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- RESEARCH NOTE -

From Communism to Democracy: Conciliation or Confrontation? The Case of Nicaragua

Alfred G. Cuzán

Two Hypotheses About Post-Communist Politics

The transition from communism to democracy now underway in several former Soviet satellites or dependencies poses a practical problem with theoretical implications, namely, what to do with the remnants of the communist regime. Everywhere Marxist-Leninists once ruled supreme, resurgent society wrestles with the question, what is to be done with the persons and structures that were once part and parcel of totalitarianism?

One approach is to let bygones be bygones. This policy uses institutions and personnel inherited from the dictatorship as a bridge to a democratic polity, treating communists or former communists as just another party or pressure group competing for influence in a pluralistic society. The other is decommunization. That is, an attempt to extirpate communism root and branch, outlawing the party as a criminal organization, putting its leaders on trial for theft, murder, and other "crimes against humanity," in short, to lustrate society in a manner equivalent to post-World War II denazification.

Post-communist societies intent on exchanging totalitarianism for democracy, then, can try conciliation or confrontation with what remains of their former dictators. Which strategy should they choose? In "The Hour of the Demagogue," Stephen Sestanovich argues unequivocally for confrontation.[1] In his view, the establishment and consolidation of democracy in nations formerly under Soviet subjugation depend on "one angry man's ability to raise the masses in a rage against their oppressors," i.e., the rabble-rousing of a Boris Yeltsin.[2] Populist demagogy is the only strategy that will work "in societies that are trying to break down totalitarian institutions and make democracy work for the first time."[3]

Unless the post-communist leadership whips up popular anger in a confrontation with the old guard, democratic reforms will be sabotaged from within, in the bureaucracy, military, and police. Unable to clear roadblocks thrown up by the remnants of the old regime, moderate reformers end up discrediting not only themselves, but democracy as well, as authoritarian opportunists, striking a stridently nationalistic note, rush to fill the anti-communist vacuum, declaiming against communism and liberalism alike. Under those conditions, the consolidation of democracy is doubtful at best.

In support of his thesis, Sestanovich, director of Soviet and East European Studies at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C., cites several cases from the former Soviet bloc. In each instance, he argues, the moderates were unable to satisfy the masses' yearnings for a radical break with the communist past or to defend themselves from anti-democratic demagogues.

For example, in the 1991 Polish presidential election, moderate intellectual Tadeusz Mazowiecki, the first Solidarity Prime Minister, had "so jeopardized support for the democratic transition that he actually received fewer votes than the mysterious Stanislaw Tyminski, an almost unknown Peruvian-Canadian spiritualist-businessman who was widely thought to be working for the secret police." Fortunately, the democrats had their own demagogue, Lech Walesa, who was "swept into office" on the promise that he would combat what remained of the communist partocracy "with an ax."[4]

Sestanovich's thesis consists of two related but distinct hypotheses about post-communist politics. The first is that during the transition from communism to democracy, a policy of conciliation loses its appeal with the public in very short order. More radical, demagogic rivals, some democrats, others not, then make a bid for popular support. Failing to satisfy the majority's desire for radical decommunization, the moderates soon fall from favor, if not office as well.

The second hypothesis is that under moderate leadership a post-communist democracy is unable to consolidate itself. Like Kerenski in 1917, the Mazowieckis of today are too weak to defend themselves from a communist reaction or, what is more likely, a throwback to pre-communist authoritarianism. Frustrated with the pusillanimity of the moderates, public opinion falls for anti-communist firebrands contemptuous of democracy. The new republic is strangled in the cradle.

The first hypothesis, that of the unpopularity of the moderates, can be, if not tested, at least evaluated in light of three-to-four years of post-communist experience in several countries. Sestanovich does just that with Eastern Europe. This paper will also attempt it in the case of Nicaragua.

The second hypothesis is impossible to assess empirically at this time. It will take at least a generation before any of the new democracies can confidently be said to have consolidated. Furthermore, failure to consolidate would, in any case, be the result of not just weak leadership, but other factors as well, not least a political culture where democracy has to compete with historic authoritarianism. The jury being out on consolidation, the second hypothesis will have to remain in the realm of theory for some time. Nevertheless, it can still serve as a basis for making predictions about whether democracy is likely to be the outcome of current political trends in any given country, even if the accuracy of the forecast can be established only at some future date.

The primary purpose of this paper, then, is to examine Sestanovich's thesis in the Nicaraguan case. We wish to know how well his hypotheses, developed in a European context, hold up in a Latin American country.

A secondary goal of the paper is to stimulate discussion of Nicaraguan politics. This is desirable in and of itself because the true nature of the Sandinista regime is not something about which external observers are in agreement. There are those who think that the

Sandinistas' goal all along was "to move the economy toward socialism in order to improve the lot of the lower classes, to built [sic] a participatory democracy under their own leadership, and to integrate all Nicaraguans into the national social and political system."[5] Berman, though noting the totalitarian rhetoric and policies of the Sandinistas, nevertheless thought that they "never had a Stalinist vocation."[6] Still others viewed the *comandantes* as Marxists or Leninists, but not of the orthodox communist type.[7]

Even as external observers disagreed on the correct diagnosis of the regime, the Sandinistas' Nicaraguan opposition was convinced that the *comandantes* were communists intent on turning the country into another Soviet satellite. Jaime Chamorro, editor of the legendary *La Prensa,* complained that "the Sandinistas are transforming the Nicaraguan revolution, fought for by all Nicaraguans, into a revolution that serves the purposes of Marxism-Leninism. That is to say, they are taking a national movement and turning it into a beachhead for Communist expansion. And they have sacrificed the national interest for the benefit of this cause."[8]

Reflecting on what the Sandinistas' "transformation" of the revolution was doing to the country's demography and culture, Nicaragua's eminent essayist and poet Pablo Antonio Cuadra mused:

> The strangest spectacle of all is the wave of improbable foreigners--Vietnamese, Cambodians, North Koreans, Bulgarians, East Germans--flooding our landscape, while a contrary current of thousands of Nicaraguans, young people above all, flee into exile. We have emptied Nicaragua of human resources and replaced them with people at once strange and totally alien to our history, our customs, our culture. The Russians and the PLO kiss us on the lips. We are addressed with endless bows by the servants of Kim Il Sung; we are advised by Cuban neo-imperialists; flocks of blond students help us, badly, to pick coffee.[9]

With the Nicaraguan opposition, the present author is persuaded that, its idiosyncracies and other influences notwithstanding, the Sandinista regime was Marxist-Leninist, i.e., communist, in its essentials. In an article published in 1989, he concluded that "the Sandinista regime has fused a revolutionary ideology, an elite party, and a secret police in a totalitarian system which has not, however, completed the developmental process toward mature totalitarianism."[10]

The premise of this paper, then, is that the Sandinistas were Marxist-Leninists who set out to sovietize Nicaragua on the Cuban model.[11] For reasons beyond the scope of this paper to discuss, the *comandantes* were unable to complete their project: the regime miscarried before the combined forces of ideology, party, police, and military had reached their logical conclusion, i.e., communist totalitarianism. This is a premise, though, about which reasonable people can agreeably disagree. To the extent that they do, readers may take issue with the author's analysis and conclusions. If the paper at least stimulates discussion from those with alternative perspectives on Nicaragua, it will have fulfilled its secondary purpose.

Sestanovich's Case for Confrontation

Stephen Sestanovich discerns two general strategies for making the transition from communism to democracy: moderate reformism and populist demagogy. Drawing on the experience of Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Russia in 1989-91, Sestanovich defies conventional wisdom with the conclusion that moderation, a hallmark of established democracies, is misplaced in the revolutionary situations brought about by the collapse of communism. It is the anti-communist rabble-rouser, not the sober reformer, who is most likely to help the democratic revolution "succeed and endure."[12]

The contrast between moderate reformism and populist demagogy is most vividly drawn in the case of Poland. Following the fall of the communists, the Solidarity movement was split in a struggle between two leaders who had been allies in the resistance against the dictatorship, Tadeusz Mazowiecki and Lech Walesa. When Walesa emerged the victor, it seemed to many observers as if "a good democrat had been laid low by a bad demagogue." The conventional view, says Sestanovich, goes something like this:

> After taking office in the summer of 1989, good-democrat Mazowiecki had clearly done all the right things, prescribing the harsh medicine necessary to cure Poland's economic disease. It had even begun to work, but with dreadful social side-effects: unemployment, the wiping-out of people's savings, steep price increases for necessities like food and fuel. As popular anxiety rose, the bad demagogue sought to take personal advantage of it, demanding early presidential elections and using irresponsible rhetoric to whip up popular anger. Walesa alleged that Mazowiecki had allowed too much of the old Communist partocracy to stay in place and was letting its members grow rich in the process of privatization. . . . Feeding on popular unhappiness and promising that he alone could set things right--"with an ax," as he put it--he was swept into office."[13]

Even some of Walesa's previous admirers criticized him for his demagogy, alleging that "a Polish leader who cannot deliver a higher standard of living any time soon has to pander to popular blood lusts instead." But Sestanovich sees it differently.

> The real issue is not how to distract people from hardship, but rather how to make sense of it for them. Hardship can be adequately rationalized only if it is part of a program that realizes the goals of the revolution. Leaders who seek to sustain popular support during the transition to democracy have to prove that a real revolution, not a halfway one, is taking place; that the country won't wake up at the end of the process to discover that the same people are still in charge. This is why anticommunist rhetoric has been a crucial source of legitimacy. Middle-class intellectuals who disdain it are unlikely to convince people that the revolution will be carried through to the end. They may even produce disenchantment with popular government itself. If this is what their vaunted 'moderation' leads to, then who are the real gravediggers of democracy?[14]

The contrast between the two Solidarity leaders is paradigmatic. It holds lessons for every post-communist government:

> The choice between Mazowiecki and Walesa has, in a variety of forms, been posed in almost every country of Eastern Europe since 1989: it is the choice between relying on old

institutions as a bridge to the new, and pushing forward hard to overturn the communist order as quickly as possible. Should the old guard be treated as potential coalition partners or as criminals? And, the crucial question, which approach does more to strengthen new democratic institutions? The answer to at least the first of these questions is quite clear. Throughout Eastern Europe, governments that tried to follow strategies of institutional continuity and national consensus lost ground; they were either obliged to pursue more radical policies or were replaced.[15]

The choice was also faced in the former Soviet Union. As the revolutionary movements unleashed by Gorbachev's glasnost and perestroika gathered momentum, newly-elected anticommunist demagogues in the cities and republics were drawn into a confrontation with the party apparatus, including its most threatening institutions, the military and police. Liberals reasoned that unless this conglomerate of power was brought to heel, it would sabotage democratic reforms, and the new leaders "would become mere figurehead rulers--enjoying 'popularity without power,' in the words of one Soviet commentator."[16]

As it became increasingly clear that reactionary forces in the military and police were preparing to overthrow him, Gorbachev did nothing. He proceeded on the assumption that he had to appease them into standing by his side, mistakenly believing that "what really counts is force, not popularity. This strategy was doomed. When the chieftains of the old order turned against him at last, he had only the popularity of someone else [i.e., Boris Yeltsin] to rely on."[17] His populist rival did not make the same mistake: "By rallying the people, Yeltsin and his allies showed that a Soviet liberal regime might--like its Eastern European counterparts--be strong enough to enforce its policies. It was a reminder that, in a revolution, force is not the only form of power."[18]

By way of conclusion, Sestanovich sums up what the liberal demagogue can do for post-communist democracies everywhere:

> [I]n societies that are trying to break down totalitarian institutions and make democracy work for the first time . . . liberal anticommunist demagogy helps to solve three separate problems with which moderate reformism has usually been unable to cope. It sustains popular support, by giving the people, who are asked to endure severe economic hardship, reason to believe that the changes underway will not be so heavily compromised that they cannot succeed. It also intimidates the guardians of the old order, who may otherwise think that the revolution can be undone by some combination of bureaucratic sabotage, strong-arm methods and stalling. Finally, it gives new democratic leaders the enduring legitimacy that enables them to thwart rival demagogues who seek power for illiberal ends.[19]

Post-Communist Politics: The Case of Nicaragua

On February 25, 1990, under pressure from a U.S.-supported guerrilla insurgency (the *Contras*), a broad-based civilian coalition ranging from the Catholic Church to old-line socialist and communist parties, their Central American neighbors, the European community, and even the Soviet Union, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN or *Frente*) held internationally-supervised elections. This was only the second time in nearly eleven years of revolution that Nicaraguans had gone to the polls.

The results stunned the world: the Sandinistas lost in a landslide. Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, widow of *La Prensa* editor and publisher Pedro Joaquin Chamorro, whose assassination in 1978 set Nicaragua on fire, sealing Somoza's fate, outpolled FSLN president Daniel Ortega 55 percent to 41 percent. Candidates affiliated with the National Opposition Union (UNO), a 14-party coalition which nominated Chamorro for president, swept congressional and local races across the country, including the capital city, Managua. UNO's largest margin of victory was in the central region of the country east of Managua, the capital, where the *Contras* had a strong base of peasant support. UNO also did well in the Atlantic region, home of the Miskito Indians, the first to rise up against the Sandinistas.

Ironically, shortly before Somoza's flight from Nicaragua in July 1979, Dona Violeta, as she is affectionately known by her countrymen, agreed to join Daniel Ortega and three others in a Government of National Reconstruction. In so doing, she lent legitimacy to the Sandinista regime during its first months of power, as the scaffolding of totalitarianism, from the political police to the *turbas*, was being erected with help from Cuba, Bulgaria, and East Germany.[20] Before the first anniversary of the revolution, however, Chamorro had resigned from the junta. Assuming an active role in *La Prensa*, she became an international symbol of resistance to the Sandinistas' attempt to silence the opposition. While hundreds of thousands of her compatriots fled the country, including one of her sons, and tens of thousands took up arms in the mountains and lowlands of Nicaragua, Chamorro opted to resist the FSLN with the power of the word. Now she had humbled the mighty *Frente* in an election that most pollsters and many professional Latin Americanists thought it could not lose.

As a result of the election, the Sandinistas were left with only 38 of 90 seats in the National Assembly, and control over only a handful of important city councils, as in the provincial capital of Leon. Unlike their East European analogues, however, the *comandantes* were not about to vacate the government just because they had lost what amounted to a plebiscite on their decade in power. No sooner had the ballots been counted and most international observers flown home that *turba* attacks, a favorite weapon of the regime, resumed. Weapons were distributed to Sandinista militants. *Comandante* Luis Carrion Cruz warned of "chaos" if the new administration attempted to wrest away control of the military from the FSLN.[21] In a revealing preview of what was to come, Daniel Ortega promised his supporters that the *Frente* would continue to "rule from below."[22]

Between the February election and the April inauguration of the new president, the Sandinista-dominated National Assembly passed a series of laws designed to limit their losses. An amnesty law granted immunity for any unprosecuted crimes committed since 1979. A civil service law protected Sandinista managers and employees in state enterprises from dismissal.

A property law gave them a blank check with which to appropriate untold

millions of dollars of what had been public property.[23] Another law and associated executive decree, not made public until more than six months into Chamorro's administration, practically guaranteed an autonomous military beyond civilian control.[24]

The property law enabled top Sandinistas to acquire title to valuable assets, some seized from the Somozas, others accumulated during a decade in power.[25] These included mansions, buildings and industrial plants, large agricultural estates, beachfront properties, vehicles, art collections, cultural artifacts, bank accounts, and much more. The property law also opened the door for the wholesale looting of government offices and warehouses. In these give-aways, which critics labeled *La Pinata,* a reference to the papier-mache dolls full of candy which children break at birthday parties, many low-level Sandinistas acquired title to humble dwellings, and to a share of farm cooperatives. But this was small change by comparison with what top Sandinistas managed to appropriate, individually and for the *Frente*.[26] Ironically, then, one of the outcomes of the revolution was simply to transfer ill-gotten wealth from Somocistas to Sandinistas.

In the meantime, Gen. Humberto Ortega, Daniel's brother and chief FSLN strategist, huddled with Antonio Lacayo, Chamorro's son-in-law, a businessman who had done well under the Sandinistas, to negotiate a transition protocol for the transfer of power. Lacayo would subsequently be appointed Minister of the Presidency in Chamorro's government, an office that may be described as something of a hybrid between the U.S. president's chief of staff and a prime minister. Lacayo is believed to be "the dominant figure in the new government."[27]

Before long, word leaked out that a pact was in the works that would leave key Sandinistas in possession of *Pinata* properties and state power. The mere rumor that Gen. Ortega would continue to run the military set off a storm of protests: "During the pre-inaugural period, Nicaraguan radio talk shows featured indignant voters complaining that they had not risked everything to find out the Sandinistas were still in power."[28]

By inauguration day, Violeta Chamorro shocked the UNO coalition by confirming the rumors: Gen. Ortega would stay on as head of the military, which to this day bears the name Popular Sandinista Army (EPS). Some high-ranking officers would shift positions, but none was retired. As a result, the command structure of the Sandinista military remains virtually intact.[29] This is in marked contrast with the purges and subjective control methods introduced into East European militaries after the fall of the communists.[30] Also staying was Rene Vivas, chief of police, who would keep his post for almost three more years.[31] Sandinistas have also been retained or appointed as Minister of Electrical Energy and Chief of Immigration, dominate the judiciary, and staff the bureaucracy below the ministerial level. In short, the Sandinistas kept a share of power that was way out of proportion relative to their dismal showing in the February 1990 election.

No sooner had Chamorro announced that Gen. Ortega would remain as the head of the military that UNO's political council voted to censor the new President. The Vice-President, Virgilio Godoy, leader of the largest party within UNO, loudly criticized Chamorro's decision. So did Miriam Arguello, the newly-elected president of the National Assembly. (In time, Alfredo Cesar, a former Sandinista turned *Contra* turned Chamorro political advisor, would assume a similarly critical stance upon replacing Arguello as Assembly president.) Two cabinet appointees refused to take their posts. Before the year was out, a movement spearheaded by ex-*Contras* and 16 UNO mayors in central Nicaragua blocked the road to the Atlantic, demanding that Gen. Ortega and Tony Lacayo be dismissed from their posts. Clashes with Sandinistas left over two dozen dead.[32]

After her inauguration in April 1990, criticism of Chamorro continued to mount with every act, or lack of it, which in UNO eyes confirmed widely held suspicions that the transition protocol embodied a pact to share power with the Sandinistas. UNO leaders vented their frustrations with what they claimed was the government's weak-kneed response to an interminable series of intermittent Sandinista strikes and acts of violence that began only a month into the new administration. In May and then again in July 1990, the government quickly folded in the face of "general strikes" (actually, lock-outs by barricaded militants) staged by Sandinista unions demanding job security and higher wages.[33] Ever since, hardly a month has gone by without some sector of the economy feeling the effects of a Sandinista lock-out or violent disruption.

The largest outburst of Sandinista violence to date occurred in November 1991, following the passing of a bill in the National Assembly that sought to recover payment for *Pinata* properties. *Turbas* took to the streets in a "daylong Sandinista rampage of burning, looting, stoning and shooting," allegedly to protest the damaging of a mausoleum in memory of *Frente* founder Carlos Fonseca Amador. Police stood by while dozens of trucks and cars belonging to government agencies were torched, the Managua City Hall was sacked and burned, opposition radio stations blown up, and other violence was visited on the capital. At the end of the day, Daniel Ortega gave a speech to his followers in which he warned the government not to try to take back *Pinata* properties.[34]

Chamorro vetoed the property law, as well as a measure to cut the military budget. Her vetoes were upheld when enough UNO legislators, calling themselves "the center group," crossed the aisle to vote with the Sandinistas. Subsequently, the Comptroller General charged that one of Tony Lacayo's deputies, Antonio Ybarra, diverted foreign aid meant for charitable purposes to bribe UNO defectors. Ybarra fled the country. From Bolivia, he confirmed the charges, saying he was acting on Lacayo's orders.[35]

In September 1992, "the center group" walked out of parliament with the Sandinistas, making it impossible to have a quorum. When Cesar continued to carry on, the holdouts won a court injunction invalidating all legislative acts since the walkout. In December, Chamorro sent the police to take control of the National Assembly, and put a provisional directorate in place. In January 1993, it was the rump UNO coalition's turn to boycott legislative sessions as a majority composed of Sandinista and "center group" deputies elected a new

Directorate. The Comptroller General was summarily fired, the first step in purging the agency of Chamorro critics.

The upshot of all these unseemly goings-on is that, with the UNO coalition split beyond repair, the fate of Chamorro's government now rests, for all practical purposes, on Sandinista sufferance, if not outright support. Her former allies charge her with betraying the UNO platform in favor of "co-governing" with the Sandinistas.[36]

Another key constituency alienated from Chamorro are the *Contras*. They have ben viewed from opposite perspectives as a mere creation of the United States or as an indigenous rebellion.[37] Wherever the true characterization lies, according to Stephen Kinzer, *New York Times* bureau chief in Nicaragua for most of the Sandinista decade, what drove Daniel Ortega into the arms of Costa Rican President Oscar Arias' Central America peace plan was "a single end: destroying the contras. Ortega had finally come to understand that he could not destroy them with guns and bombs."[38] The *Contras* themselves take credit for forcing the Sandinistas to hold elections.[39]

Following her inauguration and the abolition of the Sandinista military draft so detested by Nicaraguans, what had grown into "the largest *campesino* insurrection in Latin America since the Mexican revolution of 1910"[40] agreed to disarm. Despite their misgivings about Gen. Ortega's continuing control of the military, some 20,000 fighters turned in their weapons. They were promised land and other resources to return to civilian life. But as early as October 1990, many *Contras* were charging betrayal.[41] After the assassination of Enrique Bermudez, the *Contras*' commander during most of the war, and of dozens others, hundreds of *Contras* took up arms again. Known as *Re-Contras*, an American journalist noted "the obvious sympathy they enjoy in the northwest of Nicaragua."[42]

Over 200 demobilized *Contras*, including many former commanders, have been murdered. According to Mateo Guerrero, executive director of the Nicaraguan Association for Human Rights, "The Sandinistas are simply cutting off the head of the resistance. No one is being punished. The law does not exist. . . . There seems to be no interest on the part of the police to solve these crimes."[43] Guerrero also charges Chamorro with taking no interest in investigating the many mass graves from the Sandinista period that have been unearthed by human rights groups since her inauguration.[44] Another group of murder victims are landholders and claimants to properties confiscated by the Sandinistas. Arges Sequeira, a rancher and leader of an organization representing thousands of *confiscados*, was gunned down in November 1992.[45]

Ironically, *La Prensa*, has grown increasingly critical of the government. Editorials, including some signed by her son Pedro Joaquin Jr., have criticized Chamorro for turning her back on the coalition that helped elevate her to the presidency. The Roman Catholic Church has also chimed in, with a pastoral letter that criticizes the government for failing to resolve the property question, maintain public safety, or administer justice.[46] The Bush administration, too, which had backed the UNO coalition in the 1990 election, and given Mrs. Chamorro its blessing, grew so disenchanted with her government that, egged on by congressional Republicans, it froze the disbursement of appropriated U.S. aid in the summer of 1992.

The spectacle of Chamorro presiding, not over the consolidation of the forces that elevated her to office, but their arraying against her as they once did against the Sandinistas, cannot but delegitimate the new democracy, if that's what it is. If present trends continue, the prospects that Chamorro will complete her six-year term and hand over the presidency to a freely elected successor in 1996 or 1997 are not bright.

Conclusion: The Failure of Conciliation?

Right from the start, President Chamorro opted not to make a clean break with Sandinista institutions and personnel, but to use them as bridges to a democratic regime. Eschewing the anti-communist demagogy recommended by Sestanovich, Chamorro's victory statement proclaimed a program of "national reconciliation" that would result in "neither victors nor vanquished."[47] More recently, her son-in-law Lacayo is said to have remarked that her government is a continuation of the previous one.[48]

In practice, Chamorro's policy has boiled down to conciliating those everyone believed were her enemies while confronting those who were thought to be her friends. On the one hand, she left the military, police, bureaucracy, and judiciary in the hands of Sandinistas, did not follow through with campaign promises to try to amend the Sandinista constitution, made concession after concession in response to their violent demands, and took care not to disturb the *comandantes'* enjoyment of the spoils of a decade in power. On the other hand, she treated Vice-President Virgilio Godoy as a virtual non-person, showed no interest in investigating Sandinista crimes, old or new, refused repeated calls from her erstwhile supporters to hold a plebiscite that would allow Nicaraguans to say whether they approved of her "co-governing" with the Sandinistas, and -- by fair means or foul -- pried enough deputies away from the UNO coalition to deny them the legislative majority they had won in 1990.

The results of President Chamorro's "conciliation" policies are consistent with Sestanovich's first hypothesis. Frustrated at realizing that the Sandinistas are still in charge, one by one the forces that directly or indirectly helped put her in office, from the UNO coalition to the Roman Catholic Church to *La Prensa* to the *Contras* to the United States, have, if not turned against her, become disenchanted. Ironically, to the extent that it is one, UNO is again in opposition, this time to Chamorro.

Although as a person Chamorro is still liked by the public, her government has fallen in public approval.[49] Some of the loss of support can certainly be attributed to "the country's moribund economy,"[50] there can be little doubt that Chamorro's implicit or explicit "pact" with the Sandinistas has taken its toll. Unlike Eastern European countries, however, Nicaragua has not held another election since 1990. If a legislative election were held today, half-way through Chamorro's term, it is all too probable that the electorate would repudiate Tony Lacayo's "pact" with Humberto Ortega, voting into the National Assembly a majority of deputies opposed to "co-governing" with the Sandinistas.

Some of Chamorro's erstwhile allies, like Vice-President Virgilio Godoy, former National Assembly president Alfredo Cesar, and Managua Mayor Arnoldo Aleman, who call themselves "the group of the three," have attempted to assume the role of anti-communist demagogue advocated by Sestanovich. In public meetings and demonstrations, on the streets and in the halls of the Managua City Council and the National Assembly, they have taken up themes equivalent to those Walesa and Yeltsin used to their advantage: Sandinista enrichment from privatization, the sabotage of reforms by a combination of bureaucratic stalling and strong-arm methods, and the continuing control of the military and police by Sandinistas who, in their eyes, should be behind bars.

There can be little doubt that Chamorro has allowed a political vacuum to develop, one waiting to be filled by an anti-communist, charismatic personality who strikes the right rhetorical notes in the Nicaragua of today. Although Aleman has made some headway in public approval, he has yet to reach the stature of a Yeltsin or Walesa. If he does, he would become a prime assassination target, as happened to former *Contras* and other would be demagogues with a strong following. Already, Aleman, along with Cesar and Godoy, have been publicly threatened with death by a group calling itself the "Leftist Punitive Forces" (FPI), which claims to have carried out Arges Sequeira's assassination (see above).[51]

As for Sestanovich's second hypothesis, if democracy fails to consolidate in Nicaragua, as it appears increasingly likely, some of the responsibility should be assigned to Chamorro's "misplaced moderation." By frustrating the will for change that was expressed in the February 20 election, and echoed repeatedly by UNO deputies and mayors, Chamorro has no doubt contributed to public cynicism regarding the effectiveness of elections in bringing about popularly desired changes of regime.

This assessment, however, is subject to caveats. In contrast to Poland and Hungary, where the communists scarcely won 10 percent of the vote, the FSLN received 41 percent. Although it has been claimed that recent polls show that support for the Sandinistas is down by almost half since the election,[52] they still constitute the largest single political party in the country, and the largest single bloc in the National Assembly. In this respect, Nicaragua is more like Romania, where unrepentant ex-communists still rule. What is said about Romania applies with equal force to Nicaragua: "By numerous standards, including the health of civil society, the robustness of the rule of law, the depth and extent of due respect for property rights, and the degree of social trust, the last several years of Romania's history reveal themselves as a time when the democratic revolution was derailed. The country's post-totalitarian political framework has become a front behind which the *nomenklatura* and its allies are working to prolong their grip on power."[53]

Be it noted, also, that in Russia, President Boris Yeltsin finds himself locked in a political struggle with the head of the Supreme Soviet, Ruslan Khasbulatov, whose power base is rooted in the old guard. So even Sestanovich's prime exhibit of the virtues of democratic demagogy has been frustrated by communist or neo-communist holdovers. Freeing state, society, and culture from the clutches of communism is turning out to be a drawn-out process.[54] A rabble-rouser like Yeltsin or Walesa can quicken the pace of decommunization in short outbursts of feverish popular participation, but only temporarily, after which the demagogue, too, bogs down in the trenches of day-to-day political infighting. There is only so much that can be accomplished by charisma which, "by its very nature, tends to be ephemeral."[55]

Also to be taken into account is the fact that Nicaragua was the only country where communists were voted out in the tail end of a bitter and bloody conflict, one of the last hot spots of the cold war, with the U.S. supporting one side and what was the USSR the other. In the immediate aftermath of the election, there was frightful uncertainty as to whether the *comandantes* would accept the people's verdict.[56] If Chamorro had confronted the Sandinistas at the outset, her government could easily have been stillborn.

Finally, it should be kept in mind that in the last century of Nicaraguan history there has been only dictatorship, foreign intervention, and civil war. *Zancudismo*, an infamous tradition inherited from the Somocista regime, whereby a "loyal" opposition plays ball with the dictator in exchange for certain priveleges, is alive and well, with the Sandinistas replacing the Somozas as the grantors of favors to a self-limiting "opposition." With such historical baggage weighing it down, any attempt at democratization can make very little progress in the short run. The best one can hope for is an improvement over the previous dictatorship. Judged by this modest standard, Chamorro's government does represent an improvement: the specter of assassinations notwithstanding, there is greater freedom of speech, press, and assembly, more entrepreneurial initiative, less discontent over what is taught in public schools, and better relations between Church and State in Nicaragua today than at any time during the Sandinista decade.Keeping those caveats in mind, it is true nevertheless that the high hopes many Nicaraguans had for the new government have been dashed in the bitter argument between Chamorro and her son-in-law, on the one hand, and her erstwhile UNO allies on the other, over her tender treatment of the Sandinistas. This falling out among the democratic ranks has done nothing to promote confidence in elections as a means of regime change. Tragically, there has been a recurrence of guerrilla warfare, as *Recontras* and *Recompas* (armed Sandinistas) take to the hills.[57] But whether Chamorro or anyone else could have done better with the demagogic approach Sestanovich recommends must perforce remain in the realm of speculation. Yeltsin's current predicament, however, suggests skepticism.

In conclusion, Sestanovich's findings, that Soviet-bloc "governments that tried to follow strategies of institutional continuity and national consensus lost ground," and were "either obliged to pursue more radical policies or were replaced," are partially replicated in the Nicaraguan case. There is no question that Chamorro's government has "lost ground" and that, while not "obliged," has been repeatedly urged by the forces that elevated her to the presidency to "pursue more radical" anti-Sandinista

policies. It has not, however, been "replaced," if nothing else because there has not been another election since 1990. The next one is scheduled for 1996 or 1997. Were a referendum to be held today on Chamorro's conciliation policy, however, as UNO has demanded for some time, it is highly probable that a majority would vote against it.

Notes

[1] Stephen Sestanovich, "The Hour of the Demagogue," **The National Interest**, 25 (Fall 1991), pp. 3-15.

[2] **Ibid.**, p. 3.

[3] **Ibid.**, p. 15.

[4] **Ibid.**, p. 7.

[5] John Booth and Thomas Walker, **Understanding Central America** (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989), pp. 61-62.

[6] Paul Berman, "Why the Sandinistas Lost," **Dissent**, Vol. 37, No. 3 (1990), p. 312.

[7] See, respectively, Donald C. Hodges, **Intellectual Foundations of the Nicaraguan Revolution** (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), and Dennis Gilbert, **Sandinistas. The Party and the Revolution** (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1988). A recent book accepts Eden Pastora's characterization of the Sandinista Directorate as "scientific Somocistas." See Roger Miranda and William Ratliff, **The Civil War in Nicaragua. Inside the Sandinistas** (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1992), p. x. From 1982 until his defection in 1987, Miranda was chief of the Sandinista Defense Ministry Secretariat and top aide to **comandante** (now General of the Army) Humberto Ortega.

[8] Jaime Chamorro, "Don't Abandon the Nicaraguan People," in Marc Falcoff and Robert Royal (eds.), **The Continuing Crisis. U.S. Policy in Central America and the Caribbean** (Lanham: University Press of America, 1987), p. 467.

[9] Pablo Antonio Cuadra, "The Sandinistas and the U.S. Press," **Hemisphere**, Winter 1989, p. 19.

[10] Alfred G. Cuzan, "The Nicaraguan Revolution: From Autocracy to Totalitarian Dictatorship?," **Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies**, Vol. I, No. 1/2, 1989, p. 202. See also, by the same author, "The Rise and Fall of Communism in Nicaragua," **Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies**, Vol. IV, No. 1/2, 1992, pp. 164-183.

[11] See Miranda and Ratliff, **op.cit.**, pp. 110-113.

[12] Sestanovich, **op. cit.**, p. 3.

[13] **Ibid.**, p. 5.

[14] **Ibid.**, p. 6.

[15] **Ibid.**, p. 7.

[16] **Ibid.**, p. 12.

[17] **Ibid.**

[18] **Ibid.**, p. 13.

[19] **Ibid.**, p. 15.

[20] See Jack Child, "National Security," in James Rudolph, (ed.), **Nicaragua: A Country Study** (Washington, D.C.: American University, 1982), pp. 185-228; Miranda and Ratliff, **op. cit.**, pp. 189-201; and Cuzan, **op. cit.**

[21] **New York Times**, 28 February 1990, A8; 2 March 1990, A5; 6 March 1990, A9.

[22] Mark A. Uhlig, "Nicaragua's Permanent Crisis: Ruling from Above and Below," **Survival**, Vol. XXXIII, No. 5 (1991), p. 406.

[23] **Ibid.**, pp. 407-408.

[24] Douglas W. Payne, **Democracy vs. Dynasty. The Battle for Post-Election Nicaragua** (New York: Freedom House Special Report, 1990), pp. 3-4.

[25] Miranda and Ratliff, **op. cit.**, pp. 58-61.

[26] **Ibid.** Also, see Joaquin Ibarz, "Pinata Theology," **Crisis** (September 1991), pp. 31-34; **Latin American Weekly Report**, 4 July 1991, 2; **New York Times**, 25 June 1991, A1.

[27] Miranda and Ratliff, **op. cit.**, p. 276.

[28] Robert S. Leiken, "Old and New Politics in Managua," **Journal of Democracy**, Vol. 1, No. 3 (1990), p. 37.

[29] United States Senate, 102 Congress, 2d Session, **Nicaragua Today. A Republican Staff Report to the Committee on Foreign Relations** (Washington, D.C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1992), p. 52.

[30] See Dale R. Herspring, "Civil-Military Relations in Post-Communist Eastern Europe: The Potential for Praetorianism," **Studies in Comparative Communism**, Vol. XXV, No. 2 (1992), pp. 99-122.

[31] In September 1992, apparently in response to U.S. pressures, he was retired, only to be replaced by another Sandinista, Fernando Caldera. Far from placating UNO, the appointment set off a storm of criticism.

[32] **New York Times**, 12 November 1990, A3; 18 November 1990, A3.

[33] Uhlig, **op.cit.**, 416-417.

[34] **New York Times**, 11 November 1991, A6.

[35] **El Nuevo Herald**, 28 January 1993, A4.

[36] **La Prensa** (Miami weekly edition), 12 February 1993, A10, B1; 19 February 1993, A10.

[37] See, respectively, "Peace and Autonomy on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua: A Report of the LASA Task Force on Human Rights and Academic Freedom," LASA **Forum**, Summer 1986, p. 15; and Michael Radu, "Nicaragua," in Michael Radu (ed.), **The New Insurgencies. Anticommunist Guerrillas in the Third World** (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1990), pp. 268-269. Another student of the **Contras** also sees them as an indigenous force that came to rely too much on the U.S. See Glenn Garvin, **Everybody Had His Own Gringo. The CIA & the Contras** (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's Inc., 1992).

[38] Stephen Kinzer, **Blood of Brothers. Life and War in Nicaragua** (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1991), p. 360.

[39] Garvin, **op. cit.**, p. 260.

[40] R. Pardo Mauerer, **The Contras: A Special Kind of Politics** (New York: Praeger, 1990), p. 24.

[41] **New York Times**, 29 October 1990, A3.

[42] **New York Times**, 12 September 1991, A4. For recent accounts of the **Recontra** insurgency, see **The Washington Times**, 3 February 1993, A1, and **The Los Angeles Times**, 14 February 1993, A1.

[43] **The Washington Times**, 28 August 1992, A9.

[44] Puebla Institute, "Nicaraguan Rights Groups Cite Problems Plaguing Chamorro Government," **The First Freedom**, January/February (1992), p. 4.

[45] **Los Angeles Times**, 14 February 1993, A17.

[46] Miranda and Ratliff, **op. cit.**, p. 277.

[47] **New York Times**, 27 February 1990, A4.

[48] **La Prensa** (Miami weekly edition), 19 February 1993, A10.

[49] Telephone interview with Charles Denton, October 19, 1992. Dr. Denton is head of C.I.D., a Central America Gallup affiliate.

[50] Shirley Christian, "This Land Is Your Land . . . This Land Is My Land," **New York Times Magazine**, November 29, 1992, p. 38.

[51] **La Prensa** (Miami weekly edition), 26 February 1993, A1.

[52] Christian, **op.cit.**, p. 38; **La Prensa** (Miami weekly edition), 26 February 1993, A8.

[53] Vladimir Tismaneanu & Dorin Tudoran, "The Bucharest Syndrome," **The Journal of Democracy**, Vol. 4, No. 1 (January 1993), p. 45.

[54] See George Schopflin, "Post-Communism: Constructing New Democracies in Central Europe," **International Affairs**, Vol. 67, No. 2 (1991), pp. 235-250; Piotr Sztompka, "The Intangibles and Imponderables of the Transition to Democracy," **Studies in Comparative Communism**, Vol. XXIV, No. 3 (1991), pp. 295-311.

[55] Robert H. Dix, letter to the author, January 7, 1993. The author hereby expresses his appreciation to Prof. Dix for these and other comments on the paper.

[56] See comments by Luis Sanchez Sancho, a signer of the transition protocol, now one of Chamorro's most thoughtful critics, in Miranda and Ratliff, **op. cit.**, p. 275.

[57] Although usually hostile to teach other, on occasion **Recontras** and **Recompas** have come together to pressure the government to live up to its promises of land and other compensation for veterans of both sides of the war. When joining forces, they become **Revueltos**, a Spanish pun meaning both mutineers and scrambled.

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