



PROJECT MUSE®

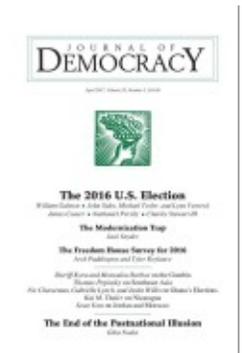
## Nicaragua: A Return to Caudillismo

Kai M. Thaler

Journal of Democracy, Volume 28, Number 2, April 2017, pp. 157-169 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2017.0032>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/653384>

# NICARAGUA: A RETURN TO CAUDILLISMO

*Kai M. Thaler*

*Kai M. Thaler is a doctoral candidate in government at Harvard University and a Democracy Doctoral Fellow at the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government.*

On 6 November 2016, Nicaraguan president Daniel Ortega of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) was reelected to a third consecutive term, winning 72 percent of the vote in a contest marred by the exclusion of the main opposition coalition. Ortega has been at the center of Nicaraguan politics for nearly four decades. A leader of the 1979 Sandinista revolution that overthrew longtime dictator Anastasio Somoza, he also held the presidency from 1985 to 1990, when he was defeated in Nicaragua's historic 1990 presidential election by democratic opposition leader Violeta Chamorro. After unsuccessful attempts at regaining the presidency as the candidate of the FSLN in 1996 and 2001, he was returned to office in 2006.

Since this dramatic comeback, Ortega has steadily abandoned the ideals that he and the FSLN had professed as they swept to power at the head of an armed leftist revolution. While solidifying his power, the 72-year-old Ortega has reversed his relations with former enemies. He now enjoys backing from the private business sector and the Catholic Church hierarchy, and maintains fairly smooth relations with the United States. This onetime scourge of the right-wing Somoza dictatorship still employs revolutionary symbols and rhetoric, but has made no move to rebuild the FSLN's coalition of urban workers, segments of the peasantry, civil society groups, and moderate members of the bourgeoisie. Instead, under Ortega the FSLN has become a hegemonic ruling party with a personalist bent, while the president himself has shape-shifted from left-wing revolutionary populist to right-leaning neopatrimonial dictator in the older Latin American style.

The opposition's call for voter abstention in the November 2016 gen-

eral election set up the landslide win for Ortega, whose vice-presidential running mate was his politically influential wife Rosario Murillo. Many Nicaraguans fear that they are witnessing the rise of a new dynasty eerily reminiscent of the Somoza family dictatorship that the FSLN deposed in 1979. Outmaneuvered by the nimble Ortega, internally divided, and ground down by selective state repression and harassment, the opposition is hobbled and pessimistic. Having ignored the opposition's abstention campaign, Ortega rules virtually unchallenged as his country continues its slide from competitive authoritarianism toward authoritarianism plain and simple. In the course of building his power since 2006, Ortega has raised numerous obstacles to any turn back toward democracy.

Nicaragua's democratic institutions remained fragile in the wake of the Sandinistas' defeat at the polls in 1990. Even when Ortega accepted his defeat by Chamorro, it was far from clear whether he respected democratic norms. While in opposition, the FSLN sought to "rule from below" via disruptive popular mobilizations that could "make Nicaragua virtually ungovernable."<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, the postwar democratization efforts of the 1990s equipped the country with the separation of powers, an independent and legitimate electoral system, and depoliticized professional security forces. In his quest for a way back to power, Ortega would erode each of these democratic bequests.

After his failed bids to win the presidency in 1996 and 2001, Ortega succeeded in 2006 despite winning only 38 percent of the vote, the same percentage that he had received in 1996 and a lower one than he had claimed in 2001.<sup>2</sup> His 2006 victory resulted from institutional changes in the electoral system and a split among leaders on the right. The FSLN, meanwhile, had become more of Ortega's personal following, especially after many former revolutionary officials left to form the Sandinista Renewal Movement (MRS) in 1995.<sup>3</sup>

Most importantly, the threshold for a presidential candidate to win the election in the first round and avoid a runoff had been reduced from 45 percent to 40, or 35 if the leading candidate enjoyed at least a 5 percent margin. This change resulted from the infamous "Pacto" concluded in 1999–2000 by Ortega and then-President Arnoldo Alemán of the Constitutionalist Liberal Party (PLC), who sought insurance against punishment for corruption and a guarantee of future influence. Through this agreement, the PLC and the FSLN established a party "duopoly" that facilitated the vote-threshold reduction, while the courts and electoral commission became subject to partisan control.<sup>4</sup> Alemán's handpicked successor Enrique Bolaños won the 2001 election, but the politicized institutions and the electoral-threshold change set the stage for Ortega's victory in 2006. That year, the right split between Alemán and Bolaños after Bolaños prosecuted his former mentor for embezzlement, and Ortega's pact with Alemán promised to let the latter back into politics.

This pattern of institutional changes meant to increase the FSLN's

power continued after Ortega took office in January 2007, as the new president “walked a tightrope between democracy and autocracy.”<sup>5</sup> The opposition parties, which controlled the unicameral, 92-seat National Assembly, quickly became worried about Ortega’s authoritarian aspirations.

The 2008 municipal elections offered an early test of Ortega’s democratic bona fides—one that he failed. The Supreme Electoral Council (CSE) opened the campaign by stripping the MRS of its juridical personhood, then forcibly placed an Ortega loyalist at the head of the right-of-center Nicaraguan Liberal Alliance (ALN).<sup>6</sup> This drove the MRS and the ALN to band together with the rightist PLC under the latter’s banner. On election day, the FSLN expanded the number of municipalities it controlled from 85 to 91, unfazed by opposition and independent observers who charged it with vote fraud and manipulation. The opposition saw its influence shrink despite mass protests in Managua, and Ortega undercut municipal autonomy by putting his wife in charge of partisan Citizens’ Power Councils (CPCs) that acted as parallel local governments and controlled the distribution of public goods and services.

## Eroding Democracy

In 2009, Ortega went to the Supreme Court—a body stacked, like the CSE, with FSLN loyalists—to overturn a 1995 constitutional provision banning consecutive presidential terms. During 2010, at the prodding of FSLN leaders in the National Assembly, the courts steadily struck down laws on the separation of powers, thereby increasing Ortega’s power over judicial and civil service appointments. The Assembly also passed changes that allowed politicization of the country’s security forces, while expanding these agencies’ domestic powers.

In the 2011 elections, the CSE refused to grant credentials for poll observers from domestic civil society groups and opposition parties, and exerted partisan control over the electoral process at all levels. Once again, the opposition alleged fraud, but the CSE did not publicly provide vote totals at the polling-station level, as required by law, only publishing municipal-level percentages. Moreover, international and domestic observers were blocked from multiple polling stations. These and other tactics led the Carter Center to label the 2011 vote “the least transparent national election in Nicaragua in the last 20 years, the results of which have proven to be impossible to verify.”<sup>7</sup> The CSE declared Ortega the winner with 63 percent of the vote, a striking increase over 2006 even considering the weakness of his 2011 opponent, Fabio Gadea.

During Ortega’s new term, the erosion of democratic institutions picked up speed.<sup>8</sup> With 63 Assembly seats, the FSLN had the power to change particular constitutional provisions and even to call a constituent assembly to rewrite the document. In the 2012 municipal elections,

FSLN candidates—all of them chosen by Ortega and Murillo—won 134 of 153 mayorships amid widespread abstentions and fraud charges.<sup>9</sup>

In 2012 and 2013, the Assembly passed new laws to enable the construction of a Nicaraguan interoceanic canal, a longstanding aspiration among the country's politicians. Supporters cast the project—intended to outmatch the recently enlarged Panama Canal in size and capacity—as a potential economic boon for Nicaragua, whose roughly six-million people have Central America's lowest per capita income.<sup>10</sup> The FSLN railroaded these laws through with minimal debate and no background studies. The canal project's concessionaire, a shadowy Chinese company known as HKND, was to receive sovereign control over canal infrastructure and property for fifty years, with an option to extend these privileges for another fifty. The Nicaraguan government gained broad authority to expropriate both private property and constitutionally protected indigenous communal property along the planned canal route between Punta Gorda on the Caribbean and Brito on the Pacific, but also exposed the assets of the country's central bank to claims by HKND in the event of disputes.

Even more disturbingly, constitutional reforms in 2014 expanded the president's power to rule by decree and permitted unlimited reelection. The defense and governance ministries were removed from the security forces' chain of command, reducing oversight and leaving Ortega in charge of appointing military and police commanders. The 2015 Sovereign Security Law erased barriers between internal and external security, and gave the Ortega government wide discretion to use coercion against any person or entity deemed a threat to the state, society, or economy. Commercial interests developed by the military and its leaders have restrained them from challenging Ortega's decisions.<sup>11</sup>

The CPCs, which served as both a means of distributing FSLN patronage and a forum for local-level citizen involvement in politics, have been replaced by Family, Community, and Life Cabinets (*Gabinetes*), now also linked to the police and used to keep communities under surveillance. A broader policy of corporatism has seen the government coopt and favor certain civil society organizations while suppressing others; influence nongovernmental nodes of power to undercut potential challengers; and respond with force when protests break out.

### **The Emerging FSLN Party-State**

The November 2016 elections marked the emergence of a full-scale FSLN party-state. The FSLN may once have had a collective leadership, but now it is firmly under the control of the Ortega-Murillo family. In May, Ortega had refused to allow any international electoral observation. The 65-year-old Murillo, whose public profile grows ever higher and whom many Nicaraguans see as the government's true power-wielder,

became the FSLN's vice-presidential candidate. Should Ortega resign or die—there are persistent rumors that he is chronically ill—she will succeed him.<sup>12</sup> Civil society and media organizations came under growing government pressure. Foreign researchers and NGO officials studying the canal project or political issues were surveilled or deported.<sup>13</sup>

The *coup de grâce* for what remained of democracy in Nicaragua came in June 2016, as the FSLN delegitimized the political opposition and removed it from the legislature. On June 8, after the opposition had agreed to organize under the umbrella of the Independent Liberal Party (PLI) for the elections, the Supreme Court ordered Eduardo Montealegre's removal as PLI leader. Pedro Reyes, an Ortega ally, was installed as the new party leader, and he demanded that PLI deputies and their MRS alliance partners submit to his leadership. When they refused, the CSE stripped them of their Assembly seats, ruling that their election had been invalidated by their deviation from the "party line."<sup>14</sup> The only opponents to Ortega and the FSLN left on the November 2016 ballot were Alemán's PLC (which still had a pact with Ortega), Reyes's compromised "new" PLI, and several marginal parties.

Ortega's farcical manipulation of the electoral system drew international condemnation, but he did not waver. Within Nicaragua, there was a mix of acceptance from FSLN supporters and outrage or resignation from the opposition. The experience of fraud in past elections had bred apathy and discouragement. The FSLN enjoyed a clear advantage when it came to campaign advertising. In Managua, the non-FSLN parties on the ballot did have some signs and banners up, but the city was heavily papered with FSLN posters, some showing only Murillo. Ortega and Murillo were the only candidates anywhere in Nicaragua to have billboards, and their campaign signs hung on many government buildings until just four days before the vote, a violation of electoral laws. In Nicaraguan elections, telephone poles are often painted with the colors and names of parties or candidates; in 2016, many poles in Granada, Masaya, and the capital of Managua still bore the names of opposition candidates from past elections, or had been repainted in the FSLN colors of red, white, and black. There was little graffiti of any kind (whether for or against the government), suggesting general apathy. Protests were relatively small.

In Managua, election day was eerily calm. Normally bustling streets were largely empty. The opposition's abstention call seemed as if it was succeeding. Few people lined up at the polling stations in central Managua, and opposition press reports and online photos from around the country, even those carried by the government outlet *El Nuevo Diario*, showed heavy turnout in only a few areas. The election was largely peaceful, though there was an armed clash near polling stations in the northern Nueva Segovia region, and ballot boxes were burned at several precincts in Nueva Guinea, a region unsettled by opposition to the proposed canal.

By evening, however, preparations for Ortega and Murillo's victory celebration were in full swing. The CSE's final results accorded them 72.4 percent of the vote. The FSLN won 70 Assembly seats, and Alemán's PLC became the leading "opposition" party with 13 seats. Parliamentary opposition barely hangs on as a ghost. It is clear that large numbers of voters abstained, even if the stay-away rate was nowhere near the 80 percent that some opposition leaders claimed. The CSE reported turnout of 68 percent, but that is almost surely false. Nicaraguans' faith that they can express their political preferences at the ballot box and have it matter is clearly dwindling.<sup>15</sup>

### **Befriending Old Enemies**

Ortega, running as the incumbent against a neutered and factionalized opposition, controlling the courts and the election-oversight body, and generally enjoying approval ratings above 50 percent, was always likely to win, even absent a boycott.<sup>16</sup> How has Ortega increased his authoritarian control while maintaining support among important constituencies? Two key factors are strategic alliances with former rivals, and the Venezuelan-aided continuation of Nicaragua's macroeconomic growth and stability.

Ortega has established close relationships with individuals and interest groups who once opposed him, while also maintaining stable and cooperative relations with the United States, the FSLN's great enemy in the 1980s. The hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church fiercely opposed the FSLN during the revolution, but Ortega repaired relations with the powerful Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo (b. 1926) before returning to the presidency. Ortega and Murillo, who had lived together for decades, were finally married by Obando y Bravo. Ortega also committed to a hard-line, Church-friendly anti-abortion stance and, reversing the FSLN's historical commitment to women's rights, outlawed abortion in 2007. Under the slogan "Christian, Socialist, and In Solidarity," Ortega and the FSLN now incorporate Christianity as a key part of their platform.

Ortega's Christian turn helped to split votes off from the right-wing opposition; it also allowed Ortega to capitalize on the rising influence of Protestant evangelical churches in the country. Moreover, Obando y Bravo is close to CSE head Roberto Rivas. The cardinal also supported Ortega when the president faced accusations of sexual abuse from his stepdaughter Zoilamérica Narváez. FSLN officials were told in no uncertain terms that the allegations were false and not to be discussed, and Murillo stood by Ortega against her daughter. Many see this as the moment when the ambitious Murillo sealed her power over Ortega.

Ortega has coopted other former opponents, while delegitimizing and slapping down those who question his authority. Ortega's 2006 running

mate was Jaime Morales Carazo, a civilian leader of the Sandinistas' old enemies, the Contras. Edén Pastora and Brooklyn Rivera, anti-FSLN rebel commanders in the 1980s, also reconciled with Ortega, though Rivera was purged from the FSLN in 2015 for challenging Ortega over the protection of indigenous lands. As it became clear that Ortega had actually begun following a crony-capitalist program, Nicaragua's economic elites, represented most coherently by the Supreme Council of Higher Enterprise (COSEP), also turned from skeptics and opponents of the FSLN into supporters or fellow travelers.

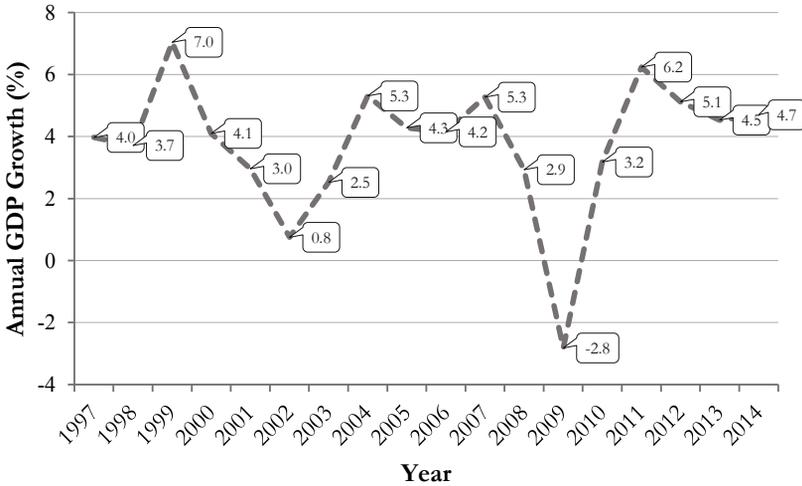
Billionaire businessman Carlos Pellas described economic elites' relations with Ortega as an "alliance entailing a unity of purpose . . . in a political effort for development and [creating] confidence in the business sector."<sup>17</sup> This alliance has worked well both for the preexisting elite and for crony capitalists associated with Ortega: Nicaragua's economic growth has primarily benefited a few, with a huge increase in multimillionaires since 2010 in what remains the Americas' second-poorest country. Land inequality, reduced by revolutionary-era agrarian reforms, has skyrocketed,<sup>18</sup> while farmers from the Pacific coast are violently pushing the agricultural frontier into indigenous lands in Nicaragua's east.

Throughout all this, Ortega has enjoyed a relatively peaceful relationship with the United States. Ortega is still known to denounce Washington when rousing his followers, but he is hardly another Hugo Chávez or Evo Morales. On the contrary, Ortega's stances in favor of business and free trade have brought him into line with U.S. economic interests. Nicaragua's military cooperates closely with the U.S. Coast Guard and armed services in the fight against the drug trade. Moreover, Ortega served U.S. interests by keeping Nicaragua's southern border with Costa Rica closed against thousands of Cuban and other migrants seeking to reach the United States from late 2015 through 2016. This cooperation forestalled stronger U.S. criticism of Ortega's creeping authoritarianism.

Traditional sources of FSLN support, by contrast, have been discarded, and civil society has been coopted or coerced into a shrinking role. With Murillo serving as government spokesperson, access to official information and advertising money has been restricted to government-allied outlets. Ortega's children now control a range of media organizations; the formerly pro-FSLN but independent *Nuevo Diario* has become completely partisan; some critical outlets have faced hostile takeovers or license revocations; independent press organizations have been infiltrated and taken over following the creation of a pro-FSLN journalists' union; and remaining opposition publications such as *La Prensa* and *Confidencial* have seen increasing government interference in their affairs.<sup>19</sup> These circumstances severely constrain press scrutiny of wrongdoing and corruption.

Civil society organizations have similarly found themselves subject-

**FIGURE—ANNUAL PERCENTAGE GDP GROWTH IN NICARAGUA, 1997–2014**



Source: World Bank, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?end=2015&locations=NI&start=1997>.

ed to investigation, funding restrictions, and, when they have organized protests, attacks by gangs of FSLN supporters and, increasingly, police. Government critics have suffered break-ins at their offices, lost their academic posts, and at times been physically attacked. Unions and women's organizations, historically popular bulwarks of the FSLN, have been corporatized or marginalized. Among Ortega's six surviving fellow FSLN *comandantes*, only Bayardo Arce remains a supporter of the current FSLN; even Humberto Ortega, the president's younger brother and a former Sandinista military chief, displays a mix of ambiguity and opposition. Finally, the poor, whose liberation supposedly once formed the FSLN's main goal, are now viewed as a collection of individuals whose votes can be bought by a combination of economic growth and targeted patronage.

### Macroeconomic Stability and Microeconomic Patronage

Ortega and his supporters credit his policies and alliances with producing a record of steady macroeconomic growth. Critics, however, point out that Ortega entered office in 2007 with the best macroeconomic conditions enjoyed by any Nicaraguan government since the 1970s, and that the level of growth achieved during his tenure has been merely consistent with what the country achieved under his post-1945 predecessors. Ortega's economic policies have reinforced his rule in three ways. First, a deal with Venezuela's late President Hugo Chávez brought Nicaragua loans and subsidized oil. Second, international lend-

ers and domestic capitalists were reassured by apparently responsible fiscal management and respect for private property. Finally, Venezuelan money and growth have funded patronage for the poor.

By 2007, Nicaragua's economy had seen a decade and a half of steady growth, reduced debt, and strong trade relations. Following setbacks due to corruption during Alemán's presidency, relative stability and confidence had returned under Bolaños. As the Figure shows, Ortega was simply continuing a growth trend that was disrupted only by the 2009 global recession. Excluding that disruption, GDP growth from Alemán in the late 1990s through Ortega in 2014 averaged 4 percent a year.

Economic performance under Ortega is less impressive when one considers two key factors: the global commodities boom of the 2000s, and Nicaragua's special economic relationship with Venezuela. The commodities boom saw rising exports of and profits from such Nicaraguan products as minerals, timber, coffee, and beef. Remittances from Nicaraguans abroad also rose. Most important, however, was the flow of oil and petrodollars from Venezuela.

Immediately after taking office, Ortega joined Chávez's Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA). The two countries then established the Petrocaribe program: Venezuela would meet Nicaragua's oil needs, and Nicaragua's national oil importer Petronic would pay for half of each shipment within ninety days and the other half in twenty-five years, at low interest. To implement the deal, Petronic paid the Venezuelan national oil company PDVSA the 50 percent owed for each shipment within three months, using government funds. The Venezuelan company then loaned the same amount (over the term of a quarter-century) to Caruna, an obscure FSLN-owned bank. This meant that public funds were paid to PDVSA and then sent back to a private entity in Nicaragua. This was the channel through which most Venezuelan aid has flowed to Nicaragua.

It is unclear exactly how much of this aid—it totaled nearly US\$4.5 billion between 2008 and 2015—has gone to private ends, but the PDVSA loans accounted for more than \$3.5 billion of it. The International Monetary Fund estimates that 38 percent of the funds loaned to Caruna went to pay for public-sector projects designed to serve clientelist aims and to bolster the legitimacy of the government, while the remaining 62 percent went to private projects. Caruna money has been traced to a web of companies controlled or influenced by the FSLN and its leading couple.<sup>20</sup>

Venezuelan money helped to insulate Ortega from international pressure. With private-sector growth strong, the balance-of-payments picture looking better, and antipoverty programs being funded by Venezuela, international financial institutions have maintained support for Nicaragua despite its leaders' political illiberalism. When the United States and the European Union restricted aid flows following the dis-

puted 2008 municipal elections, Venezuelan cash cushioned that blow as well. Continued growth and new export opportunities have kept domestic capital appeased.

The “public” use of the Venezuelan money has been to fund lower-cost, small-scale credit and development programs, with government officials or party-controlled CPCs and Gabinetes deciding where the money goes. One of the most popular programs has been Plan Techo, a scheme to give corrugated zinc roof panels to poor families. It is heavily publicized and a big help to the poorest Nicaraguans, but it costs very little. The same holds for microloans, programs to supply schoolchildren, food and livestock grants, and neighborhood-level road improvements. The FSLN directs all these programs toward its supporters. Each program costs only tens of millions of dollars. Together, the programs build loyalty among citizens whose circumstances are precarious. The remainder of the privatized money has allowed Ortega, Murillo, and their associates to boost their control over key parts of the economy.

### **What Comes Next?**

Political pessimism is rife among Nicaraguans and outside observers alike. Ortega’s positioning of Murillo as his successor has set the stage for a family dynasty: The couple’s children control many key businesses, and their son Laureano has emerged on the political stage as a key player in promoting the proposed canal project. Ortega has eroded opposition and checks and balances within the government and society. Protests against the 2016 election results and continued mobilization against the planned canal have been met with police repression. Internal avenues for change appear to be blocked. The opposition lacks unity and charismatic leadership, though the ousted PLI leader Montealegre, PLI vice-presidential candidate Violeta Granera, or anti-canal peasant leader Francisca Ramírez could step to the fore. The opposition may need a broad, multiclass coalition—reminiscent of the one that the FSLN led against Somoza in 1979—that would unite the (largely bourgeois) opposition parties, peasants angered by the canal and other extractive development projects, indigenous groups, and antigovernment women and young people.

Prospects are better, though still highly uncertain, in terms of external pressure. Before the elections, Ortega agreed to an Organization of American States (OAS) dialogue about the state of democracy in Nicaragua. OAS secretary-general Luis Almagro visited Nicaragua on 1 December 2016. A relaxation of policing during his visit enabled opposition supporters to protest in Managua, but it is unclear what, if any, concessions may result from OAS intercession. Civil society leaders worry that any reopening of space for opposition parties may be counterbalanced by a crackdown on nongovernmental organizations.<sup>21</sup>

Pressure against the Ortega-Murillo regime could come from the

United States, whose embassy strongly criticized the conduct of the 2016 elections. In response to Ortega's crackdown before and during the voting, conservatives in the U.S. Congress put forward the Nicaragua Investment Conditionality Act (NICA), which would veto non-humanitarian aid to Nicaragua from international financial institutions until steps are taken to restore democratic political competitiveness. Although Republican control of the White House and both chambers of Congress might seem to augur a harder stand against Ortega, there is reason for skepticism. The main supporters of NICA are Senators Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio and Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen. All are members of the caucus in Congress that opposes Cuba's Castro regime, which suggests that the measure was motivated by erroneous perceptions of Ortega's Nicaragua as leftist. Nicaragua's business elite finds NICA worrisome, but the wealthy can always move their money. Those who would suffer most from an aid cutoff would be the poor, and it does not take much imagination to picture what a coup this could be for Ortega's propaganda operation. The United States would also need to reckon with what confronting Ortega might do to Nicaraguan cooperation in the tasks of limiting drug trafficking, criminal gangs, and international migration.

More worrying for Ortega might be a general economic downturn. Commodities prices have dropped, Venezuela is in chaos under Chávez's successor Nicolás Maduro, and China's weakened economy threatens both future export prices and the canal project (the Chinese billionaire who owns HKND has reportedly lost much of his wealth). Although Vladimir Putin's Russia has undertaken increased security cooperation with Nicaragua, it lacks the economic muscle to substitute for the U.S. market if Ortega's relations with Washington deteriorate. Economic contraction would press Ortega and Murillo to use privatized funds for patronage or state programs in hopes of heading off popular unrest.<sup>22</sup>

Another possible threat to the Ortega-Murillo hegemony could come from a split in FSLN ranks, perhaps in conjunction with an economic downturn. Murillo has bolstered her public profile and influence among women, young people, and the poor by controlling ministries that provide goods and services as patronage, yet she still lacks respect among significant segments of the FSLN, most importantly within the security forces. If Ortega leaves the scene, the FSLN could plunge into a leadership and legitimacy crisis, with results no one can predict.

Today, the FSLN is well-entrenched within state institutions, and the opposition is feeble and fragmented. The country has a history of armed challenges to power, but instances of resistance by force to the Ortega regime have been isolated and sporadic. Absent an economic shock or other crisis, prospects for democratization are dim. Yet Nicaraguan political culture is not predisposed to strongman rule: On the contrary,

the 2016 abstention campaign and survey data indicate that support for democracy is relatively strong.<sup>23</sup> It remains to be seen whether the opposition can capitalize on external conditions and internal FSLN fractures to force a democratic reopening, or whether an Ortega-Murillo dynasty will endure.

Ortega has followed the path of Vladimir Putin, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Viktor Orbán, and other illiberal leaders who have moved from electoral victory to strongman rule. Ortega, however, has resuscitated a variety of authoritarianism—that of the right-wing personalist *caudillo*—not seen in Latin America for decades, a worrying throwback to darker times. Redemocratization will be a difficult task. Nicaraguans should lead it, but they will need international help.

## NOTES

The author is grateful to interlocutors in Nicaragua, to the Ash Center and Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard for research funding, and to Jorge Domínguez, Mateo Jarquín, Steven Levitsky, Eric Mosinger, and workshop participants at Harvard and MIT for helpful comments.

1. William M. LeoGrande, “Political Parties and Post-Revolutionary Politics in Nicaragua,” in Louis W. Goodman, William M. LeoGrande, and Johanna Mendelson Forman, eds., *Political Parties and Democracy in Central America* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1992), 198.

2. As Edmundo Jarquín points out, Ortega’s victory, unlike the rise of left-leaning populists in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela, did not result from a party-system collapse, an economic crisis, or the emergence of a new social movement or coalition. Edmundo Jarquín, “Introducción,” in Edmundo Jarquín, ed., *El régimen de Ortega: ¿Una nueva dictadura familiar en el continente?* (Managua: PAVSA, 2016), 23.

3. There was potential in 2006 for a split on the left, but MRS candidate Herty Lewites, a former FSLN leader, died during the campaign while he was polling close to Ortega.

4. See David Close and Kalowatie Deonandan, eds., *Undoing Democracy: The Politics of Electoral Caudillismo* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington, 2004); David Close, *Nicaragua: Navigating the Politics of Democracy* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2016).

5. Leslie E. Anderson and Lawrence C. Dodd, “Nicaragua: Progress amid Regress?” *Journal of Democracy* 20 (July 2009): 157.

6. Anderson and Dodd, “Progress amid Regress?”; José Antonio Peraza, “Colapso del sistema electoral,” in Jarquín, ed., *El régimen de Ortega*, 124.

7. Carter Center, “Carter Center Statement on the Reappointment of Magistrates to Nicaraguan Supreme Electoral Council,” 1 June 2014, [www.cartercenter.org/news/pr/nicaragua-06022014.html](http://www.cartercenter.org/news/pr/nicaragua-06022014.html).

8. See Close, *Nicaragua*, ch. 7; Julio Icaza Gallard, “Fin del estado de derecho: los principales reformas constitucionales y legislativas,” in Jarquín, ed., *El régimen de Ortega*, 65–115.

9. “2012 Municipal Elections: Chronicle of an Outcome Foretold,” *Envío*, November 2012, [www.envio.org.ni/articulo/4618](http://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/4618).

10. José de Córdoba, "Nicaragua Revives Its Canal Dream," *Wall Street Journal*, 13 June 2013, [www.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887323734304578543432234604100](http://www.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887323734304578543432234604100).

11. Interview with Roberto Cajina, Managua, 3 July 2015.

12. Tim Johnson, "In Nicaragua, Fears of Dynastic Power as Ortega Jointly Wield Power," *McClatchy*, 9 January 2014, [www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/article24761302.html](http://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/article24761302.html).

13. Nina Lakhani, "Nicaragua Suppresses Opposition to Ensure One-Party Election, Critics Say," *Guardian*, 26 June 2016, [www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/26/nicaragua-opposition-daniel-ortega-presidential-election](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/26/nicaragua-opposition-daniel-ortega-presidential-election).

14. Carlos Salinas, "Daniel Ortega asesta otro golpe al Parlamento y se hace con todo el poder en Nicaragua," *El País*, 30 July 2016, [http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2016/07/29/america/1469811779\\_708844.html](http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2016/07/29/america/1469811779_708844.html); "Not a Stone Will Be Left Standing..." *Envío*, August 2016, [www.envio.org.ni/articulo/5226](http://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/5226).

15. "A New Move on the Game Board: The Voters' Massive 'NO!'" *Envío*, November 2016, [www.envio.org.ni/articulo/5280](http://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/5280).

16. Victor Hugo Tinoco, however, argues that Ortega would have lost truly free elections, citing declining poll numbers, and it is unlikely that the FSLN would have maintained its legislative supermajority. See his "Nicaragua's Electoral Farce Augurs a Conflict with Whoever Wins in the US," *Envío*, August 2016, [www.envio.org.ni/articulo/5228](http://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/5228).

17. Icaza Gallard, "Fin del estado de derecho," 101–102.

18. Enrique Sáenz, "La gestión económica: ¿Despilfarro de oportunidades?" in Jarquín, ed., *El régimen Ortega*, 240–43.

19. See Guillermo Rothschild Villanueva, "Asedios a la libertad de expresión," in Jarquín, ed., *El régimen de Ortega*, 186–208; IREX, *Media Sustainability Index 2016: The Development of Sustainable Independent Media in Nicaragua* (Washington, D.C.: IREX, 2016), [www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/IREX\\_MSI\\_Nicaragua\\_10-17-16\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/IREX_MSI_Nicaragua_10-17-16_FINAL.pdf); and the reports of watchdog groups such as Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders.

20. See International Monetary Fund, *Nicaragua, Staff Report for the 2013 Article IV Consultation* (Washington, D.C.: IMF, 2013); Sáenz, "La gestión económica"; Iván Olivares, "La 'alcancía' de Albanisa," *Confidencial*, 9 April 2016, <https://confidencial.com.ni/la-alcancia-de-albanisa>; Olivares, "Una pulpería de negocios," *Confidencial*, 11 April 2016, <https://confidencial.com.ni/una-pulperia-de-negocios>; Olivares, "PDVSA dijo no al 'negocio' de Caruna," *Confidencial*, 15 August 2016, <https://confidencial.com.ni/pdvsadijo-no-al-negocio-caruna>.

21. Interviews with individuals who requested to remain anonymous, Managua, November 2016.

22. Since Ortega took office in 2007, the Nicaraguan córdoba has lost about 60 percent of its value against the U.S. dollar.

23. On support for personalism, see Forrest D. Colburn and Arturo Cruz S., "Personalism and Populism in Nicaragua," *Journal of Democracy* 23 (April 2012): 104–18. On support for democracy, see surveys conducted by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) and Latinobarómetro.