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Nicaragua: from liberation to a new dictatorship

The Sandinista rebels, headed by Daniel Ortega, toppled what should be the last dictator. But now, the supposed hero became the tyrant

I spent part of my childhood in the central-American country of Nicaragua.

It is an incredibly beautiful place, an immensely green stretch of land between the Atlantic and the vast waters of the Pacific. In the east arise an impressive row of active volcanoes; towards the west, rain forests stretch to the white beaches along the azure Caribbean. Inland, plains with rich pasture give way to a mountain range blessed with precious metal — gold is the country's largest export — on whose slopes some of the world's tastiest coffee grows.

'Momotombo', by the Nicaraguan national poet, Rubén Darío, takes its name from the volcano which casts its reflection on the sun-drenched surface of one of the largest lakes of the Americas:

Lord of the heights, emperor of the water,

at his feet the divine lake of Managua,

with islands all light and song.

Just as it is adorned with enchantment, Nicaragua is however cursed with bad politics.

In 1979, it was declared free, for the first time since the era of the *indigenas*, having endured centuries of submission and oppression —

first under Spanish colonialism, then under a series of dictatorships. The young *Sandinista* rebels, Comandante Daniel Ortega at their head, made a revolution and toppled what should be the last dictator, Anastasio Somoza, whose dynasty had been in power since 1937.

The Western left unites

I am not alone in having a special place in my heart for this small country. In the 1980s, there was strong solidarity with struggling Nicaragua.

It was a kind of social-democratic projection. At first, the *Sandinistas* insisted that, although Somoza's dictatorship had been supported by the United States — in 1939 the president, Franklin Roosevelt, is alleged to have said: 'Somoza may be a son of a bitch, but he's our son of a bitch' — they would not side with the Soviet Union in a cold-war reflex.

Across Europe, the left mobilised for Nicaragua.

Nicaragua presented itself as a small nation trying to wend its own, third way between the great powers, intending to create a mixed economy and build a welfare state. The progressive left hoped this would inspire other countries in a Latin America still shaken by the military coup in Chile in 1973 dislodging Salvador Allende's democratically elected left-wing administration.

Across Europe, the left mobilised for Nicaragua. Pencils and kerosene lamps were collected, so that young students who had just fought in the guerrilla war could go into the countryside and teach the people to read in a massive literacy campaign (*la cruzada nacional de alfabetización*). Money was raised, so that health centres could be set up and schools built.

European volunteers — including my parents — flocked to Managua. Sweden was one of the largest donors and the Social Democratic Youth of Sweden built an events centre for its *Sandinista* sister organisation.

Ortega's ongoing oppression

As would soon become clear, however, none of the world's superpowers had any patience with a country in the US backyard pursuing an independent policy — not least the neighbour to the north, which, under the then president, Ronald Reagan, financed a counter-revolution. The

preschool pavilion at my school was hit by a bomb. A trip to a swimming competition in Costa Rica had to be cancelled due to armed fighting at the border.

My mother, a librarian, had to move the National Library books into a basement shelter. My father, a child psychiatrist, had to prepare himself to treat another generation of Nicaraguan children experiencing the trauma of war.

The revolution nevertheless retained its popular support throughout the 1980s. After decades of dictatorship, it gave people a sense of dignity. But no one can eat dignity and, as the economy deteriorated under the pressure of war and US sanctions, Ortega lost the 1990 election.

Today, Ortega is president again. With his charismatic wife, Rosario Murillo, at his side, he has won three elections in a row — just not with popular support. He has relied on widespread corruption and a step-by-step assumption of control over state institutions: the parliament, the electoral authority, the supreme court.

Hundreds of thousands of Nicaraguans have fled to neighbouring Costa Rica.

Newspapers are closed down, the major title *La Prensa* publishes from exile and journalists are persecuted. Police shoot at protesters. A number of political parties have lost their legal status and the right to participate in elections.

According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the goal of the Ortega-Murillo regime is to abolish independent civil society. The repression strikes in blunderbuss fashion — its targets ranging from the Catholic Church to organisations working for the rights of indigenous peoples. The latter include not least those struggling to protect their lands and livelihoods against exploitative extraction by companies invited by the regime.

Activists are not only forbidden to organise or put in jail. They are often victims of violence and even killings and, while the perpetrators enjoy impunity, survivors are forced into exile. Hundreds of thousands of Nicaraguans have fled to neighbouring Costa Rica. Recently, large numbers have moved on to the border with the US, prompting the president, Joe Biden, to launch a new policy for asylum-seekers from Nicaragua.

A supposed hero turns into a tyrant

In November, the regime won local elections in each one of the 153 municipalities — sometimes through outright electoral theft. A human-rights activist I reached via WhatsApp in San José, in Costa Rica, described it as a totalitarian consolidation.

When I ask what allows the regime to stay in power, I get two answers. One is that it has secured support from powerful financial interests. Nicaragua is indeed rich in natural resources and the regime has exchanged political support for the right to exploit the rainforest, the pastures and the mines.

Another answer involves a nostalgia the exiled human-rights activist still encounters — an inability to see that what Ortega stands for today is not the *Sandinista* revolution but a new dictatorship. As one of Nicaragua's most important contemporary writers, Gioconda Belli, points out, this is not the first time a supposed hero has turned into a tyrant.

That is where Nicaragua is now. As stunningly beautiful as always. The mighty volcanoes. The archipelago of islands in the lake outside Granada. Dark green coffee bushes glistening with shiny red coffee beans in the mountains outside Matagalpa.

The Nicaraguan people are still there, too — in need of solidarity as much as ever.

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