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Why We Joined the Movement to Rescue Sandinismo

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Part 1 of 2**

“We call on all Sandinista militants,
all who share the dream of a different Nicaragua,
to join this effort to rescue Sandinismo.”

While the legendary FSLN guerrilla commander
opened her reflections with this call to Nicaraguans,
they should also enrich the current debate
about the Latin American Left.

Our Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) was that of Carlos Fonseca and we first knew about it through the mysterious paintings that appeared on the walls of homes in the early sixties. It was an FSLN of values and a convincing mystique, drawing us into the fight and even the challenge of death. It was an FSLN of hope that has now been transformed into just another political party, usufruct of an economically and politically dominant group in the party structures whose fundamental aim is to dispute arenas of power. This transmutation didn't happen overnight. It has been a long and continuous process not without its share of resistance. A politically conscious grassroots membership is still resisting the intent to annul their historic role as a transforming force committed to the excluded.

The Democratic Left: Critical Consciousness and Grassroots Struggle

Many of us have been involved in the struggle to maintain the original vocation of this political force, trying to form small groups, movements, organic tendencies and currents of opinion within the Sandinista Front under various names. The most persistent group in this respect has been the Democratic Left (ID), which grew out of the “Group of 29” that emerged in October 1993—three years after the FSLN's electoral defeat—to challenge the FSLN's policy of “co-government” with the Chamorro government. Later, the ID became a tendency that fought for leadership of the FSLN in the 1994 Congress, where new statutes were debated and a new party leadership was elected. We struggled convinced that there were forces interested in “moderating” the FSLN to turn it into a centrist force, something we rejected. The Democratic Left was also the main force behind Daniel Ortega at that time. We have to acknowledge that this permitted his leadership—at the time very weakened within the party—to recover the strength to establish and ensure what he now is: the autocratic head of a good part of Sandinismo.

Starting with the 1994 Congress, at a time when the revolution was being dismantled and neoliberal “packages” were being imposed, the Democratic Left insisted on maintaining the FSLN’s grassroots nature, ideologically identified with revolutionary proposals and banking on establishing a social correlation for change based on developing people’s educated and critical consciousness, resistance and above all grassroots struggle against the neoliberal avalanche and the ideological backpedaling so in vogue in those years.

From within the FSLN leadership we also pushed for internal changes, convinced that internal democracy was not at odds with its revolutionary nature. We aspired to improve our party’s existing organization, inherited from the years of war. Our forces pushed for the election of internal authorities through a democratic process of mass participation and encouraged the development of alliances with forces such as the Women’s Coalition, which allowed us to seek a new relationship with the autonomous movements. We also promoted women’s participation through the “braid,” in which every other candidate on the slate had to be a woman, and the consulting of candidacies, which led to genuine primary elections with over 400,000 participants in 1996.

Distrust, Maneuvers, Accusations and Exclusions

This transforming vision led us to propose a new presidential candidate. Few know that in 1995, our tendency persuaded the National Directorate plenary and the main FSLN bodies that allowing Daniel Ortega to run again would be a mistake. We even managed to temporarily convince him, as FSLN general secretary, of this point of view. So we unanimously decided that Mariano Fiallos, the prestigious former rector of the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua (UNAN) and then president of the electoral branch of government, would be the presidential candidate, but this decision was aborted by a combination of maneuvers by Daniel and his closest cronies, plus certain vacillations by Mariano. In the end, we went into the 1996 elections with Daniel Ortega as the candidate. Arnaldo Alemán won.

The tension and constant struggles within the National Directorate gradually convinced Daniel Ortega that our forces weren’t as unconditional as he would like. He was right. We were advocating principles, values and a vision of Nicaragua and the FSLN. Our current was not about strengthening a figure or gravitating around a single person.

Thus we came to the 1998 Congress. It was by then evident that General Secretary Daniel Ortega no longer trusted a good part of the Democratic Left. The most important shifts were felt internally in late 1997 when conservative forces within the party, with his endorsement, totally neutralized a proposal to reorganize the party that had been carefully drafted by an internal commission. The most important arguments revolved around the idea that the proposal’s real purpose was to weaken Daniel’s strength.

Another significant sign was the FSLN’s excessive opening—at Daniel Ortega’s initiative—to the development of a new current within the FSLN called the Sandinista Business Bloc, which included Herty Lewites. For the 1998 Congress, Ortega offered this group his full support to increase its corresponding quotas of internal power. By then Zoilamérica had already accused Ortega of sexual abuse and harassment, shaking the party and all Sandinistas. The reaction was classic Stalinist-style internal maneuvers, accusing important members of our current for what were called “imperialist lies and maneuvers” to weaken Daniel’s leadership. [When Zoilamérica Narvaéz, Ortega’s stepdaughter, formally accused him of years of sexual abuse and harassment, many within the party believed it was a

lie and part of a rightwing, or even CIA plot.] The idea behind unjustly blaming us was to disqualify our tendency.

All this led us to the conviction not to run for posts in the FSLN's National Directorate. We were convinced of the importance of occupying spaces in the middle-level leadership, closer to the base. Backed by the Carlos Fonseca Initiative in Managua, we sought spaces in the departmental leadership. All internal paths were closed to us in a manner worthy of a police state and we were finally relegated from all party posts. Even so, we persevered without resigning our militancy.

The Pact: Perks, Property, Putrefaction and Politicking

Daniel Ortega's closing speech to the 1998 party congress marked the way to the deals and pacts that had been opened with the negotiation of the Law of Reformed, Urban and Rural Property in August 1997, just months after Arnold Alemán took presidential office. This new approach was a unilateral decision, not consulted with any structures.

Immediately after that congress, the path was cleared for the pact with the PLC. They agreed to constitutional reforms and pocket-lining agreements whose implementation was postponed only because Hurricane Mitch left the Alemán government seriously questioned. From then on, our tendency's differences with the transactional policies and lines of the Daniel backers became increasingly evident within the FSLN's bench in the National Assembly. The FSLN pact with Alemán was felt even in Ministry of Government interventions against social foundations, NGOs and media belonging to members of our tendency.

The worst part of the pact—in the Democratic Left's judgment—was the commitment to demobilize the grassroots forces, pulling the plug on the struggle against the privatizations and other International Monetary Fund and World Bank policies, including the structural adjustment plans. The takeover of Nicaragua by the market economy and its imbalances encountered no resistance. The pact was also expressed in a huge number of under-the-table property negotiations, which ensured the new holdings of the emerging Sandinista economic group, including former worker and peasant leaders who had appropriated part of the business properties negotiated in the first and second concertation agreements signed during the Chamorro government. The pact further opened the way for the most raging corruption ever seen, with no official denunciation or opposition from the FSLN. As a result, the capital of the emerging economic group headed up by Arnoldo Alemán also grew apace.

The Democratic Left further warned of the pact's disastrous political-ideological consequences. Early on we charged that the pact was intensifying the FSLN's slide down the slippery slope of politicking, election mania and a logic of power based on divvying up public posts and personal businesses. We argued that this behavior was changing the FSLN into a party along the lines of the "historical parallels" denounced by Carlos Fonseca, which was precisely what had triggered the construction of a new force representing the oppressed in the sixties: the FSLN.

Whatever Works for the Moment: Pact with Bolaños, Pact with Alemán

The Democratic Left was able to pull together hundreds of Sandinistas around rejection of the pact between the FSLN and Arnoldo Alemán. Opinion polls showed that over 80% of the population opposed

the pact's agreements, and over half of all Sandinistas disagreed with the path chosen despite the propagandistic campaign arguing that the constitutional and electoral reforms agreed to in the pact would guarantee the FSLN victory in the 2001 elections.

In 2000, the Democratic Left again reiterated its opposition to Daniel Ortega's perpetual presidential candidacy and thousands of Sandinistas expressed their own disagreement in the FSLN primary elections. Despite rigged elections, official results showed over 40% having voted for pre-candidates Víctor Hugo Tinoco and Alejandro Martínez Cuenca, although it is known that they really pulled over 50%. The results of the 2001 general elections did not justify the pact defenders' argument and again the Right won the presidency, this time with the victory of Enrique Bolaños.

Recent events are better known. The FSLN leadership—by then one official body and another equally real one in the shadows representing the interests of the economic groups and with evident power assigned to Rosario Murillo, General Secretary Daniel Ortega's wife—chose to “play both sides,” cutting deals with either Bolaños or Alemán based on the needs of the moment.

This explains why, despite strong pressure from the base and the population in general, the FSLN's official position on corruption was timid, ambiguous and irrelevant. Not until commitments had been wrung from the Bolaños government did Daniel give the FSLN legislative bench the nod to strip Arnoldo Alemán of his parliamentary unity so he could be tried on corruption charges.

US meddling, Washington's visceral hatred of anything Sandinista and President Bolaños' servile attitude shattered the Ortega-Bolaños pact's precarious equilibrium and Ortega returned with new energy to his pact with Alemán, by that time sentenced to 20 years in “prison,” which he is still serving on his luxurious hacienda. Daniel Ortega and his buddies met with Alemán innumerable times in that residential “prison” and in the drunken atmosphere of that union signed “strategic agreements” with a man convicted of brazenly pillaging the public treasury! They even recorded this ignominy in a despicable photograph that has provided inerasable proof of their conspiring.

Demobilized, Resigned and Cowed in the Ortega-Murillo Family's Hands

There is more to these commitments than is publicly visible. Under the perverse “one for you, one for me” logic, Daniel Ortega and Arnoldo Alemán divvied up all the important public posts, sentences, public funds, laws and judges. This process has intensified the conviction that all decisions taken in Nicaraguan state institutions directly depend on the will of the two *caudillos*.

Simultaneously, many FSLN leaders have begun to get actively involved in fundamentalist religious sects, creating an objective confusion between their political and religious militancy. It was no accident that this coincided with the evident pact between the Ortega-Murillo family and Cardinal Obando after it became clear that the corruption had sunk its roots into various institutions linked to the Catholic hierarchy as well.

This other pact also has expressions in the public institutions. The PLC evidently demanded the presidency of the Supreme Electoral Council for one of its own militants, but the FSLN made sure it went to Obando's highly questioned protégé, Roberto Rivas. It was also expressed in the public defense of Cardinal Obando by Ortega backers through radio and TV campaigns, banners and flyers with

mottoes such as “Obando, prince of reconciliation, the FSLN supports you.” Or in banners alluding to the Virgin Mary, all signed officially by the FSLN. Or in the meshing of political and private activities such the Ortega-Murillo religious marriage officiated by Obando, covered by the FSLN propaganda secretariat and sent out to all the TV channels as if it were a party act.

The official FSLN is increasingly controlled by the Ortega-Murillo family circle and its economic group. Together with their intimate allies from the powerful Business Bloc, they have not only wrested the FSLN as an instrument of change away from the people, but have slid down the path of conformity and resignation—similar to the effects of certain religious currents—through the opiate of electioneering and the insane competition for posts of power.

Today’s FSLN: An Autocratic Power Surrounded by Courtiers

Autocracy—power in the hands of a single person—is the polar opposite of democracy. It damages the development of any political or social force, particularly one that claims to work for transformation. The FSLN hasn’t been led in a political direction as a result of debate, analysis and joint decisions since the 1998 congress. It has instead suffered an involution from collective leadership to authentic autocracy.

What has happened to the citizenry has also happened to the party membership. It isn’t passive, but rather engages every day, in practice. It can’t be called submissive, because it is not blindly subordinate. We have the right and duty to be critical, self-critical, thoughtful and belligerent and to take an active part in our party’s decisions. Autocratic power promotes a passive membership, one that deposits its sovereignty in the autocrat. This isn’t being a militant; it’s being a vassal. Autocratic power seeks to reduce militancy to vassalage, which is why thousands of us have been rebelling for years, refusing to subordinate ourselves to what’s happening in our party.

In our Nicaragua, desperation is growing alongside poverty. And we Sandinistas haven’t only been despoiled of a force for change that used to represent us, we’ve also been plunged into alienation. Because autocrats don’t educate, don’t provide tools for shaping subjects who feel that they are owners of their own destiny. Autocrats have no interest in debate, diversity of thought, alternative information or political formation.

To maintain power, autocrats need a compact contingent of courtiers to guarantee their power. Autocrats depend on their court, and the courtiers on the autocrat’s power. They need each other. Autocratic power also needs religious power on its side, turning spiritual affairs into an instrument of domination. It even needs magic and the stars lined up to sustain it.

In the Ortega court everything revolves around proximity to power and struggles for leadership positions and public posts. Its main cadres periodically get embroiled in internal battles over inclusion on the privileged list and many unemployed middle-level cadres systematically sell out for some space that will toss them salary crumbs from the tables of power served from the courtiers’ control of the institutions.

But, we know many revolutionaries inside the current party structures who are making unflagging efforts to remain faithful to Carlos Fonseca’s legacy, fighting for political education and the party’s grassroots orientation. Their efforts are praiseworthy, inspired by the colors of our banner, an

understandable concern to preserve the party's unity in the hope that one day Daniel Ortega will rectify his path.

Resisting and Struggling Against an Inhumane Capitalism

As a current of opinion, the Democratic Left has consistently demanded that Daniel's wing of the party return to the FSLN's original postulates. As historical militants in our organization, we have demanded rectification time and again, warning of the de facto capitulation implied by all these attitudes and decisions.

We've done it by political means, writing in the media, developing activities with grassroots Sandinista sectors, participating in all spaces of resistance we've been able to pry open, with a legitimate agenda that includes total rejection of imperialist policies and the war against Iraq; militant solidarity with the people, revolution and leadership of the Cuban revolution, especially with Fidel Castro; and militant backing of the Palestinian people's struggle and Venezuela's Bolivarian revolution.

We've been participating in the forums of resistance against the Free Trade Agreements, Plan Puebla Panama and have particularly mobilized against ratification of the Central American Free Trade Agreement, against privatization of water and for defense of people's rights in general. We've also been supporting the struggle of workers affected by Nemagon and the just demands of consumers against the public service rate hikes.

From the different spaces the Democratic Left's members occupy in civil society, in the alternative social movements and grassroots organizations, we have supported people's efforts to get some social responses and have developed civic education efforts. At the same time that "Danielismo" has been deconstructing the FSLN as a force for change, we have continued struggling to reconstruct Sandinismo inside the party and from other arenas of society.

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