

# Historical Background

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## From Anarchy Through Somocismo to Sandinismo

Nicaragua and its Central American neighbors received their independence from Spain without an armed struggle. It is possible that the lack of a revolution such as those of Mexico and the United States impeded Nicaragua from building an internal consensus. In any event, from the time that the Central American Confederation fragmented soon after independence, Nicaragua failed to develop any national project that could command the allegiance of its people. Struggles between the oligarchical leaders of the Conservative and Liberal parties, frequently carried on through an armed peasantry, did not allow long periods of peace and stability.

From 1912 to 1925, the United States exercised a kind of protectorate over Nicaragua in which the Marine Corps tried to preserve the peace. When they were withdrawn, civil war recommenced. Henry Stimson, sent to Nicaragua in 1927 as Special Advisor of President Coolidge, brokered a truce between the

warring factions and brought back the U.S. Marines to supervise elections in 1928 and 1933.

In order to assure the continuation of the peace, Stimson helped to create a National Guard to replace the rival militias. Its chief was Anastasio Somoza Garcia. What Stimson did not foresee, although in hindsight it was inevitable, is that the chief of the National Guard would use the position to place himself in the presidency and establish a dynasty that would endure for 45 years. When "Tacho" Somoza, who took over the presidency on January 1, 1937, was murdered in 1956, he was succeeded by son, Luis, while his other son "Tachito" remained as chief of the National Guard. After the death of Luis, "Tachito" controlled the country politically until 1979.

In the 1950's, Nicaragua saw economic progress without parallel in its history. Due to high prices for its principal products of coffee, cotton and meat, the exports of Nicaragua reached a value of \$648 million in 1979. However, the country was increasingly agitated by extensive opposition to the political authoritarianism and economic pressures of the Somozas. The triumph of the Cuban revolution in 1959 and the spread of socialist movements in Latin America were influential in the creation of the Sandinista National Liberation Front in 1961.

Until 1975, the strategy adopted by the FSLN guerrillas to struggle against Somoza was known as the Guerra Popular Prolongada (GPP). This involved the creation of guerilla bases in the mountains from which targets in the cities could be attacked. The strategy had little practical effect because the Somoza National Guard was able to surround most of these camps and capture most of the leaders. In an attempt to recoup their losses, a group of FSLN leaders began to adopt a strategy to organize urban workers and secondary school students, developing another doctrine called Proletarian Revolution. In 1975, a third strategy was developed under the direction of a third faction of the FSLN. This group commonly known as the "Terceristas" proposed to make a tactical alliance with certain elements of the "Burguesia" and other progressive forces, aimed at creating a general insurrection controlled by the FSLN.

From 1973 to 1979, the support Somoza received from various elements of the population deteriorated and political opposition was focused by an organization called UDEL, headed by Pedro Joaquin Chamorro. In his newspaper, La Prensa, Pedro Joaquin Chamorro attacked Somoza systematically until he was murdered on January 10, 1978. Chamorro's assassination led to generalized opposition to Somoza and the organization of the Frente Opositor (FAO).

Although the FAO gained widespread support, it was unable to negotiate the withdrawal of Somoza and the guerilla war continued. In order to provide additional pressure, Venezuela stopped supplying petroleum and the United States terminated the sale of arms to Somoza.

On July 12, 1979, the Organization of the American States published a resolution calling for the immediate and definite replacement of the Somoza regime. On July 17, Anastasio Somoza resigned the presidency. On the following day the National Guard folded and the FSLN was the only armed forces in the country. After FSLN troops entered Managua in triumph, an initial Junta de Gobierno was organized to include two members of the FAO, Violeta Chamorro and Alfonso Robelo, who soon resigned as it became increasingly clear the Sandinistas would allow them no effective power. Thenceforth, the regime was oriented to the realization of Marxist-Leninist dogma as the official ideology of the FSLN. As the Sandinistas increased their domination of the country and expropriated private properties, many Nicaraguans emigrated.

The FSLN took control of the police, the army and other organizations, beginning with local neighborhoods which were placed under the control of

Committees of Sandinista Defense. Political control was supplemented by economic control, the government attempting to control the production and distribution of all goods and to carry forward the program of the revolution, which was to construct a socialist state. The intransigence of the Sandinistas in pursuing this goal led to persecution of all opposition, including the Catholic church.

By 1987, the Nicaraguan economy had seriously deteriorated. Widespread opposition to the program of the FSLN and the presence of communist advisors from Cuba and Eastern Europe sent to implement this program led an increasing number of people to begin armed resistance from the Northern mountains. The power of these groups of counter-revolutionaries was augmented by financing from the Reagan Administration. Militarization of the country expanded as the FSLN decreed conscription of males over the age of 16 to meet the challenge of the Contra. As casualties mounted, the crisis of Communism raced to its inevitable denouement; the support that Communist countries and their sympathizers provided Nicaragua began to fade. The other Central American governments meeting in Esquipulas called for national reconciliation, democratization and free elections. The Sandinistas agreed to the appeal in the belief that they could not lose the elections. To their great surprise, the

February 1990 elections strongly favored the 14 party UNO headed by Violeta Barrios de Chamorro. Before it left office on April 25, 1990, the Sandinista government adopted a number of decrees, including number 85 and 86 passing the property of many houses and other properties to members of the Sandinista party in a process that became known locally as "la Piñata".

### **The Administration of Violeta Chamorro**

The new government entered office with a country in ruins, an immense foreign debt, a Sandinista army of 100,000 men and a guerilla force of about 25,000.

In the six years following the 1990 election, the principal task of the new government was to affect a reconciliation along the Nicaraguan people, divided by deep political hatreds, and to construct a climate of tolerance in which a democratic system could evolve. The government achieved substantial success, including reduction of the armed forces, but did not achieve the return of many of the properties looted in the "Piñata".

The attempt to make peace with the Sandinistas