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Democracy or Dictatorship? *The Rebirth of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua*

By Ezra K. Fieser

APRIL 2008

MANAGUA, Nicaragua—Daniel Ortega is everywhere in this city of nameless streets. He greets visitors on a welcome sign in front of the airport, surrounded by a checkerboard of dried-out empty lots and rusty corrugated metal roofs. He appears on dozens of giant billboards rising from Managua's weedy sidewalks. And campaign posters, still standing two years after the election, show his smiling face and a promise to bring power to the people.

The only thing as ubiquitous as his pockmarked face is the graffiti calling him a dictator.

Like Ortega, it was everywhere: On electricity poles and bus stops: "No! Dictadora" or "No CPC" — a direct rebuke to Citizen Power Councils, the centerpiece of the Sandinista government.

In a country long divided along political lines, both the signs for Ortega, who

was democratically elected, and the graffiti could be dismissed as harmless jousting. But after spending two weeks talking to Nicas, I saw the messages as a representation of the deep divisions the Sandinista government has caused since regaining power.

Ortega took back the presidency last year, 17 years after the Sandinista revolution first fizzled. Shortly after taking power, Ortega said that citizens would be making decisions on "all national and local projects of economic, social and cultural policies" by way of local assemblies. At the center of that promise are the Consejos del Poder Ciudadano (Citizen Power Councils) or CPCs, non-elected neighborhood councils whose leadership is selected by the Sandinista government. In a short time, with the help of Venezuelan oil aid, Ortega has organized



(Top) The message No! Dictator found on a bus stop sign on one of Managua's busy streets. (Bottom) In front, and behind, one of the many Daniel Ortega campaign signs, a graffiti message is found in opposition to CPCs — an acronym for Citizen Power Council.

more than 10,000 of the councils. Despite a Congressional vote against the CPCs, Ortega gave them governmental authority to dole out aid and administer programs aimed at alleviating poverty — from food distribution, to organizing health clinics, to choosing which streets should be paved, to administering small business loans and deciding which schools should receive more desks. In theory, the councils struck me as a creative way of addressing social issues by empowering people to make choices they believe will help them most. Eighty percent of the population lives on \$2 a day or less and the government is saying 'lets put the decision-making power into the hands of the people.'

However, the more deeply I looked at the councils, the more I understood why Nicas equate them with dictatorship. A true direct democracy would allow all citizens an equal voice in the government and even expect their participation. But under the CPC model, leaders are selected by the Sandinista government, not elected by the people. Political opponents are regularly excluded from the decision-making process. And the way the councils were formed and are financed demonstrates Ortega's willingness to do an end around democratic institutions. The councils may be sold as direct democracy, but they are anti-democratic in practice. In fact, they remind many Nicas of the neighborhood councils the Sandinistas used in the 1980s to 'defend the revolution.' Those groups, while making progress on many social programs, such as literacy and health, ended up abusing their powers and becoming the 'eyes and the ears' of the Sandinista party. On Managua's grimy streets, where distrust of the government has lingered alongside piles of black garbage bags stacked higher than cars, old political lines are being re-drawn.

To see how the CPCs operate, I traveled to 14 de Septiembre, a grassless community separated by a wide boulevard that crawls up a hill away from Lake Managua. The rows of colorful, modest, concrete houses looked like gift-wrapped boxes lining the community's narrow alleys. At mid-day, the streets were nearly empty. A middle-aged man and woman paced on the sun-baked sidewalks near a bus stop. A few teens feigned a fight, presumably for my benefit. Occasionally, a car's undercarriage scraped the street bottom trying to traverse the deep ruts in the roads.

I reached a small pink house to find six elderly Nicas sitting on stumpy white concrete posts, talking leisurely about the heat. Months earlier, the local council chose the house to site a food distribution center. Aside

from the red-and-white Coke Classic symbol and an 8.5" x 11" sign that read "Alimentos Para El Pueblo" (food for the people), the building blended unremarkably. Each Wednesday, the government delivers 1,000 pounds of beans, 500 pounds of rice and hundreds of liters of oil from the government.

Hundreds of similar centers have been set up to sell staples at heavily discounted rates — sometimes 50 percent of market price. Under the program, the CPCs contract directly with bean and rice farmers, paying what they call a "consistent amount" — slightly higher than market rate — for production throughout the year. The program seeks to expand agricultural production, which has gone from representing more than 40 percent of Nicaragua's economy in the early 1990s to 17 percent in 2006. And it feeds people in a country where the UN says one in every three children suffer from chronic malnutrition.

But in doing so, the food distribution program has become one of the most controversial aspects of the CPCs' work. Enrique Saenz, a congressman and deputy of the opposition Sandinista Renovation Movement, said the distribution center capitalize on the rising price of food — the cost of some basics has doubled in the last year, helping drive inflation up 17 percent in 2007 — by offering subsidized rice, beans and cooking oil to win political favor in neighborhoods. "They hope that by selling food and paving roads, people are going to switch to the Sandinista party," Saenz said. "Instead, it is pushing people away."

In terms of distributing food, the centers are remark-





Xiomara Cuadro discusses the local food distribution center.

haired woman, lives a few blocks from the center in a two-bedroom concrete house with four children and her mother. When the center opened, she went often, about 10 weeks in a row. Each time, she was told they had run out. Only once was she successful, getting a few pounds of beans that she said tasted like and had the consistency of pebbles. She rarely tries anymore, even though she has trouble feeding her family. "There is nothing for anybody but their friends and family. That's the only people it helps," she told me.

Minutes earlier, I watched Cuadro approach the center only to be shooed away like a child by Lidia del Carmen Urbina, who

was chosen by the Sandinista party to run the center with her family. "There is none. There's nothing," Urbina told her, shaking her index finger above her head.

"This is the problem," Cuadro said, leaning on a sapling in front of her home. "They say the councils are for everyone. But they're only for the Sandinistas. You have to join the Front (Sandinista party) to be helped."

The councils' national organizers do not deny a Sandinista bias. How could they? The national director is Ortega's wife, First Lady Rosario Murillo. But they

ably ineffective. Each site receives enough for all the needs of about 1,200 to 1,400 people for one day. Although the aid is only a supplement meant to help normalize the cost of food, there is hardly enough to make a difference in places like 14 de Septiembre, where one centers serves an area of 20,000. And because they are set up and controlled by Sandinistas, political opponents say that they are being excluded. The message, as many of the people living in this neighborhood told me, is: You have to be a Sandinista to receive food.

Xiomara Cuadro, a bespectacled salt-and-pepper



Two Nica men passing the day in the 14 de Septiembre neighborhood in Managua a few blocks from the food distribution center. They each said the Citizen Power Councils help only Sandinistas.

take issue with the idea that the councils are closed to outsiders.

“They don’t even ask what political party you’re in,” said Elias Chévez, national organizer for the councils and president of the Sandinista party in Managua. “The objective is not political, it’s to get people working in the communities.”

Chévez and other national leaders spent the bulk of 2007 organizing the councils. 2008 is the “year of citizen power.” Chévez estimates between 500,000 and 1 million people have been organized into the councils, a powerful number in a country with a population of only 5.6 million. Roughly 150,000 of them are cabinet members, meaning they have a direct say in the councils’ decisions. Surely, members exist who are not Sandinista, although the dozens I spoke with identified themselves as members of the party.

Their work goes beyond food distribution, reaching into nearly every local issue — security and crime prevention, water access, education, transportation, etc. The councils have grown powerful because they are official channels of the Sandinista government. In some communities where the Sandinista party is particularly strong, the councils are more powerful than elected leaders.

For example, back in the 14 de Septiembre neighborhood, Patricia Ramirez, a Sandinista and the local CPC coordinator for education, said until recently the local elementary school had more students than desks and a gang problem. Ramirez said she had heard stories from her neighbors about the school. And, with a soon-to-be school-aged grandson, she went to see for herself. She brought the concerns to the council at its biweekly meeting and they pressured the school systems to bring in more desks and the police to beef up security. The government “listens to us now. They attend to us,” Ramirez said. “And now people are coming to us because they want to see things change.”

On the surface, it does not sound too different from a school PTA — a group of concerned citizens that has come together to push for needed change.

But the councils are more than just neighborhood groups. They are organized from the top level of the government and have been set up as official channels, like a parallel government. At the street level, the idea is to have about one council for each 1,000 people. Those councils report to community-wide councils, which report to district councils and so on. The council leadership is made up of 15 cabinet members, each representing a different issue.

When forming the councils, organizers chose people in the communities that they knew, usually Sandinistas. Even if the national leaders intended for the councils to be non-partisan, they set them up in a way that fails to

take into account human nature. To use an overly simplistic analogy, it’s the equivalent of giving all the candy to the playground bullies and asking them to share the wealth.

“It’s a very dangerous situation because the CPC are the only groups with support from the government. The government is only using the CPC to distribute aid. And that gives them power in the community,” said Violeta Granera, executive director of the non-partisan civic organization Movimiento Por Nicaragua. “And those councils have started to abuse their power. It’s creating a lot of friction in the communities.”

Granera’s organization also works in communities, sometimes side-by-side with the councils. But they no longer distribute or are financed by government aid. The Sandinistas cut them off. While she is not opposed to the councils’ existence, she said they were given too much power and too little oversight, she said. In some rural areas of Nicaragua, the CPCs were given the power by the administration to choose which citizens would receive a government-issued worker ID card. In those cases, she said, the majority of the cards went to Sandinistas. Fearing such abuses, led her group and 19 others— from across the board politically and philosophically — to sign a joint declaration last year urging rejection of the law that created the councils as an official government organism. It called the idea of the CPCs a “manipulation ... coordinated by the [Sandinista party].”

Congress did reject the law. But Ortega went ahead and formed the councils, claiming it was an executive right. The Constitutional Chamber of the country’s Supreme Court, where three of the six judges are Sandinista appointees, acted when three opposition judges were absent and ruled in Ortega’s favor. The ruling was later upheld by the 16-member high court.

The case was one of a handful of examples of the Ortega government’s disregard for democracy. My final few days were to be spent on Nicaragua’s Caribbean Coast. But my flight was canceled due to anti-Sandinista political demonstrations that ended up turning deadly. Local leaders were demonstrating against Ortega’s decision to cancel local elections. Ortega said the region was still suffering from damage from last year’s Hurricane Felix. But most people, including those in the affected area, said Ortega canceled the elections because several local Sandinista leaders were about to lose their seats. The vote was suspended for a full year.

The government has also suppressed the media. On April 4, Jaime Arellano, a television journalist critical of the government, said he had been forced off the air by the station that broadcast his show after it received pressure from the Ortega family. In another case, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, members of the Sandinista party told a reporter for leading opposition newspaper, *La Prensa*, to get a bulletproof vest and police

helmet to protect himself. The reporter had written two articles on government corruption. More recently, the editor of that newspaper, Jaime Chamorro, was found guilty of slandering five CPC organizers after the newspaper published a story about an attack on one of its reporters by Ortega's security forces. Although the story falsely identified the security forces as a CPC, the article did not name any of the CPC organizers. The lawsuit was condemned by international organizations, including the Inter-American Press Association, which pointed out that the judge in the case was a known Sandinista supporter. The Sandinista government's tactic has been to avoid the independent media whenever it can. When I visited, all requests for interviews with top government officials were denied. Instead, the government uses official state-run media outlets to broadcast its messages or carry press conferences, which are usually closed to independent media.

The tactics are so similar to those the Sandinistas used in the 1980s to suppress opposition, that it is hard not to draw parallels.

"There's a strong odor in the air," said Saenz, whose Sandinista Renovation Movement spun off from Ortega's Sandinista National Liberation Front in the 1990s. "The government today smells a lot like it did in the decade of the 80s."

In 1979, the Sandinistas overthrew the Somoza family, an oppressive political dynasty that ruled the country for 43 years. They took over a country in shambles, with more than \$1.5 billion in debt and an estimated 600,000 homeless.

In what is still considered a remarkable success, one of the first projects of the new government was a literacy campaign that dropped the national illiteracy rate to 13 percent from over 50 percent within months. Equally remarkable was the national vaccine drive that eliminated polio and measles by setting up clinics in every neighborhood and staffing them with nurses.

But during their 11 years in power, the Sandinistas brutally oppressed political opposition. The government declared a state of emergency in 1982. During the six years it lasted, hundreds of suspected political opponents went missing, independent news broadcasts were canceled, and the right to demonstrate was suspended. A report by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights estimated that thousands of executions were carried out in the months following their rise to power.

Of course, throughout the decade, the Sandinistas were undermined by Contras forces that were funded and equipped by the U.S. Would the Sandinista Revolution have looked different if the U.S. had not meddled? Asking seems fruitless, like pondering Cuba without

the blockade. And the average Nica doesn't seem to care much about the external factors. What they saw were neighborhoods turning against each other.

In the 1980s, they were called the Sandinista Defense Committees. They were similar to the CPCs, neighborhood councils empowered to make local decisions. But they became "eyes and ears" of the revolution, reporting on activities of neighbors, who could then be interrogated by the government.

Curious to learn how much of the opposition to today's councils is based on the past, I went to a tortilla shop where, I was told, I would find plenty of stories of abuses the Sandinista government carried out in the 1980s.

But like all directions in Managua, no street name, no street number. Managua operates on a system of, sometimes meaningless, reference points. In this case, the shop is two blocks north of an auto repair shop and two and a half blocks east of where the little tree used to be. It took more than a little help to find it. Out front, four men disputed the best course of action for the engine of a broken down white, four-door Toyota Echo. Two others, shirtless, passed beer in a brown paper bag between them and warned me that the area was dangerous and to be careful with my camera. Weeds grew between the cracks of the otherwise desolate street. It didn't strike me as a breeding ground for political opposition.

Maria Pérez flipped tortillas on a grill heated by firewood. It was midday and the temperature was surely above 90. Standing near the grill for even a few seconds was too much for me, but Pérez hadn't broken a sweat. She stood sandwiched between three homes. A few men sat and watched the fire. A young mother fed her baby. Nobody answered my questions about what it was like here in the '80s.

"What you should be asking is who told neighbors to spy on each other. Who told them to turn against each other."



Maria Pérez, who makes a living selling tortillas in the Altamira neighborhood of Managua, said little has changed in the last 25 years, regardless of who is in power.

er," Pérez said, referring to the Sandinistas. She was never caught up in the politics of the day, but said the councils did more damage than good in her neighborhood.

Each time I read about the committees of the '80s — I found a dozen or more articles — I was shocked how similar they seem to today's councils. "Capable of organizing mass health campaigns, but also capable of abusing their power," The New Internationalist wrote in 1986.

The likeness is clearly on the minds of Nicas. "They're doing it again," Pérez added, referring to the formation of the CPCs. "And once you're on the wrong side," she stopped talking and shook her head.

Similarities between the Sandinista Defense Committees and the CPCs have drawn criticism from the street level to the halls of congress. But these are different times. Without the U.S. government breathing down the back of their collective necks, the Sandinistas don't have the same intensity of need for spies.

Nicaragua has all the jaw dropping and faceless statistics of poverty. According to the United Nations, the per capita income is \$895, the 2005 infant mortality rate was 30 deaths per 1,000 children, and only 35 percent of the rural population has access to potable water. (In the U.S., the infant mortality rate in 2005 was 6 deaths per 1,000 births and per capita income is \$21,587) And you don't have to travel far to see people living in crumbling shacks or to find dried up farms.

In a country with seemingly endless problems, the sophisticated structure of the organizations and speed at which they've been set up astound. They must be spending a lot of money, I thought. Chévez, the national director, was cagey with his response. "We don't have to spend much because we have so many people volunteering," he said, reaching for a fresh pack of cigarettes that he tapped on his forearm. I looked around his spacious office, pointed out that they are selling subsidized beans, running health clinics and helping install drinking water systems. "I mean, they all seem like good things, but they must cost money." He relaxed his shoulders a bit. "Well, yes, we need *some* money. But we have no government funding. Not a bit." He didn't elaborate.

So where does the money come from?

Strike up a conversation about the councils with the average Nica — most aren't shy with their political opinion — and it's likely to come back to that question. And then turn sharply to Venezuela.

Shortly after Ortega took office last year, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez forgave Nicaragua's debt of about \$33 million and told a group of business leaders that the country could "forget about its oil problems,"

according to a report in the local press.

The aid has started pouring in.

The thing is, nobody seems to know exactly how much. Saenz, the opposition congressman, says \$300 million in 2007. Elsewhere, in published reports, the number is closer to \$100 million. The confusion rests in the way it is distributed.

Here is what has been documented: A private company named ALBANISA, jointly owned by Nicaragua and Venezuela, receives about 10 million barrels a year of petroleum from Venezuela, and resells it in Nicaragua. Half of the revenue from the sales goes back to Venezuela, one fourth goes to ALBA (Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas) and the remaining fourth stays with ALBANISA.

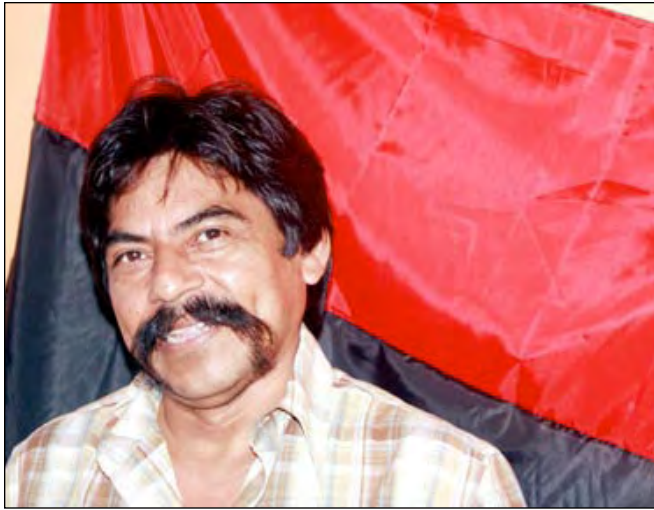
Since ALBANISA is not public, the amounts of revenue and details about how it is being spent are closed from public inspection. What's more, Francisco Lopez, president of PETRONIC, the Nicaraguan state-owned oil company, is the treasurer of the Sandinista party.

"Where does the money go?" said Saenz, the opposition congressman. "That's the mystery we're dealing with."

The assumption is that the aid funds the CPCs. But because the aid is handled in private, nobody can say how much money the councils receive. It's another sign of Ortega working around the country's institutions, which deepens political divisions. Instead of the alliance with Venezuela being seen as beneficial, it's become fodder for jokes and t-shirts. On one occasion, a Nica suggested I investigate whether Chavez lets Ortega sit on his lap when they drive back from the airport. (Ortega has personally picked Chavez up from the airport and allowed him to drive.) And around the country, t-shirts, in bright blues and greens, depict Chavez, Ortega, Cuba's Fidel Castro and Bolivia's Evo Morales together, a kind of public affirmation of the international perspective of the Latin American left with which Nicas now associate their government.

Weeks after I left Nicaragua, the *New York Times* published a story about the CPCs. The headline read "Nicaraguan Councils Stir Fears of Dictatorship." In some senses, it's easy to understand the fear. The government has worked in secrecy to accumulate power outside of governmental institutions. The CPCs bear the brunt of the criticism because they are so visible. But healthy opposition also exists.

The Sandinistas are likely more interested in staying in power than repeating the missteps of the 1980s. The memory of the failed 1990 presidential election is still



Elias Chévez, national coordinator of the Citizen Power Councils, stands in front of the Sandinista party flag in his office in Managua.

fresh. Ortega earned just 38 percent of the vote in the 2006 elections. And his party does not carry the majority in Congress.

Ironically, that flimsy political support makes the work of the councils even more important.

In the Managua Frente party offices, Chévez, the chain-smoking national coordinator of the councils, shrugged his shoulders when asked if the existence of the groups was helping recruit new Sandinistas.

“Some people may change to the party because they see the results of the work,” he said, running stubby fingers through a thick handlebar mustache. The councils “are growing and more people are joining.”

Chévez’s comment resonated as I left Managua. On the back of many of the same electricity poles I’d noticed upon arriving, there was a change in the graffiti. The “No” of the “No CPCs” had been crossed out.

A sign of the growing power of the councils, I wondered, or just reaffirmation of the contention? □

Current ICWA Fellows

Elena Agarkova • RUSSIA • May 2008 - 2010

Elena will be living in Siberia, studying management of natural resources and the relationship between Siberia's natural riches and its people. Previously, Elena was a Legal Fellow at the University of Washington's School of Law, at the Berman Environmental Law Clinic. She has clerked for Honorable Cynthia M. Rufe of the federal district court in Philadelphia, and has practiced commercial litigation at the New York office of Milbank, Tweed, Hadley & McCloy LLP. Elena was born in Moscow, Russia, and has volunteered for environmental non-profits in the Lake Baikal region of Siberia. She graduated from Georgetown University Law Center in 2001, and has received a bachelor's degree in political science from Barnard College.

Ezra Fieser • GUATEMALA • January 2008 - 2010

Ezra is interested in economic and political changes in Central America. He is an ICWA fellow living in Guatemala where he will write about the country's rapidly changing economic structure and the effects on its politics, culture and people. He was formerly the deputy city editor for *The* (Wilmington, Del.) *News Journal*, a staff writer for *Springfield* (Mass.) *Republican* and a Pulliam Fellow at *The Arizona Republic*. He is a graduate of Emerson College in Boston.

Suzu Hansen • TURKEY • April 2007 - 2009

A John O. Crane Memorial Fellow, Suzu will be writing about politics and religion in Turkey. A former editor at the *New York Observer*, her work has also appeared in *Salon*, the *New York Times Book Review*, the *Nation*, and other publications. She graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1999.

Derek Mitchell • INDIA • September 2007 - 2009

As a Phillips Talbot Fellow, Derek will explore the impact of global trade and economic growth on Indians living in poverty. He has served for the past year as a volunteer for Swaraj Peeth, an institute in New Delhi dedicated to nonviolent conflict resolution and Mahatma Gandhi's thought. Previously he was a Fulbright scholar in India at the Gandhi Peace Foundation. He has coordinated foreign policy research at George Washington University's Institute for Communitarian Policy Studies and worked as a political organizer in New Hampshire. Derek graduated with a degree in religion from Columbia University.

Raphael Soifer • BRAZIL • April 2007-2009

An actor, director, playwright, musician and theatre educator, Raphi Soifer is a Donors' Fellow studying, as a participant and observer, the relationship between the arts and social change in communities throughout Brazil. He has worked as a performer and director in the United States and Brazil, and has taught performance to prisoners and underprivileged youth through People's Palace Projects in Rio de Janeiro and Community Works in San Francisco. He holds a bachelor's degree in Theatre Studies and Anthropology from Yale University.

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