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LASA leftists proven wrong by the people

By Alfred G. Cuzán

"Unexpected," "remarkable," "stunning," "a surprise upset." These are words the American media used the morning after to describe what apparently only right-wing zealots were willing to predict would happen if only the votes were counted honestly: Violeta Chamorro handily defeated Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua's presidential election. UNO candidates also won a majority of seats in the national assembly and in local governments across the country.

In short, the Sandinistas lost in a landslide.

The consternation of the media was probably mild compared to what leftist Latin Americanists, many of them in Managua on election day, must have felt. For years they have deceived themselves into thinking that the comandantes enjoyed the support of a majority of Nicaraguans who had, we were told, benefitted from the economic and social policies of the Sandinista regime.

If, in the last few years, the Nicaraguan economy has taken a dive, that is all the fault of the United States, above all the Reagan administration, which for purely ideological reasons waged an undeclared war on Nicaragua, unleashing a contra army against its people and slapping a cruel trade embargo on its economy.

It is also the contra war that is to blame for the deterioration of human rights which, we have been assured, nevertheless still enjoy greater protection in Nicaragua than in El Salvador or Guatemala.

Since, in the view of leftist Latin Americanists, the Nicaraguan people understood these things, there was no reason to doubt that the Sandinistas would win a free and fair election.

Writing in the *New York Times* a few days before the election, Kenneth Sharpe of Swarthmore College had a ready explanation for the Sandinista victory "predicted by most reliable pollsters." As he and his co-author saw it, the Sandinistas were better organized and more effective campaigners, and had succeeded in defining the issues as: "the war, nationalism, autonomy and pride." On the other hand, UNO "had been badly hurt by widely perceived connections to the rich, the contras and the U.S.," as well as by internal division and poor organization.

There is no reason to doubt that the Nicaraguan electorate was able to associate Violeta Chamorro with the contras and the United States. One of her sons, Pedro Joaquin Jr., a former contra director, is on her team, as are other former contras, and as is Brooklyn Rivera, a Miskito Indian leader (the Miskitos were one of the first groups to rise up against Sandinista rule).

As for the U.S. connection, President Bush met with Violeta Chamorro and the Congress appropriated several million dollars for the UNO coalition, even though the money came through only in the final weeks of the campaign. And, horror of horrors, Chamorro did not categorically condemn the U.S. invasion of Panama last December.

Turning Sharpe's argument on its head, may we infer that, since Violeta won in a landslide, the Nicaraguan people do not despise the rich, or the contras, or the United States, and that they hold the Sandinistas responsible for the civil war (not to speak of the wretched state of the economy)?

Sharpe's willingness to believe that the Sandinistas would win was apparently also shared by a Latin American Studies Association delegation sent to observe the Nicaraguan election. In an interim report published in the Winter 1990 issue of the *LASA Forum*, the delegation reported that "several polls have been conducted; many of them are flawed; the latest and most professionally conducted poll shows an FSLN lead."

Unlike the *New York Times*, whose Managua reporter did not put much credence on polls because of the observed reluctance of many Nicaraguans to voice their true views in public, the LASA delegation blithely stated that "the climate for survey research seems very good. Most survey organizations report subjects' willingness to cooperate and share their opinions."

As Freedom House's senior associate Penn Kemble noted two days after the election in a *New York Times* piece, "few in our country's political and journalistic establishment have absorbed the meaning of totalitarianism: the ability of the rulers to instill fear, and the way subject peoples learn to hide their true political sentiments."

For years leftist Latin Americanists deceived themselves into thinking that the comandantes had majority support.

The same goes for LASA leftists. Time and again they have denied that the Sandinista regime is an incipient totalitarian state whose development was arrested in part by U.S. policy. Having fellow-traveled with the comandantes for over a decade, leftist Latin Americanists would have been, next to the Sandinistas themselves, the last to predict their resounding defeat.

LASA leftists, who presume to know Nicaragua so well, and on the basis of their alleged expertise to criticize relentlessly U.S. policy in Central America, have been proven wrong by an unimpeachable source: the Nicaraguan people themselves.

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