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US Targets Nicaraguan Presidential Election: Former Solidarity Activists Echo Imperial Talking Points

By Roger Harris

Before Henry Kissinger became a Clinton pal, liberals condemned him for saying: “I don’t see why we need to stand by and watch a country go communist due to the irresponsibility of its people. The issues are much too important for the Chilean voters to be left to decide for themselves.” The 1973 US-backed coup and bloodbath in Chile followed. Now Uncle Sam has a problem in Nicaragua, where independent polls predict a landslide victory for Daniel Ortega’s leftist Sandinista slate in the November 7th presidential elections.

The US government and its sycophantic media are working to prevent Ortega’s reelection. On July 12, the US slapped visa restrictions on one hundred Nicaraguan elected legislative officials, members of the judiciary, and their families for “undermining democracy.” A month earlier, the Biden administration imposed sanctions on President

Ortega's daughter, along with a military general, the head of the central bank, and an elected legislator.

These and other recent illegal US sanctions on Nicaragua are designed to promote regime change and are based on the ridiculous charge that this poor and tiny nation is a “extraordinary and unusual threat to the US national security,” when the opposite is the case.

The NICA Act of 2018, under the Trump administration, imposed sanctions, including blocking loans from international financial institutions controlled by the US. In August 2020, the Responsive Assistance in Nicaragua (RAIN) plan was revealed, which is a multi-faceted coup strategy by which the US contracted corporations to overthrow the Nicaraguan government. RAIN calls for a “sudden, unanticipated transition” government to forestall what they admit would otherwise be a Sandinista victory in a free election. In a seamless handoff from the Trump to the Biden administration, the pending RENACER Act would further extended “targeted sanctions.”

US intervention in Nicaragua and, indeed, in all of Latin America under the 1823 Monroe Doctrine has a long history continuing to the

present. Back in 1856, US citizen William Walker tried to impose himself as head of a slave state in Nicaragua, only to be assassinated four years later. In 1912, the US began an occupation of Nicaragua, forcing the country to become a US protectorate. The US was ousted in 1933 in a war led by national hero Augusto C. Sandino, after whom the present revolutionary party was named. In the 1980s, the US government proxies, the Contras, fought the new Sandinistas after they overthrew the US-backed Somoza dictatorship.

Problematic premises

In the past, most US progressives opposed the imperialism of their government. But more recently, as Jeremy Kuzmarov of *CovertAction Magazine* observed: “United States warmakers have become so skilled at propaganda that not only can they wage a war of aggression without arousing protest; they can also compel liberals to denounce peace activists using language reminiscent of the McCarthy era.”

A recent *Open Letter to the Nicaraguan Government from U.S. Solidarity Workers 1979-1990* reflects the US imperial talking points. This US open letter, dated July 1, is joined by one from Europeans,

formerly active in solidarity with Nicaragua, and one from international academics, mainly in the field of Latin American studies. (Links to all three letters may be dodgy.) All three letters, likely coordinated, use similar language to make matching critiques and demands.

While other international activists from the 1980s still prioritize non-intervention and solidarity with the Sandinista government, the concerns expressed in the open letter should be respectfully evaluated. The open letter is based on the following problematic premises:

The open letter claims the Ortega “regime” is guilty of “crimes against humanity.”

In fact, Nicaragua is by far the most progressive country in Central America under the Sandinista government.

Unlike the Guatemalans, Hondurans, and El Salvadorians in these US client states, Nicaraguans are not fleeing to the US in search of a better life. Poverty and extreme poverty have been halved in Nicaragua, and the UN Millennium Development Goal of cutting malnutrition has been achieved. Basic healthcare and education are free, and illiteracy has been virtually eliminated, while boasting of the highest level of

gender equality in the Americas. Nicaragua, which enjoys the lowest homicide rate in Central America, also has the smallest police force with the smallest budget in the region. These are not the hallmarks of a dictatorship.

The open letter claims the 2018 coup attempt was simply a “demonstration of self-determination.” While the open letter correctly notes that the events of 2018 reflected an element of popular discontent, it renders invisible the millions of dollars and many years of US sponsored subversion in Nicaragua.

Social media campaigns of false information orchestrated by US-sponsored groups fueled viciously violent protests. According to solidarity activist Jorge Capelán: “those who kidnapped, tortured, robbed, murdered and raped citizens here in Nicaragua in April 2018 were the coup promoters. They themselves recorded everything with their cell phones. They even set fire to murdered Sandinista comrades in the street.”

Benjamin Waddell, a signatory to the open letter, admitted “it’s becoming more and more clear that the US support has helped play a

role in nurturing the current [2018] uprisings.” Dan La Botz, another Ortega-must-go partisan, provided the background: “US organizations such as USAID and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), and no doubt the CIA had for decades, of course, worked in Nicaragua as they do everywhere in the world.”

No substantive progressive alternative was offered by the opposition in 2018, according to William Robinson, another signatory to the open letter. Rather, 2018 was an attempt to achieve by violent means what could not be achieved democratically at the ballot box.

The open letter claims the Nicaraguan government “in no way represents the values, principles and goals of the Sandinista revolution.” This stance arrogates to foreigners the role of telling the Nicaraguan people how to evaluate their revolution. The electoral process in Nicaragua makes clear that the Nicaraguans think otherwise.

After successfully overthrowing the US-backed dictator Somoza and fighting the counter-revolutionary war against the US-backed Contras, the Sandinista’s lost the 1990 election. Notably, outgoing President Ortega without hesitation obeyed the electoral mandate, the first time in

Nicaragua's history that governing power was passed peacefully to another political party. After 17 years of neoliberal austerity, Daniel Ortega won the presidential election of 2006 with a 38% plurality and went on to win in 2011 with 63% and 72.5% in 2016. Ortega's ever increasing electoral margins suggest the majority of Nicaraguans support him as the legitimate leader of the Sandinista revolution.

Problematic proposals

Using the same loaded language as the US government, the open letter calls on the "Ortega-Murillo regime" to release political prisoners currently being held, including "pre-candidates," members of the opposition, and "historic leaders" of the Sandinista revolution; rescind the national security law under which these individuals were arrested; and negotiate electoral reforms.

Nicaragua has passed two recent laws: the Foreign Agents Law and the Law to Defend the Rights of the People to Independence, Sovereignty, and Self-Determination for Peace. These laws, which the open letter wants rescinded, criminalize promoting foreign interference in Nicaragua's internal affairs, seeking foreign military intervention, organizing acts of terrorism, and promoting coercive economic

measures against their country. These are activities, it should be noted, that are similarly prohibited in the US's FARA Act, after which the Nicaraguan laws were modeled.

The recent actions of the Nicaraguan government prosecuting people who break their laws is a normal function of governance. That some of the accused perpetrators may have political aspirations does not immunize those individuals from arrest for unlawful activities.

The letter from the aforementioned academics claims that among those detained are the “most prominent potential opposition presidential candidates.” In fact, none of the 17 political parties in Nicaragua have chosen their candidates, and “most of those currently under investigation do not belong to any legally registered party.” In fact, Stephen Sefton reports from Nicaragua that “no leading figure from Nicaragua’s opposition political parties has been affected by the recent series of arrests of people from organizations that supported the 2018 coup attempt.”

One of the most prominent of those arrested is NGO director Cristiana Chamorro, charged with money laundering for receiving millions of dollars from the USAID, other US government agencies, and allied

foundations for regime-change purposes. In her defense, she incredulously claimed that the US State Department had audited her and found everything to their liking.

The “historic leaders” of the Sandinista revolution are just that; people who had broken with the revolution long ago and since 1994 had collaborated with the US-allied rightwing opposition and NGOs. More to the point, they are being charged with illegal collusion with foreign powers.

The open letter calls for “negotiating electoral reforms,” but electoral law in Nicaragua as in the US is determined by the legislative process and not by negotiations among various power blocks. Nicaragua has implemented some but not all reforms mandated by the Organization of American States. The fourth branch of government, the Supreme Electoral Council (CSE), oversees elections. A third of the current CSE is composed of representatives of parties other than the ruling party, even though the Sandinistas hold a supermajority in the legislature.

The right of the Nicaraguan revolution to defend itself

While acknowledging “the long and shameful history of US government intervention,” the open letter does not acknowledge the

right of the Nicaraguan revolution to defend itself. On the contrary, their implied endorsement of the 2018 coup attempt is a call for regime change by non-democratic means and an implicit pass for US interference.

The open letter's finding that "the crimes of the US government – past and present – are not the cause of, nor do they justify or excuse" the behavior of the current government in Nicaragua is a door that swings two ways. Whatever the alleged wrongdoings the Ortega government, that still does not justify the US government's regime-change campaign. The open letter is thunderously silent on current US intervention, notably the punishing NICA and RENACER acts.

The Nicaraguan government has prioritized the needs of poor and working people and has made astounding progress on multiple fronts. That is why they are being targeted for regime change, and why the Nicaraguans have taken measures to thwart US intervention.

The Trump administration specifically targeted the so-called "Troika of Tyranny" – Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua – with repressive illegal sanctions aimed at regime change. That policy of US domination did not start with Trump, nor is it ending with the new US administration.

The imperialists are clear on who they target as their enemy; some elements on the left are less clear on who is their friend and whether Nicaragua has a right to defend itself. If the signers of the open letter believe, as they claim, “in the Nicaraguan people’s right to self-determination...of a sovereign people determining their own destiny,” then the November 2021 election should be protected, free from interference by the US, its international allies, and its funded NGOs.

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