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Nicaragua: Ortega Started to Kill Democracy a Long Time Ago

Richard Sanders

Some have said that Nicaraguan leader Daniel Ortega's arrests of his potential rivals in this year's presidential election, as well as of journalists and civil society activists, mark the end of democracy in Nicaragua. But if democracy has died in Nicaragua, this is truly a chronicle of a death foretold. Looking at the history of Ortega's rule since he won office in 2006, it is clear that he jumped off the track of democratic governance almost from the beginning.

Ortega, of course, had first gained power in 1979 through a violent revolution in which the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional overthrew the government of Anastasio Somoza. During its twelve-year lifespan Sandinista rule was marked by political repression, an awkward combination of Marxist and free-market economics, and a grinding war with the U.S.-backed "contras" together with painful U.S. economic sanctions. By the late 1980's a tortuous negotiating process led by neighboring Central American countries ultimately resulted in a deal, accepted by the new Bush administration, in which the contras were definitively demobilized and elections were held in 1990.

When, to Ortega's surprise, opposition unity candidate Violeta Chamorro won, he devoted himself to rebuilding his Sandinista political machine for an eventual return to power. Nicaragua, prostrate after years of war and misgovernment, slowly recovered with U.S.



and international assistance. Chamorro was succeeded by Arnoldo Alemán and Enrique Bolaños, while the Sandinistas remained a powerful force, particularly in Congress.

After fending off reform forces within sandinismo, Ortega saw his chance in the November 2006 presidential elections. The anti-Sandinista forces were hopelessly divided, Ortega having engineered a corrupt deal with old-line Liberal boss Alemán in which the latter agreed to legislation lowering the threshold under which the front runner could be declared the victor without a run-off. Ortega gained the presidency with only 38 percent of the vote as the opposition split between reform-minded Eduardo Montealegre and Alemán ally José Rizo.

While many had hoped that Ortega would govern more democratically than before, he instead followed the formula of the Bourbon kings of France, of whom it was said when their monarchy was restored that they had learned nothing and forgotten nothing. He moved to re-impose partisan political control over the police and army, even returning them to their old names —“Policía Sandinista” and “Ejército Popular Sandinista.” Protests were dealt with harshly. Close ties were established with Cuba and Venezuela.

A year into Ortega’s term came the first major political test, the race for mayor of Managua. This position is always important, given that the city represents one third of Nicaragua’s population. But it also was clearly becoming a referendum on the Ortega administration’s performance. Former presidential candidate Eduardo Montealegre ran, this time for a unified opposition. It was evident that, should he win, the mayoralty would be a powerful base for a rematch against Ortega in 2011. The Sandinistas nominated Alexis Argüello, the beloved but financially and emotionally troubled boxing champion.

With the public put off by Ortega’s authoritarianism and the economy souring as international investors began to look askance at Nicaragua, Montealegre’s chances looked good, with polls putting him well ahead. But Ortega took no chances. Respected international and local organizations were not permitted to observe the count. Results were announced as final while tally sheets went missing. Only a partial recount was permitted. Argüello was declared the winner. Subsequent protests were suppressed, and Nicaraguans learned the same lesson as do gamblers in Las Vegas—in the end the house always wins.

Politics of a sort has continued ever since that fateful day in 2008, but democracy has never really recovered. The opposition has never achieved the élan and unity which it had during the 2008 mayor’s race. The business community, which had been a staunch opponent of the Sandinistas in the 1980s, cut an implicit deal with Ortega. It would stay out of political life and Ortega would leave them alone. Divided and short of funds, and subject to constant harassment, the opposition has struggled. Ortega cruised to victory in 2011 against a

lackluster opponent. And when in 2016 Montealegre challenged Ortega again, the Sandinista-dominated Supreme Court ruled him ineligible to run, allowing Ortega to win essentially unopposed.

Without even the trappings of democratic legitimacy, crude repression, either in the streets or in the courts, has been Ortega's principal recourse. Massive protests in 2018 were put down, with over 320 deaths. And the current wave of arrests, coming as Nicaragua has been hit hard by the coronavirus and attendant global economic turmoil, shows he is taking no chances ahead of the presidential elections in November.

But outrageous as the 2018 killings and current round of arrests are, we should remember that Ortega crossed the Rubicon when he stole the first election in 2008. Like Caesar, he has never looked back.

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