

Daniel Ortega's slide into corruption and authoritarianism

Nicaragua's liberator has become its dictator.

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [February 12, 2020](#) issue



Photo by Cancillería del Ecuador via Creative Commons license

Forty years ago, Nicaragua stood high on the list of strategic concerns for the United States. Central America was passing through an era of revolutions and bloody civil wars in which hundreds of thousands would ultimately perish. In 1979, the leftist Sandinista regime triumphed in Nicaragua, raising the prospect of a new Soviet puppet state in the region which would subvert neighboring nations. US attempts to overthrow the Sandinistas involved building up an anticommunist guerrilla army known as the Contras. The unorthodox means used to fund this venture came close to bringing down the Reagan White House.

Sympathy for leftist activists and rebels in the region became a mainstay of liberal opposition to the Reagan administration. This was the time when US cities first declared themselves sanctuary cities for refugees from Central America's civil wars, beginning a form of dissident activism on immigration issues that continues today.

It is easy today to forget just how pivotal a role those struggles played in American religious thought and liberal activism in that era among Roman Catholics and

mainline Protestants. In Central America itself, it was the highwater mark of liberation theology, and leftist victories stirred something like millenarian expectations. Several radical Catholic priests held high office in Nicaragua's Sandinista government, notably the poet and theologian Ernesto Cardenal, author of the once-famous book *The Gospel in Solentiname*.

Such examples could not fail to inspire liberal-minded Catholics in the US and Europe, and Catholics were prominent among the idealistic believers who flocked to Nicaragua. In the US, liberal and left-wing Catholics were passionately interested in the crisis in Central America, stirred by such atrocities as the assassination of Salvador's Archbishop Óscar Romero and the murder of US women church workers. Many Americans had high hopes for the Sandinista experiment and fiercely opposed US attempts to defeat it. The confrontation was painted as a black-and-white moral struggle.

During this period, the face of Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega was a mainstay of media coverage. For friends and enemies alike, he seemed a latter-day Fidel Castro or Che Guevara. As such, Ronald Reagan demonized him alongside such other global villains as Muammar Qaddafi. On the other side he was viewed as an authentic fighter against tyranny, indeed as a romantic rebel. For activist Catholics, he epitomized the ideals of liberation theology that were finally being put into practice.

The Nicaraguan war wound down at the end of the decade, and the Sandinistas lost power in a crucial election in 1990. Efforts at national reconciliation followed over the next decade, to the point that in 2006 Ortega became president again, with the support of the Catholic Church, of which he now claimed to be a devout member. Accordingly, he supported draconian anti-abortion laws.

As president, Ortega became progressively more corrupt and authoritarian, amassing personal wealth and distributing benefits to his family; his wife serves as vice president. (Ortega's family history is deeply troubled in many ways, as his daughter has accused him of multiple acts of sexual abuse.) Increasingly, he fits the worst stereotypes of a Latin American caudillo.

Since 2018, protests against Ortega have been met by brutal violence from government agents and paramilitaries. Hundreds have been killed, many more jailed and tortured. As in comparable situations around the globe, the Catholic Church has played a key role in the opposition, providing resisters with physical refuge as well

as ideological support.

The best-known face of resistance to the Ortega regime is Silvio Báez, the auxiliary bishop of Managua, who has faced repeated threats. Although Catholics make up only half of the country's population, they are still a powerful force. No less significant, any direct attacks on churches or clergy run the risk of confrontations with the Vatican, not to mention hostile media coverage worldwide. Commonly, protests take explicitly religious forms, through special masses and pilgrimages. As the political situation deteriorates, churches have become the focus of battles and sieges.

In recounting these contemporary horrors, I am not trying to offer any retroactive commentary on the US political debates of the 1980s; the evils of one individual do not discredit larger causes. But the story of Daniel Ortega does reaffirm the truth of one ancient political axiom: put not your trust in princes.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Liberator to dictator."