. Between 1978 and 2011, there were 13 years of economic contraction, including a catastrophic plunge in GDP of 26.5 percent in 1979, which was the apex of the insurrection. Only four years have seen growth rates greater than 5 percent, the level deemed necessary (given the constant growth of the population) to make some headway in reducing poverty. As a small, poor country, Nicaragua must import many goods, making the country dependent on its ability to earn foreign exchange income. The country's dominant export today is the same one that drove its economy in the 19th century—coffee. In 2010, coffee accounted for 19 percent of Nicaragua's exports, followed by beef, gold, and sugar. Even more significant, though, are the dollar remittances sent home by relatives working abroad, largely in neighboring Costa Rica or the United States. Also significant are "gifts"—foreign aid which today comes overwhelmingly from Hugo Chávez's Venezuela. Only half of the foreign exchange necessary to drive the economy of Nicaragua comes from goods produced in Nicaragua.

In the 1960s, Nicaragua and its southern neighbor Costa Rica, also a small country, had roughly the same per capita income, with Nicaraguans boasting a higher per capita caloric intake, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization. Today, according to the World Bank, Costa Ricans have an average per capita income six times that of Nicaraguans. Costa Rica has progressed because of its political stability, investments in education and health care, and strong institutions like its national parks and government bureaucracies. Today, Costa Rica continues to export significant quantities of bananas, coffee, and other traditional exports. It also exports non-traditional goods, ranging from pineapples to hardwood doors to computer chips (thanks to an Intel plant). Costa Rica has developed an impressive tourism sector, now the country's most significant generator of foreign exchange reserves. This economic dynamism has not only led to a general rise in the standard of living but also enabled the country to cut its poverty rate by half between 1982 and 2002.

Nicaragua has been unable to follow suit and remains stagnant. Indeed, it appears the country was too broke and

beleaguered after the Revolution to catch up with other countries, particularly neighboring Costa Rica, which had a head start with producing and marketing non-traditional exports. At the same time, Nicaragua's lack of infrastructure and international image of strife prevented it from competing for lucrative tourists and foreign investment. Political conflict chased off most managers and entrepreneurs and corrupted others into living off government contracts or foreign aid, while continued political uncertainty limited risk-taking and innovation.

PERSONALITY CULTS

While the muted economic performance of Nicaragua during and after the Revolution has been disappointing, the political evolution of the country since 1990—the year the Sandinistas lost their hold on the state—has been bizarre, disconcerting, and, for those who recall the aspirations of the Revolution, deeply troubling. In the 1990 presidential elections, Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, publisher of the newspaper *La Prensa*, defeated the *Comandante de la Revolución*, Daniel Ortega. Barrios was backed by a loose and eclectic coalition of political parties and other organizations united only by their ambition to end the reign of the Sandinistas.

Their electoral defeat, combined with the collapse of socialist regimes in Eastern Europe, demoralized the Sandinistas. A party driven by ideology suddenly was not only out of power but without a compass. Still, Ortega insisted on preventing their collapse and made it clear that he hoped his party would return to power. At the same time, others began to revive Somoza's Nationalist Liberal Party, under a new leader, Arnoldo Alemán. A gifted orator who led a youth organization that supported Somoza's rule, he returned as mayor of Managua in the post-Sandinista years. The Liberals and Alemán gained traction because of widespread disappointment with the Sandinistas. Some rural poor even concluded, "life was better under Somoza." For many, a vote for the Liberals was an anti-Sandinista vote, or even a vote for "revenge." Alemán took office as president in January 1997.

What was a surprise to all during Alemán's tenure was the intimate relationship he developed with Ortega, who, despite having lost two consecutive elections, remained in control of the Sandinista organization. With the control the two leaders exerted over their party members in congress, they were able to modify the constitution to distribute government positions among themselves, including the judiciary. As a result, Nicaragua changed from being a winner-take-all presidential democracy with an American-style tri-cameral government to a crony-like "consociational democracy," a coalition of two political parties firmly controlled by their leaders, in collusion for their mutual benefit.

The corruption of Alemán, however, proved to be his undoing. In August 2002, his successor and political ally, Enrique Bolaños, denounced Alemán on radio and television, alleging that Alemán stole $97.6 million from the public treasury. In a moving speech, Bolaños charged, as if speaking directly to his predecessor, "Arnoldo, you took away the pensions of the retired, medicine from the nurses, paychecks from the teachers." With the support of Ortega, Bolaños managed to have Alemán convicted on corruption charges and sentenced to 20 years in prison.

Ultimately, a rift in the Liberal Party enabled Ortega to win the 2006 election. What was striking was that a party—the traditional Liberal party—whose head had been convicted of corruption managed to secure a quarter of the votes. Despite all the publicity of backroom deals, heavy-handed administration, and corruption, the two traditional parties of the country—one on the left and one on the right—garnered 65 percent of the vote. Efforts to offer a more "modern," less "personalistic" approach to politics floundered. Thoughtful Nicaraguans wondered—and continue to wonder—why their country is so beholden to *caudillos*, or "strongmen."

There is an unnerving resemblance between Alemán and the last Somoza—big, overweight men with well-scrubbed faces, sharing a threatening personality for a political leader: clever, glib, self-righteous but domineering, and—above all—greedy. How could Alemán rob public coffers of nearly $100 million in a country beset by widespread poverty?

Even before Ortega was reelected president in 2006, there were worries that he too was becoming autocratic. Ortega insisted on retaining tight control of the party and his role as standard-bearer in elections. Indeed, the party's central office is at his sprawling residence. Ortega had been schooled by masters of advertising. Campaigning on a platform of peace and harmony, he chose bright pink as the color of his campaign and adopted for his jingle the melody of John Lennon's song "Give Peace a Chance." Upon assuming power, he governed as a "one man show," with his closest confidant being his wife Rosario Murillo, a poet known for her flamboyant outfits and fierce temper. Finally, he made a "deal" with Alemán, who was freed, and promptly resumed management of the Liberal Party.

Of the other eight *Comandantes de la Revolución*, only one—Bayardo Arce—remains at his side, and Arce has become known for his skills in business, particularly the export of agricultural products. (A second *Comandante* does serve as ambassador to Peru.) Ortega has a very hands-on approach to government, maintaining control over his cabinet, his legislative block, and his cronies in the judiciary. He also remains keenly interested in foreign affairs, with an exaggerated sense of the international role of Nicaragua. Francisco de Paula Gutiérrez, former president of Costa Rica's Central Bank, remembers attending a meeting in Managua organized by the Inter-American Development Bank. Ortega spoke at great length as his wife continuously passed him notes, which he would glance at, and then abruptly veer off to a new topic—apparently to whatever his wife had suggested. De Paula Gutiérrez became totally bewildered when Ortega turned to the subject of a recent vote in the United Nations on a human rights initiative. Ortega had a list of the countries that had voted, and went through the entire list. "Niger. How did Niger vote? Benin. How did Benin vote?"

THOUGHTFUL NICARAGUANS WONDERED—AND CONTINUE TO WONDER—WHY THEIR COUNTRY IS SO BEHOLDEN TO *CAUDILLOS*, OR "STRONGMEN."

Nonetheless, Ortega secured a substantial gift for Nicaragua—from Venezuela's head-of-state, Hugo Chávez. Since the 2008 financial crisis, Venezuela has provided the Ortega administration with some $1.5 billion dollars in the form of gifts or concessionary loans,

none of which has formally entered the government budget. Arturo Cruz, who served as Ortega's ambassador to the U.S., recalls a private conversation he had with Ortega. Cruz told Ortega that in his dealings with Chávez he should keep in mind the relationships between Hitler and Mussolini, and between Hitler and Franco. Mussolini, Cruz said, received much from Hitler and gave much—and was hung. Franco received much from Hitler and gave little in return—and died in his own bed. Ortega's response? Cruz shrugs: "Oh, he just looked at me with his mouth open." Still, Ortega has not given anything of any consequence to Chávez.

THERE IS NO IDEOLOGICAL OR SOCIAL COMMITMENT IN NICARAGUA—IT IS GONE, ALONG WITH MOST OF THE ORIGINAL SANDINISTA REVOLUTIONARIES.

Much to Ortega's credit, he has managed economic resources with prudence, even acumen. Returning to the presidency after the 2006 elections, Ortega is said by Eduardo Montiel, a former finance minister, to have been haunted by three "nightmares" from the Sandinista era—shortages, inflation, and the sudden collapse of an all-important benefactor, the Soviet Union. Ortega has placated local businessmen, courted foreign investors, avoided conflict with the United States, and even maintained good relations with the International Monetary Fund. Ortega's pragmatism has generated economic growth, at rates of between 4 and 5 percent over the past two years, with even higher growth rates of exports. Still, Nicaragua remains frightfully poor.

Ortega has used economic resources to curry political favor. The poverty of most Nicaraguans leaves them preoccupied with immediate concerns, and an attitude towards politicians of "what can you do for me?" Ortega, like Alemán, has successfully responded with a calculated populism—visible goods and services, from lights for a village's soccer field to wheelchairs for the infirm, in exchange for political support.

UGLY LUNCH

One Saturday afternoon, en route to the provincial city of Diriá, along the Pan-American highway, two older *campesinos* were waiting for a ride home. Dressed in little more than rags, each carried machetes. It is common in rural Nicaragua to only work until mid-day on Saturdays. Poor Nicaraguans are taciturn, giving rise to the quip: "Flies do not enter closed mouths." The two men labored on a nearby coffee estate and gradually relaxed and loosened up. They worked for a "salary of death by starvation" and an "ugly lunch." Pressed for details, they confessed that the salary left them at the end of the day with the means to buy a single pound of beans and two pounds of rice to support their families. The "ugly lunch" was just rice and plantains—no beans, because they were expensive. Since the Revolution, their lives had changed, and not for the better.

When they reached their destination, they were asked how they and their neighbors planned to vote in the upcoming elections. One paused, looked down, and said, "Most people here will be voting for Ortega." Just up the road in El Crucero, two middle-aged women selling homemade tortillas volunteered their own blunt thoughts. "Daniel identifies with the poor," blurted one. "He has given chickens, pigs, and even cows to

the poor. And he has given roofing material and other construction material to others. He helps people like us."

In the November 6, 2011 elections, Alemán and his party had few resources to back his reelection campaign. While he did not appear, surprisingly, to have been seriously hurt by his conviction for corruption, he suffered from his pacts with Ortega. Ortega's detractors now view Alemán as compromised. Ortega was the victor, with 63 percent of the vote. Moreover, his party won 62 of the 90 seats in the unicameral legislature, enough to amend the constitution. Alemán received only 6 percent—a mortal wound. Another liberal party faction managed to secure 31 of the votes cast but were hampered by the absence of resources and a charismatic candidate (the two essentials of Nicaraguan politics).

The 2011 elections in Nicaragua—the fourth since the 1990 election that effectively brought to a close the Sandinista Revolution—might have been expected to consolidate an incipient democracy. But despite the formal presence of democratic institutions and processes, the election actually marked the consolidation of an agile autocratic regime.

Ortega governs with a potent blend of self-promotion, populism, and authoritarianism. There is no ideological or social commitment in Nicaragua—it is gone, along with most of the original Sandinista revolutionaries. Those in the government, starting with Ortega himself, only aspire to protect or further their interests. The regime is in many ways as much a cult of personality as the Somoza regime. Appointments in the administration, even in the judiciary, are based in large measure on personal loyalty to Ortega. The line between party and state is blurred, as is the line between private and public. Barely 15 percent of government contracts go through an open bidding process. How the other 85 percent are distributed remains shrouded in mystery. Ortega personally owns television and radio stations, which sell advertising to the private sector.

One of the original nine *Comandantes de la Revolución* was Jaime Wheelock, who served as minister of agricultural development and agrarian reform. Today, he heads the Institute for Development and Democracy. He has watched painfully, he says, the split in the leadership of today's Sandinista Party. Some of his colleagues have turned with a vengeance against Ortega, others remain loyal, and still others—including Wheelock himself—have withdrawn from public life, refusing to take sides. He has tried to remain on good terms with all his former colleagues, sometimes even serving as a messenger between those who no longer speak to one another.

Wheelock refers vaguely to authoritarian tendencies in the government and offers oblique criticisms of populist agrarian policies—giving out chicks, piglets, and calves in exchange for political support—but he is otherwise reserved. Instead, he expands about how much he enjoyed his studies at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government in the aftermath of the 1990 Sandinista electoral defeat. And then there's the cookbook he proudly authored. If he's aware of the irony of an erstwhile revolutionary writing a cookbook, he doesn't show it. Yet, the more potent ironies are the numerous ranches the mastermind of agrarian reform is reported to own. Winding down our conversation, he observes that while he will always be a Sandinista, he can do little

but adapt to the "new reality" of Nicaragua, which seems to mean providing for himself as best he can.

VOLCANIC CHANGES

Masaya Volcano National Park is one of the nation's few such preserves. The summit is quiet and peaceful, and there is a sweeping view of the countryside. In the late afternoon, swarms of small parrots return to the volcano where they spend the night in its warm crevices. For thousands of years, parrots have been roosting in the crater. The massive volcano conveys a sense of timelessness and permanence. There will always be a Nicaragua, populated by Nicaraguans, whose idiosyncrasies are shaped by the country's history. However, the impact of the Sandinista Revolution, for all its intensity, seems evanescent. The most insightful book about revolutions may still be Crane Brinton's *The Anatomy of Revolution*, published in 1938 when Brinton taught history at Harvard. He concludes his comparative study of the English, American, French, and Russian Revolutions by observing that for all their carnage, revolutions change little: "The behavior of men changes with a slowness almost comparable to the kind of change the geologist studies. ... The blood of the martyrs seems hardly necessary to establish decimal coinage."

At the time of the fateful 1990 elections in Nicaragua, a Princeton colleague, the historian Michael Jiménez, held what was to be a victory party for students, celebrating the electoral triumph of the Sandinistas. When the results arrived, showing that the Sandinistas had, in fact, lost to the opposition, the mood turned sour. Michael expressed shock the next day when he heard an undergraduate say, "How could they [the Nicaraguans] do this after all that we have done for them?" This insensitive question demonstrated not just arrogance, but a blind faith in the possibilities of political activism, a belief shared at the time by many, from President Ronald Reagan to the *Comandantes de la Revolución* themselves.

Countries, including those that are small and poor, do change. However, the case of Nicaragua, looking back through its recent history, suggests that change, if it comes, is not likely to follow any planned or anticipated trajectory. It is not going to be guided by any single individual or any cogent set of ideas—particularly any that seek to press their influence from abroad. Whatever change takes place in the future will likely just be a reworking, with contemporary flourishes, of the past. ●