

# Nicaragua's Failed Utopia

Francis McDonagh

Many aspects of the society created by the 1979 Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua qualify it to be described as a utopia. Perhaps most notable is the literacy campaign launched less than a year after the overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship. It is estimated that the campaign reduced the illiteracy rate from 50% to 13%. No less important was the methodology, which involved, as well as government institutions, citizen's associations, labour organizations, and church and student groups. The unprecedented focus on rural areas also had by-products such as infrastructural and construction work, an anti-malaria campaign, environmental, health and sanitation actions, and research for the governmental Agrarian Reform Institute. An emerging health programme reduced infant mortality by half. These results were achieved against the hostility of the United States, which regarded the revolution as a communist intrusion into its 'backyard', and supported a military opposition known as the *contras*, which attacked civilian communities and regularly killed Sandinista prisoners.

This was also a government that initially included four priests as ministers, inspired by the 'preferential option for the poor' proclaimed by the Latin American bishops' meeting in Medellín in 1968 in the wake of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1968). The Medellín conference began a transformation of the Roman Catholic Church from the closed, defensive structure created after the Reformation into one that engaged with the world and its problems.

Remarkably for a Marxist-dominated movement, the Sandinistas allowed free elections in 1990 and accepted their defeat by the opposition. Nevertheless, between their election defeat and the new government's taking office some leading Sandinistas seized estates, vehicles and other property confiscated from the previous elite. This started the fracturing of the Sandinista leadership, which had originally been a coalition of Marxists and other groups opposed to the

dictatorship. In 1994 Daniel Ortega, who had led the revolutionary junta and was later elected president, removed Sergio Ramírez from his role as vice-president. In the same year priest and poet Ernesto Cardenal, who had been minister of culture, resigned from the Sandinistas, saying: 'My resignation from the FSLN has been caused by the kidnapping of the party carried out by Daniel Ortega and the group he heads.'

The Sandinistas regained power after Daniel Ortega was re-elected to the presidency in 2006. The party also won a plurality of seats in the legislature. In 2009 the Nicaraguan Supreme Court lifted the constitutional ban that prevented presidents from serving consecutive terms, paving the way for Ortega's re-election in 2011. Having obtained a 'super-majority' in the National Assembly, the Sandinistas then pushed through changes to the constitution that removed presidential term limits, setting the stage for Ortega's re-election in 2016.

2018 was a key year for Nicaragua. In April President Ortega and Vice President Murillo ordered police and paramilitary forces to put down with violence peaceful protests that began over discontent with a government decision to reduce social security benefits. The government's excessive response included the use of live ammunition and snipers. Protesters built makeshift roadblocks and confronted police and government paramilitaries with rocks and homemade mortars. By late November, the conflict had left at least 325 persons dead, more than 2,000 injured, hundreds illegally detained and tortured, and more than 52,000 exiled in neighbouring countries. Beginning in August the Ortega government instituted a policy of 'exile, jail, or death' for anyone perceived as a member of the opposition, amended terrorism laws to include prodemocracy activities, and used the justice system to characterise civil society actors as terrorists, assassins, and coup-mongers.



*The Risen Christ* by Olivia Silva. 1982.

Primitive painting by a member of the Solentiname Community.

The risen Christ wears the Latin American traditional *cotona* shirt. The 3 crosses bear the names of the members of the Community who died in the struggle for the Revolution: Felipe, Donald and Elvis.

In 2018 student protesters were sheltered at the Jesuit Central American University in Managua. In August this year the Nicaraguan government closed down the Jesuit university and transferred its premises to a state university, which, however, has still not been able to start operations. The attack on the Jesuit university is part of a broader attack on the Catholic Church, symbolised most dramatically by the arrest of the bishop of Matagalpa, Rolando Álvarez, who is serving a 26-year sentence for ‘subversion’. A reason for the government’s focus on the Church was suggested by the Jesuit spokesman for Central America, Fr José María Tojeira: ‘Without being as much a competitor as the political opposition, it remains so at a level of awareness-raising. The Church is a very powerful force, and the contrary thinking there is in the Church, the opinion of clergy and laypeople.’

There are signs that the government’s harassment of the Church are causing it political problems internationally, as more and more governments and international bodies criticise it. This seems to be the explanation for its request to

the Vatican to take twelve imprisoned priests, who were deported to Rome on 18 October.

For the present, Nicaragua’s utopian dream is being kept alive in exile, by opposition media now forced to operate from Costa Rica, or by prominent exiles such as Giaconda Belli and Sergio Ramírez, now based in Spain. At an award ceremony in Costa Rica on 21 October the two writers commented their dream. Belli said: ‘As a Nicaraguan I can say that I am a survivor of a failed utopia. It was not just overthrowing the tyranny, but creating a happy society, where inequalities, the oppression of one person by another, would end and culture, education, freedom and humanism would thrive.’ Sergio Ramírez said the two were ‘united by the utopia of victory, of creating a new Earth under a new Heaven. It is a utopia in which we believed and continue to believe.’

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