



# **POLITICAL VIOLENCE** AGAINST THE PEASANTS OF THE NICARAGUAN **RESISTANCE**

A SOCIOHISTORICAL ANALYSIS



expediente abierto





expediente abierto

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“On the pages, one by one  
Nicaragua’s history unfolds  
But there is no page  
That is free of pain:  
It is as though red ink,  
Freshly spilled blood,  
Inscribed our history  
And memory would weep  
If there was no pause  
For the glory of San Jacinto”

## PROLOGUE

As a child I learned these verses that memorialize the Battle of San Jacinto. Now, at the age of sixty-three, they sprang spontaneously to my mind as I was perusing **HISTORICAL MEMORY: PEASANT RESISTANCE, FROM ARMED CONFLICT TO STATE TERRITORY IN NICARAGUA**. I do not remember the poem very well. My memory had erased a verse that I completed with my own imagination to fill the void according to the rules of poetry; a verse that tells of the new wave of blood that once again stains our soil, shed by the new “Hermanos Contreras,” the blood of innocent people, blessed by priestly hands: “**FRESHLY SPILLED BLOOD.**” I feel that the poem speaks of my blood too, for I am a son of this land and shepherd of this people.

I have witnessed that “Freshly Spilled Blood.” Indeed, under the pretext of **FREEDOM, “A NEW DAWN,” DEMOCRACY AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE KINGDOM OF THE POOR**, a new kind of slavery has been established. Forgotten are the words that Mexican President Lázaro Cárdenas spoke in 1940 at the inauguration of the **FIRST INTER-AMERICAN INDIGENOUS CONGRESS** in Pátzcuaro, Michoacán:

“Any regime that aspires to true democracy must consider making use of the virtues of the indigenous races and eliminating the vices or evils imposed by oppressive systems, as an essential factor in achieving collective progress. As long as there are human contingents who, dispossessed of the lands of their elders and their rights as persons and citizens, continue to be treated as beasts or machines, it cannot be considered that equality and justice prevail in the New World.

I witnessed that “FRESHLY SPILLED BLOOD” when I saw how they have sought to kill the soul of the peasantry, not only reducing it to a “pack mule” but also trying to tear away the most sacred thing that these people carry in their souls: their faith. Loss of faith erodes a society’s sensitivity to many socio-political, ethical, moral and religious issues.

It has been thirty years since the Holy See appointed me Bishop Ordinary of the Diocese of Estelí. The district entrusted to my paternal care is mostly rural. Throughout my episcopal ministry I have witnessed the context that is extensively described and documented in this “Historical Memory.” I have seen close up the reality in which the peasant families in the departments of Estelí, Madriz and Nueva Segovia live, as they are victimized by the blight of social inequality.

I have waged an ongoing prophetic struggle in this region of the country, proclaiming the Gospel and denouncing the injustices and human rights violations that afflict the peasants, because where Man suffers, God also suffers.

For over forty years, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) has contaminated the institutional framework of the Nicaraguan State with its totalitarianism. For this reason, much of my teaching is oriented towards the struggle for democracy and to helping peasant families claim their fundamental rights. Indeed, this sector is one of the most disadvantaged and is therefore a stumbling block to any totalitarian political movement. Since the majority of peasants are vulnerable to injustice and violations of their rights, they constitute the visible face of the evil policies of the State.

When the voice of those who most suffer is silenced, their silence becomes a cry that calls out for justice, and it is manifested in many different ways in our society. Armed resistance is one of these ways, and so my call has always been to dialogue, to listen to their voices and their reasons for dissent (which are not few).

Over these years I have come to believe in three fundamental pillars of the peasant population:

1. Unity and solidarity, making a clean break from the divisionist and segregationist “divide and conquer” policies of the Sandinista Front’s authoritarian ideology in Nicaragua.

2. What is more, I must say that the peasants have a deeply rooted tie to Creation; the land is part of their culture, their identity and their survival mechanism. Faced with any ideology, policy and economy that threatens their security (land, labor and housing), they are forced to defend it with their own lives.

3. Furthermore, they are deeply religious men and women. Their faith is intimately linked to their worldview; faith is what gives meaning to their lives and their work in the fields, and helps them to objectively discern the reality in which they live. Trying to uproot them from this will lead to resistance that may at times degenerate into violence. They must be treated with a deeply human touch, without interference from selfish interests. It is therefore necessary to view this reality in its entirety: to see the human being as a subject of law, to enhance his life in a way that is consistent with the greatness of his human dignity.

This report is a valuable tool for arriving at an objective reading of the drama that the Nicaraguan peasants have been going through during the last forty years and which continues in the present day. It exposes the murky politics of the Sandinista Front in their eagerness to fuse the Party–State into a single organ of power.

It places the peasant struggle into context, enabling us to understand the phenomenon of guerrillas and violence in rural regions. Through this report, a sociological, anthropological and theological reading can be carried out of the reality that Nicaraguans experience in the countryside.

It is written in simple, accessible language that everyone can understand. The research is extensively documented with a relevant bibliography, so that readers may go to the sources and read more on the issues.

It is not the intention of the researchers to give the last word about the path ahead, but rather to present a historical journey so that everyone can calmly evaluate the present situation and draw conclusions about what actions may best maintain the path of forward progress. The peasants are men of hope and therefore believers in love, which enables them to face the structures of sin that seek to oppress them.

As I take my pastoral walks in the quiet evenings among my beloved faithful here, I raise my voice in pain and in hope.

May this report serve to seek justice, an essential condition for building a Nicaraguan society with peace and progress for all.

**+ Monsignor Juan Abelardo Mata Guevara, SDB.**

Bishop of the Diocese of Estelí



# INTRODUCTION

Rural violence is a persistent, endemic, historical problem in Latin America (Kay, 2001), and Nicaragua has been no exception. The history of the Nicaraguan peasantry over the last forty years shows that they have been subjected to a succession of statist agrarian reform processes. These have taken place in the political sphere – coercion to join organizational processes that ignore the characteristic features of their society; and in the military sphere; violence that has spawned insecurity, promoted by state security agencies and organizations exercising partisan control to punish the peasants for not giving up their demands for freedom. This has exposed a tragic reality, the peasantry's efforts to change the present injustice having led to an uncertain and potentially crisis-ridden future.

With the rise to power of Sandinismo in 2007 after sixteen years in opposition, rural peasants continue to face one of the worst tragedies as the systematic policy of repression by the state intensifies as a result of their opposition to the ruling party since it first emerged in the 1980s as the so-called “Sandinista Popular Revolution” (1979–1989) against those who took up arms to defend their way of life and historical perception of freedom. This armed struggle cost more than 30,000 lives, and it was the peasants who were the historical subject in what has been called the “Contra War.”

Following the signing of the peace accords in 1990, the majority of the combatants demobilized and surrendered their weapons. In spite of the disarmament, political violence has since claimed the lives of more than 400 peasants who were part of the Contra, or their close relatives. According to the testimonies of survivors, relatives, and witnesses; reports from Nicaraguan human rights organizations;<sup>1</sup> investigations by independent reporters; and reports from

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1. As an example, since 1990, the Nicaraguan Center for Human Rights (CENIDH in Spanish) has been documenting reports of murders of peasants in general, and of peasants who were former members of the Nicaraguan Resistance. The Permanent Commission on Human Rights (CPDH) has also reported and denounced these murders.

special commissions and international organizations,<sup>2</sup> these victims have been murdered with impunity by Nicaraguan state security forces over the past thirty years.

The April 2018 nation-wide popular uprising against the eleven years (2007–2018) of the more recent consecutive Sandinista government once again made the peasantry a target of Sandinismo, since they joined the struggle, having mounted protests in the north of the country since 2013 against extractivist projects. Enormous demonstrations were mounted against Bill 840, which provided for a contract with the Chinese HKND Group to develop free trade zones and infrastructure associated with an interoceanic canal that would run through the country to link the Pacific Ocean with the Caribbean Sea.

The government of Daniel Ortega had approved the bill hastily and without social consensus. Peasants from the area where the canal would run through held more than one hundred marches from 2013 to 2018, to the point that their protest became a large-scale movement. They were repressed, imprisoned and tortured in the period leading up to the April uprising and became key protagonists in it, as they pressured the Sandinista government to step down. In response, government repression left more than 350 dead, hundreds wounded and political prisoners, and exiled more than 80,000 from their homes, both rural and urban.

One of the groups hardest hit by the repression were anti-canal peasants and those from other areas of the country who were identified as being with the former Nicaraguan Resistance. These experiences added to the desire they shared with other social actors to build a new Nicaragua in which they could claim their role as political subjects.

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2. In 1992, the United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations prepared a report that listed approximately 217 murders that took place during the first two years of the government of Violeta Barrios de Chamorro.



This research report is intended to contribute to knowledge of the key factors and elements that may serve to provide an understanding of the violent relationship between the Nicaraguan state and the country's peasants in the last four decades, in particular in the following aspects:

a) Historical roots. No form of political violence can be understood and transformed without taking its historical background into account. Violence, as an objective fact and a social construct, is perceived and evaluated differently according to its historical, social and cultural context (Huhn, Oettler, & Peetz, 2007). But different expressions of violence have different meanings and historical effects within a society (Martín-Baró, 2012).

This study covers thirty-nine years, 1980–2019, dividing them into three historical periods.<sup>3</sup> The FSLN governed during two of the periods, the first in the 1980s and the most recent from 2006 to the present. In both periods, state violence reached its highest and most lethal levels in different ways. In the 1980s, the internal armed conflict escalated and in the most recent period since 2007, a resurgence of violence began, although covertly, with Sandinismo's new rise to power until it became overt and intensified in the April 2018 sociopolitical crisis.

b) In these two Sandinista government periods (during the 1980s and in 2007–2019), there is a certain continuity due to common elements related to the regime's authoritarian, centralized, vertical manner of controlling and exercising power, and their vision of the state and way of relating to society (Ferrero Blanco, 2015; Carrión, 2019), and especially to the peasantry (Fauné, 2014; Rueda, 2015).

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3. The three periods can be identified with a) the 1980s; b) the 1990s; and c) from Ortega's 2007 return to power to the present.



## METHODOLOGY

The objectives of this study are to identify the patterns, levels of coordination, and intensity of violence in a series of phases: a) contradictions and background of a revolution deeply entwined with the peasantry and their resistance; b) the path from dismantling the armed conflict to the failed transition: the historical debt owed to the (de)mobilized peasantry and their mobilizations; and c) violence and the politics of uncertainty in authoritarian regimes: the case of Nicaragua.

In order to develop a socio-historical analysis of the violence against the peasantry, this investigation is divided into three historical periods; namely, the revolutionary process during the 1980s; from 1990 to 2006, following the postwar period and the establishment of democracy; and from 2007 to 2019, when Sandinismo rose to power again. The analysis looks at the critical points when conflicts between the government and the peasant sector broke out, the strategies and methods used to control them, and the factors that triggered violence and contributed to its escalation.

Two types of sources were used: a) secondary sources; documentary, newspaper, and multimedia material; and b) primary; direct interviews with people with various roles in the events, according to the objectives of the research project. These included experts on the subject; informants and key actors, such as members of the Nicaraguan Episcopal Conference and former members of the Resistance from 12 municipalities, who provided information on cases of political violence; assaults, imprisonment, torture with interrogations and executions. In addition, they told of their demobilization experience and the greatest difficulties they faced in this post-conflict period.

The qualitative data were processed in MaxQDA to generate results that included tables of code outputs, patterns and profiles. The data analysis strategy was enriched by contextualization and socio-historical analysis of the events. It is interesting to note that one axis of the analysis focused on the objective elements of the episodes – specific events, descriptive in nature; and the other axis on the subjective aspects, which are more hermeneutical and interpretive in nature, placing importance on the resignification that victims and witnesses assign to these episodes.

This distinction highlights a persistent problem which has an empirical basis and at the same time gives rise to accusations, records, documentation of the collective memory that has not been recognized, of the voice that has not been heard, of the lament or outcry that has become louder not only in Nicaragua but internationally.

It concerns a debt of social and historical justice owed to the peasantry, and so it is hoped that this initiative could plant a seed that may germinate into social and political recognition of these serious violations, and restore justice in memory of the victims. In other words, it is an investigation with political implications. This bias can be acknowledged without affecting the academic rigor of the study.

# I

## A REVOLUTION INTIMATELY

LINKED WITH THE PEASANTRY





# I

## A REVOLUTION INTIMATELY LINKED WITH THE PEASANTRY

**T**he Sandinista revolution is undoubtedly one of the most complex historical phenomena ever to have taken place in Nicaragua. Social science has studied it extensively without exhausting its meanings, impacts and contradictions. This process has given rise to a complex social project due to the nature and ideological origin of those who led the armed struggle against the Somoza family dictatorship (1934–1979); namely the Sandinista National Liberation Front, FSLN in Spanish. This military political group brought together in a common cause people from Christian, Marxist, intellectual, student, worker and peasant backgrounds.

One of their goals, expressed both in the FSLN's Historical Program (1969) and in the First Proclamation of the Government Board of National Reconstruction (1979), was to promote an ambitious agrarian reform by transforming land ownership, access to credit, technical assistance and social services to the peasantry (Ortega, 1986). As analyzed in the following section, one of the problems with this process was the influence of the orthodox interpretation of socialism on the state bureaucracy, who were in charge of implementing rural development policy. The focus on carrying out certain practices of what was known as real, actual socialism "was contradicted by the reconstruction and national unity program" and led to an excessively centralized and controlled system of public management that ignored the peasants' demand for land and other rights (Blokland, 1992, pp. 4-5).

The revolution imposed its vertical model, alien to the peasants' tradition, on the rural people. The resulting changes undermined the community life of this important social group on which the country's fundamentally agrarian economy rested.

## **Institutionalization of revolutionary violence against the peasantry**

The literature in this area has identified multiple factors associated with the forms of violence perpetrated against the Nicaraguan peasantry: a) processes of configuring highly unequal agrarian structures based on concentrating land, resources, and livelihoods, together with rural flight and/or turning peasant farmers into employees (Baumeister, 1998; Gould, 2008; Brockett, 1991); b) inconsistent and authoritarian implementation of agrarian policies (Deere, Marchetti & Reinhardt, 1985; Gionotten & Wit, 1987; Baumeister, 1988; Serra, 1990; Blokland, 1992; Horton, 1999; Martí i Puig, 2012; Rueda, 2012; Baumeister & Martí i Puig, 2017); c) failed political transitions and with this, covert establishment of authoritarian political regimes (Abendaño, 1991; Núñez, 1992; ANPDH, 1996; Martí i Puig, 2007; Rueda, 2007, 2012, 2015; Brown, 2001; Kruijt, 2011).

Faced with these threat structures, the peasantry has tried to defend its rights, especially the right of continuing to be peasants; that is, their reruralization (Fauné, 2019). To do so, they have resorted to a repertoire of collective actions at various times. The government has responded to these confrontational collective expressions by the peasantry in the last thirty years with violent disregard for their rights, through actions planned and coordinated among the different institutions and agencies of violence, with the aim of dismantling the peasant mobilizations or preventing their emergence.



Unfortunately, the Nicaraguan state, far from constructively managing rural conflict, has played a prime role in the emergence and escalation of violence, to the point of becoming one of its main perpetrators (ANPDH, 1996; Bataillon, 2014; Rueda, 2015). Not only does the Nicaraguan state lack the political will to abstain from violence, but Kay (2001) warns that it will be difficult to reduce rural violence as long as effective conflict management is not institutionalized through legal and political channels.

It is precisely this that has been one of the great unlearned lessons in the recent history of armed conflict and the period of rearmament, in which the peasantry has suffered and continues to suffer the serious consequences of these vicious circles of violence.

The historical problem of political violence against the peasantry cannot be viewed or considered as a merely local matter or a phenomenon that affects only one sector of the country's peasantry around specific demands such as land. Rather, it constitutes the expression of political problems that bear on democracy as the prospect for humanity in every society.

As Wolf (1987) warns, "peasant struggles or resistance are not merely simple responses to local problems, if they ever were, but are also local reactions to social disturbances" of great importance, caused by changes that affect all society (p. 401). Peasant mobilization has the potential to acquire a vicarious function, identifying the front where efforts for democratization must be engaged.

## **1.1. FROM THE GOVERNMENT JUNTA TO FSLN AUTHORITARIAN HEGEMONY**

According to McAdam, Tarrow & Tilly (2005), the overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship in 1979 had had two important effects on the nation: the end of almost fifty years of a cruel dictatorship, and the beginning of a process of democratization, through a co-government led by the FSLN and representatives of the moderate opposition to Somoza, who made up the Junta de Gobierno de Reconstrucción Nacional (Junta of National Reconstruction; JGRN).<sup>4</sup>

It was a fragile revolutionary power-sharing coalition that agreed on a mandate to prepare the conditions for holding elections as soon as possible, with the potential, as far as the country was able, to establish democracy (Ferrero Blanco, 2015).

The government plan and proposal led by the FSLN after the triumphant overthrow of the Somoza family dictatorship was encapsulated in a model of a mixed economy, political pluralism and diplomatic non-alignment. To carry out the first plan, most of the properties belonging to the Somoza family and those close to them were confiscated, turning them into People's Property Areas (APP); that is, they would belong to the state. The second point was addressed by creating a Council of State whose membership was nurtured by parties that agreed with the political pluralism offered by Sandinismo, but the institution was given a name similar to the Cuban parliamentary model. For international non-alignment, a firm anti-American discourse was proposed and they joined the fold of the Soviet socialist bloc. With this, the honeymoon was ended between Sandinismo and the separate groups that had supported the fight against Somoza.

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4. The JGRN had five members; Violeta Chamorro, the widow of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro; Alfonso Robelo, a businessman, leader of the MDN and member of the FAO; Daniel Ortega, representative of the FSLN; Sergio Ramírez, representative of the Group of Twelve (also a member of the FSLN); and Moisés Hassán, representative of the MPU (and also a member of the FSLN).

Two factors undermined the plurality of the Council of State<sup>5</sup> and the JGRN leadership in their mission to bring about Nicaragua's reconstruction and democratic transition. One was the unprecedented power vacuum created when the Somoza regime was dismantled and the other was that the FSLN leadership interpreted that vacuum as an opportunity to transition from the co-government arrangement to total hegemony as it reconstructed and controlled the state,<sup>6</sup> imprinting the seal of Sandinismo on the government. As Mojica (2014) points out:

“All conditions were extremely favorable, because the military defeat of Somoza was absolute: the capitalists were left without any instruments of repression. Never before had conditions been so auspicious for the development and spread of the revolution in Central America as they were in 1979 (p. 26).

Martí i Puig (2008) argues that with its historical program, the FSLN conceived the strategic importance of organizing a new army and police force, subordinate to and identified with its political project which was, at the time, the revolution. However, their desire for hegemony not only resulted in their controlling the army and the police, but also brought a strongly partisan character to these agencies in the 1980s. Forty years later, the commander of the revolution, Luis Carrión (2019), acknowledged that “we began the construction not of a national state, but of a Sandinista state” (p. 18).

This “confusion between state and party” was a source of dismay and mistrust in the nation, as expressed by businessmen in a communiqué from the High Council of Private Enterprise, dated November 14, 1980 (Envío, 1984).

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5. According to Mojica (2014), the Council of State was a corporatist body made up of delegates from various social and political sectors, not democratically elected by the people, in which the Sandinista delegation would have only 6 of the 33 members. The bourgeoisie trusted that having a majority in the Council of State would enable it to control the excesses of the comandantes and of the revolution itself.

6. The FSLN had a clear advantage over the parties opposed to Somoza in terms of organizational capacity, and even over other forces in society and power groups such as the business sector.

In a critical analysis, Ferrero (2015) and Carrión (2019) warn of the counterproductive effect caused by implementation of the guidelines of the “78-Hour Assembly,”<sup>7</sup> which were directed toward the FSLN achieving political power hegemony. This shift meant the distortion of its own historical program, conceived starting in 1969, by radicalizing its ideological bias and vision of class struggle. Moreover, it meant breaking up the pluralist character lent by the participation and support of actors connected to the JGRN and the Council of State.

One of the abuses produced by the ideological strategy was that “traitorous bourgeois” turned into an arbitrary and ambiguous concept that was extended to everything and everyone considered an opponent of the revolution or who disagreed with any government policy. Once stigmatized, these individuals and groups were liable to reprisals or punishments that could range from having their property confiscated to imprisonment without judicial guarantees (Amnesty International, 1981; Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 1981).

The absence of a democratic line of thought in the ranks of the FSLN, combined with the enormous power accumulated in its leadership, squandered the degree of consensus inherited at the beginning the revolution and the people’s expectation of liberty. This contributed to the implantation of a dogmatic and authoritarian model, and with it the survival and reinforcement of a militarized culture, which was just beginning to be shaped in the new context of reconstructing the Nicaraguan state.

The FSLN leadership was not monolithic; its members held diverse positions and the group was not exempt from internal debate. In many decisions on matters of national importance, some approaches prevailed over others. Although the FSLN was open to internal discussion, its political-military roots cannot be disregarded,

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7. The guidelines postulated the following programmatic actions: a) isolate the traitorous bourgeoisie; b) organize the driving forces of the revolution; namely, the workers and the peasants; and c) subordinate all forces under the leadership of the FSLN. For more on this analysis, see Ferrero Blanco (2015) and Carrión (2019).

nor can its style of political leadership, characterized by a highly vertical and hierarchical structure and strong control over its members. This type of leadership was later institutionalized under the slogan “Dirección Nacional ordene” (National Directorate – give us your orders!). Sergio Ramírez describes this power structure, the National Directorate, as:

“the model of a politbureau that made decisions, a Central Committee, the Sandinista Assembly, which merely blessed those decisions, and the application of democratic centralism, which in the end was not democratic. Moreover, during the war there was no room for extensive political debate, but there were people who were blessed with divinity, such that what they said was right and just. As for the rest, their only duty was to obey (Interview by María Dolores Ferrero Blanco with Sergio Ramírez, December 2010).

## **FSLN Despotism: The Main Inspiration of the Peasant Uprising**

This political culture and leadership style “limited the Sandinista government’s ability to correct certain [erratic] policies and did harm to certain sectors of society, [such as the peasantry], who, initially not being supporters of the Sandinista project, had not dealt with it” (Martí, 2007, p. 51).

A political philosophy and practice so strong and deterministic was taking hold that it kindled a chain of conflict, that would flare up with serious consequences.

Two cases in the recent history of the country are particularly notable; the clash between agrarian policy and the peasants in the the center and north of the country (Gionotten & Wit, 1987; Baumeister & Martí i Puig, 2017; Horton, 2004; Fauné, 2014), and rejection of the demand for an autonomous regime by the indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples of Caribbean Nicaragua. Both escalated and fed the internal armed conflict in the 1980s. The United States government took advantage of these struggles and financed them in its war of aggression against the Sandinista regime (Sánchez, Castro, Rodríguez & Guerra, 2016).

The FSLN's return to military action reinforced the momentum of centralized leadership and vertical authority, typical of war conditions. A narrative and ideology were generated that justified the errors and abuses committed against certain sectors and actors in Nicaraguan society. Serra (1988) has analyzed how this momentum structured social relations and the symbolic world in a particular way. "It led to a large part of the population being fit into a military structure characterized throughout by its hierarchical nature; permeated by military organizational method, without distinguishing between party and government." (p. 44).

Faced with this state of affairs, in 1980 the Conservative Party expressed its concern about "the unlawful situation" towards which the country was heading – a single-party regime – adding that:

“ The most abnormal and conflictive situation is produced by the fact that the FSLN has embedded itself in the body of the nation, in the government, and in the political and social life of the country, with its guerrilla organizational structure. What we could call a guerrilla state has been established, which in many ways preserves the guerilla mentality, system and technique” (PCD New Year's Message, December 1980, in Envío, 1984).

The expression “guerrilla state” is perhaps not the most fair or accurate description of the model that was being forged; however, it was the perception held by these political forces at the time. It pushed them to distance themselves from the FSLN, and even to become an active political opposition, some joining the armed struggle. Rueda furnishes a telling description (2015) “that politics was at the service of the military and that the armed conflict directed the policy of the Sandinista government” to the point where relations between the the army and the rest of Nicaraguan society were configured through armed conflict (p. 110).

Along similar lines, Cuadra (2003) states that “contact with the population was through military actions.” In many rural areas, “the only presence of the Nicaraguan state was the army and the police.” In many cases this led to abuses of authority and serious human rights violations, which to date are still relegated to the protection of impunity (p. 11).

It should be added that the military doctrine of the Nicaraguan Army was rationalized as a sociopolitical project. The problem was not only reduced to the progressive militarization of a society at war, but to an escalation of control and repression against the actors or groups that were identified as enemies or threats to the political project of the revolution, and were punished with severe reprisals. An emblematic case, which occurred a few months after the revolution, was the demonstration organized by Alfonso Robelo in the town of Nandaime in March 1980, and forestalled through violent repression by the first Sandinista mobs with the complicity of the police. This repressive action, under the slogan “Nandaime no va,” (Nandaime will not take place) demonstrated the intolerance of the Front in not allowing any real, effective opposition.

According to Carrión (2019), this event set the FSLN’s course and determination to prevent any political action that could challenge the revolution and its policies.

“ This of course implied censorship of the press and repression of any attempt at opposition. The political space allowed for any opposition was swiftly closing. The Sandinista Front was the “enlightened vanguard” that had to manage and control everything in Nicaragua, their right to do so born of the revolution. This was the prevailing mentality from the start (p. 18).

Despite criticism of undemocratic behavior in the FSLN, these behaviors continued, always justified on the grounds of “wartime priorities.” Although the war did put certain limitations on the development and scope of the Revolution’s projects, what impeded these projects the most was the FSLN’s authoritarian and vertical way of exercising power (Ferrero Blanco, 2015). As Alemán (2019) has pointed out, since “very early in the 1980s, Sandinismo was already showing all of these authoritarian symptoms, which did not arise from the needs of the war” (para. 2).

In the early months of the revolution, the Sandinista Front did not fail to take advantage of the historical circumstances that were helping it acquire dominance and achieve hegemony in the powers of the state. Given this situation, Hernández Ruigómez (2012) warned that the FSLN imposed “a power structure with tight

control over the decision-making process, very centralized and vertical” and with it “its model of society” (p. 198), which a few months later would trigger “one of the largest armed peasant mobilizations in the contemporary history of Latin America” (Kay, 2001, p. 113).

The counterrevolution arose in response to these impositions. New actors appeared on the political scene amid the contradictions of Sandinismo, which led to a decade-long civil war between the Sandinistas and the Contras. On one side, the United States government actively financed the peasant guerrilla group and imposed a trade embargo on the FSLN government. On the other side, the then Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) supplied weapons to the Sandinista state, along with military advice from Cuba. More than 72% of the Contra armed force members were peasants, according to the Organization of American States (OAS, 1998).



## 1.2. TRIGGERS OF THE PEASANT REBELLION

Martí i Puig (2007) published a study on the revolution and its conflictive relationship with the peasantry, titled “¿La última rebelión campesina? Revolución y contrarevolución” (The Last Peasant Rebellion? Revolution and Counterrevolution). The title refers to the emergence of armed peasant resistance in response to certain policies promoted by the Sandinista government and the abuses it committed against the peasantry, mainly in the center and north of the country during the 1980s.


Behind this relevant question lie others: Why was the only successful revolution in Latin America during the last third of the twentieth century fought by a peasant army, in a predominantly agricultural country? How is it possible to explain that the most ambitious project in the history of Nicaragua to modernize agriculture and improve the living conditions of the peasantry pushed these same peasants to rebel so fiercely and for so long? What relationship does this painful historical situation have with the violent repression that began in April 1984, in which the peasantry continues to suffer the greatest harm and whose rights are the most violated?

The peasant resistance and the violence that aroused it are rooted in the way in which the FSLN decided to re-establish the Nicaraguan state, subordinating it to the Front's ideology and interests. Its decision-making mechanisms were rigidly controlled by its centralized, vertical power structure, the National Directorate. Inherent in the process of constructing the institutionality of the Sandinista state was the shaping of its relationship with society and its government agencies, also subject to this same subordination scheme (Serra, 1990; Ferrero Blanco, 2015; Sánchez, et. al., 2016; Carrión, 2019).

Before delving into the factors that triggered the peasant rebellion, it is important to examine the significance of agrarian policy and its dimensions in a country whose economy has historically relied on agriculture.

According to Kay (2001), and Baumeister & Martí i Puig (2018), the agrarian policy promoted in Nicaragua was one of the most radical transformations of the social structure and social relations in the countryside, with different effects in different contexts. As will be explained in this section, it was not free from contradictions and mistakes.

The policy was developed progressively in five aspects, as described in **Table 1**.

ASPECT	IMPACT
 <p><b>EXPROPRIATION AND MASSIVE TAKEOVER OF AGRICULTURAL ESTATES</b></p>	<p><b>ACHIEVEMENTS:</b> In 1979, the country had 160,000 peasant families, 75% of which did not have land, since the majority lived near large estates and had no guarantee of being able to keep their properties as the amount of land held under the latifundio system expanded substantially (Gutiérrez, 1989, p. 116). The reformed sector accounted for 28% of agricultural land on farm estates, benefiting 43% of peasant families organized in cooperatives (Baumeister, 1997, p. 259). By 1988, the number of beneficiary families was 6,500 with 130,900 hectares; and 58,500 cooperatives with 639,100 hectares (Gutiérrez, 1989).</p> <p><b>PROBLEMS:</b> According to Kay (2001), a radical agrarian reform (AR) was implemented, with almost half of agricultural lands expropriated, which would benefit more than a third of the peasantry. However, most of these properties “were organized into state farms; production cooperatives, and only a small proportion was distributed directly to peasant families” as private beneficiaries (p. 111). It was an agrarian reform with a strong collectivist emphasis and a state bias in the distribution of properties, called People’s Property Areas (APP in Spanish) (Utting, 1988). Even farms that had been taken over by poor peasants who had risen up against the Somoza dictatorship were taken away to be administered directly by the state, under the argument that it was necessary to take advantage of economies of scale, which would generate benefits to the state. While state companies became the new strategic target of the country’s economy, the peasantry became a proletariat. The RA was opting for a de-peasantization strategy (Deere, Marchetti &amp; Reinhardt, 1985).</p>

## ASPECT



### EXPROPRIATION AND MASSIVE TAKEOVER OF AGRICULTURAL ESTATES

## IMPACT

This meant that the peasant movement was summarily rejected. In February 1980, thousands of peasants, organized through the Association of Rural Workers, carried out mobilizations in various places in the Pacific region of the country. Their demands included land and the return of expropriated farms.

Enríquez (1991) notes that the peasants exerted pressure on the government. As a result, a less centralized agrarian reform policy was adopted by the state. This gradually began to be implemented in 1986. In spite of these changes, the government decided not to address the peasants' demands, and instead prohibited land occupations and strikes (Martí i Puig, 1997).

## ASPECT



### LARGE-SCALE ACCESS TO FINANCING

**ACHIEVEMENTS:** Institutional loans increased across the board substantially in all productive sectors. Up to 1979, only 33% of agricultural land had financing; during the revolution years, the proportion exceeded 75% (Baumeister, 1997, p. 263). In 1978, only 28,000 peasants received 4% of agricultural credit; in 1982, 87,600 peasants were beneficiaries of agricultural loans (Martí i Puig, 2007 p. 63).

**PROBLEMS:** However, this investment prioritized modernization of production over consumption, so financing was concentrated in the state sector (Kleiterp, 1989), which absorbed 70% of the resources. The cooperative sector received only 25% and the private sector 5% (Serra, 1990, p. 84; Utting, 1988, p. 13 cited in Baumeister & Martí i Puig, 2018, p. 292).

Another critical aspect is that in the hands of the Ministry of Agricultural Development and Agrarian Reform (MIDINRA), credit became a way to exercise control over the cooperative sector, integrating them into production plans and goals designed by the administration and approved by National Development Bank (BND) technicians. The supply of inputs was controlled exclusively through state agencies<sup>8</sup> (Martí i Puig, 1997, p. 63). The model was vertical, and centralized in the state through its delegated agencies.

8. PROAGRO, AGROMECA and SUMAGRO.

## ASPECT

LARGE-SCALE  
ACCESS TO  
FINANCING

## IMPACT

The two most important credit and technical assistance agencies, BND and PROCAMPO,<sup>9</sup> did not take into account the existing organization of the countryside – comarcas, agricultural districts and family nuclei – and their productive potential, but rather focused on cooperatives authorized from the Agrarian Reform Act and state companies (Martí i Puig, 1997). This modernizing bias shows the ideological influence of the socialist camp and Latin American developmentalism (Baumeister, 1997, p. 265).

## ASPECT

INTENSIFICATION OF  
THE MODERNIZATION  
PROCESS

Underlying this aspect was a technocratic approach by the state, oriented towards industrialization and de-peasantization. It focused on accelerating agro-industrial development destined for export through state-owned companies. The modernization strategy relied on intensive capital investment concentrated in modern production units in a few regions as the fastest and most efficient way to increase agricultural production and yield (Wheelock, 1986, p. 48). The design was based on centralized and vertical planning, and on the expectation that the backwardness of the economy would be overcome by creating a large state sector that would progressively absorb and proletarianize the peasantry into public companies, sidelining the rest of the farms.

The premise was that the bigger the company, the greater its impact. The average size of state-owned agro-industrial companies was 13,481 hectares. Many of them incurred a high investment cost in infrastructure but failed for multiple reasons. An example was the large Victoria de Julio project, a sugar mill built in 1986 for 200 million dollars, of which Cuba donated 73.8 million. Classified as one of the “productive elephants” of the 1980s, it was abandoned and eventually destroyed completely.

The combination of attrition generated by the cost of the war, the trade embargo imposed by the United States, problems with the administration of resources and equipment, and the counterproductive effect of political errors all contributed to the failure of this ambitious project.

9. PROCAMPO was the state agency responsible for authorizing and administering cooperatives; it was in charge of ensuring that the cooperative movement was kept in line with national planning.

## ASPECT



CREATION OF  
AGENCIES  
SUBORDINATE  
TO THE  
GOVERNMENT

## IMPACT

**ACHIEVEMENTS:** The dizzying growth of the cooperative peasant organizations was unprecedented in this context of agrarian reform.<sup>10</sup> In July 1980, there were 2,647 cooperatives with a total of 77,358 members. The National Union of Farmers and Ranchers (UNAG in Spanish) had a membership of 124,212, according to the 1989 count (UNAG-ECODEPA Statistics, cited in Baumeister, 1998, p. 226). The social organization of production was transformed through the creation of cooperatives and state corporations (ERAS in Spanish), all of them linked to the FSLN.

**PROBLEMS:** According to Baumeister (1998, 2009), productive and organizational functions were over-politicized, which was counterproductive in terms of the autonomy and democratic culture of these expressions of collectivism. The FSLN assigned two different types of roles to cooperatives: a) in the economic sphere, the production of staple grains and perishable goods, and reproduction of the workforce for large state companies producing goods for agro-export (MIDINRA, 1982); and b) in the social sphere, cooperatives were conceived as mechanisms for overcoming the backwardness of traditional peasant production units. In other words, cooperatives were superior forms of social organization for production. It was a corporatist organizational model that in addition to ignoring and looking down on the economic and productive potential of the existing peasant way of organizing, decided to implant a new model without consultation, promoting clientelistic relationships with local leaders in exchange for their political control.

Another element that clashed with the deep aspirations of the peasantry was making the handover of land conditional on the creation of cooperatives, violating the principle of willingness and gradual transition stipulated by the cooperative law itself. Added to this was interference by external agents, including technicians, professionals and political cadres, which further limited internal democracy and the autonomy of the cooperatives (Serra, 1990, p. 146). According to Fauné (2014), those who refused to cooperate were deemed bourgeois or counterrevolutionary. With this stigmatization, confiscation and imprisonment were used as weapons of political punishment (Carrión, 2019, p. 18). According to records of the Permanent Commission on Human Rights in Nicaragua (CPDH in Spanish), at least 3,000 complaints against the secret police agency (DGSE) had been documented. These referred to unjust accusations against citizens, the majority peasants, who had been prosecuted without trials or evidence. A mere false testimony by a third party in the people's court was enough (Ferrero Blanco, 2015). Given these facts, Amnesty International (1981) denounced arbitrary sentences that were based on political affiliation or position in the chain of command (6-35).

10. Three types of cooperatives were promoted; Sandinista Agrarian Cooperatives (CAS), Credit and Services Cooperatives (CCS) and Agrarian Defense Cooperatives (CAD), the latter in border regions.

## ASPECT



## CONTROL OF INTERNAL TRADE

## IMPACT

**ACHIEVEMENTS:** Through the National Staple Food Company (ENABAS in Spanish), a rigid, comprehensive national system of state harvesting, purchase and distribution of agricultural production was implemented, supposedly to ensure the food supply for the whole country, above all the the urban population of the Pacific region (Fauné, 2014) and to avoid price speculation.

The Ministry of Internal Commerce (MICOIN) obliged the peasantry to sell their products to the state at pre-set prices that did not take production costs into account. In addition, it was strictly prohibited to ship foods outside the region where they were produced.

The trade policy dismissed and dismantled the traditional market, which was the axis around which life had turned in villages, comarcas, and municipalities. A system of intermediaries, supply, credit and trade had developed from these exchange relations, based on personal relationships and on knowledge of the demand and needs of the peasantry. The state network could not address these, nor could it replace the network or supply the necessary resources for the producers. A black market emerged, an undesirable situation caused by the state itself. This market took advantage of the scarcity caused by the state network and the needs of the most vulnerable elements in Nicaraguan society (Dore, 1990). The peasants strongly disapproved of these policies as they were causing acute scarcity, increased poverty, and steep drops in production, increasing the vulnerability of survival in the countryside.

## **Political stigmatization of the peasant way of life**

In spite of the agrarian policy's claim to create equality and justice, many of its strategic initiatives clashed with the peasant identity rooted in rural hierarchy, given the scarcity and desolation experienced by many rural peasant communities for years.

In the opinion of Horton (2004), the thrust of this political project not only ignored these social, political and cultural realities of the peasant world, but also committed a number of errors. The full set of lines of action of the agrarian policy destroyed the socio-economic scaffolding of the peasants and ended up excluding them from the revolutionary project (Palerm, 1980, p. 159 cited by Martí i Puig, 1997, p. 90).

As the Sandinista government's agrarian policy increased tension in their relationship with a significant segment of the peasantry from the center and north of the country, two polarized identities were generated:

- a) The peasants who identified themselves as poor and considered themselves part of the political plan of the revolution and its policies.
- b) The peasants who undertook a resistance born of a deep desire to remain peasants, of wanting to continue working their own land and making a living from it. According to Fauné (2014), even before these peasants organized themselves to confront the agrarian policy measures, they had already been considered a counterrevolutionary movement.

Some of the mistaken assumptions that shaped the design and implementation of the agrarian policy:

☛ Given the urban nature of the FSLN insurrection movement, the dominant imaginary in the Sandinista leadership of the late 1970s and early 1980s considered that semi-proletarianization was present in 64% of the rural population (FIDA, 1980, p. 28 cited in Blokland, 1992, p. 5).

☛ The design of agrarian policy was based on a focus of capitalist development in agriculture. It generated ideas of essential classes – such as the proletariat – and the need to collectivize agriculture. This approach ignored and denied the social heterogeneity of the rural population, their ideological visions, the way they organized themselves, and their historical demands, among other aspects.

☛ The agrarian reform was based on theoretical concepts of the collective organization of production that had nothing to do with the peasant reality. The strategy of cooperative development and state property ignored the distinct forms of peasant organization within their social and territorial structures.

For example, the organizational potential of the comarca, which depended on territorial identification, was not valued. The comarca was not only the social and cultural terrain of the peasantry, but also the economic support, the space where family relationships converged and flourished. Family ties and their importance in the peasant economy and in social security and cultural reproduction were discounted and squandered for all practical purposes.

☛ The MIDINRA ideology, far from recognizing the peasant as a social force with economic potential, looked down on the peasant economy as



“backward.” The collective form of socialist production was awarded a connotation of superiority over a family-based economic system. “The collective would indeed guarantee accelerated growth, socioeconomic equality and popular control of production” (Blokland, 1992, p. 16). The rural landscape was considered something that had to be modernized, and preference was given to developing large projects with high-impact technology, such as agro-industrialization. In practice, it was a colonizing logic with an urban slant, nor was it exempt from paternalism.

The peasant was viewed as a passive, unfinished element who necessarily had to be subsumed into social classes as a proletarian. Organizational imposition, a necessary condition for access to collectivized land, was seen by the peasantry as way of destroying their organizational base of production and reproduction.



One of the most sensitive points in this conflict between the peasantry and the government’s agrarian policy was “attachment to individual land.” Even before the revolution, this distant, almost impossible dream was a constant and persistent demand made by the peasantry throughout the three basic stages of the agrarian reform (see Table 2). “The right to own a piece of land” was considered not only a vestige of the cultural backwardness and undeveloped consciousness of the peasantry, but also a “petit-bourgeois ideology” that contradicted the objectives of the revolution, since it “rejected one of the processes of socialization of private property” (Gianotten & de Witt, 1987, p. 45). This hope held by the peasants was seen as a threat, for it had the potential to lead to the development of capitalist relationships.

TABLE 2.

# STAGES

## OF THE SANDINISTA GOVERNMENT'S AGRARIAN REFORM

**1979**  
**JULY, 1981**

The reform began in 1979 with the intensification of the war of liberation and continued up to the enactment of the Agrarian Reform Law in July 1981. Peasants invaded the farms of large landowners.

As a result of pressure from peasant land claims, the FSLN supported these invasions on the front lines.

Having just taken power, the FSLN issued Decree No. 3 on July 21, 1979, affecting the Somoza family, military personnel, and officials who had left the country in 1977, excluding the large latifundio farm estates.

The political reason for this decision was so as to not affect the Somoza family's and their relatives' properties further, under the mistaken assumption that they comprised more than 50% of the country's agricultural properties.

In 1980, Decree No. 329 was issued, which established that all the properties involved would not be returned to their former owners. In addition, it established that no further land expropriations would be carried out other than those ordered by the state within the framework of the Agrarian Reform.

**JULY 1981**  
**JUNE 1985**

On the basis of the Agrarian Reform Act, Decree No. 728, land was titled, prioritizing state properties and cooperatives. Peasant demands for individual land were blatantly disregarded. The family farm and comarca productive unit was not considered a viable alternative, but an institution that had to be transformed.

Believing that peasant unrest had been resolved, the government significantly decreased the rate of land handover and titling.

At this stage, a limit of three hundred and fifty hectares for fallow land was set in capitalist production zones and seven hundred hectares in the rest of the country.

**JUNE 1985**  
**JANUARY 1986**

This period began with the recognition that the peasant demand for land would persist, given the pro indiviso land regime. This realization was triggered by land occupations and mobilizations by peasant farmers. These actions persuaded the government to title more than 224,000 hectares to 17,000 peasant families between June and December 1985. The land handed over in this six-month period represented half of the lands that were granted from July 1981 to June 1985.

SOURCE: AUTHOR, BASED ON ORTEGA (1986), PP. 17-23.

☛ To the peasants, the denial of their individual and family right to land was incomprehensible, and the People's Property Areas (APP) seemed a betrayal of their aspiration to own land. The state became the new landowner and an obstacle to their interests and the fulfillment of their demands.

In response to their attempts to take over land, the state penalized and prohibited these actions, even protests and marches. For this reason, the 1985 Masaya peasant march demanding land was a landmark protest. Titles to land in cooperatives specified the non-negotiable nature of the property. The land must remain undivided and could not be exchanged. This was considered a denial of the right to property, one of the fundamental elements of peasant life (Martí i Puig, 1997).

☛ Institutionally, the state apparatus involved in implementing the agrarian policy was excessively fragmented and bureaucratized; a set of uncoordinated agencies (Coraggio, 1985; Deere, et al., 1995;) responsible for dealing with a complex, heterogeneous peasant group (farmers, merchants, consumers, wage laborers, craftspeople, etc.) In addition, many officials in these agencies were of urban origin and had little experience or knowledge of rural areas. This introduced a certain bias into the technical administration of the agrarian policy.

☛ For the peasants, the Nicaraguan state was not only the owner of the confiscated lands, but also the only agricultural merchant who could sell and buy farm products, inputs, and other related transactions. It was the state who was blocking and suffocating traditional trading networks. Trade policy was thus one of the dynamics that did the most damage to economic relations in the peasantry.

In the face of this adverse and complex situation, two socio-political phenomena forcefully relaunched the peasantry back onto the political scene:

a) The militancy of the organization created by medium and large farm producers who identified with Sandinismo, the National Farmers and Ranchers Union, UNAG, in the agrarian reform's statism and developmentalism.

b) The emergence of resistance forces with a social base made up of sizeable sectors of the peasantry in the center and north of the country (Baumeister, 1988). There is no doubt that the state's increased control over political life and the forms of production and distribution of surpluses caused the peasantry to join the ranks of the resistance (Abendaño, 1991).

### 1.3. **THE WAR IN THE PEASANT COUNTRY**

The war in Nicaragua, according to Rueda (2015), was a peasant uprising that turned into an agrarian civil war with external financing. At the same time, it was also a campaign of armed political aggression by the United States. The peasant rebellion grew swiftly; from 1982 to 1984 its strength increased from 4,000 troops to 16,000. According to Kruijt (2011), by early 1984, the peasant resistance had gained military hegemony in terms of training, weapons, supplies, logistics, organization, technological capacity and, above all, support from a broad and growing social base.

This state of affairs forced the leadership of the Sandinista Popular Army (EPS) to negotiate drastic changes in military strategy with the National Directorate (DN), since it was clear that the Resistance would be capable of mounting a threat to the capital of Managua in a matter of months. Alerted to the threat, the government changed its recruitment tactics and expanded the military forces with young people recruited through the mandatory Patriotic Military Service (SMP) for two-year terms of service. The government also formed mobile battalions, the Irregular Battle Battalion (BLI) and territorial battalions, the Light Hunter Battalion (BLC).

Many of the BLI were made up of young people from urban high schools, while the BLC were made up of young people from rural areas, especially from regions affected by the armed conflict. The BLC ensured that young people who knew the area well where military operations were taking place were forced to take part.



These measures had three main effects: a) with young people being drafted into the army, Nicaraguan society as a whole was drawn into the armed conflict in such a way that the war became all-encompassing, affecting many Nicaraguan families in multiple ways;<sup>11</sup> b) in the opinion of Marchetti (1985), the SMP had unexpected consequences in the “peasant country;”<sup>12</sup> it caused Resistance troops to increase, since young people from rural areas preferred to voluntarily join the Contras,<sup>13</sup> to the point that “the counterrevolutionary ranks increased their peasant membership and identity” (p. 6).

A change in the political and military leadership of the war took place that ended up subordinating the economic management and activities of the entire public sector. The army began to function as an autonomous entity, strengthening military capacity to the point where in a short time it had become “the largest and most sophisticated army in the history of Central America” (Pestana and Latell, 2017, p. 18).

## **The political defeat of the FSLN in the peasant country**

Although the military capacity of the army was growing meteorically, it did not manage to defeat the Resistance, which was active in almost half of the country (Pestana and Latell, 2017). Thus, although the Sandinista Army won some military victories, these did not necessarily translate into political victories for Sandinismo. As Núñez et al. (1991) acknowledge, “behind each dead counterrevolutionary there was a family or local network that would continue to stir up sentiment against a revolution they did not understand and whose repression was barely visible to them” (p. 273).

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11. From 1983 to 1989, the army recruited 149,590 young men for compulsory military service and from 1985 to 1989, 175,695 men were mobilized to the military reserves; in total, 325,285 Nicaraguans (Núñez, 1992, p. 267).

12. Marchetti (1985) uses the term ‘peasant country’ to “underline the immense gap that separates the culture and the standards of rural life from that of the city. The peasant country is in the Nicaraguan countryside, where there is no city as a point of reference, where the local community and religion satisfy spiritual needs” (p. 3). The peasant country is remote and secluded. It is only reached by many hours of travel.

13. According to Marchetti (1985), young people judged that they were safer with the Contras; the probability of dying was much higher with the EPS, who were ambushed by the Contras when they went into the mountains. The Contras had better military training, which was conducted in the field, as well as superior weapons and clothing (p. 6).

In remote regions, where the first contact between the peasantry and the revolution had been the National Literacy Crusade, subsequent contacts were traumatic. EPS operations caused terror through their use of the Katyusha,<sup>14</sup> the critical experience of the SMP, and their dismantling of the trade networks, which cut the peasant farming system off at the roots (Marchetti, 1985).

As of 1987, the EPS had not managed to achieve a military defeat of the Resistance for two reasons: a) the nature of the insurgent army allowed it to survive, since it had become a peasant resistance movement with strong roots in the center, north and Caribbean region of the country; and b) the crucial support lent by the United States government, which provided the Contras with military supplies for effective sabotage operations that were wearing down the economy (Núñez et al., 1991).

In the early years of the revolution, Marchetti (1985) had warned that the situation had two contrasting aspects; the EPS's weakness against the "peasant country" and its counterinsurgency strategy, but on the other hand, a Resistance able not only to enter and establish itself in the center of the country in areas such as Matiguás and Muy Muy, but also to recruit young peasants and train them in the Tuma River region. According to the Contra leaders, their armed movement managed to cross the country from north to south through mountain trails, in a sense dominating the rural landscape in a despite the stark difference in the number of troops (around 25,000 Contras against 300,000 EPS troops) and the army having an air force.

In political terms, the failure of the FSLN's attempts to win electoral support in the countryside was clear, and as Marchetti points out, the peasantry preferred to supply their men and what they produced to the Contra rather than to the state and its Sandinista army. According to estimates, by 1985 the Resistance had a potential base of 25,000 families in the most impenetrable areas of Nicaragua; regions that were cut off from the government not only for geographical reasons

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14. The Katyusha is a Russian-made rocket launcher capable of firing 16 missiles faster than conventional artillery, but with less precision. According to accounts by peasants Marchetti interviewed in communities in the center and north of the country, most of the missiles did not hit military targets, but rather peasant villages.

such as few roads and the absence of state presence, but also because of the growing gap between the government and peasant country thanks to the former's abuses and political errors.

Taking advantage of the growing peasant unrest and the territorial control that the embryonic Resistance had over the rural villages, the United States government managed to coordinate "the peasant uprising until it became a true mobile army" (Fauné, 2014, p. 19). Moreover, it enjoyed military superiority in its home front: the mountains.

According to the CIAV-OEA (1998), 72% of its members were peasants and 60% were under the age of 25. They had grown up in this environment and were much more familiar with it than were the Sandinista army troops (Bendaña, 1991; Agudelo, 2017), whose members were mostly from the cities.

A lesson that the FSLN leadership and many of its operators failed to assimilate were the political and military abuses and errors that violated peasant neutrality in the armed conflict. The Sandinista army had fallen "into the classic trap utilized by guerrilla forces against established governments: bearing down harder on the civilian population than on the enemy's military forces" (Marchetti, 1985, p. 5).

The anthropologist and peasant Angélica Fauné (2014) acknowledges that in this battle, "the Resistance was born from a deep sense of wanting to remain peasant farmers, of wanting to continue working their own land and live off that land" (p.18). It was an army staffed, for the most part, by peasants, and it had bases and corridors throughout Nicaragua. They even played a double role; "in the morning those Contras were members of the UNAG and in the afternoon they fought with the Contras, [also] the peasant women were playing a decisive role in the Resistance organization" (Fauné, 2014, p.18).



A former official of the secret police agency, the Bureau of State Security (DGSE), relates that despite the presence of the military and the DGSE in the central region, the peasants in some municipios in that area were part of the Contras and maintained their bases:

“In El Ayote, in La Piñuela there were seven BLIs operating permanently. In other words, can you imagine the type of theater of operations? That’s where there was a regrouping area to dislodge the Contra; in other words it was an enclave. When you realize, it’s some armed men, but with them you have all the peasants and the villages that you incited to fight them daily, to fight together with them as a Contra force, so you say, my god! What had I got into? Because eventually, you realize that all those peasants, all those villages from Santo Domingo to El Tortuguero were with the Contras. All I can say is, Mother of God be praised they didn’t kill me (Personal communication, August 7, 2019).

### **The Sandinsta Mistake – Counting on the Peasantry**

According to Fauné (2014), sociologist Orlando Núñez<sup>15</sup> used to claim that the Front lost its “peasant face” step by step; an idea with which she disagrees. She counters that the FSLN never really represented the peasants, because “the peasantry was against a system that had been hegemonically imposed on them and that mistreated them” (2014, p. 24).

The clash between the political project of the revolution and the peasant reality in the central and northern areas of the country left an unfavorable image of the state as negative and threatening. Wolf (1987) identifies the peasant rebellions of the twentieth century as “an evil that must be replaced as soon as possible by their own domestic social order.” That is, by institutions by which the peasantry feels represented and respected (p. 400). As a bishop of the Nicaraguan Episcopal Conference stated, “the peasant has been treated as one more piece of the country’s political machinery, and this ended up turning into political violence for the peasant” (Personal communication, August 8, 2019).

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15. Orlando Núñez Soto was the director of the Agrarian Reform Research and Study Center (CIERA) during the 1980s. Currently, he directs the Center for Research and Promotion of Rural Social Development (CIPRES).

The FSLN's return to military action due to the escalation of the armed conflict during the 1980s not only reinforced its centralized leadership style and its authoritarian exercise of power, but also deployed a number of social control and repression mechanisms against any actor that was considered a threat. This led to human rights violations, such as those committed against the peasantry. Torres-Rivas (2011) argues that "the terrorist features of the [Central American]<sup>16</sup> state made their first moves murdering peasants, and this was where the violence of the war evinced its most distinctive feature, the death of non-combatants" (p 168).

In the case of Nicaragua, escalation of armed conflict characterized the course of the war and the postwar period, with long-term consequences in the countryside, which was the combat zone. The toll of the war was high in terms of human lives and material losses.

Forty years later, Carrión (2019) acknowledges and, in a sense, justifies that in this "struggle for survival to the death, vigilance over respect for human rights weakened and abuses grew, and only a few of those abuses were investigated and prosecuted" (p. 22).

From this perspective, two closely related realities can be identified: a) from the perspective of the victims of human rights violations, Nicaraguan society bears a historical debt to investigate and determine responsibilities, which would guarantee that this violent past perpetrated by the armed forces in conflict will not be repeated; and b) peasant participation in the conflict determined the character and the course of the war, which is why the peasants are the main group affected in the regime of Daniel Ortega and his wife Rosario Murillo (Center for International Studies, 1995, p. 16).

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16. Material in the citations within square brackets has been added by the author of this study.

Unfortunately, our society has not followed this path. In the next section, an analysis is presented of the confluence of political errors and complex conditions that compromised the historical opportunity for political transition and the possibility of building peace in the country.



# II

## FROM DISMANTLING

THE ARMED CONFLICT TO THE FAILED TRANSITION

(1990-2006)





“

El pueblo sandinista estaba preocupado porque se pensaba que al asumir el gobierno doña Violeta, la Contra iba a ocupar el lugar del Ejército y, como decía Virgilio Godoy, le “pasarían la cuenta” a todos los sandinistas

HUMBERTO ORTEGA



# II

## FROM DISMANTLING THE ARMED CONFLICT TO THE FAILED TRANSITION (1990-2006)

### 2.1. ARMED CONFLICT IN A CENTRAL AMERICA IN CRISIS

The armed conflict in Nicaragua unfolded in both regional and global historical contexts. At the regional level, Central America was submerged in one of its deepest structural crises, which manifested in insurrection and intense armed confrontations. These neighboring conflicts were fought by insurgent guerrilla forces<sup>17</sup> and regular armies, whose governments received economic support and military aid from the United States on different scales (**see Table 2**). At the global level, the international scene was dominated by the tensions of the “second cold war,” such that the “Central American conflicts became an international crisis”<sup>18</sup> (Sanahuja, 2017, p. 3).

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17. In Guatemala, the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG) and in El Salvador, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN).

18. The tension of this “cold war” was heightened by the geopolitical struggle between the two hegemonic blocs, the capitalist versus the socialist, each led by a world power; the USA and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

TABLE 3.

## US ECONOMIC AID DURING THE CONFLICT YEARS IN CENTRAL AMERICA.

	1965-69	1970-77	1978-81	1982-88
EL SALVADOR	30.7	14.7	65.3	343.6
GUATEMALA	33.4	29.4	26.7	85.5
NICARAGUA	47.5	31.1	27.3	0.0

SOURCE: COASTWORTH, 1994, CITED IN TORRES-RIVAS, 2011, P. 234.

In these warlike conflicts, the United States implemented a new kind of military aggression known as the “low intensity conflict,”<sup>19</sup> based on “two main features; reversion of successful popular revolutionary processes, as in Nicaragua; and counterinsurgency in those countries where there was a clear threat to the established order, as in El Salvador and Guatemala, or a potential threat, as in Honduras and Costa Rica” (Bermúdez, 1985, p. 2). Its components include recovery of the offensive position at all levels, and combining military, economic, social and political efforts not to only destroy or damage the insurgency but also to win the support of the population (Borges, 1986).

This new mode of aggression has the purpose of minimizing the visible effects of these conflicts and their real consequences on the attacked country as far as national and international opinion can see, and consequently hiding the level of involvement of the intervening country or power and the scale of its investment in resources.

19. Historically, the low-intensity conflict has been a covert colonizing strategy. It manages conflict by creating crises or polarizing the local social forces of the country or nation that is the object of domination or intervention.



Sanahuja (2017), in one of his research hypotheses on North American aid during the 1980s, referring to the period of maximum socio-political turmoil in the Central American isthmus, warns:

“ The primary goal of the United States in dealing with the Central American crisis has been to reestablish US hegemony in the region. This is consistent with the traditional orientation of its policy towards Central America being based on national security considerations derived from realistic and neorealist premises and, since World War II, from bipolarism, which was reactivated during the Reagan administration (p. 9).

Promoted by the Reagan government (1981–1989), this new strategy of aggression, the low intensity conflict, had an impact on the course and the balance of armed conflicts in the region. The Sandinista government and its revolutionary project were among the most affected by this strategy. According to Torres-Rivas (2007), “the FSLN forgot that ‘low-intensity conflict’ does not seek military victory, but rather to demoralize and wear down the enemy. The disproportionate price of [wanting to] win the war was political, and plunged the economy into total bankruptcy, as well as engendering severe political weakness” (p. 143). This balance sheet of mutual attrition was recognized by Núñez (1991):

“ ...We [the government] could not win military or political control of large areas of the countryside where they had well-established bases; for their part, they could not advance much either. The Contras did not succeed in advancing past a certain territory; we did not succeed in removing the Contras from that territory (p. 111).

In the case of El Salvador and Guatemala,<sup>20</sup> the guerrilla movements did seek military defeat of their adversaries, hoping to seize power to promote “a radical transformation of the political, economic and social structures, [establishing] political and economic regimes that would make the Central American people’s aspirations of democracy, freedom, justice and equality come true” (Sanahuja, 2017, p. 3). On the other side, the governments tried in vain to annihilate the insurgent forces with a “scorched earth” strategy.<sup>21</sup>

In spite of their brutal offensive, the counterinsurgents were unable to defeat or eliminate their adversaries. In the Salvadoran case, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, FMLN, managed to expand its bases “in the face of a better equipped army that could not defeat it” nor displace it from the “controlled zones”<sup>22</sup> (Torres-Rivas, 2011 p. 333). In Guatemala, the offensive capabilities of the revolutionary force were soon decimated by the ruthless counterinsurgency strategy of the Guatemalan Army<sup>23</sup> in 1982–1983.

According to Torres-Rivas (2011), in the first conflict there was a stalemate and in the second, an impasse. As is often the case in wars, adds Torres-Rivas, the two sides fought unsuccessfully under a win–lose scheme, which resulted in escalation and intensification of the war, and with it, a devastating impact in terms of lives, human resources and material costs, only for nearly everyone to lose.

The toll of these conflicts was approximately three hundred thousand lives, in addition to the forced displacement of some one million eight hundred thousand to two million people (Aguayo, 1989). There is no doubt that armed conflicts are among the most traumatic events in the history of any society (Cepeda Castro & Girón Ortiz, 1997). In Central America, the consequences of these conflicts have

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20. The United States had significantly reduced its military support to the Guatemalan government and made its cooperation contingent on the human rights situation.

21. The Salvadorean Procurator for the Defense of Human Rights has established that one of the objectives of the scorched earth strategy was massive extermination of civilians, including women, children and the elderly, carried out by the Salvadorean state mainly during the period 1980–1982. Their tactic sought to destroy the alleged “social base” of the developing guerrilla movement and was aimed at the rural population of the “target regions” (Procuraduría para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos, 2005, p. 2).

22. These territories were also called “liberated zones.” They included northern Morazán, Chalatenango; the Guazapa hill near the capital; and in the center of the country, the departments of Cabañas, San Vicente, Usulután, and others.

23. During the Efraín Ríos Montt dictatorship with General Lucas García at the head of the army, more than 600 indigenous communities were exterminated. In the region known as the Ixil triangle, some 21% of the general population was killed, mostly women, children and the elderly (Torres-Rivas, 2011).

ochocientas mil a dos millones de personas (Aguayo, 1989). No hay duda de que los conflictos armados han constituido uno de los acontecimientos más traumáticos en la historia de las sociedades (Cepeda Castro & Girón Ortiz, 1997). En la región, sus consecuencias alcanzaron dimensiones intergeneracionales, como bien ha señalado Torres-Rivas (2011) “al menos dos generaciones de centroamericanos han sufrido la anormalidad de una existencia personal [y colectiva] gravemente alterada” (p.75).

## **El sandinismo en el poder y su contrainsurgencia**

En el caso del conflicto armado nicaragüense, entre el Gobierno sandinista y la Resistencia, Carrión (2019) reconoce que la situación de desgaste humano y agotamiento acumulado, en términos económicos y políticos, fue uno de los factores que terminó imponiendo la negociación como salida a la crisis, dado que la misma guerra había perdido la batalla para todos los bandos. Sobre esto último, el general Humberto Ortega (1992) admitió que:

“la guerra continuaba en nuestro territorio, y por eso provocaba una enorme tensión para el Ejército Popular Sandinista, sobre todo porque ya comenzábamos a enfrentar un serio problema: el agotamiento de las canteras del Servicio Militar Patriótico.

Fue por ello que, en enero de 1989, nos dimos a la tarea de encontrar la forma más expedita de poner fin al enfrentamiento armado, llegando a la conclusión —en base a experiencias de otras partes del mundo [sic]— que el desenlace de una guerra de este tipo solamente podía darse a partir de la combinación de factores políticos, militares, diplomáticos (...) ya no se trataba simplemente de la confrontación de dos fuerzas en un campo de batalla en la que una fuerza aplastara a otra, y la guerra terminaba (pp. 35-36).

El Gobierno sandinista era consciente del desgaste que implicaba para la sociedad nicaragüense el peso de la guerra, y la necesidad de poner fin a su impasse devastador. Por consiguiente, la conclusión de la guerra fría contribuyó a la finalización de un número significativo de conflictos en el mundo, entre ellos los centroamericanos, sobre todo por la evidente reducción de la capacidad o voluntad de las potencias externas para apoyar —económica y militarmente— a las facciones en combate (Ramsbotham, et., al, 2011).

As the armed conflict died down, some elements surfaced that made the transition process difficult, such as the impact produced by violence and by the polarization of society as a result of the intense, prolonged fratricidal war; and the massive militarization to which a good part of the population had been subjected by the armed forces, particularly young people. Another factor that played a part was that the conflict in Nicaragua was not resolved through a total military victory by one of the warring sides but through a tortuous negotiation process. Ramsbotham et al. (2011) warn that when surviving undefeated combatants have been unable to successfully achieve their prior political objectives, they are determined to achieve them when the demobilization agreements are not fulfilled satisfactorily.

Although these considerations help explain the challenges and problems of post-conflict situations, it is necessary to also take account of further socio-political variables that enrich this understanding; a) the heritage of a partisan army that poses serious challenges for the post-conflict scenario, especially in a democratic transition; and b) the corporate authoritarianism that has characterized the FSLN in its way of conceiving and controlling the powers of the state both while in government and when in an opposition role.



## **2.2. THE BURDEN OF CORPORATE AUTHORITARIANISM**

### **2.2.1. The Partisan Roots of the Army**

The Sandinista Popular Army (EPS) is the youngest army in Central America and the army that developed its military capacity the most rapidly in the recent history of the region. At its origin, it was conceived as “the armed organization par excellence of the revolutionary masses” (Dirección Nacional del FSLN, 1979, p. 28), led by the party – the FSLN – and not a military institution of the state as such. This partisan gene has shaped its identity and its doctrines and to some extent permeated its organizational structures.

According to Cajina (1998), the army’s top commanders, including the commander-in-chief, simultaneously held party positions. They were thus dually anointed: both by the political and the military authority. The FSLN’s zeal to control and influence all state structures led it to reproduce the organizational scheme of its party structures in the army, which explains why at least 80% of army officers actively served in the ranks of the FSLN, through its partisan–political structures.

According to Guzmán (1992), the Front had adopted the scheme called the iron triangle: party–state–army (p. 15). The way the scheme worked was that party officials would serve in different areas. In the case of the civil–military connection, this guaranteed that the armed forces would be completely subordinate to the political elites. This system of overlapping elites enabled the loyalty of the armed forces to the party to be ensured, as well as that of other co-opted institutions. The party became the “highest authority, establishing

values and policies, and settling internal disputes” (Guzmán, 1992, p. 19). This tactic of remodeling the institutions and their procedures was defended in the 1980s with an oft-repeated saying: “the Revolution [by which can be understood the National Directorate] is the source of the law.”<sup>24</sup> Institutional control would be a strategy constantly employed by the Front as it exercised of political power without counterweight, with negative consequences for democracy and human rights.

Cajina (1998) points out that at the doctrinal and ideological level, the cohesion and corporate identity of the army were nourished more by its political-partisan basis than by any military doctrine, given the original ideological influence on the party, Sandinismo, which has historically been its doctrinal touchstone.

Retired general Humberto Ortega has acknowledged that subordination of the army to the interests of the party, and the partisan political mentorship to which the military institution had been subjected during the 1980s were harmful and destructive to efforts at professionalizing and institutionalizing the army (Ortega, 1992). In many cases, they were hampered by the weight of partisan political demands imposed on the military.

## **The “Professionalization” of the Army in the Postwar Period**

Despite the fact that the military capacity of the Nicaraguan army was developed over a short time, for ten years it had no legal underpinning. It was not until December 27, 1989 and February 22, 1990 that the FSLN proceeded to approve, in record time, several laws: a) a reform of the law creating military ranks and degrees of honor (December 27, 1989); b) a law stipulating the military organization of the Sandinista Popular Army (December 27, 1989); and c) the organic law of the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Nicaragua, and the reform of the implementation regulations of the law creating the degrees of honor, duties and military ranks (February 22, 1990).

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24. Material in square brackets has been added by the author.

Cajina (1997) suggests that this legal maneuver had several purposes; one was to partially correct the gaps in the legal framework for the army, in order to guarantee its existence and stability; the other was to restrict the power of the Executive over the military, in order to protect its autonomy from the state and the new government, in the event that they might lose the election.

For example, Article 19 of Act 2-91 stipulates that:

“ the EPS commander-in-chief will be appointed by the president upon nomination by the Military Council. The highest ranking officer must be appointed without exception, which implies that in practice the president has no alternative and only confirms the candidate proposed by the military council (Guzmán, 1992, p. 98).

This legal maneuver established certain limits of civilian control over the army, such as the selection and nomination of its commander-in-chief. According to the law, jurisdiction over the army was in the hands of the military leadership and not of the Executive. The Front sought to ensure the appointment and continuation of a general who was trusted by the party and who, in turn, would be loyal to the political tradition of the military. Although the FSLN was confident of winning the 1990 elections, and an end had been negotiated to the armed engagement between the army and the Resistance, it did not rule out an unfavorable political scenario such as an election defeat and a potential armed conflict that would have to be disrupted.

Once the 1990 election results were known, the FSLN held an assembly of political cadres in Managua. They were concerned about the continued presence of irregular forces in the country, approximately twenty thousand troops. In the opinion of the Sandinista leadership, this opposition army represented a serious threat, since a revanchist course could trigger a settling of accounts. According to Martí i Puig (1997), this would lead to a new resurgence and escalation of paramilitary activity.

Years later, Humberto Ortega (1992), then general of the EPS, acknowledged:

“ that they had become too defensive. The people who backed the Sandinistas were concerned because they thought that when Doña Violeta took office, the Contra was going to take the place of the army and, as Virgilio Godoy said, they would ‘hand the bill’ to all the Sandinistas” (p. 52).

Hence, one of the FSLN’s most important strategies was to preserve the army, protecting it from potentially being dismantled by a radical sector of the UNO (National Opposition Union), known as the Godoyistas,<sup>25</sup> supported by some leaders of the RN (Nicaraguan Resistance; Contras) and officials of the Bush Sr. administration (1989–1993). Faced with this threat, the FSLN and the government of Violeta Barrios de Chamorro were aware that without the institutions of the military and internal affairs, they would be vulnerable, exposed to the consequences of reprisals and political revenge on the part of their adversaries or new contenders as the country faced many challenges with few resources (Cajina, 1997, p. 174).

From this perspective, the challenge to transform the army as a national and professional institution within the framework of the transition process was restricted in its scope due to the irreconcilable tension between those who sought a total dismantling of the armed forces and those who, with a certain pragmatism, defended its preservation as a stabilizing factor in a turbulent context of protests, conflicts and the reemergence of armed groups.

The army, as a key actor in the peace process and the political transition, recognized that its institutional survival depended on its willingness to submit to civilian control and cooperate with the departsation of its doctrine and identity (Ruhl, 2004).

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25. The Godoyistas were a group of politicians led by Vice President Virgilio Godoy. They had radical anti-Sandinista aspirations, and their main aim was to de-Sandinize state structures and relegate the technocrats of the Violeta Barrios government advisory team to the background. In their opinion, these advisors obstructed their political ambitions to establish a new state monopolized by them and free of Sandinismo (Cajina, 1997). The Godoyistas had a certain amount of power, since they were members of the UNO Political Council, had partial control of the parliament, enjoyed the support of the US Republican radical wing and had close relationships with members of the board of the former Resistance and its leadership. One of their demands was the removal of Humberto Ortega from the army and René Vivas from the head of the police.



A final important element of the nature of the army was its deep-rooted autonomy and the absence of any auditing of its operations. From its foundation in August 1979 up to April 1990, the EPS had enjoyed a disproportionate degree of autonomy from the state; its form of command and control, operation, and administration had been determined and approved through internal dispositions, instructions and methodologies, according to Cajina (1997), all under the protection of military secrecy. This operational autonomy model continued in 1990 although with certain nuances that left a false impression of an army under civilian control.

In other words, the EPS had operated without the necessary scrutiny by the relevant authorities of the state and civilian society. The army was subordinate only to the FSLN, an organization that had become an armed party and moreover “had subordinated its empire and under its leadership – voluntarily or by force – all the institutions of the state and [certain actors of] Nicaraguan society” (ibid., p. 97). All this took place under the premise that this way of concentrating and exercising power was the only way to ensure the full and effective realization of the FSLN’s political project during the 1980s, above the interests and needs of all the different sectors organized at that time.

According to Cajina (1997), the FSLN in its eagerness to preserve its hegemony, both over state institutions and over society, became a kind of corporate caudillismo, a phenomenon already analyzed when the authoritarian hegemony that had characterized the Front since the beginning of the revolution was addressed.

### **2.2.2. A Party Disposed to (Un)Govern**

The hegemony that characterized the FSLN distorted the vision of power and its role as a political force, both when it was in government and in opposition. Sergio Ramírez acknowledges that the FSLN leadership had clung to the idea of “supporting the elements of power of a revolution that was no longer in power, and that the only remaining power factor was the army” (Cajina, 1997, p. 95).

Another significant aspect that Cajina (1997) identifies in this crisis is the way that Daniel Ortega conceived the FSLN; as a party created “not to be governed, but to govern.” He expressed it this way in his statement on February 27, 1990: “the day will come when we will govern from above, because the FSLN together with the people of Nicaragua will continue to govern from below” (Barricada, February 28, 1990, cited in Cajina, 1997, p. 60).

To the FSLN, it had lost the elections – that is, temporarily, the government – but not power with its coercive instruments.<sup>26</sup> This view was nurtured and promoted by the FSLN leadership to its bases, a view that contributed to political instability and polarization, with harmful consequences for the complex transition process.

And as will be seen in the next chapter, for the Ortega regime, clinging to power at any cost would become a byword and an authoritarian political practice, once it achieved a return to power in 2007. An iconic example was expressed by FSLN commander and founder Tomás Borge Martínez in an interview with the Venezuelan network Telesur,<sup>27</sup> about his party’s determination to do anything to hang onto power:

“Anything can happen here, except that the Sandinista Front lose power. The return of the Right in this country is inconceivable to me. I used to say to Daniel Ortega, you know, we can pay any price, whatever they want, the only thing we cannot lose is power. Let them say what they want, but we’ll do what we have to do... the highest price we could pay would be to lose power. There will be a Sandinista Front today, tomorrow and forever (Retrieved from *El Nuevo Diario*, October 14, 2011).

Undoubtedly, the confluence of these and other elements affected the course of the political transition, the role of institutions related to the use of force – the army and the police, and the evolution of political violence in the context of the neoliberal democracy of the post-conflict period, whose main victims have been the peasants who were part of the Resistance.

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<sup>26</sup> Under the premise that the elections were a mere formality of democracy.

<sup>27</sup> On July 26, 2009.

## **2.3.**

### **THE POST-CONFLICT VIOLENCE IN NICARAGUA**

Ending an internal armed conflict after a revolution is probably one of the most complex transitions for a society that has suffered acutely from the intensity and assault of both conflict and revolution in such a short time. Although the fratricidal war was dismantled, it must be acknowledged that there were constraints that affected the peace process, the unlearning of violence and the construction of a sustainable peace. Nicaraguan society longed for acknowledgment and healing of the deep wounds of the war and of the peace that was betrayed, but these have not been completely resolved. In this section, some of these constraining factors will be outlined, to draw lessons from the challenge of finding the way back onto the path to democracy.

#### **2.3.1. The Nature of the Transition Process**

El proceso de desmantelamiento del conflicto armado en Nicaragua transitó por The process of dismantling the armed conflict in Nicaragua went through various stages, in several series of conversations that began in 1983 with the Contadora Group, and then developed through the presidential summits (Esquipulas I and II, Sapoa, Costa del Sol). Once the results of the 1990 elections were accepted, the Transition Protocol was signed by the FSLN and the National Opposition Union, UNO, the winner of the 1990 election.

After this agreement was signed, the terms of Resistance disarmament and demobilization were negotiated between its political board and the UNO government. The conditions for the insertion of Resistance troops into civilian life were established. Torres Rivas (2007) points to two relevant considerations that characterized the development of the post-conflict period in Central America and that illuminate the analysis of the Nicaraguan case.

First, that “the war shaped the elections, and the elections shaped the peace processes” (126). This was what happened in Nicaragua with the 1990 founding elections of democracy that were prescribed by the Costa del Sol Joint

Declaration of the Central American Presidents (McConnell, 2011). The unexpected outcome was that the FSLN lost the election to Violeta Barrios de Chamorro. This historical event gave a decisive turn to the process of negotiating the end of the armed conflict. In addition, it highlighted two precedents that are worth making explicit:

- a) The transition to democracy took place ahead the cessation of conflict, in the sense that armed conflict was not dismantled as the result of a participatory negotiation process coming to fulfillment, but rather was the product of a popular referendum that was expressed in the results of the 1990 elections.
- b) For the first time in the political history of Nicaragua, the destiny of the country was not determined by the interests of a political party, but instead was in the hands of a fragile alliance made up of a group of parties that had come together in the run-up to the 1990 elections. However, before the election, internal rivalries began produce cracks in the pact (Cajina, 1997).

This unprecedented political vulnerability limited the margin available to Violeta Barrios's government to maneuver in managing the political transition in an adverse situation full of complex challenges. Its main opponent, the FSLN, continued to hold significant measures of power in state institutions, in addition to maintaining its ability to organize and mobilize its social bases.<sup>28</sup>

As Cajina (1997) aptly characterized in his study of the political transition and reconversion of the army, the government of Doña Violeta was "pressured by all and supported by few, [which is why] in order to survive it had to depend on the power still held by the political force that she had defeated at the polls" (p. 68). At this political crossroads, the army, an opponent of the Resistance, became one of the Violeta Barrios government's best allies. The military leadership took advantage of this to defend its institutional interests, shielding itself from mechanisms of civilian control.

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28. At various times during the transition period, riots in the streets were turning into one of the ways that the war was moving from the military arena to the political sphere.

Ruhl (2004) argues that the Nicaraguan armed forces are the only such forces in Central America that continued to enjoy institutional political autonomy after the cessation of the armed conflict. This is considered unacceptable in advanced democracies, given that it constitutes a formidable obstacle to the processes of democratization.

The code approved in 1994 only allows the president to say yes or no to the candidate proposed by the council of top officers for the position of military commander; the Executive does not have the power to nominate an alternative candidate. Even during the Enrique Bolaños government, 2002–2006, “control of military planning, budgeting, operations and education continued to be in the hands of the military commander” (Ruhl, 2004, p. 147).

Second, this political scenario of alternation and rearrangement of political forces affected the peace negotiation process, resulting in an inconclusive democratic transition pact whose effects restricted the scope of the peace process and was among the factors contributing to the spiral of violence and rearmament of the disenfranchised groups.

This made the army a key actor in the transition negotiation process: on the one hand, the FSLN was trying not only to ensure the survival of the military institution, but also to circumscribe civilian control over the military; and on the other, the incoming government required the army’s support in order to ensure stability. Cajina (2019) describes it as a transition negotiated between doves and hawks:

“ The incoming government was caught between naivety and its own weaknesses, political inexperience and pragmatism. In the end, the FSLN was left with the largest slice of the power pie, since the Sandinista Popular Army and the Sandinista Police remained embedded as toxic foreign bodies in the fragile democratic fabric that was just beginning to be woven (p. 28).

Doña Violeta's government and the subsequent administrations failed to strengthen the state capacity that would have been necessary to build a legal framework of strategic orientation, leadership and political oversight for the armed forces, as well as the means for effective civilian control of their functions (García Pinzón, 2014). This was the case, for example, of the National Assembly Committee. The armed forces reform was not based on consolidating democracy; rather, the goal of strengthening institutional, party and corporate interests prevailed. Rueda (2014) notes that the Nicaraguan army cannot be separated from the political and societal events of the postwar period.

A third element that García Pinzón (2014) acknowledges in the political transitions in Central America is that "none of the countries had a [prior] tradition of democratic government or institutions." This has been noted in the corporate caudillismo of the FSLN, in the partisan nature of the army and in the control that the Executive had over all the institutions, in addition to the abuses, never independently investigated, that had been committed against the peasant country.

Hunter (1998) points out that one of the issues that has most concerned the military in Latin America has been institutional preservation. In many cases, they have used this umbrella to protect themselves from any procedure that might investigate and punish serious violations of human rights committed by its troops. In their scheme, legislation was enacted to impede the role of justice in investigating human rights violations. Notable among these are amnesty laws that have represented "a serious obstacle to the fight against impunity and reconstruction of a sense of justice for the present problems" (Beristain, 2005, p. 61).

In Nicaragua, not only has amnesty been employed, but also de facto mechanisms such as ineffectiveness of the institutions to address violence against demobilized members of the Resistance. These situations of impunity feed further into the spiral of violence, as has been documented by the Nicaraguan Center for Human Rights (CENIDH) since 1991, the Permanent Commission for Human Rights

(CPDH), and investigations by the Expediente Abierto initiative related to the murders, between 1990 and 2019, of peasants who had been part of the Contra.

According to Ruhl (2004), since the approval of the 1994 Military Code, “few soldiers have been accused of human rights abuses or corruption” (p. 147). In addition, he warns ironically that responsibility for the current failures in advancing the democratization of civilian–military relations falls on the civilians and not exclusively on the military’s resistance, given that the political elites and society underestimated the challenge of military reform after the armed and private forces had been deprived of their political influence.

Consistent with Rueda (2015), the neoliberal governments “showed total incomprehension of the issue of the civilian–military relationship during their mandates” (p.110) and of the importance transforming this relationship as one of the crucial conditions for successful transitions to democracy.

### **2.3.2. The Premises of a Failed Transition**

Conflicts and violence did not disappear with the end of the war, because the security and defense forces were not redirected to activities that would help consolidate democracy. Military privileges were not modulated as a fundamental part of the exercise of civilian control over military power, nor was there an independent investigation and purging of the officials responsible for serious human rights violations.

There was no promotion of reforms or actions to dismantle the operational and intelligence services that had been repeatedly identified as committing serious violations and abuses of rights, such as the General Department of State Security (DGSE) of the Ministry of the Interior (MINT). It is important to note that in the 1980s the MINT was one of the institutions with great power and little oversight.

Its institutional growth and powers generated tensions and disputes between it and the EPS, as General Humberto Ortega later acknowledged:

“ I was of the opinion that there could not be such a large Ministry of the Interior. At some point it even tried to get helicopters; that is, almost to become another army. When the Pablo Úbeda Unit was created, a kind of competition began as to who killed the most Contras, who was winning the war, whether the Pablo Úbeda Unit or the BLI (Ortega, 1992, p. 55).

Following the 1990 election defeat, this unit became part of the army and was given the name of Defense Information Directory (DID) under the leadership of Lenín Cerna<sup>29</sup> (US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 1992; Cajina, 1997). According to General Humberto Ortega (1992), the DID would carry out an “ongoing information-gathering and analysis process regarding the general situation of the country, in order to counteract any criminal act, terrorist plan or espionage against the country” (p. 56). The information they obtained would be passed to the Ministry of the Interior for legal prosecution.

However, a report in the New York Times says that at least 800 members of the DGSE were incorporated into the military officer corps (Uhlig, 1990). It should be borne in mind that the DGSE was one of the bodies specialized in gathering information on counterrevolutionary activity in various areas of society. According to Núñez et al. (1992), information was obtained in two ways: interrogation of prisoners and clandestine methods, by means of information supplied by security collaborators who participated in the social bases of the Contra; or by professional agents who infiltrated their military units, the “vermin.” These agents, in addition to collecting information, carried out specialized military operations on the basis of this information.

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29. Lenín Cerna was the director of the DGSE and one of those accused of ordering committing serious human rights violations; torture, assassinations and intimidation of opponents of the Sandinista regime in the 1980s, according to sources from the New York Times (04.11.90) and Washington Post (07.09.90).



During the armed conflict in the 1980s, this unit developed highly lethal effective military capability. In three years they annihilated forty Resistance bands, with a toll of more than 230 casualties and the capture of 500 soldiers. It is also known that they carried out indiscriminate arrests of peasants who were later tried in the people's courts (Ferrero Blanco, 2015) and committed abuses against peasants whom they considered "ideologically entrenched," and who were intimidated in order to prevent them from collaborating with the Resistance (Núñez et al., 1992, p. 273).

Embedding DGSE personnel within the army represented a serious impediment to the democratization process of the country, since it was handled without any investigation or vetting process. In other words, it took place with total impunity and under the protection of the military. It is likely that this contributed to the persistence and intensification of lethal violence directed against members of the Resistance and their families during the post-war period.

In a period of less than two years, the OAS had received more than 1,400 accusations of violence committed against members of the Resistance (1992). A team from the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, made up of Republican senators, compiled a list of 217 former Contras killed since the government of Violeta Barrios de Chamorro had taken power. Among those killed, they recognized five commanders who belonged to the general command of the Resistance.

Moreover, they had received a warning from Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo, a member of the Tripartite Verification Commission, about evidence of a covert campaign to eliminate members of the Resistance (United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 1992, pp. 53-57). At the same time that this institutional process of persecution was going on, groups of rearmed former members of the EPS and the MINT were surfacing.



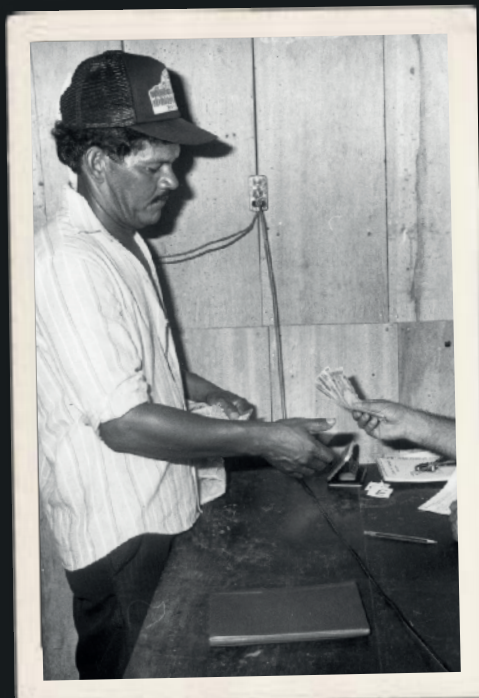
The rearmament that took place during the political transition process in the early 1990s was a multi-causal problem that has been studied by various academics.<sup>30</sup> They coincide in indicating several determining factors that shaped the phenomenon, among which can be noted: a) variables related to the process of negotiating agreements; b) variables of the post-conflict context and the limited abilities of the Nicaraguan government and state; c) variables related to the subjects' overall (in)secure situation; d) faulty (non)compliance with the agreements; and e) unscrupulous manipulation by some political actors.



## **A. THE NEGOTIATION PROCESS.**

From the perspective of peacebuilding in post-conflict contexts, Ramsbotham et al. (2011) list several characteristics of satisfactory settlements that contribute to effective fulfillment of agreements, such as inclusion and participation of the parties affected, and formulating treaties to provide for clear and thorough transitions that address the fundamental issues of the conflict and lead to real transformation. On the Resistance side, it is acknowledged that their representatives lacked the negotiating capacity to call for real commitments from the government for the insertion of demobilized fighters. The ambiguity of the agreements allowed the government and the CIAV-OEA to partly evade responsibility for fulfilling these commitments. Consequently, it was not possible to establish a legal framework and a proposal with a strategic vision that would encompass a comprehensive process of demobilization, disarmament, and socio-economic and political reintegration of the demobilized fighters.

30. Rueda (2015), Martí i Puig (1998), Cajina (1997), Rocha (2001), Cuadra (2001), Cuadra, Pérez Baltodano & Saldomando (1998).



## **B. CONTEXT AND INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY.**

The process of dismantling the armed conflict took place in an adverse context; the country's economy was laid waste by the prolonged low-intensity conflict and the international economic blockade imposed by the United States. In this scenario marked by bankruptcy, insolvency and economic debt, the new government – of Violeta Barrios – faced the challenge of enacting a political transition under adverse influence of a confluence of counterproductive variables: implementing neoliberal policies – of structural adjustment and stabilization – in a process of undisguised trade liberalization, privatization and deregulation of the country's economy. Added to this, cuts in social spending and overhead – massive layoffs – were increasing the numbers of unemployed, who including demobilized fighters from both sides. Faced with scarce opportunities for jobs, and these precarious, with the experience of abandonment, indignities and despair, many opted for the old repertoire of demanding compliance with the agreements that would allow them to survive in this context.



## C. A SITUATION OF INSECURITY.

Experts in peacebuilding, such as Woodhouse, Ramsbotham, Miall (2011) and Licklider (1993) warn that the end of a fratricidal war is not usually a specific point in time, but rather a process, whose course has reached maturity when, in the best of scenarios, it gives way to a new political order and the parties manage to reconcile. The worst scenario is when a new conflict eclipses the previous one. Internal confrontations resolved through agreements tend to be more complex to bring to an end, and in turn are more likely to return to armed violence, depending, among other variables, on the conditions of the context. In the case of Nicaragua, it did not take long before a new climate of violence emerged a few months after the demobilization process. It was aggravated by the climate of impunity caused by the ineffectiveness of public institutions, and the resulting wave of murders and executions perpetrated by members of the police and the army against former members of the Resistance (CENIDH, 1991, 1992, 1993; CEI, 1995; ANPDH, 1996; Rueda, 2015). Added to this were the criminal actions of groups made up of former members of the Resistance who took over farm cooperatives and assassinated former EPS, MINT and cooperative members. These dynamics, in a context militarized by cached weapons and those which the FSLN had distributed to civilians among the population prior to the political transition, facilitating rearmament.



## **D. BREACH OF AGREEMENTS.**

When it began its administration, the government of Violeta Barrios de Chamorro underestimated the economic burden and the complexity of the process of demobilization and reintegration of fighters from both sides. In addition, the contribution of financial resources from the international community, including the US, was meager in relation to the size of the government's commitments. The US had financed the internal armed conflict and the destruction of the country's productive capacity.

Fundamental aspects such as relocation of the demobilized fighters, were insufficient, barely managing to to cover 30%. In addition, there were problems with the land they were granted and with guaranteeing their legal titles, combined with incomplete satisfaction of their demands, which led to renewed pressure, including an increase in weapons.



## E. MANIPULATION AND INCITEMENT TO VIOLENCE.

Politicians – led by Virgilio Godoy – representatives, mayors, and Resistance leaders – such as Rubén, Wilmer, and Waslala – unscrupulously exploited Recontra demands in an unsuccessful bid to demand that the Minister of the Presidency, Antonio Lacayo; the Minister of the Interior, Carlos Hurtado; and the general of the army, Humberto Ortega be removed. This political group was aiming for de-Sandinization of the government and the state, a demand that only fueled a sharper confrontation and polarization of a country decimated by the armed conflict, just when it was beginning the process of political transition in a very adverse context.

Ramsbotham et al. (2011) warn that in peace processes, a certain faction usually emerges or seizes leadership. These authors call this actor saboteurs; stakeholders who take advantage of the continuation of conflict or chaos to promote their hidden agendas.

A phenomenon known as Godoyazo<sup>31</sup> was the discrediting of the actions of the demobilized among other sectors. Although their initial demands were just, their claims were distorted in the political landscape to destabilize the government. In other words, Godoyazo ended up being a failed strategy that incurred a political cost for those involved, and as often happens, those at the bottom had the worst of it.

31. The term comes from the surname of the liberal politician Virgilio Godoy. For more information about El Godoyazo, see the article in *Envío*, “Contra-concertación: el desafío de la ultraderecha”, No. 110, December 1990. Available online: <https://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/646>





## **F. LACK OF PSYCHOSOCIAL PROCESSES.**

Armed conflict has been considered one of the most devastating experiences that a society can experience. In Nicaragua, it transformed “community settings into places of fear, truncated life plans and caused unspeakable indignities, uncertainties and loss of identity” (Charry-Lozano, 2016, p. 55). These traumatic events have consequences that affect the vital structures of people and social groups in ways that depend on the characteristics of the violence suffered, the type of perpetrator, the forms of violence, and the characteristics and profiles of the victims. In Nicaragua, no psychosocial programs were developed to facilitate grieving processes or to help manage post-traumatic stress. Nor were any social networks promoted for forming mutual support groups in the demobilized areas and communities affected by the ravages of armed conflict. Undoubtedly, the absence of these resources amplified the vulnerability of many of the demobilized fighters and their families to cope. Other consequences were the loss of credibility and trust in the Nicaraguan state and its institutions, withdrawal from social leadership activities, breaking of people's deep-rooted ties with their communities, and transmission of the effects of trauma to future generations. All this made the complex process of social reintegration more difficult and contributed to the resurgence of various forms of violence, including armed violence.



According to Rueda (2014), some took up weapons again with the intention of preventing the return of agricultural properties; others to demand that the government come through with the medical care, credit and other benefits promised in the agreements reached during the demobilization process. Some armed groups reorganized as a security measure and some to combat former members of the Resistance (see Sidebar 1. Causes of rearmament).

Among the rearmed troops, some notable units were Danto 91, later renamed the National Self-Defense Movement in Arms (MADNA); the Pedro Altamirano Column; the Cristóbal Vanegas Column; the Rigoberto López Pérez Western Front; and the Fanón Montenegro Central Front.

In October 1992, one of the most violent ex-military groups surfaced, the Fuerzas Punitivas de Izquierda (FPI) (Punitive Forces of the Left), who set explosives at the headquarters of the High Council for Private Enterprise (COSEP).

The FPI was credited with the assassinations of farmers Esau Úbeda and Arges Sequeira. Sequeira was president of the Farm Producers Union of Nicaragua (UPANIC) and a COSEP board member. Frank Ibarra Silva, Germán Lacayo Guerrero and Diego Javier Espinoza, all former members of the small Special Forces units of the EPS (FUPE) and the MINT, were accused of Sequeira's murder.

In statements to the media, Frank Ibarra stated that the FPI had been in the planning since two years earlier in 1990, when he was active in the ranks of the EPS (La Prensa, February 23, 1993, p. 12). Even though the case was tried before the courts and Ibarra was sentenced to 20 years, his case was dismissed definitively by virtue of an amnesty granted by the Executive (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 1998).

Insecurity caused by violence perpetrated by the army and some rearmed groups<sup>32</sup> in a context of impunity ensured by the ineffectiveness of the authorities

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32. The Left Punitive Forces, Danto 91, and the Pedro Altamirano Column, to mention some examples.

was one of several factors motivating the demobilized members of the Resistance to rearm for self-protection. General Humberto Ortega (1992) says that “the army [had] received pressure from Sandinista forces in the territories to allow them to act on their own in the face of provocation, vandalism, criminal acts by these illegitimate forces [rearmed groups] who [were] acting outside the Constitution and the laws of the country” (p. 181).

### **The breach of agreements with the demobilized forces as a form of violence**

A factor that increased the complexity of the violence committed against members of the former Resistance was the failed peace process, torn apart by issues of a political nature. In the opinion of Martí i Puig (1998), the attempt to pacify the peasant country through disarmament, co-optation of the Resistance cadres, and land allocation without a prior overall strategy guiding the policies that were implemented, contributed to failure in most cases.

The Center for International Studies (1995) states that the government not only failed to fulfill the commitments made to the demobilized fighters, but also lacked a legal framework and strategy that would have informed a clear reintegration process (p. 23). The government underestimated the economic burden and the complexity entailed by the demobilization and reintegration process. The Agrarian Reform Institute stated that “handing over the amount that was initially promised to each [of the demobilized fighters] was unsustainable for the government” (Envio, 1990, cited in Rueda, 2015, p. 174).

According to Abu-Lughod (2000), each combatant had been offered fifty manzanas of land (about 87 acres or 35 hectares). This would have meant distributing at least 900,000 manzanas (nearly 2450 square miles), not counting all the land expropriated in the 1980s. Moreover, there was no willingness or sensitivity to understand the urgency of the demands and needs of the demobilized, as can be seen in the words of the INRA minister; “it was not so important to give land and credit to the demobilized fighters for planting. First of all, because there were other things to do, besides seeding, at the growth poles” (Rueda, 2015, p. 174).

Postwar agrarian policy encountered several obstacles that suffocated the hopes of many ex-combatants. Among these obstacles, several are of particular note:

a) the short-term, contradictory view held by some officials who believed that the proposal to grant land would ensure that former combatants could disarm and reintegrate, when it was known that the agricultural sector was already facing serious difficulties;

b) the government and its donor partners did not appreciate the complexity and high cost of managing competing and clashing demands for land (Abu-Lughod, 2000). Landowners who had returned from exile and those who had stayed in the country pressed for the return of their properties confiscated in the 1980s. On the other side, the beneficiaries of the Sandinista agrarian reform wanted their properties and the deeds to them to be protected and preserved. In some rural communities, they even rearmed as a strategy to pressure the government and “protect their assets.” In addition, there were demobilized fighters from both armies who hoped to obtain land or to recover their expropriated or occupied farms

To give an idea of the size of the humanitarian and land transfer commitments, the Government of Nicaragua had to answer the demands of 71,750 refugees returning from Honduras and Costa Rica, 22,413 fighters demobilized from the Resistance, 72,000 demobilized from the EPS and 5,100 from the MINT. In addition, there were 345,000 internally displaced persons in Nicaragua (Rueda, 2007).

Another sticking point of the political transition was inserting the demobilized into the labor market. Over four years, 1990–1994, the government demobilized 89,604 fighters from both armies, with no income, little training and, in addition, without any psychosocial care process. Moreover, this was taking place in an unfavorable economic context, since the Nicaraguan state had implemented structural adjustment and stabilization programs.<sup>33</sup>

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33. The initial programs were intended to rectify the imbalance in the balance of payments and the problem of inflation. The second round of programs was supposed to reactivate economic activity under the leadership of the private business community and through increased insertion of the national economy into the world market. (Sánchez et al., 2018, p. 17).

One of the adjustment measures was to reduce current spending in the public sector; specifically, reducing the workforce. This increased the Nicaraguan unemployment rate to historic levels (Evans, 1995). Despite this troubling scenario, a certain amount of progress was made. The National Center for Planning and Administration of Development Poles (CENPAD) reported that in 1990–1991, at least 5,208 heads of households received a total of 134,088 manzanas (233,395 acres; 94,451 hectares) of land (see Table 3).

The land handover process was slow, irregular and incomplete. Only one in three had been resettled, and the land area handed over fulfilled only 18% of the demand. The lack of farmland deeds was a problem at the national level, with negative repercussions for social stability and the integration of peasant families with those demobilized from the RN (Centro de Estudios Internacionales, 1995, p. 34).

TABLE 4.

AMOUNT OF LAND GRANTED TO DEMOBILIZED FIGHTERS 1990–1991		
MEASURES OF AGREEMENTS	HANDED OVER	PENDING
NO. OF FARMS	75	—
AREA (MANZANAS)	134,088	620,000
PERCENTAGE/AREA	18%	82%
NO. OF EX-COMBATANTS	5,208	10,000
NO. OF FAMILIES	15,350	30,000
AVG. MANZANA PER FAMILY	2.6	62

SOURCE: CENPAD 1990–1991

These data show that only about a third (34.2%) of the demobilized fighters received land, leaving 65.8% unfulfilled. It should also be kept in mind that 83% of those demobilized were peasants, mostly poor, and native to rural and agricultural areas of the country. In addition, 60% were young people under 25 years of age (National Center for Planning and Administration of Development Poles (CENPAD), 1990 cited in CEI, 1995, p. 33).

Many of the social and economic promises that had been made were not fulfilled, nor were the minimum conditions for reintegration satisfied. According to a study cited by CENIDH (1993, p. 24) on the impact of programs to assist demobilized people on both sides, administered through the Agroforestry Development and Rural Employment initiative (DAFER) and TECHNOSERVE, of 10,000 people demobilized from the Resistance, the army and the government, 92% were unemployed and the remaining 8% were underemployed; one out of every three had nowhere to live; 95% of the houses did not have electricity and only one in six demobilized families had a latrine. That is, the demobilized from both armies were in an extremely vulnerable socioeconomic state, with few resources to face the difficult insertion into regular society after so many years of bearing the burden of a fratricidal war, and with the additional problem of being abandoned by the political class.

In this account by a demobilized Contra from Quilalí, the harsh shock of his experience is evident:

“ We were coming out of a brutal war and we didn't even have a spare pair of underwear; nothing, no clothes, only an old pair of pants. We were homeless, knowing that our families were gone, our farms were burned or confiscated, our cattle had been taken away, and these were hard troubles.

Another thing was, after spending ten years carrying a rifle, to take up the machete again, and to earn a living again. The really hard things were to rebuild a house, to re-plant a coffee tree. And mistrust: after being in the military, integrating into civilian life is hard, because there they gave you everything you needed, but when you returned you had to earn everything yourself, plus you had a family to support (Personal communication, April 12, 2019).



Along similar lines, a compilation of testimonials from people demobilized from the armed conflict in Nicaragua, collected by the Center for International Studies (1995), warns that when the minimum conditions for survival are not guaranteed, there is frustration in the face of non-compliance with agreements and pressure builds to meet urgent needs. The result is often violence. From the governmental perspective, Antonio Lacayo (2006), who had been Minister of the Presidency in the Violeta Barrios administration, tells in his book *La difícil transición* (The Difficult Transition), that the cabinet had acknowledged a number of causes of rearmament, including “the accumulation of ex-combatants, extreme poverty, unemployment, criminal attitudes and the manipulation of political interests to seek revenge” (p. 330).

An illustrative example was when the mayor of the municipality of Murra, Miguel Ángel Cornejo, was kidnapped by a group of *Recompas* under the command of “Tarzán.”

The municipal authorities recognized that “the situation in the north was becoming more critical every day, because the peasantry not only suffers from encroachment by armed groups in the countryside,” but also from an acute economic crisis that “motivates the men to regroup and rearm” (*La Prensa*, February 21, 1993, p. 12). Even the army's head public relations spokesman, Lieutenant Colonel Ricardo Wheelock, stated that the desperation of poverty was affecting these rearmed groups seeking to survive: “for them, their weapons have turned into their machetes” (*La Prensa*, January 25, 1993).

Another factor that further complicated this scenario of social turmoil was the historical absence of the Nicaraguan state in the territories where growth poles were established and in areas where demobilized members of the Resistance were resettled.<sup>34</sup> This situation of scarcity and scant institutional regulation of the problems and demands of the disenfranchised caused a power vacuum and uncertainty that in many cases was mixed with a feeling of betrayal due to the

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34. Most of the ex-combatants were resettled in the areas designated as growth poles, but with the delayed response by the government, many of them moved back to their home regions, especially in regions I, V and VI of the country (Center for International Studies, 1995, p. 31).

distancing of the Contra political leadership and a government that in their opinion had abandoned them. The UNO had won the elections thanks to the armed struggle of the Resistance, and now it was not complying with the agreements and guarantees for their reinsertion.

The cumulative effect of these factors set off a spiral of armed violence. Within a few months of the signing of the agreements, 700 armed incidents had been recorded, with a thousand victims (Martí i Puig, 1997, p. 5). The violence erupted with such intensity that a peasant was murdered on average every second day. From mid-1992 and into 1993, the number of rearmed fighters reached 21,905, with an arsenal of 13,980 automatic rifles (Martí i Puig, 1997, p. 6). Among the first actions of these groups were to seize and occupy land, city halls, and highways. These actions were carried out by demobilized people from both sides. Saldomando estimates that 60% of all the demobilized members of the resistance rearmed, as well as 54.4% of former EPS members (undated, p. 21).

In the end, the reactivation of the war brought a number of phenomena to bear, such as survival, social decomposition, and the lack of prospects and hope for those who had been mobilized for years by a certain group of elites whose negotiation process did not represent any progress or improvement in their lives, but only the prolongation of a harrowing future of uprootedness, subordination and heightened inequality (Martí i Puig, 1997).

### **2.3.3. From Breached Agreements to “Violent Peacemaking”**

Although contending sides had halted their military operations in the context of the political transition and the peace and reintegration process, various manifestations of violence continued in the countryside. As Orozco notes, there were two stages of violence in the countryside: one predominantly multi-causal and diffuse, and the other more directed and political in nature. política.

“ The stage that occurred after the peace process is multi-causal. There was a little of everything: first, there there was a certain settling of accounts, a logical result of lingering enmities. The first deaths in 1990–1992 were due to these factors, but later these causes diminished, giving way to conflicts over land and social conflict. What was the social conflict? The reinsertion (...) actually, the state never really complied. Nicaragua and the state have unfinished business with the demobilized Contras who were of peasant origin (Personal communication, May 8, 2019).

In both situations, the state had a dual historical responsibility: as the guarantor of its constitutional obligations to protect the rights of its citizens without distinction, but also as the main perpetrator of violence. A guarantor, because the public institutions were passive and ineffective in containing, investigating and determining responsibility for these acts of violence.

A CENIDH investigation (1992) found that of a total of 215 deaths, no judicial investigation had been carried out for 160 of them (74.4%). In the few cases where the courts were prosecuting the alleged perpetrators, the vast majority of the files had been archived and the cases were not being processed (Nicaraguan Center for Human Rights, 1992, p. 21). The state's negligence in the face of these outbreaks of violence caused many demobilized persons from both sides to rearm themselves, and others to unearth the weapons they had stashed or stored<sup>35</sup> to protect themselves or to carry out some vigilante justice.

The armed conflict was dismantled without removing the multiple structural causes that generated it. Combined with the innate and deliberate inability of the state to resolve the initial episodes of violence, this added to non-compliance with the peace agreements and demands of the demobilized groups, which provoked what Rocha (2001) has called military activism. More and more rearmed groups took up a cycle of rearmament and disarmament to back up their demands of the government and to pressure it to fulfill the commitments made in the peace agreements (Rocha, 2001; Rueda, 2007, 2014; Fauné, 2014).

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35. It should be noted that the country was still militarized; many civilians kept weapons in their possession that the FSLN had distributed as a security measure at two points in time; a) during the 1980s to members of cooperatives in war zones; and b) at the end of the 1980s, when the Sandinista government provided weapons to its militants, anticipating that the Resistance would refuse to disarm and fearing a potential US invasion, given the invasion of Panama in December 1989 (Rocha, 2001).



The second phase of violence was on a different scale and more lethal. In this, the state was one of the main protagonists. The violence broke out as a result of the confluence of two situations; the actions of the rearmed groups in making their demands, and the repressive response of the government and its security forces.

The government made serious mistakes in the way it addressed the problem of rearmed fighters. Initially, the Violeta Barrios administration tried to minimize the presence of the rearmed fighters; to deny and ignore their unfulfilled or unsatisfied demands as a strategy of depoliticizing these contentious actions in order to criminalize them. It was easier for the government to deny the problem than to acknowledge its mistakes in breaching its commitments; for the army, it was an opportunity to justify its military operations and cover up abuses and serious violations in this postwar context. It was a political strategy that tried to depoliticize the problem by criminalizing the opposing side. As “criminals,” they had to be attacked and “eliminated” by the army.

An example of this can be seen in the words of General Joaquín Cuadra Lacayo: “We will put an end to this criminal behavior (...) The holiday is over for these antisocial elements.”<sup>36</sup> On a tour of Pantasma, the Minister of the Presidency, Antonio Lacayo, referred to the rearmed groups as “attackers, assailants, armed civilians,” but not as “Contras, Recontras or Recompas” (La Prensa, January 25, 1993, p. 3). Criminalization of the opponents was not exclusive to the army, but was also adopted by the police and public institutions in general.

The CENIDH (1994) expressed its concern about the military operations being conducted by the army and the police, referring to the danger “of this policy, since its generalized application can lead to actions of actual social cleansing” (p. 24). Specifically, they pointed out the negative repercussions that these operations were producing in terms of human rights violations against the peasantry, stigmatizing them as criminals or dangerous people. Yet the peasants were far from being criminals; “they have been victims of torture, arbitrary detentions and

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36. Statements in *El Nuevo Diario*, March 11, 1995.

other violations of physical integrity. Many of these military operations degenerated into political persecution against these peasants and their families” (Nicaraguan Center for Human Rights, 1994, p. 24).

**TABLE 5****VIOLENT DEATHS BY IDENTITY OF VICTIMS 1991–1994**<sup>37</sup>

	1991		1992		1993		1994		TOTAL	
	NO.	%	NO.	%	NO.	%	NO.	%		
RESISTANCE	31	43.1	30	40	71	25.4	28	53.8	160	33.4
POLICE	7	9.7	6	8	14	5	2	3.8	29	6
EPS	5	6.9	7	9.3	27	9.6	6	11.5	45	9.4
CIVILIANS	29	40.3	32	42.7	168	60	16	30.8	245	51.2
TOTAL	72	100	75	100	280	100	52	100	479	100

SOURCE: AUTHORS, BASED ON CENIDH DATA (1991–1994).

Table 5 shows that the greatest number of victims during the first four years were civilians (51%). Many of them were relatives of the demobilized fighters on both sides, given that the murders occurred in family and community contexts, according to CENIDH records. The next most common victims were demobilized members of the Resistance (33.4%), a third of all fatalities. According to the records consulted for this table, the most violent year was 1993, with a total of 280 deaths, of which 60% were civilians, followed by members of the former Resistance with 25.4%, one quarter of the victims. Although these data represent only a sample of institutional monitoring, they coincide with the year when the rearmed groups and the repressive response of the army carried out the most military activity.

37. The counts in the table have been compiled from data presented in CENIDH annual reports. These are undercounts, since they correspond only to complaints or cases verified in the field, and media monitoring. This means that there are unreported cases.

This began the cycle of political violence against the mobilized, organized peasantry making their demands in the post-conflict context. Fauné (2014) calls it “the violent peace process of the 1990s (...), in which the state intensifies institutional violence to annihilate the rearmed peasants who refuse to accept what the government does and decides” (p. 22).

In 1995, through its spokesman Captain Milton Sandoval, the Nicaraguan army acknowledged the problem of escalating violence between the military, the police, and armed groups in the northern part of the country. In this “silent war,” as Sandoval called it, there were an average of two armed confrontations per week. In this context, at the beginning of October, 1995, General Joaquín Cuadra had announced that an offensive was being prepared against these groups, with a contingent of at least 3,000 troops (La Prensa, Friday, October 6, 1995). Faced with these events, the representative of the OAS Support and Verification Commission (CIAV-OEA), Sergio Caramagna, warned without much success that the peace was not yet concluded, and that the armed rebels were making their demands, without denying that there were also criminal groups in the picture. Aware of this state of affairs, Caramagna urged that:

“The government presence must be directed towards bringing about a true reintegration of the former combatants of the National Resistance into civilian life, which has not yet occurred in its entirety, at least in the region [Jinotega, Matagalpa, Nueva Segovia]. Promotion of the defense of human rights is urgently needed. (...) Despite the great efforts made by the government and the international community, there is still extreme poverty; problems of land, health, education; and above all security problems, which are bred by violence (La Prensa, Friday, October 6, 1995).

The statements by the CIAV-OEA representative concluded with a warning that if the escalation of violence continued its course, at least 400,000 people of voting age would not be able to exercise this right in the 1996 presidential elections. In this region, which Caramagna had identified as the “boundary of the conflict,” the peasantry had been plunged into deep uncertainty and violation of many of their fundamental rights, from politics to life itself. This tragedy has been further aggravated by the overpowering and repressive response of the army, as can be seen in the years of the Daniel Ortega administration.



# III

## LA POLÍTICA DE LA INCERTIDUMBRE DEL RÉGIMEN ORTEGA-MURILLO

(2007-2018)



“

The peasant has been a permanent fighting force, in all the political systems that there have been. I believe that the peasantry, which is a historic, heroic, brave sector, will always follow the peasant resistance at the forefront of the cannon, it has been demonstrated in all the most outstanding stories that our country has had. They react and will defend their culture, their idiosyncrasies when they see that there is a repressive system that is violating all their rights.



*Comandante Bragg*

# III

## THE POLITICS OF UNCERTAINTY IN THE ORTEGA-MURILLO REGIME

(2007-2018)

With Ortega's return to power in 2007, political violence against the peasantry and any political adversary considered a threat to the regime was amplified and escalated. This dynamic intensified following the sociopolitical crisis triggered in April 2018. The significant change in violence, based on the analysis of the authoritarian profile of the regime, has been the result of a covert process of de-democratization, characterized by de-institutionalization, co-optation of those who were its opponents in the traditional political parties, and a considerable power to wreak destruction.

The route to authoritarianism emerged from three socio-political dynamics:

- a) the FSLN party leadership's commitment to redesigning and controlling the powers of the state in line with their interests, called by Schedler (2016) the horizontal power control strategy, effected through constitutional reforms and by means of political pacts and alliances negotiated with economic and political elites;
- b) a party socio-political territorial control structure, called the vertical power control strategy. This strategy required that advances in decentralized local management, municipal autonomy, and multiparty and plural participation that had been achieved in the 1990s be dismantled before the strategy could be implemented. When Ortega returned to power in 2007, one of his first acts was to repeal the regulatory framework and reform the institutions to reverse the process of

decentralization and municipal autonomy.<sup>38</sup> With this, he was able to implement a model of vertical territorial control emanating from the Ministry of Communication, whose guidelines would be channeled through the councils and offices of citizen power in coordination with various public institutions;

c) the institutionalization of violence, with impunity for its perpetrators and powerlessness for its direct and indirect victims.

This process of regression towards authoritarianism began to emerge in the 1990s, when the FSLN, defeated in the election, decided to “govern from below.” It worked to preserve a share of power in some state structures, but above all to recover control of the institutions, initially by making a bipartisan alliance with the liberal party, specifically with its leader, Arnaldo Alemán. Once he had gained access to power, Ortega intensified his struggle for hegemony and full control of the various powers of the state (horizontal strategy) and territorial control (vertical strategy), as will be described in the following sections. The process continued for some two decades.

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38. Presidential Decree No. 03-2007, a reform of Bill 290, the Executive Power Organization, Jurisdiction and Procedures Act. The process of dismantling municipal autonomy and rolling back progress in decentralization was begun by creating the Communication and Citizenship Council, an organization to coordinate media relations, direct the Social Cabinet and design citizen participation policies throughout the country through Citizen Power Councils. Another political consequence was that the multiparty and plural nature of citizen participation was restricted, by imposing a one-party route to participation.



### **3.1.**

## **TOWARDS CONTROL OF HORIZONTAL POWER**

Once it lost the 1990 elections, the FSLN tried to preserve its share of power and control over the institutions of the state, as well as to regain control of those it had lost. The goal in the short and medium term was to return to power and reestablish its hegemony. To accomplish this, Daniel Ortega, considered by his followers to be the senior leader of the party, established an alliance with Arnaldo Alemán (1997–2001), leader of the Constitutionalist Liberal Party, to control the Supreme Electoral Council (CSE) and other powers of the state.

First, they contaminated democratic governance of party interests by modifying the criteria and method of selecting and appointing CSE magistrates, substituting political party criteria for ethical and professional suitability requirements. This bipartisan political maneuver was one of the first steps in the institutional design that came into being through the reform of the 1995 Constitution. As a result, officials are controlled by CSE magistrates being selected according to their loyalty to the interests of the caudillos and their parties. These officials are subject to a remuneration policy that operates under an incentive or penalty scheme, depending on their performance and unconditional compliance with the directives of their “political mentors.”

Both the institutional design and control of officials neutralized what Green, Slater & Schedler (2015) call the democratic core of elections; their competitive nature. By this means, the two caudillos gradually installed a bipartisan electoral regime that would later become a single-party regime, as Ortega regained his hegemony and subordinated his ally, the PLC. Table 6 outlines the transition from the competitive election cycle to a regime of hegemonic authoritarian elections.



# THE PROCESS OF ELECTORAL SYSTEM REGRESSION IN NICARAGUA (1990-2017)

TABLE 6

## COMPETITIVE ELECTION CYCLE (1995–2001)

### CONTROL STRATEGY MOVING TOWARDS HEGEMONY

#### 1995 REFORM OF POWERS

Partisanization of the criteria for nomination and selection of CSE magistrates proposed by the political parties, Article 16 and Bill 211 (Icaza, 2016).

### ELECTIONS

#### 1996 ELECTIONS

Elections for president, representatives and regional councils, with national and international observation.

The results show a political polarization between the FSLN and the PLC.

Funding for political campaigns was given equally to all parties in advance.

#### 2000 FSLN–PLC GOVERNANCE PACT

Partisanization of the judicial, electoral and other government control institutions formalized through Bill 330 and Bill 331.

The CSE began to violate what Schedler (2004) calls the principle of freedom of parties to participate. Candidates and parties were arbitrarily excluded from the electoral arena.

#### 2000 ELECTIONS

Election of municipal councils. Exclusion of Pedro Solórzano from candidacy for mayor of Managua, due to changes in the municipality of Managua's borders.

Election campaign funding delivered after the fact, which reinforces bipartisanship by favoring the largest parties (Peraza, 2016).

#### ELECTORAL LAW REFORM (2000)

Access to elections restricted for political parties that represent competition to the PLC and the FSLN.

Threshold of the 5% difference required for a candidate to win the presidency reduced from 45% to 35%.

#### 2001 ELECTIONS

Presidential and legislative elections with national and international observation by the OAS and the Carter Center. Only the FSLN, PLC and PC participated.

Representatives elected under the national and departmental constituency system.

SOURCE: AUTHOR, BASED ON MARTÍ PUIG (2016), MCCONNELL (2009), SCHEDLER (2004), PERAZA (2016), ICAZA (2016), CERDA (2018), CITED IN SÁNCHEZ & OSORIO (2020, PP. 81-83).

# THE PROCESS OF ELECTORAL SYSTEM REGRESSION IN NICARAGUA (1990-2017)

TABLE 6

CYCLE OF CONTESTED AUTHORITARIAN ELECTIONS (2006–2008)	
<div>CONTROL STRATEGY MOVING TOWARDS HEGEMONY</div> <div><div>RUPTURE OF LIBERALISM</div><p>The FSLN worked to fragment and weaken its adversaries and control its allies. It took advantage of liberalism's weakening and rupture to partisanize the judicial and electoral powers for its own benefit.</p><p>The competitive nature of the electoral system was being increasingly neutralized.</p></div>	<div>ELECTIONS</div> <div><div>2006 ELECTIONS</div><p>Presidential and legislative elections.</p><p>The electoral competition between Sandinistas and anti-Sandinistas had split into four camps; those who were for and against the pact.</p><p>The FSLN won the presidency and a majority in the National Assembly.</p></div>
<div>FROM PACT TO HEGEMONY (2006–2008)</div> <p>More structured fraudulent practices developed in coordination with the judiciary and state institutions, taking advantage of their resources.</p> <p>The freedom of political demand and the formation of preferences were violated.</p> <p>The CSE left the PC and MRS without legal status.</p>	<div>2008 MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS</div> <p>National and international observation committees were denied accreditation. Exit polls were prohibited (McConnell, 2009).</p> <p>There were irregularities in the vote counting process in the Managua and León mayoral elections; tally sheets falsified, ballot boxes burned. According to the count of 239 vote tally sheets recovered by the MRS, the PLI Alliance candidate, Eduardo Montealegre, won Managua.</p>

SOURCE: AUTHOR, BASED ON MARTÍ PUIG (2016), MCCONNELL (2009), SCHEDLER (2004), PERAZA (2016), ICAZA (2016), CERDA (2018), CITED IN SÁNCHEZ & OSORIO (2020, PP. 81-83).

# THE PROCESS OF ELECTORAL SYSTEM REGRESSION IN NICARAGUA (1990-2017)

## HEGEMONIC AUTHORITARIAN ELECTION CYCLE (2011–2017)

### CONTROL STRATEGY MOVING TOWARDS HEGEMONY

#### ELECTORAL REFORM 2011–2012

The Supreme Court of Justice ruled on an amparo appeal for constitutional protection that would allow Ortega to be permanently re-eligible as a candidate, by appealing to the principle of unconditional equality of all citizens. The ruling reaffirmed the state's obligation to eliminate any obstacles that would impede this equality and citizens' effective participation in the public, economic and social life of the country (Art. 48 Cn.)

The CSE laid claim to the power to revise and clean up the electoral roll on an ongoing basis, even if that would bias it. Patronage control of voter ID institutionalized to parastatal and partisan organizations; Citizen Power Committee, and the Sandinista Family and Youth Cabinet in rural areas.

By these means, what Schedler (2004) calls the principle of voter inclusion was violated.

### ELECTIONS

#### 2011 ELECTIONS

Presidential, legislative and Central American Parliament elections, without a clear and public electoral roll.

More than two hundred thousand citizens were denied the right to voter ID. In addition, opposition parties were not allowed to have representatives at the polling stations. Election officials were mainly from the government party.

Reports by international observers from the EU and OAS indicated that the elections were riddled with irregularities.

Ortega won again and the FSLN captured 134 of the 154 mayoral races and 63 of 92 legislative seats.

#### Removal of legislators 2013–2016

In June 2013, the CSE removed FSLN legislator Xóchitl Ocampo from her post for holding back her approval of the Interoceanic Canal Act and related projects.

In July 2016, the Board of Directors of the General Assembly dismissed 28 opposition legislators for not supporting the replacement of Eduardo Montealegre as president of the PLI.

# THE PROCESS OF ELECTORAL SYSTEM REGRESSION IN NICARAGUA (1990-2017)

TABLE 6

CICLO DE ELECCIONES AUTORITARIAS HEGEMÓNICAS (2011-2017)	
CONTROL STRATEGY MOVING TOWARDS HEGEMONY	ELECTIONS
<p><b>CONSTITUTIONAL COUNTER-REFORM, 2013</b></p> <p>Through Bill 854, constitutional violations of Article 147 were legalized, and Article 201 was reformulated. The latter repealed the prohibition on re-election and on officials remaining in their positions after their terms expired.</p>	
<p><b>INCREASED DEINSTITUTIONALIZATION</b></p> <p>The FSLN consolidated total control of government institutions, and eroded political opposition.</p> <p>The CSE and the Judiciary endorsed the candidacy of Ortego and Murilla, husband and wife, for president and vice-president in clear violation of Article 147 of the constitution. This was first time in the history of Nicaragua that political power was so concentrated in one family.</p>	<p><b>2016 ELECTIONS</b></p> <p>The CSE administered three electoral rolls; passive, active and cleaned, generating confusion and difficulties for the voters themselves and for measuring the true level of abstention.</p> <p>Despite the unresolved issues and low turnout at the polls, the CSE awarded a third election victory to Daniel Ortega.</p> <p>This was one of the elections most tainted with violence due to repression of citizen protests.</p>
<p><b>“THE PRINCIPLE OF EQUALITY RULING”</b></p> <p>The Supreme Court of Justice and the CSE quickly resolved the 105 amparo appeals that the mayors and President Ortega had filed to legalize his re-election (Cerde, 2018).</p>	<p><b>2017 MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS</b></p> <p>These were among the elections with the most re-elected mayors; 118 from the ruling party, the FSLN.</p>

SOURCE: AUTHOR, BASED ON MARTÍ I PUIG (2016), MCCONNELL (2009), SCHEDLER (2004), PERAZA (2016), ICAZA (2016), CERDA (2018), CITED IN SÁNCHEZ & OSORIO (2020, PP. 81-83).

As seen in Table 6, and in accordance with Martí i Puig (2016), starting with the 2011 elections, the Nicaraguan electoral cycle went from a contested authoritarian election system to a hegemonic authoritarian system that allowed no uncertainty in the outcome. The equation that has been used by the Sandinista regime has been a combination of an opaque electoral system, with its irregularities calculated with a substantive certainty that guarantees the expected outcome.

## **Re-election and resurgence of political violence**

One of the institutions over which the FSLN has retained control for several decades has been the Judiciary. A clear example was the judicial shortcut by which Ortega managed to reverse the restriction in Article 147 of the constitution that had prevented him from running for re-election as president in 2011. The Constitutional Chamber issued two rulings – on October 19, 2009 and September 30, 2010 – that allowed an appeal for amparo filed by Ortega, along with 109 mayors, before the Supreme Court of Justice. Rocha (2019), warns that:

“... The way the magistrates proceeded violated the regulations established in the Organic Law of the Judicial Power, Bill No. 260. The procedure was contrary to the norms of constitutional interpretation accepted in the international community, since it was a covert reform that violated amendment precepts provided in the constitution itself, and which are prerogatives of the Legislative Power. In any case, the magistrates were obliged to submit a report of their assessment of incompatibility to the National Legislative Assembly for it to determine whether or not there would be a reform of the constitution.

In practical terms, the highest level of the judiciary, which in theory should have the jurisdiction in constitutional matters, reformed the constitution following the Executive's guidelines. This precedent echoes the words of Schedler (2016) that “the limits to authoritarian innovation and imagination are not logical, but empirical” (p.132).

Thanks to the establishment of the electoral system, the FSLN guaranteed an increase in its legislative seats from 38 representatives to 70 in the 2016 elections. This gave it significant control of the Legislative Branch, since it enabled the FSLN to have a majority of votes that would be necessary for the approval of any bill or reform initiative, regardless of whether these violated the rights of citizens or of historically excluded or marginalized sectors. To name two examples, the legislature approved Bill 840 and Bill 996. Bill 840, known as the Interoceanic Canal and Related Projects Law, stimulated the anti-canal peasant movement to mobilize and resist for a period lasting more than four years. They were violently repressed, despite the peaceful nature of their demonstrations and the appeal of unconstitutionality filed by the movement and social organizations before the Supreme Court of Justice.

Bill 996, the Amnesty Law, represents an offense to victims of violent repression by the state during the April 2018 crisis.<sup>39</sup> Both laws have been disputed because they are incompatible with the constitution and violate the individual and collective rights of Nicaraguans in multiple ways.<sup>40</sup>

In addition to passing these types of laws, the National Assembly has become a repressive mechanism of the regime, unjustifiably suppressing the legal status of nine non-profit and private organizations that have worked in the area of community development, human rights and democracy during 2018 and 2019: the Communication Research Center (CINCO), Institute for Development and Democracy (IPADE), Popol Na, Del Río Foundation, the Leadership Institute in Las Segovias (ILS), the Nicaraguan Center for Human Rights (CENIDH), the

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39. The national civic uprising in April 2018, which included massive demonstrations in the countryside and the cities, united peasants, students and urban citizens for the first time. It was the straw that broke the camel's back following constant violations of the constitution and freedom of citizens, and violent reactions to any expression of discontent with control by the party, the FSLN, which had become the only party since Daniel Ortega's first reelection in 2008. Another trigger for the accumulated discontent, prior to this uprising and making use of the FSLN's control of the parliament.

40. This concessionary law, Bill 840, has been questioned by Nicaraguan Academy of Sciences (ACN, 2015) from various disciplines, by human rights organizations, and CENIDH (2013). An appeal has even been filed before the Supreme Court of Justice based on the law's unconstitutionality, supported by an exhaustive analysis of 25 articles that show it clearly conflicts with the constitution, since it threatens the sovereignty of the country and multiple individual and collective rights, especially of first peoples, and peasant and indigenous communities (López, 2013). Bill 996 has similarly been rejected by the victim organization Asociación Madres de Abril; by human rights organizations such as the Nicaraguan Center for Human Rights, the Nicaraguan Association for Human Rights and the Permanent Commission on Human Rights; and by international human rights organizations such as Amnesty International, the Foundation for Due Process, the Inter-American Commission, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, among others.



Institute for Strategic Studies and Public Policy (IEEPP), Hagamos Democracia and the Center for Information and Health Advisory Services (CISAS). Most of these organizations carried out citizen auditing, denouncing abuses of power and human rights violations committed by the regime.

### **3.2.**

## **TOWARDS VERTICAL CONTROL OF POWER**

Another area of power captured by the authoritarian electoral system has been the local municipal sphere. Out of a total of 153 mayoral races, the FSLN took control of 88%, mostly the department capitals. From the beginning of its administration, the Ortega government had been dismantling the mechanisms and scope for plural and multiparty participation, implementing a one-party model of participation through the Councils of Citizen Power (CPC) and Cabinets of Citizen Power (GPC).<sup>41</sup> This parapartisan trend provided it vast potential for intervention and control at the territorial level. In the context of the socio-political crisis, it became one of the links in the repressive machinery against citizens and the peacefully mobilized peasantry.

Through the FSLN mayors, department headquarters and local secretariats, the regime coordinated the delivery of weapons to paramilitaries and the operational logistics of the so-called clean-up operation that ended the April uprising. It was of the most violent repressive deployments that has been perpetrated in the recent history of the country.

In its National Strategy Policy,<sup>42</sup> the Ortega–Murillo government has institutionalized the integration of these armed groups “into the Citizen Security Cabinets as community leaders and defense instructors for institutions, strategic points and critical elements for the security of each community” (Government of Reconciliation and National Unity, 2019, p. 12). It is a multilevel structure that involves a large number of the public institutions and the party organizational infrastructure that the regime has been incorporating into its scheme for control of power (Sánchez & Osorio, 2020)

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41. On November 29, 2007, Decree 112-2007 was approved. This measure created the councils and cabinets of citizen power.

42. This national policy is entitled “Defense comes first... For peace, for the common good, for production.”

### **3.3.**

## **THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF VIOLENCE**

The institutionalization of paramilitarism, along with the implementation of control and political persecution mechanisms by the state at the territorial level runs a serious risk of exacerbating political violence, triggering social violence and generating a process of illicit income accumulation. Recent Central American history shows that paramilitary groups sponsored and protected by governments have had dire and painful consequences on their communities directly and indirectly during and after the period of repression. In the words of Bobea (2016), there is a danger that the perpetrators of violence and their criminogenic dynamics – in a context of repression – will continue to operate beyond organic changes.

The process of institutionalizing violence has been based on an ideological strategy, typical of populist authoritarian regimes. To be more precise, its polarizing nature proposes that the leader or caudillo represents the people and their interests, so any adversary of this leader is against the people (Azpuru, 2018).

The narrative is reduced to two extremes: on one side, there is us, the good citizens, worthy of political consideration; and on the other side the others, the non-people, whose needs and demands can be ignored or criticized. With this polarization, Schedler (2016) says, an authoritarian regime usually sends two unmistakable contrasting messages: for some there are declarations and decisions to persecute and punish dissidents, restricting the limits of tolerable behavior and actions. For the others, their acts are ignored, there is silence and complicity, no prosecution or punishment by supporters of the regime of those who commit organized violence, making explicit which expressions of violence are allowed, sponsored and institutionalized, as has been the case under the Ortega–Murillo regime.

The Ortega–Murillo regime, with its vertical and centralized structure, is characterized by hegemonic control of state institutions and participation by regions. In the following, the cycles of violence suffered by the demobilized peasantry of the Resistance are analyzed.

### **3.3.1. The Peasantry and its Dangerous Potential**

To authoritarian regimes and their repressive apparatus, the most important enemy they have to “defend” themselves from is the enemy inside. They criminalize this enemy as a terrorist, a lawbreaker, and even an enemy of the country and of democracy, in such a way as to make him a target of their repression (Beristain and Esquivel, 1993).

To the elites, the veterans of the war deserve special attention, given their potential for organizing demonstrations and protests (Abu-Lughod, 2000). In post-conflict Nicaragua, the demobilized peasants of the Resistance and their social base would be able to organize and mount a sustained resistance, as was evident in the 1980s. In an interview with the Expediente Público team, Comandante Bragg affirmed this when he stated,

“Peasants have been a permanent fighting force in all the political systems that have existed.” I believe that the peasants, who are a historic, heroic, brave people, will always follow the peasant resistance and face the guns, as in our country’s most famous stories. They will react and defend their unique culture if they see that there is a repressive system that is violating all their rights.

According to Roberto Orozco, “there is a violent administration whose aim is to dismantle the peasants’ ability to organize” (Personal communication, May 8, 2019). This is especially so when these peasants have denounced the abuses committed by the regime and warned of the serious consequences entailed by the process of regression and deterioration of democracy. José Garmendia, alias Yahob,<sup>43</sup> warned of the problems that would be entailed by Daniel Ortega’s re-election:

“There are many people who are watching and waiting, because if Daniel Ortega is reelected it will be a problem tomorrow (...) The people of Nicaragua must make sure not to lose hope, but I can only tell them that we must close ranks because the worst is yet to come; namely, the reelection of Daniel Ortega. (El Nuevo Diario, January 25, 2011).

Another former Resistance peasant leader, Pedro Díaz López, had taken up arms against the Daniel Ortega regime, and had recorded a message eight days before his assassination: “The time has come for us to oppose this Government. We already have a dictator in our country now. We would be ready to lay down our lives, but let us remember that when our country is in danger, the patriots rise up to defend it” (Confidential, August 21, 2015).

In the same journal, Byron Chamorro, coordinator of the Broad Front for Democracy (FAD), stated that “these people (the rearmed ones) are in fact already politically motivated and here there are problems with the elections, problems of institutionality, problems of all kinds and they (the government) want to hide these armed groups because otherwise they would have to accept that there is much dissent here in Nicaragua” (Confidential, November 21, 2017).

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43. José Garmendia, alias Yahob, was a special forces member of the Resistance. In mid-2010, he had declared himself in rebellion against the government, given the imminent re-election of Daniel Ortega as president in the 2011 elections. Yahob had challenged the heads of the army and the police to call on President Ortega to refrain from violating Article 147 of the Nicaraguan constitution. On February 14, he was assassinated at a farm in Santa Teresa de Kilambé, El Cua, Jinotega. Although the army denied responsibility, it had been criminalizing him since 2007, linking him “to drug trafficking cells based in Honduras assigned to open marijuana trafficking routes from northern Nicaragua” (Government of Reconciliation and National Unity, 2018, p. 49).

### **3.3.2. Political Demands and a Criminal Response**

This outbreak of peasant mobilization was concurrent with the deteriorating electoral cycle that in previous sections we termed a hegemonic authoritarian regime (Martí i Puig, 2016). The response by the regime demonstrated one of the most violent facets of its authoritarian nature, as it met conflicts and critical situations with lethal force.

Between 2011 and 2018, seventy-nine peasants were tortured and murdered in the northern part of Nicaragua's Caribbean region and the center of the country. According to the government, these casualties were the result of "armed confrontations" between voluntary police and army personnel clashing with armed peasants. Expediente Público has data indicating that between 1990 and December 2020, almost 443 former Contras were killed in combined operations mounted by the army and the police.

According to reports from the Nicaraguan Center for Human Rights (CENIDH), many of these victims were members of political parties, former Resistance members, or leaders who had demonstrated against the Daniel Ortega's reelection. Others had demanded their political rights – voter registration – and free and transparent elections. The peasant leadership has, for the most part, organizational and political experience, and the potential ability to mobilize in their communities. Many of them maintain links and networks through which they promote community, political, church, and environmental development work, among others. Starting in 2009 and 2010, some peasants who were Resistance members declared themselves in rebellion against the Daniel Ortega regime, faced with his imminent reelection in 2011. Others mobilized peacefully, demanding constitutional guarantees for free and transparent elections. In Ciudad Antigua, Mozonte, San Fernando, and Nueva Guinea protests were held against the denial of the right to identity cards, an essential requirement for

voting. A demobilized Resistance fighter, now a peasant from the municipality of Murra, tells about the abuses and reprisals he suffered for demanding his rights:

“ I have been in the struggle [during the 1980s] since I was a little chatelito<sup>44</sup> and up to the present day, I have continued to fight for Nicaragua to exist again. Because unfortunately the politicians have done whatever they wanted. We, the Resistance, have always been persecuted. I was tortured merely for protesting and demanding that young people be given their identity cards. I was grabbed by two riot police and thrown on the ground, five of them grabbed me and cuffed me, and they were saying, “Tell us who’s paying you.” “Tell us who’s financing you.” I said that I was a member of the Resistance, and we were Contra (“against”), against the injustices of the government, and that I was going to be until my dying day.

In the municipality of Murra, rights are violated all the time. I was locked up and I couldn’t do anything because we cannot assert our rights, we have no guarantees in this country, our rights are not respected because the government is in everything. We feel totally invalidated, we have nowhere to complain. And it’s not a question of being afraid, because they already came to my house twice looking for me, and they threatened my kids, two hooded men with guns. We have been living under persecution one way or another (Personal communication, April 12, 2019).

Despite state repression and vulnerability, the means of protest employed by the peasantry have mainly been peaceful. However, there are other peasants who opted for other more confrontational actions, such as taking up arms in the mountains, and exhorting the leadership of the army and the police to denounce President Ortega for violating the country's constitution and exacerbating the deinstitutionalization of the state.

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44. The term “chatelito” refers to a child or minor.

Against these measures, the regime has responded with a strategy of persecuting and eliminating the leadership of rearmed groups and peasants who had exercised their right to peaceful protest, to the point that these murders or executions have been documented and denounced by human rights organizations as serious violations of rights. These are situations that cannot be considered as isolated events, but rather part of a lethal plan coordinated by the army and the police. In Cajina's opinion:

“...The reality is that one can readily identify what I would call a perverse tactic on the part of the army, specifically, within the Defense Information Directorate, which is what identifies the leaders. After getting intelligence on where they operate, they proceed to eliminate them, under the premise that eliminating the leader ends it (Confidencial, November 21, 2017).

Speaking of this environment of terror caused by the actions of armed forces in the countryside, Bishop Abelardo Mata urged the government to seek other mechanisms to manage these situations:

“We request that the government listen to the voices of these people, their reasons for having armed themselves, and to the peasant movement. Problems are not solved with riot police, but by seeking dialogue (...) if we address issues as crucial as these, it is not that we are endorsing violence or putting ourselves against the government; it is quite the opposite, as pastors we do our part to help the government to do better” (November 15, 2017).

As part of the political violence, the regime has given the rearmed groups the label of criminals, cattle rustlers or drug traffickers. Along these lines, the former head of the police, Aminta Granera, commenting on the murder of “Pablo Negro”,<sup>45</sup> stated that “the police are looking for criminals and if someone feels like a criminal and feels persecuted, he must have his reasons. We do not carry out political persecution in any way.”<sup>46</sup> Cajina argues that “the act of denying that the rearmed fighters have political motivations and turning them into criminals turns a political phenomenon into a phenomenon of common crime,” so that Ortega is not obliged to engage in dialogue.

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45. Pablo Negro was Santos Guadalupe Joyas Borge. He was a refugee in Honduras and was assassinated on January 13, 2012, near the border. He had been lured there with the promise that he would be given seventy thousand dollars and a truck. According to Roberto Petray, his body was found with a bullet in the forehead and signs of torture.

46. Statements published by *El Nuevo Diario*, August 23, 2014.



Along similar lines, Elvira Cuadra stated:

“... The government has always responded with a prejudiced and stigmatized vision that disparages the peasants, and the clearest example is the denunciation of the human rights of the countryside, since it only speaks of acts of repression, militarization of villages, harassment and intimidation. The response has always been repressive, from the 1990s to the present day and they have never wanted to open spaces for dialogue or understanding (Personal communication, March 11, 2019).

The goals of repression and criminalization have not only been aimed towards suppressing mobilization, but also to disrupting collective action (Sánchez & Osorio, 2020). Despite the resurgence of repression and attempts to break up the movement, the peasants from various areas of the country have continued to resist in whatever way they could, as explained by a former member of the Quilalí Resistance:

“Here we have to go out at dawn, hidden and we have to make a lot of sacrifices. I see the difficulty that we Contras have, those who put our hands to the task, those who shed blood, I was injured by a landmine, I still suffer the effects and now in this war I have to go back to running away, going around not even being able to trust my own shadow. I would like to tell you something about our organization, we have been struggling for a long time, with thousands of setbacks. Surrendering is not in our repertoire, that is what the commandos' creed says, that is why we never give up even if we are afraid. Here we are, even if I have to leave tomorrow so that no one will see me. We are well organized, we keep on and for us it is an achievement that our message gets through because it is hard, the torture in El Chipote is very hard and nobody would like to be there (Personal communication, April 13, 2019).

### 3.3.3. Silence That Cries Death in the Mountains

The dismantling of the war did not necessarily mean that the conflicts of the recent past disappeared. According to Beristain (2006), these conflicts have taken a new shape in the presence of persistent problems such as land, marginalization and political violence. With Ortega's return to power, political violence has intensified against the peasantry and against anyone who might be considered an enemy. As his regime accumulated power, increased the co-optation of state structures and intensified its extractive economic model, repression of its opponents became increasingly violent and lethal.

It is not surprising that inherent in Ortega's de-democratization process has been re-politicization of the police with a partisan bias. Trust in the army has fallen to 22%, just half the average level of 44% in Latin American countries (Latinobarómetro, 2018).



In the case of violence against peasants in the north and central areas of the country, operations were planned in advance. Some were covert and carried out jointly between the army and the police, and also had the cooperation of the social network that has served as a source of information and social control.

Journalist Elizabeth Romero notes in her report “Bajo control de orejas” how the social control triggered by “the supporters of the government party” has increased anxiety and mistrust among residents of rural villages. El Portal, in Jinotega:

“Look, we are insecure, because you know, how do we know if the enemy is behind us? And they can get us at any time, and we don’t know how we will die. You’re better off staying quiet, because you don’t know when your number is up (María Lourdes Sevilla, La Prensa, February 10, 2015).

These supporters of the ruling party are “the ones in some rural regions of the country who not only watch out for people who disagree with their ideology, to find out who and what they are talking about, but also in order to (mis)inform the police and the army” (La Prensa, February 10, 2015). In this issue of La Prensa, Mr. Elías Díaz, the father of Yairon Díaz, a young man murdered in October 2013 in Anizales Tres by members of the army, tells how the Citizen Power Councils (CPC) exercise surveillance and control:

“They go around to the houses, in the mountains, and then the army comes, because they call them. You have to know who you are talking to, because if you are going to talk to one of those people, then they have it... (misinformation), they go to Pantasma or just from here. No cell phones! (Romero, February 10, 2015, La Prensa).

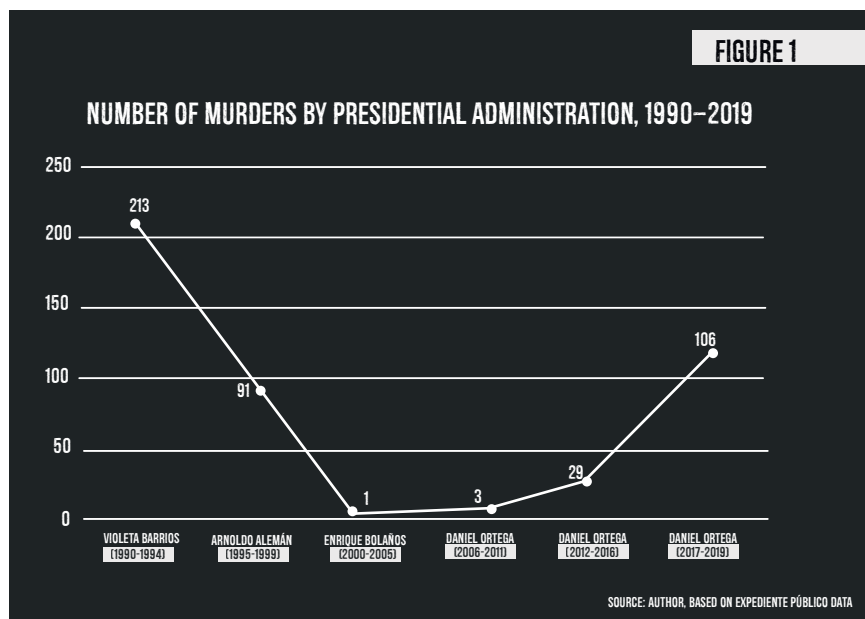
In another media report, investigated by Arlen Cerda of *Confidencial* (2017), Juan Carlos Arce, director of the Matagalpa CENIDH office, said that the residents of some rural communities in the center and north of the country feel that they are constantly monitored. Haydeé Castillo, human rights defender and director of what was then the Segovias Leadership Institute (ILS), explained that monitoring and espionage was carried out “not only by state security, but also by members of the communities themselves” (Confidential, November 21, 2017).

Some of their procedures are in conflict with the law, with international standards on human rights, given the cases of torture, inhumane treatment, executions and criminalization that have occurred before and after the violence. These operations are not isolated or spontaneous cases, but organized as part of an operational plan. In an interview, Dr. Enrique Zelaya Cruz commented to journalist Eduardo Cruz of *La Prensa* that:

“ It is the army, not all the soldiers, that is involved in the selective elimination (of armed peasants). There is an army and police brigade that decides on the targets. This is an extremely secret thing, even those stationed in the region do not know, they go out on missions for specific targets and set traps for them. These are planned deaths. It is a selective elimination that we are facing. If they catch them alive, they torture them to get the names of their armed companions, their phone numbers and their network of friends (La Prensa, December 4, 2016).

In this report, Mauro Ampié, the director of CENIDH, urged the army and the police to treat the armed people in a way that was proportional to their actions, respecting their rights as citizens, regardless of whether they are considered criminals. He also demanded that they “investigate whether these incidents are confrontations or if they were only cases of the authorities using violence or weapons, to establish whether these were arbitrary extra-legal executions of citizens” (La Prensa, December 4, 2016).

A review carried out by the Expediente Público team of newspaper<sup>47</sup> and documentary sources on the murders of peasant ex-Resistance members counted 443 victims during the period 1990–2020. **Figure 1** shows that despite the political transition and demobilization process, violence and the number of murders of peasants remained high during the administrations of Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, with 213 victims, and of Arnoldo Alemán, with 91. The records of murders dropped notably during the years of Bolaños's administration, but once again rose during the last two terms of Daniel Ortega's administration (see **Table 7**).



47. Printed media and digital editions consulted were La Prensa, its supplement Magazine; and the journals Envío; El Nuevo Diario and Barricada. Barricada is the only one that was published in print. From digital media and television: Radio Ya, Tn8, 100% Noticias, Confidencial and Artículo 66. Among the document sources, reports published and prepared by two human rights organizations were reviewed; Nicaraguan Center for Human Rights (CENIDH) and the Nicaraguan Association for the Defense of Human Rights (ANPDH).

During the fourteen years since Ortega returned to the presidency, there have been 138 of these peasant murders, of which 77% (106) were perpetrated in the last three years. This period is also when levels of socio-political conflict associated with elections (municipal and presidential) have been highest, due to demands for political rights in regions that have historically been social bases of the Resistance or that have been predominantly liberal or aligned with other non-Sandinista factions. In addition to these tensions, other conflicts related to regional defense and socio-environmental rights have emerged in opposition to mining projects, mega-projects, and colonization of indigenous reserves or territories.

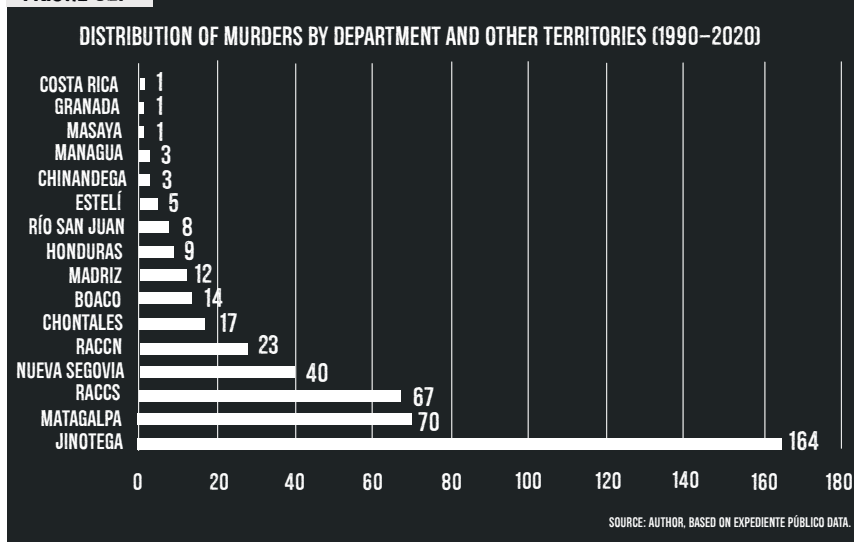
Unfortunately, the Ortega regime's way of managing this conflict and increased mobilization has focused on criminalizing, persecuting and exterminating peasants and their political leadership. The repression intensified even more after the April 2018 crisis.

**TABLE 7.****NUMBER OF MURDERS PER YEAR DURING NEOLIBERAL GOVERNMENTS (1990-2020)**

<b>GOVERNMENT</b>	<b>NUMBER OF MURDERS</b>	<b>PERCENT</b>
<b>VIOLETA BARRIOS (1990-1994)</b>	<b>213</b>	<b>48.1</b>
<b>ARNOLDO ALEMÁN (1995-1999)</b>	<b>91</b>	<b>20.5</b>
<b>ENRIQUE BOLAÑOS (2000-2005)</b>	<b>01</b>	<b>0.2</b>
<b>DANIEL ORTEGA (2006-2011)</b>	<b>03</b>	<b>0.7</b>
<b>DANIEL ORTEGA (2012-2016)</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>6.5</b>
<b>DANIEL ORTEGA (2017-2020)</b>	<b>106</b>	<b>23.9</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>443</b>	<b>100</b>

SOURCE: AUTHOR, BASED ON EXPEDIENTE PÚBLICO DATA.

This lethal violence against the peasantry has been concentrated in specific regions, particularly in areas which have historically housed social bases of the Resistance and where the electorate has predominantly been aligned with other non-Sandinista political forces.

**FIGURE 02.**


As seen in Figure 2, the department most affected by political violence was Jinotega with 164 cases, followed by Matagalpa with 70, the South Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region 67, and Nueva Segovia 40. These first four departments account for 77% of the total cases and Jinotega and Matagalpa alone have 53% of the total; a little more than half of the murders registered.

These data represent a sample of the true deaths, since they are only those that were reported in print and digital media. There are undoubtedly more cases that were not reported for a variety of reasons: a) victims' families having little confidence in public institutions; b) fear of reprisals or feeling legally vulnerable, given the climate of impunity, among other factors.

As its ability to manage demands and conflicts becomes more restricted, the Ortega regime is deploying a policy of criminalization, repression and extreme violence against its opponents. These are mainly peasants, indigenous communities, and former Resistance leaders who had declared themselves in rebellion due to such structural threats as election irregularities, presidential re-election, and the grand canal project. Table 7 presents details of some cases that exemplify the methods used by the army and police which involve serious human rights violations with the complicity of other state institutions, cooperating in a regime of impunity that violates the dignity and rights of victims, families and communities.



(JULY 11, 1995)

 ZACARÍAS NAVARRETE  
AND REYNALDO NAVARRETE

 KILAMBÉ,  
JINOTEGA

At eleven o'clock at night, five men in military clothing and carrying military weapons went to the home of Mr. Zacarías Navarrete, located in the village of Santa Teresa de Kilambé, San José de Bocay, Jinotega department. Identifying themselves as members of the National Police, they took Mr. Navarrete and his son Reynaldo out of the house. Both were tied up, tortured, and executed in the presence of their relatives. The case has remained in total impunity (ANPDH, 1996, p. 9).

(NOVEMBER 30, 1998)

 HÉCTOR WILSON  
CHAVARRÍA

 LA TRINIDAD,  
ESTELÍ

Demobilized from the Revolutionary Workers and Peasants Front group (FROC). His body was found on October 30, 1998 in La Trinidad, Estelí municipality.


According to the police, his murder was apparently planned by an enemy known by the name of "El Negro Watson." According to information from the CENIDH affiliate in Estelí, they received the accusation from family members who believe that Chavarría's death is related to the actions by National Police and army troops. The case was not investigated by the police nor referred to the courts because there was no evidence (Nicaraguan Center for Human Rights, 1998, p. 55).

SOURCE: AUTHORS, BASED ON ANPDH AND CENIDH DATA.

(NOVEMBER 6, 2016)



JOSÉ NAHÚM MENDOZA,  
MARGARITO MENDOZA  
AND ARMANDO LÓPEZ

 CERRO MOJÓN,  
CIUDAD ANTIGUA

On election day November 6, 2016, peasants José Nahúm Mendoza Arriola, 47; Margarito Mendoza Sevilla, 35; and Santos Armando Pérez López, 19 years old, were tortured and executed by members of the army at El Coyol hill, Las Magdalenas, Ciudad Antigua, in the department of Nueva Segovia. José Nahúm had been a former member of the Resistance and was the brother of the deputy mayor of Ciudad Antigua, Damaris Mendoza Arriola. In the CENIDH report (2016), Nahúm's wife, Lidia Fajardo, reported that he was being politically persecuted for demanding that voter identity cards be issued without partisan bias. Six months previously, he had taken up arms against the government because the army and the police had come to the farm looking for him. Due to this persecution, he had decided to go into the mountains.

The official police version, according to statements by Deputy Commissioner Francisco Díaz, was that the victims were linked to Honduran drug trafficking. This version was rejected by their family members, other residents of their community, and human rights organizations such as CENIDH,<sup>48</sup> who identify the army as the main culprit, according to their investigations.

SOURCE: AUTHORS, BASED ON ANPOH AND CENIDH DATA.

48. More information available at <https://www.cenidh.org/noticias/960/>

(NOVEMBER 13, 2016)



ELEA VALLE AND  
CHILDRENS



COMARCA  
SAN PABLO

Francisco Pérez and his wife Elea Valle, originally from the village of Silibila, Prinzapolka, had been victims of army persecution because Francisco's brother Rafael Pérez was an armed rebel. This forced them to move to keep their family safe. Don Francisco, Elea's husband, was forced to go live in the mountains for more than two years. On November 6, 2016, in a telephone call with his wife Elea, he asked to see their two oldest children. On November 10, the two children, a girl of 16 and a twelve year old boy, set out on the road to the San Pablo 22 comarca, maintaining telephone contact with their mother. The children reportedly intended to return home two days later, but "[...] the army surprised them at five in the morning that Sunday, while they were still sleeping on the riverbank in the mountains. Her children, her husband and two rebels [including her brother-in-law and a young woman] were killed. The girl had been sexually assaulted, and her face and those of her brother and father were completely unrecognizable due to their injuries; however, their mother was able to identify them. The bodies had been buried in a common grave in another village. They had not been examined by an expert, nor had an investigation been conducted into what had allegedly happened.<sup>49</sup> The bodies were not returned to Elea Valle for her to hold funeral rites. The case remains unpunished, despite the fact that the army officially acknowledged responsibility, but justified the massacre by criminalizing its victims, claiming that the deaths were the result of a confrontation in which "that was all of them. There were no survivors" (Colonel Marvin Paniagua, head of the Sixth Military Command, quoted in CENIDH, November 23, 2017).

SOURCE: AUTHORS, BASED ON ANPDH AND CENIDH DATA.

49. These data are from CENIDH (<https://www.cenidh.org/noticias/1026/>) and from Resolution 10/ 2018 on Precautionary Measures, Elea Valle and children with respect to Nicaragua, issued by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights

In many of these cases, serious human rights violations were committed, as Juan Carlos Arce of CENIDH warns; “We have people who who report acts of torture, situations that we can call extrajudicial murders or summary executions and for which there is no subsequent investigation by the appropriate authorities (Confidencial, November 21, 2017). The figures and cases presented in this chapter show the seriousness of a systematic, persistent historical problem that the peasantry has been suffering; political violence, compounded by of impunity on the part of state authorities. What is more, academia and society in general have not given due attention to this problem that has long plagued rural Nicaragua nor have they sufficiently addressed it.

To conclude with the words of Mauro Ampié, former director of CENIDH, on how the government was handling the problem of armed groups: “If the government does not address this issue properly; not with a military response but in other ways, the conflict could escalate to unsuspected levels, which would threaten peace in Nicaragua” (La Prensa, December 4, 2016).

# CONCLUSIONS



1. Violence in rural Nicaragua has been a persistent and historical problem with political repercussions, given the involvement of the state. Although the phenomenon of violence has been related to the process of reconfiguring unequal agrarian structures – dispossession and accumulation of land and natural resources, the recent history of the country exposes the “Sandinista Popular Revolution” as one of Nicaragua’s great paradoxes. This political project was expected to bring social, economic, political and cultural transformations. Yet it brought about one of the greatest contradictions between the state and the peasantry, by imposing ambitious agrarian policies with an urban bias and certain influences from socialist countries at the time. This commitment to agrarian transformation ignored and undervalued the economic, political and socio-cultural potential of the peasantry, who felt threatened by the stripping away of their way of life.

2. The accumulated discontent and grievances provoked by the authoritarianism of the Sandinista government in the way it managed changes in rural relations and social structure sparked one of the largest peasant rebellions. The escalation of the war and international involvement in what came to be called the “Contra war” turned it into one of the most violent fratricidal conflicts with devastating consequences for Nicaraguan society, especially for the peasant country, where the theater of war was located.

3. The FSLN further exacerbated their vertical authoritarian style in the face of conflict and political strife by the absence of democratic thought in their ranks, the power accumulated by the Sandinista leadership, and their desire to achieve hegemony without checks and counterbalances. With this, the party–state–army triad limited any capacity of rectifying these flaws in their implementation of problematic policies. The numerous expressions of peasant resistance and violence against the FSLN can thus be explained, among other factors, by the way the Sandinistas set out to re-found the state, subordinating it to party interests and ideology amid a context of regional and global conflict.

4. One of the critical weaknesses of the political transition was the flawed process employed to shape the army into a national, professional institution. Tension was polarized between those who demanded the army be dismantled and those who advocated it be preserved as a stabilizing factor in a context of conflict. The government of Violeta Barrios de Chamorro (1990–1995), weakened by the fractured political coalition that had brought it to power, faced opposition from the FSLN, a party conceived to govern. Although the latter was defeated in the election, it retained significant shares of power in government institutions.

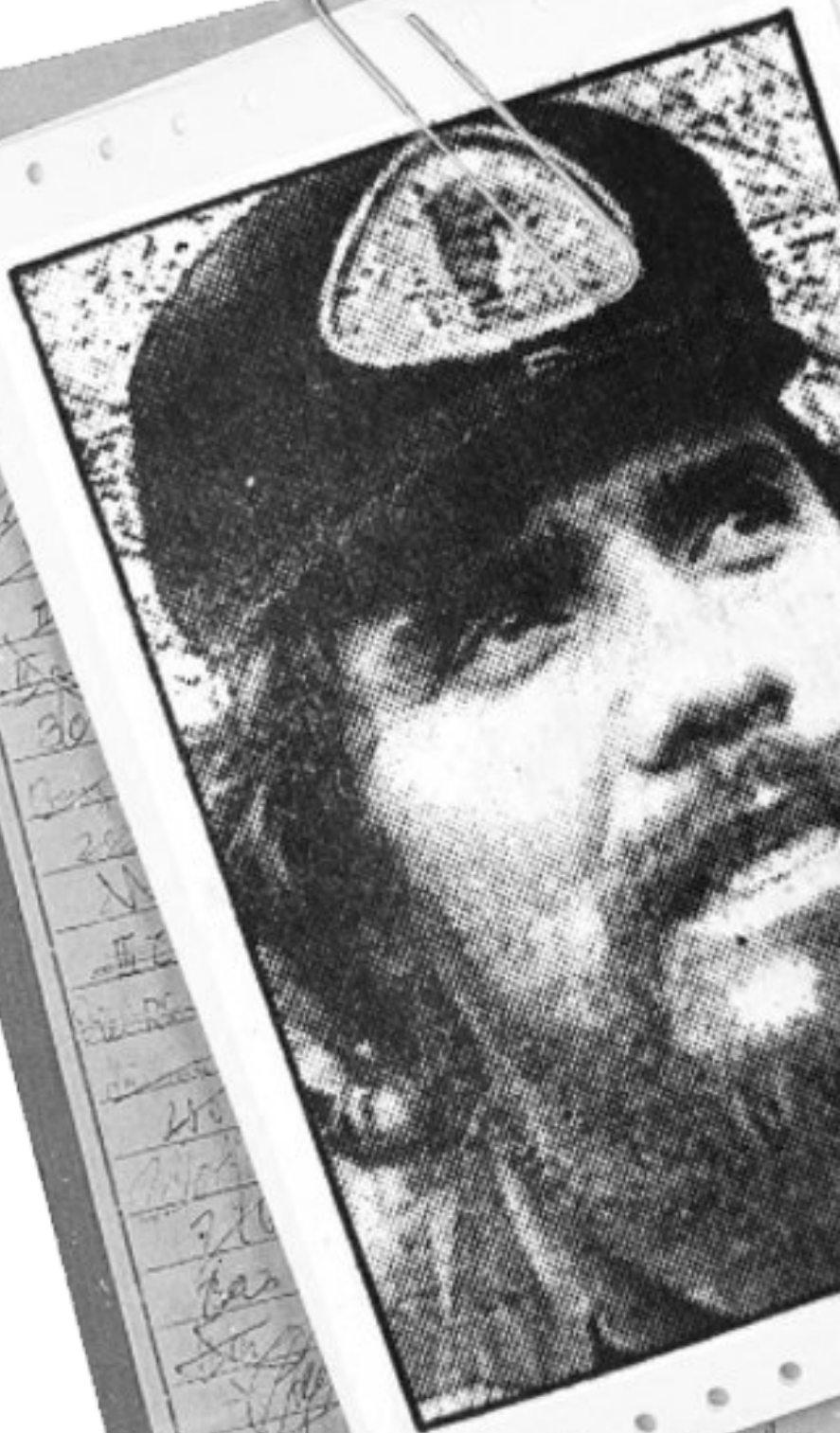
5. The democratic transition that had been agreed upon remained incomplete as political forces were rearranged between the government of Barrios de Chamorro with its ally, the army, allowing the military institution to preserve the deep-rooted autonomy that shielded it against any operational audit by the relevant public institutions. In other words, the political elites and the government irresponsibly underestimated the need to enact a true military reform and establish effective mechanisms by which civilian power could control the military institution. This precedent, as well as a lack of any clean-up of institutions involved in human rights violations, such as the DGSE personnel who joined the Intelligence Directorate for the Defense of the Army, constituted a serious obstacle to the fight against impunity and the ability to rebuild a sense of justice to address present-day problems.

6. The limited military reform and ongoing partisan control of public institutions without effective counterbalances for public scrutiny fostered a climate of impunity that led to relapses into continued violation of human rights of historically vulnerable actors, such as the peasantry. Since Ortega's return to power (2007–2020), persecution and extermination of the peasantry have intensified, especially toward those who have mobilized to defend their rights against extractivism, political violence, institutional crisis and de-democratization of the country.



7. The government of Daniel Ortega tried to justify the spiral of violence and assassinations committed against the peasantry by appealing to “compliance with public policies of sovereign security and security in the countryside.” Nevertheless, his course of action has always skirted the edge of legality, violating the rights and guarantees granted to every Nicaraguan citizen by the country’s constitution. Nor has the government properly investigated or answered the allegations made by relatives of the victims, peasant movement members, church leaders and national and international human rights organizations regarding abuses and serious human rights violations committed by members of the army, police and other officials in rural areas, especially in the center and north of the country.

8. A pending issue for the social sciences to analyze in the context of rural heterogeneity is the imaginary that has been constructed of the peasantry and the power relations knit between the elites, the various actors involved and the peasant country of Nicaragua.



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