

"Nicaraguans want to trust the U.S. and give it a chance to be trustworthy"

A Revolution in Our Own Backyard

BY AGOSTINO BONO

When the Sandinista Liberation Front triumphantly marched into Managua, Nicaragua, on July 19, 1979, the air was filled with joy, youthful enthusiasm, and vigor. Accompanying the Sandinistas in the victory march were conservative businessmen, Catholic priests, peasants, urban workers, and leftist intellectuals. All were part of the pluralistic alliance that defeated Anastasio Somoza and his hated National Guard, the country's only security force under the forty-five-year dictatorship of the Somoza family.

Lost in the euphoria of victory were the invisible enemies facing the new rulers: a bankrupt treasury (Somoza lost the war but salvaged the spoils), failed crops, a virtual paralysis of industrial production, and a 30 per cent unemployment rate. Added to this was the U.S. fear that the Sandinistas' Marxist elements would turn Nicaragua into another Cuba. There has been heavy U.S. pressure on Nicaragua to declare itself Western and capitalistic, even if this means watering down its revolutionary fervor.

To meet the challenges the Sandinistas quickly appointed a pluralistic government that reflected the broad-based opposition to Somoza and assumed for itself the tasks of forming the army and forging grass roots political organizations from the massive popular support it received in the anti-Somoza struggle. A successful start made the Sandinistas the real power behind the government and provided assurance that the new economic and political order will travel a revolutionary path that incorporates the desire for greater justice, equality, and economic opportunity than was possible under the Somozas.

With the first anniversary of Somoza's overthrow, euphoria and enthusiasm are still a key element of the new Nicaragua. The Sandinistas are channeling support for themselves and the government through the Sandinista Defense Committees, basically neighborhood groups responsible for applying government programs on the local level.

In garnering this support, the Sandinistas have a major ally in the grass roots Catholic Church. Catholics are about 90 per cent of the 2.5 million population and the backbone of the institutions now being formed. An

overwhelming majority of Catholics were actively involved in the fighting; they saw opposition to widespread oppression, injustice, and corruption as their Christian duty. Participation in the new government is seen as a positive Christian activity and an extension of the fight against Somoza.

The Sandinistas appointed two priests to cabinet posts in the new government. Father Miguel D'Escoto of the U.S.-based Maryknoll Missionary Society was named foreign minister and Father Ernesto Cardenal, a well-known poet and student of Thomas Merton, was named cultural minister. Several months later Ernesto's brother, Fernando Cardenal, a Jesuit, was appointed head of the government's literary crusade, which aims to teach basic reading and writing skills to 750,000 people.

Support from the Nicaraguan bishops, backed by the Vatican, is reluctant. Prior to the overthrow the bishops stated it was morally justifiable to join the Sandinista-led fighting. Now, fearing Marxist elements therein, the bishops see participation as a way of keeping Nicaragua Christian. Most Catholics, however, do not see Marxism as a major ideological force in the country. Rather, they say the guiding light is a fusion of Christianity, humanism, and nationalism.

The new government has nationalized the banking system and transferred Somoza-owned enterprises to workers; yet it has pledged that 60 per cent of all economic activity will remain in private hands. Its economic plan—called Plan 80—stresses a major role for private enterprise, with specific rules regarding profit ceilings, taxes, and business law to be worked out as the situation evolves. Cooperation "will be a patriotic test by which businesses can show their decision to cooperate in this process." According to Plan 80 projections, 41 per cent of the GNP for 1980 will be the result of state activities, with private enterprise to account for the rest.

Father Xavier Gorostiaga, a Spanish Jesuit, was invited by Nicaragua to be a main architect of Plan 80. He suggests that 13 per cent be the ceiling for fair profit and that the government attract domestic and foreign manufacturing investment by limiting the number of competing firms that produce the same item. The companies will be chosen on the basis of whether their product is in keeping with the needs of Nicaragua's underdeveloped economy. "We need automobiles, but we don't need Mercedes Benz," he said.

The key to quick economic success is increased agricultural production. Nicaraguan soil is fertile but, according to government officials, was misused under Somoza. "Somoza and his friends owned about 50 per cent of the arable land and about 20 per cent was unused," said Father Gorostiaga. "If we use this potential, Nicaragua could be self-sufficient in food in 1981 and an exporter in 1982." Father Gorostiaga estimates that for 1980 Nicaragua will have to import \$56 million in food.

The lands owned by Somoza and his followers were turned into "Property of the People"—basically, cooperatives made up of those who worked the lands under Somoza. The government plans to support these cooperatives through technical aid and loan programs. According to agriculture officials, this is the first time that government assistance will be provided to small and medium farms. Discussions have also been initiated with individual landowners about pricing and other policies necessary to increased plantings.

Father Gorostiaga has said that Nicaragua needs private enterprise, but he and other government officials do not eliminate the possibility that the government will eventually move toward socialism. The business community fears such a move. Privately, many say they do not trust the Sandinistas and some are considering liquidating their companies. One business leader lamented that only eight months after the revolution did the government call the first meeting of an advisory commission composed of business and government representatives. The result, they say, has been impractical policies that fail to stimulate business investment. For example, at the time Father Gorostiaga was suggesting a 13 per cent profit ceiling, investors could earn about 18 per cent in time deposits.

BENIGN NEGLECT

In matters of foreign policy Nicaragua has taken a non-aligned stance. It has maintained normal relations with the United States while it receives Soviet and Cuban assistance with open arms.

Like the Roman Catholic hierarchy, the Carter administration is a reluctant supporter of the Sandinista government. It fears another Cuba lest it maintain economic and political ties with Nicaragua, yet it has allowed Nicaraguan policy to fall into benign neglect. The administration has put little pressure on Congress to pass aid measures, and Capitol Hill has rung with conservative criticism of Nicaragua. A \$75 million aid bill was submitted to Congress in August, 1979, as a supplement to the 1980 budget. By June, 1980, after hundreds of hours of debate and hearings, the money still had not been approved.

In the absence of supportive statements from the administration, there is nothing for Nicaraguans to read but the conservative criticism emerging from the Congress, to wit: Nicaragua is already a member of the Communist bloc and a police state because it signed aid agreements with the Soviet Union and has two thousand Cuban doctors and teachers working in remote areas. The result: a growing paranoia among Nicaraguans. "We want to trust the United States and give it a chance to be trustworthy," said Father D'Escoto, the

foreign minister. Nicaragua believes the U.S. must earn this trust, and one important way is to provide an aid program that places no restrictions on Nicaragua's policy of nonalignment.

Nicaraguan officials are especially irritated about charges of Cuban influence owing to the presence of Cuban teachers and doctors. They note that aid from Western Europe has been much greater than that from Communist countries. "We have about four hundred Cuban doctors in the most remote and difficult areas of the country. They don't receive a salary from the Nicaraguan Government," said junta member Sergio Ramirez. "We are ready to receive any doctor from Manhattan or California who is willing to work under the same conditions, even if this means running the risk of falling under U.S. influence." Many regions of Nicaragua have no doctors, and the country has an average of one doctor per 22,000 inhabitants.

Although the Nicaraguan Government bristles at the idea that U.S. aid is tied to nonacceptance of Communist aid, it is flexible enough to agree to certain strings. It does not object to aid provisions stipulating that 60 per cent of the funds be used for the private sector of the economy or that the bulk of the money be used to purchase goods and services in the United States. This flexibility is motivated by the need for aid to reactivate the economy and the desire to avoid provoking in the United States the intransigent attitude it took toward Cuba in the 1960s. While Nicaragua does not mind dealing with the Soviet Union, it does not wish to be pushed into a bear hug.

Despite problems, a foundation has been laid for firm U.S.-Nicaraguan relations. Immediately after the Sandinista victory the U.S. provided the new government with \$39 million in aid, much of it in needed food supplies, and U.S. Ambassador Larry Pezzulo is one of the strongest supporters of aid to Nicaragua. Nicaraguan officials call current relations between the two countries normal and positive.

But the doubt lingers and will continue to linger until the Carter administration takes time from its other preoccupations to assert friendly intentions. Nicaraguan officials look apprehensively at the snowballing support for Republican presidential candidate Ronald Reagan and are making preparations against such time as anti-Communist conservatism holds sway in the United States. "If Reagan decides to blockade Nicaragua, we would have to react because we have to survive," said Ramirez.

A Nicaraguan priest said his country is providing Christians with a chance to show that they can be revolutionaries. Similarly, it can be said that Nicaragua is giving the U.S. Government a chance to accept and support revolutionary changes in its backyard. Right now the Carter administration is avoiding that challenge. **WV**