

THE LOST REVOLUTION

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Delivered February 18, 2010

Latin American and Caribbean Center at Florida International University

Latin American and Caribbean Studies Distinguished Speaker Lecture Series

Miami, FL

One night some five years ago, in April 2004, a man was stabbed mortally in a cantina fight in the district of Monimbó in Masaya. The victim, Manuel Salvador Monge, *El Chirizo*, was 55 years old. The assailant, a teenager. According to the police account, the incident that led to the death was the result of a dispute about which of the two was “more of a man.”

The teenager was unaware of the caliber of the “man” whose life he had taken: unaware that *El Chirizo* had been a member of the commando unit headed by Edén Pastora that sensationally captured the national palace in Managua on August 22, 1978; one of the decisive events in the fall of the Somoza dynasty's dictatorship in Nicaragua. An anonymous hero. A hero of the revolution that triumphed on July 19, 1979, poor all his life, and now forgotten, had fallen in an obscure quarrel between drunkards.

But what has become of the revolution *El Chirizo* and so many others fought for?

A traveler returning to Nicaragua after these thirty years, or one arriving there for the first time, would be forced to wonder if there had ever been a revolution. There are no visible traces, except for the increasingly confused rhetoric of Daniel Ortega.

And worst than that, Nicaragua has never experienced such unequal distribution of wealth nor had so many poor people who scratch out a living beneath the circling

vultures in the rubbish-heaps of Acahualinca. The poor are inescapable. They flock around the traffic lights in Managua's streets, selling everything from costume jewelry and contraband goods to jungle animals that have fled the predations of the timber mafias. When night falls, they return to flimsy dwellings improvised with rubbish and discarded packaging; slums whose numbers multiply by the day, leaving the city-far from the gleaming lights of its magical shopping malls-looking like a huge refugee camp.

And where are the Revolution's ideals that once captured the imagination of people like *El Chirizo*?

Disappeared under an avalanche of despair, frustration, ideological disarray, empty rhetoric, and amnesia. 70% of the Nicaragua's current population is under 30 years old. Now, the living memory of the revolution among the young is precarious or altogether absent. The judgments of those who lived through it all, meanwhile, are as polarized as ever: a radiant dawn for some, a dark night for others.

Nicaragua was alone in the continent in stubbornly proclaiming the right of a small country to have political independence, free of the traditional domination of the United States. This domination had been a constant theme in Nicaraguan history since the buccaneer William Walker proclaimed himself President of the country in 1855; it was made manifest through repeated military interventions, and lasted until the end of the Somoza family's reign. The insistent defense of sovereignty shadowed this long era of external domination. In the 1980s, Nicaragua's search for a form of national redemption became part of a decade of extreme confrontation and aggression during the US presidency of Ronald Reagan.

The Sandinista Revolution endured for an entire decade of illusions and culminated with Daniel Ortega's electoral defeat in 1990, when I ran with him as

candidate to the vice-presidency. Violeta de Chamorro won the elections amid the circumstances of a devastating war that was coming to an end.

Defeat was very painful to those of us who had taken part in overthrowing the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza ten years before, because we were not just losing an election. The defeat meant the collapse of a political project of profound transformations interrupted by a war that, though fought between the Sandinista army and the army of the Contras, was mainly a war between us and the Reagan Administration.

We could say that when we lost the elections, Reagan won the war, and not on the military battlefield, but on the political battlefield. The country was in rubble and the economy had collapsed. Thus, social welfare programs, land reform, literacy and public health also lost the war. Dreams were defeated.

War was the main cause of the collapse of the revolution, although we certainly cannot excuse our own mistakes. First of all, our unfounded belief that the initial revolutionary fervor would last. At first, we had the support of all those who were against the dictatorship, even the wealthy, but this general support evaporated as we deepened structural reforms and raised the radical tone of our speeches.

The country was divided. We lost the middle class' confidence, and peasants, our main source of support, were also divided. Very soon, we had a peasant war because peasants were the Contra's social base. Peasants who were very much afraid of the changes the Revolution proposed. And the Reagan Administration certainly took advantage of that. When we called for elections in 1990, we had already lost them, except we didn't know that. Elections were a sort of plebiscite against the war, and people decided that, while in power, the Sandinista Front couldn't guarantee peace.

That is one way to see the results of that election: the loss of power and a revolution that was lost. But it can also be seen from another perspective: democracy. For the first time in Latin American history, a revolution that had come to power by the force of arms, was leaving power by the force of votes. That was a new lesson we all had to learn.

Democracy had won, although democracy was not something that we, a revolutionary power, had always put first. First came social transformations and changes in domestic economic structure; and, at first, we believed there had to be a party to lead those changes without delay: our party. But in the end, that was not what the majority of the people were thinking.

Reality went on teaching us lessons, the first of them being war. We were a divided country because the revolutionary project had lost the initial overwhelming support, as I already stated. At first, we proclaimed we didn't need elections, but in 1983, only three years after the triumph of the revolution, we were already organizing the first election, seeking a peaceful way out of a war that had already exploded. We won that election. The 1990 election also sought a political way out of war, but it was impossible for the country to move on. There was no harvest, a critical shortage of oil and power supply due to terrorist attacks, exports were at their lowest, inflation was at its highest and there was a lack of general goods and supplies, and most importantly, there was the military draft, which had become increasingly unpopular.

We paid homage to democracy by accepting the electoral results without arguing. But inside the Sandinista party some thought that our immediate task was to return to power, at any cost and by any means.

Attempting to return to power was logical; we were now an opposition force. But the problem was this concept of "at any cost" and "by any means." This meant that

we didn't have to be loyal to the democratic system we ourselves had created, and there was a will to undermine Mrs. Chamorro's presidency with all kinds of obstacles: strikes, riots that were artificially set up. The Sandinista Front that was defeated at the polls was still a much disciplined and well organized force, able to create disturbances on the streets.

The other issue was that, to return to power, the Sandinista Front needed economic resources. So, before leaving power, it organized the transfer of state goods and national resources to the defeated party. But actually, those resources never reached the party; they remained "on their way." Many new personal fortunes rose from those resources. That is what is known as the *piñata*, a cheerful distribution of state goods among a number of high-ranking members of the Sandinista Front.

None of these people were expelled from the party, nor were they brought to trial. Not even were they subjected to any disciplinary measures for their ethical violations, and that caused an even worse collapse, that of moral values. The Sandinista Front had always been a party that preached personal detachment from wealth and material goods. When it lost its moral credibility, it truly lost everything.

Those of us who opposed this embarrassing transgression lost the battle, but in years to come, that initial opposition would become the seed for the splitting of the Sandinista Front. In 1995, we created the Movimiento Renovador Sandinista (MRS), because it was impossible to carry out such a battle-a battle in favour of ethics and democracy- inside the old party.

That was the first phase of the *piñata*. The second phase took place when the new government, complying with the new economic policies dictated by the International Monetary Fund, began a quick privatization process of state enterprises and goods. At the time, more than half of the economy was in state hands since the

revolution had nationalized dozens of industrial, agricultural, transport and trade enterprises. But the new government could not privatize them against the will of the Sandinista Front which dominated the unions and social organizations that were able to paralyze the country.

So, an agreement was reached. Thirty percent of all privatized companies would become workers' property. But again, none of the goods and resources which represented that thirty percent ever reached the workers' hands, but rather they were kept by powerful people within the Sandinista Front. And those who took part in both phases of the *piñata*, are now prosperous entrepreneurs who know well how to take advantage of power to facilitate their business operations. And there is a third phase now, related to the oil resources coming from Venezuela.

Since 1990, Daniel Ortega has persistently presented himself as a presidential candidate. He was defeated again in 1996 by Arnaldo Alemán, head of the Liberal party, and once again in 2001 by Enrique Bolaños, of the same Liberal party, until finally, in 2006, he fulfilled his old desire to return to power, winning the Presidency with 38% of the vote.

He won because there had been a conspiracy to reform the Constitution to allow him to win in a single round with such a precarious majority. The need of a second round was eliminated, as was the requirement to receive more than 50% of the votes. Such thorough reform of the Constitution was possible because of Ortega's deal with Arnaldo Alemán, the corrupt leader of the Liberal Party, who in 2003 was sentenced to 20 years in prison for money laundering,

That pact allowed other core reforms to the Constitution. The reforms drafted in 2000, and then again in 2005, were conceived to establish a distribution of power between Ortega and Alemán, each one gaining tight control of state entities. It

facilitated submissiveness of the courts of justice to the personal will of both signatories, as well as submissiveness of the electoral system and the Comptroller's Office. The Supreme Court of Justice was extended to 17 members, a scandalous number of magistrates for a poor country of hardly 5 million inhabitants, with the sole purpose of distributing positions among the unconditional.

The question is now: Is this the same Sandinista Front that fought and won the revolution? Is this the same Sandinista Front that took the National Palace with the participation of humble men like *El Chirizo*?

Are we in a second stage of the revolution of the eighties? Is there still a revolution going on in Nicaragua?

Daniel Ortega put up with successive defeats, raising an intransigent battle flag in favour of the poorest and excluded, not giving up his rhetoric except when he was advised by his electoral campaign strategists to lighten his tone or keep silent; at the same time, he was able to articulate the Sandinista Front around him, based on personal rather than ideological loyalties, while getting rid of his opponents, mainly those who threatened his leadership, through periodic purges. But none of that would have been enough without the political pact he devised with Arnaldo Alemán.

Political pacts among "caudillos" are nothing new in Nicaraguan history. In 1950, for similar reasons, general Anastasio Somoza García, founder of the dynasty, signed the "pact of the generals" on behalf of the Liberal party, with General Emiliano Chamorro, who signed it on behalf of the Conservative party. Besides the distribution of positions and parliament seats, that pact fostered a constitutional reform that allowed Somoza to announce his candidacy for re-election in 1956, when he was shot by the young poet, Rigoberto López Pérez.

As I said, by means of the 2000 pact, Daniel Ortega was able to pass a constitutional reform, reducing to 35% the votes required to win in a first round. In turn, he allowed the courts of justice to release Alemán from prison declaring him “valetudinarian,” that is, disabled by senile decrepitude, an unusual measure that can only be explained by the judge’s submissiveness. Now, thanks to the same pact, the Supreme Court of Justice has dismissed his case. It is the only known case in which a criminal convict leads a political party.

Meanwhile, Daniel Ortega got the unconditional support of Cardinal Obando y Bravo, an old adversary of the revolution and the epitome of the most conservative positions in the eighties. Now, he is a member of the government, appointed as head of an office called the “Reconciliation Commission,” intended to extend official influence in the countryside and gain votes for Ortega’s re-election.

Ortega has also allied himself with old leaders of the Nicaraguan Resistance, the Contras that fought Sandinismo in the eighties, headed and financed by the CIA under President Reagan’s auspices. Jaime Morales Carazo, a member of the Contra’s Supreme Leadership that operated from Miami, is now Ortega’s vice-president.

Some could see these alliances like a boast of political ability, or as the cold application of a pragmatic vision. I have reasons to see them, rather, as the consequence of the renouncement of those principles that weighed so much in the epic of the Revolution, now replaced by an ambition of personal power robbed of all ethical consideration. A power that no longer serves a transcendent project, but only resembles the traditional power in our domestic history.

Within that dual confusion in which a flaming leftist speech coexists with core concessions to the most intransigent right, to the point of identifying itself with it, the banning of therapeutic abortion even when it means saving a mother's life, recently

ratified in the penal code reform, becomes a cruel and painful example. Under Daniel Ortega's patronage, therapeutic abortion, allowed by the Nicaraguan legislation since the middle of the XIX century, even before the 1893 liberal revolution, has become a crime punishable by 7 years in prison. This proves his apparent conversion to militant Catholicism; but not the Catholicism of liberation theology, but rather the regressive Catholicism of Cardinal Obando, who persecuted the priests committed to the Revolution.

The Sandinista Front that again elected Daniel Ortega as its candidate in the 2006 elections is, in spirit and nature, very distant from the one that conquered power in 1979. It is very different from the Sandinista Front that throughout an entire decade fought fiercely to impose a popular program, and that, in spite of errors, false conceptions and multiple obstacles, was inspired by that mystique with deep ethical roots that has now been replaced by ambition for personal power and greed.

The return of this other Sandinista Front to government, or rather the return of Daniel and his wife, Rosario Murillo, by his side, has not meant the restoration of those principles that are fading. Nor is the project the same, because its articulation now responds to personal aspirations that are no longer revolutionary. The difference is abysmal.

Before, words corresponded to facts. Sandinismo had no capitalists in its ranks, so those who were, could be easily demonized. Fidelity to principles demanded disdain of material goods as a rule of behaviour. Now, reality separates facts from words. Today there are enough capitalists in the Sandinista Front ranks, and truly rich ones-their money obtained through corruption-to deny the aggressiveness of a radical speech in favour of the poor. Such a speech drops words like dead fruits; lacking that substance it once had plenty of, credibility.

In spite of the diatribes against imperialism, and in spite of the fact that the International Monetary Fund is the “imperialism’s privileged financial instrument” according to Ortega, his government signs agreements with the Fund which force him to maintain monetary discipline and the same structural adjustment program that previous governments signed. In the same way, while loudly attacking the Free Trade Treaty with the United States, signed by the previous government, he strictly complies with its application.

I don't believe it is convenient for the country to break with the International Monetary Fund, or to condemn the Free Trade Treaty with the United States, or to return to confiscatory practices. We don't need the artificial climate of hostility and distrust that vicious rhetoric creates inside and outside a country prostrated by the chronic illness of a poverty that words can't cure. So I just demand coherence between words and facts.

The other remarkable example of this alienation is the persistence with which Ortega resists a democracy that demands respect and invigoration of institutions. Institutions which he has placed at his personal service, ignoring the fact that the effectiveness of institutions is based on alternating power, not in clinging to it, not in the power of the “caudillo.” And *caudillismo*, the one man rule, is the oldest political institution in Latin America, and the most evil one.

Once, in a speech he gave in Managua, during the First Congress of the Sandinista Front, Lula da Silva, who was not yet president of Brazil, said that the left's great mistake had been to create an ideological difference between bourgeois democracy and proletarian democracy, when truly, there was only one class of democracy. In doing so, the left had acquired a bad name presenting itself as an enemy of democracy, which meant an enemy of voting and choosing your rulers.

This marks for me the great difference among the leaders of the Latin American left in power today. Whoever thinks that a democracy that allows power to alternate is an outdated system is still thinking in terms of "bourgeois democracy;" thinking that by using the same bourgeois democracy mechanisms some sort of proletarian democracy can be built, is looking to the past. It is easy to speak of sweeping institutions and establishing a new system that should rise from the ashes of the old system, but in that new system the leader, or "caudillo" remains where he is, because he judges himself indispensable. And in order to do so, he needs a constitution that allows him to be re-elected as many times as it is necessary, or as many times as he wants. Now, this is not a new system; this is the same one we've recurrently lived with since the 19th century; a source of bad habits, corruption, confrontation, violence and poverty.

Again we face the irreplaceable leader. The enlightened one who believes that only he knows what a country needs. But the irreplaceable leader is not an idea of the left. It comes from the darkest bottom of Latin American history, from the deepest abyss of patriarchal society, where the landowner became the military leader, and then the perpetual president. There is nothing new in the proposal of owning power forever.

This regressive vocation has taken Ortega to create the Citizen Power Councils, following President Chavez's model, as instruments for direct, or participatory, democracy, destined to amend the functions of representative, or formal, democracy, which has little prestige before his eyes since, again, it collides with the old ghost of proletarian democracy that still rattles its chains.

The Citizen Power Councils headed by Ortega's wife, Rosario Murillo, organized district by district, neighbourhood by neighbourhood, block by block, result in what is called the "national cabinet," a supreme power pulled out of a magician's hat,

in which Councils' popular delegates would sit beside the ministers who, as in Venezuela, are officially called "ministers of people's power," or "of Citizen Power."

Downstream, the Councils have supervisory faculties on a multitude of political and administrative matters, which range from authorizing credits for the "zero usury" program to approving beneficiaries of the "zero hunger" program that donates cows, pigs, poultry, and farming implements to rural families; they can also demand the removal of public officers at all levels, and it has been announced that they will have "voluntary" surveillance functions, complementing those of the police. These committees are not pluralistic entities, accessible to the diverse sectors of the population. The citizens that integrate them are all militants or supporters of the government's party, and are controlled by the same political secretaries, or local party commissars. A net knitted with the same threads and the same knots which could seem unnecessary but isn't, because it ensures control and long-term power.

The old party of the eighties, with a collective leadership, has been replaced by Ortega's own unique and personal will, and that of his wife, Rosario Murillo. Once again, as always, throughout the history of Latin America, the family is the mold in which a political party shapes itself, and shapes the state.

Ortega is arming himself with long-term instruments, all those that any "caudillo" needs, as has happened so many times in the history of Latin America. And now he is not trying to reform the Constitution to stay in power, as did the members of the Somoza family, but simply violating the Constitution or forgetting that it exists.

For someone who was elected with 38% of the votes, while having a polarized majority in opposition, the search for consent should be a necessary act of sound judgement. But all of Ortega's actions tend to move away from consent and result in the repeated polarization of society, starting with his intention to remain in power. We need

to remember that re-election and family governments have been the most disastrous bad habit of Nicaraguan politics and have always had tragic consequences. If nothing less, they were the cause for the Sandinista Revolution that overthrew the Somoza family.

In the Kingdom of past illusions, where the idea of the eternal revolution prevailed, consent was not considered necessary. But today, a vision as obstinate as this does nothing but ignore the landscape, or confuse it with another that no longer exists. In today's landscape, society claims the right to plurality and dissidence, to free expression of thought, to diverse sources of information, to transparency in state performance, to accountability, to the existence of social organizations and parties that don't respond to a unique interest.

This landscape is the result of many years of struggle and experiences that highlight a democratic progress marked by the same plurality in which a multitude of interests and opinions move today, and which cannot be concerted but in their diversity. A single political behaviour dictated from power has scarce possibilities to be imposed as long as an independent media, civil society organizations, political parties, and entrepreneurs of all sizes-the smaller ones being the most numerous-continue to exist.

Moreover, one of the most visible institutional inheritances of the Revolution is the existence of a National Army and a National Police that function as modern and professional entities in compliance with the Political Constitution. We must not forget that army and police forces were bound in a single corrupt and blood-thirsty repressive force under Somoza, and that the Revolution swept that away from its roots.

Both institutions have now won the prestige they enjoy in Nicaragua, proclaiming their distance from any kind of submission, be it to a party, a family, or an oligarchy. This is also part of the new landscape, and it removes one of the traditional

and fundamental pieces of “caudillismo,” which is the unconditional support of the armed and security forces.

But the police force is now under assault, since Ortega is trying to debilitate its neutrality by converting it into a personal instrument of repression. The destruction of the professional police in an attempt to use it at the personal will of the caudillo will signal that we are again under a dictatorship, and that citizens’ safety under the law is lost.

But there are other ominous signs that predict the future of democracy. The electoral fraud perpetrated in the municipal elections of November 2008, for example, which snatched Managua and some forty cities from the opposition. The electoral machinery is under Ortega’s absolute control, and he wouldn’t doubt in using it to ensure reelection, now that the Constitution has started to be altered, or ignored, as I said before.

The Constitution of Nicaragua prohibited presidential re-election. Since Ortega doesn’t have the necessary votes in the National Assembly to reform the Constitution, he used the bizarre expedient of ordering his loyal magistrates in the Supreme Court to rule that the article of the Constitution that prohibited him from being re-elected was unconstitutional, since a different article establishes that all citizens are equal under the law. The court passed the resolution within minutes. The first known case in which a Constitution is declared unconstitutional.

More recently, Ortega decided again to ignore the Constitution when he signed a decree prolonging the periods of service of the judges to the Supreme Court of Justice, as well as the periods of all magistrates and superior members of all independent branches of the state, including the Electoral Council. This is a right that, according to the Constitution, doesn’t belong to the president, but rather, to the National Assembly.

Another threatening signal is the accumulation of economic power in his own hands and in those of members of his family, taking advantage of the resources from oil provided by Chavez. This provision of oil is made by means of soft credits, however, that money doesn't go to the state coffers, but to Alba-Caruna, a private company under the control of Ortega and his family.

Using Venezuelan economic resources, to President Chavez's satisfaction, in January of this year (2010), the Ortega family bought "Telenica-Canal 8," an independent television channel, for the sole purpose of cancelling journalist Carlos Fernando Chamorro's show, "Esta Semana," which is a program that is very critical against Ortega. Obviously, the aim is to get control of all independent media, or to neutralize them.

Thus, the history of Nicaragua is again at a decisive crossroads. It will have to gather all existing democratic resources to safeguard the Nicaraguan people from a new dictatorship. A tenacious struggle will have to be fought to preserve the constitutional character of the armed and security forces, to rescue the independence of the judicial system, to impede continuity, re-election or family succession, and to keep a free press functioning; in short, to move institutions away from the "caudillo's" shadow.

What we must preserve are the dreams that inspired such unsung heroes as Manuel Salvador Monge López, *El Chirizo*.