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5 Nicaragua's Anti/Authoritarian Returns

“Us” versus “Them” in the 2018 Protests and Their Repression

Julienne Weegels

Introduction

On 18 April 2018, elderly citizens in León and Managua, Nicaragua, demonstrated against far-reaching social security reforms announced by sitting President Daniel Ortega (2006-present). When they were violently repelled by pro-government mobs, groups of students took to the streets and campuses to express their solidarity and discontent. This time, instead of sending out their mobs for another beating, the government deployed the National Police. Toting shotguns and AK-47 assault rifles, the police attacked the student demonstrations. The first dead fell at a Managua public university (GIEI Nicaragua) – and no apologies followed. Angry and in shock, massive anti-government protests subsequently erupted across the country. Yet rather than stopping to listen and negotiate, the government doubled down. On 20 April, Ángel Gahona, a Bluefields journalist, was shot dead while reporting on live TV. That same day, Álvaro Conrado, a 15-year-old schoolboy, was shot in the neck while carrying water to students occupying a public university in Managua. His last words – *I can't breathe* – were live-streamed. By the time the government offered to revoke the social security reforms – on Monday, 22 April, with the death toll nearing 30 and the denial of medical attention to wounded protesters documented across social media platforms in spite of an attempted blackout (GIEI Nicaragua) – hundreds of thousands of disgruntled Nicaraguans had taken the streets to demand the immediate resignation of President Daniel Ortega and his wife and Vice President Rosario Murillo.¹

In what seemed like the bat of an eye, the events of those first few days of protest in April catalysed into a multi-vocal, months-long uprising with insurrectional qualities (Díaz and Weegels). As the protests evolved, a myriad of student movements were founded at occupied universities and dozens of popular April Movements mushroomed across the country. Their members called themselves *autoconvocados*, self-convened protesters, as they emerged in direct response to the uprising, unaligned with any existing political party (Rocha, *Provocation and Protest*). While the government initially sought to downplay the uprising by calling these movements “minuscule” and its members “vandals”, it called on its militants to “go all out” (*vamos con todo*) when it realised it was facing a budding insurrection. For the majority of the young, urban protesters, the systematic, lethal violence the government deployed to repress the protests was unfathomable. Soon,

a recurring slogan could be distinguished amid the crowds: *Ortega y Somoza son la misma cosa* – Ortega and Somoza are the same thing. But how could the right-wing Somoza dynasty that ruled Nicaragua from the early 1930s until their ousting at the hands of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) in 1979, possibly be compared with the leader of that once revolutionary left-wing party, Daniel Ortega?

In order to answer this question and understand Nicaragua's "new" authoritarian return, as well as the anti-authoritarian contestations that have emerged in response, it is not only necessary to consider the enactment of (anti-)authoritarian politics beyond the left-right divide, but also to approach phrases like this teleologically – that is, *in terms of the purpose they serve*. From a discourse-analysis perspective (e.g., Moffitt, Rheindorf), they bolster the sense of standing at a historical turning point that, once again, requires the toppling of a long-sitting government after its (seemingly sudden) loss of popular legitimacy. In drawing historical parallels between the Somoza and Ortega regimes, protesters and protest movements signal the latter's belonging to the class of charismatic strongmen (*caudillos*) who have turned on their people and, as a consequence, deserve their wrath – legitimating their desire to topple his government. Over the course of the 2018 protests and their aftermath, these parallels served to foster an anti-government "Us" (in part anti-authoritarian, in part anti-Sandinista), vis-à-vis a pro-government "Them" pitched to stand in opposition to "the people's will" (*la voluntad popular*), their human rights and their civil and political rights to protest and dissent. This also occurred vice versa, as both sides staked claims in the name of the Nicaraguan people as a whole, sought to publicly delegitimise the other side's story by construing them as part of respectively a corrupt system or an imperialist project, and criticised each other's repertoires of political action. As both sides deployed ostensibly populist rhetoric to construct themselves as the true representatives of "the people", both the pro-government and parts of the anti-government camp² sought to anchor themselves historically in anti-authoritarian and revolutionary political culture. In doing so, the pro-government camp harked back to a Cold War rhetoric of imperialist intervention and externally funded internal enemies, while a range of protesters – especially those from popular, urban sectors and historically Sandinista families – drew on local anti-authoritarian histories of liberation to fight for radical change. At some sites, this meant that the same historical period, ranging from the popular insurrections of 1978–79 to the Sandinista revolutionary triumph of 1979 and its defence throughout the 1980s, came to be drawn on and reconfigured by both those fighting for and protesting against Ortega's regime.

In this chapter, I turn to the discourses and practices around which the drawing of the "Us" versus "Them" divide thickens with historical parallels. First, I situate this analysis in the emerging debate on the "new" authoritarian turn and, relatedly, Ortega's "authoritarian populism" (Awadalla; L. Chamorro). I then turn to the protesters' call for a free fatherland *to live in* as opposed to a free fatherland *to die for*, and explore practices of urban insurrection and state repression, projected to be supported by, realised in protection of, or deployed against "the people", as mediated in and through the digital realm. To bring into view the "actors, events

and processes that transgress the nation state" (Beer 7), I combine this digital ethnographic approach with a "transnational perspective" (Beer 5). After all, in their struggle to delegitimise one another's actions, both protesters and the government continuously sought to publicly expose one another to garner international support and solidarity for their cause.

The "New" Authoritarian Turn and a Brief Note on Methodology

Over the past two decades, multiple governments headed by democratically elected presidents have begun shrinking the civic space for dissent. They implement constitutional changes or laws that allow for their (indefinite) re-election and the consolidation of their political dynasties, while criminalising protesters and amassing power in the executive branch and/or with the governing elite (Weegels et al.). These "new" authoritarian regimes, contrary to their "old" authoritarian predecessors – the military or revolutionary juntas of the sixties and seventies in the case of Latin America – came to power not by force or by a coup, but through the popular vote, largely by deploying populist rhetoric and strategies (de la Torre and Arnson). This grants them a level of international legitimacy that complicates the contestation of their established hegemony (Wiatr). Yet their authoritarian legacy often remains evident in their use of state security forces to control political adversaries and in the deployment of para-state forces for their "dirty work" (e.g., González). As these new or populist authoritarian leaders come to dominate the state's law-making capacities, the implementation of freedom-restricting legislation to quell protest and exonerate themselves from wrongdoing then becomes a matter of pre-decided majority vote. In Latin America, examples include, on the left, Hugo Chávez, Rafael Correa, and Daniel Ortega, and on the right, Nayib Bukele, Álvaro Uribe, and Jair Bolsonaro. Their attempts to (gradually) dissolve the "trias politica" have been theorised by legal scholars as "autocratic legalism" (De Sa e Silva) and by political scientists "populist constitutionalism" (Roznai and Hostovsky Brandes), which are key elements for the entrenchment of new/competitive authoritarian regimes (Corrales; Levitsky and Way; Wiatr).

In Nicaragua, a country with a long-standing tradition of anti-pluralist charismatic leadership and "fragile" democratic institutions, populist rhetoric and authoritarian tactics have historically been deployed in tandem and by both left and right-leaning politicians (e.g., Kampwirth; Steigenga et al.; Thaler). This combination of populist and authoritarian strategies underpins Ortega's "Sandinismo 2.0" (Collombon and Rodgers). In fact, its particular brand of "authoritarian populism" appeals to the promise of popular sovereignty (L. Chamorro), all the while being unapologetically conservative, oligarchic, and strongly anti-feminist (Awadalla; C. F. Chamorro; de Abreu).

Interestingly, this "new" authoritarian turn has unfolded amid the rapid digitisation of societies across the globe, which means that a substantial generation of digitally-savvy and connected youth, particularly in the urban centres, emerged alongside it (Sastramidjaja). Widely perceived as apathetic and relatively unorganised at first, such youth have come to spearhead massive anti-government protests

in recent years (e.g., González Valencia; Tufekci). Alluding to the Arab Spring, observers spoke of a Latin American “autumn of discontent” by the end of 2019 (e.g., Dorner). Critiquing in particular their governments’ recourse to authoritarian tactics for the repression of protest (especially the excessive use of violence by military/police, such as in Chile and Colombia), these digitally-mediated protest movements have been met by their governments’ legal and criminal justice institutions. This includes arrest, imprisonment, and prosecution, as well as forms of repression and surveillance taking place in or mediated by the digital realm – in the more extreme cases, internet bans and cyber policing, which constitute core practices of what has been termed *digital authoritarianism* (e.g., Feldstein; Sastramidjaja). The research conducted for this chapter was part of a collaborative transregional project³ aimed at identifying recurring patterns and unique configurations in the politics and aesthetics of emerging global digital cultures of protest and repression, approaching the new authoritarian turn with special attention to digitally-mediated protest and digital authoritarian techniques.

In order to grasp this particular episode of anti/authoritarian re-emergence in Nicaragua, I therefore rely on a combination of social media and document research, digital ethnography, and interviews with (exiled) protesters and (former) political prisoners. Though I was not physically present during the protests, I spent about 31 months spread over the course of seven years (2009–16) conducting a multi-sited ethnography inside and around Nicaragua’s prison system, which brought me into its process of institutional politicisation (Weegels, *Performing Prison*, “Sensing Secrecy”). Following live-streams, friends, and (former) research participants as they moved from barricades to safehouses and sometimes (back) into the prison system – or into pro-government mobs – I quickly realised that both protesters and government supporters used social media platforms as “performance spaces” (de Kosnik) to showcase their acts of mutual de/legitimation (Beetham) and garner transnational support or condemnation.

Somoza – Ortega

The Somoza dynasty, which ruled Nicaragua both charismatically and as if it were their own private estate for over 40 years (1936–79), was not fully understood as a dictatorship until the killing and incarceration of those who openly challenged their rule became widespread and began affecting the upper middle class (Ferrero Blanco; Rueda). In the bloody struggle that led up to the FSLN’s revolutionary victory in 1979, Somoza and his National Guard killed thousands of opponents and civilians and tortured at least as many. The Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), which began articulating in the early sixties, deployed guerrilla tactics in their long and unequal battle against Somoza’s regime, reaching its epitome with the popular insurrections of 1978–79 (also known as the Final Insurrection). The revolutionary triumph was short-lived and soon met by U.S. president Ronald Reagan’s anti-communist interventionism. While Daniel Ortega was certainly co-responsible for the deaths of many thousands⁴ during the Contra War (1981–90) – first as one of the FSLN’s nine ruling *comandantes* (1979–84) and later as the

country's president (1984–90) – that war had all the characteristics of a covert foreign intervention (and was later proven to be so). Born not only out of an anti-U.S. imperialist tradition then, personified in the figure of Sandino, but also having directly suffered the consequences of U.S. interventionism, anti-U.S. imperialist rhetoric has been a defining characteristic of the FSLN and Ortega's populist political discourse around the protection of the nation and popular sovereignty (Martí i Puig and Close), hereby taking a classic *pars pro toto* approach that equalled the Sandinista revolution to Nicaragua. Though Ortega was long the incarnation of an embattled anti-imperialist, who ordered the conscription of thousands of Nicaraguan youth into the Sandinista Popular Army (EPS) throughout the 1980s, he promised to never again take up arms upon the unexpected defeat of the FSLN in the 1990 elections, when Violeta Barrios de Chamorro became the first female president in the Western hemisphere with her U.S.-backed National Opposition Union. Barrios de Chamorro was the widow of the well-known, progressive journalist Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, who was assassinated by Somoza's National Guard on 10 January 1978, which had galvanised popular support for the FSLN at the time.

Before Ortega's return to power by way of a marginal electoral victory (38%) in 2006 under the banner of *El pueblo presidente!* (The people for president) – made possible by a pact with the Liberal Constitutionalist Party (PLC) to lower the threshold for a win in the first round – there were signs on the wall of his increasingly populist authoritarian tendencies (Jarquín; Rocha, *Tras el Telón Rojinegro*). For one, Ortega never relinquished the leadership of the FSLN, and his inner circle weeded out any internal opposition to ensure his uncontested continuation at the head of the party (Martí i Puig and Serra). This allowed him to present himself not only as the incarnation of “the people” but also as the personification of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (the party). Then, despite having completed the two presidential terms permitted by the constitution (1984–90 and 2006–11), Ortega ran for a third (and second consecutive) presidential term in 2011. Having masterfully incapacitated the opposition (both outright through party-bans and indirectly through co-governance pacts), ensuring a favourable Electoral Council and Supreme Court composition, the constitution was amended to accommodate him.⁵ Following these elections, the FSLN grew into the National Assembly's majority party, giving Ortega free reign. In 2016, Ortega's wife Rosario Murillo, already a key figure as the government's spokeswoman and leader of the Citizen Power Councils⁶ joined him as his vice-president on his fourth ticket (Awadalla). By then, their inner circle and numerous children respectively held key government and private sector positions, the latter largely controlling the television media panorama (Collombon and Rodgers).

At the time of the unexpected eruption of the 2018 protests, the Ortega-Murillo couple controlled the FSLN absolutely and, by extension, appeared to control all echelons of public life through their extensive loyalist institutional and para-institutional network of influence and surveillance. Together with their allies in business and politics, they constitute Nicaragua's oligarchy, each benefiting from their own proverbial “piece of the pie” (Collombon and Rodgers). As a result, the

Sandinista party-state – largely disbanded and de-institutionalised following the Sandinista’s 1990 electoral defeat – gradually re-emerged between 2006 and 2018 with all state ministries, the judicial system and armed state institutions, including the National Police, being brought under the executive’s direct political control (Thaler; Weegels, *Performing Prison*).

Still, it was not until the repression of the 2018 protests that Ortega-Murillo’s rule became fully understood as dictatorial by large swaths of the citizenry, journalists, and academics alike. This hinged on Ortega’s breaking his promise that the FSLN would never again take up arms against the people. The moment the first young protester died, it was met, almost in a knee-jerk reaction, by massive, open resistance (Mosinger et al.). This led parts of the business and political elite to strategically defect from the co-governance pacts (“consensus model”) they had established with the Ortega-Murillo regime. In backing the protests, they expected to be part of a watershed moment, opening up the renegotiation of those pacts or even the possibility of (negotiated) regime change.⁷ For the protesters erecting barricades in the urban centres, the more the state behaved in the way they had been taught the Somoza-dictatorship operated, the more they felt justified in their demand for Ortega to step down. After all, even though these protesters were largely “[b]orn long after the Sandinista Revolution, [they] were raised in a society that celebrated the defeat of a dictatorship through a popular uprising while watching a new authoritarian regime consolidating in front of their very eyes” (Sierakowski 238). Taking friend and foe by complete surprise then, the younger generation’s anti-authoritarian push provoked a massive, nation-wide uprising, with protesters quickly occupying large swaths of national territory and blocking main economic arteries (Díaz and Weegels). For the first time in 40 years, the FSLN lost control of the streets. “If they could do it back then, we can do it again”, was the thought that reigned in the streets. That is, 2018 was quickly projected to *be like 1979*, when thousands of Nicaraguans likewise took the streets against Somoza, risking their lives in support of the Sandinistas’ Final Insurrection.

Insurrectional History on Repeat?

In effect, as the 2018 protests evolved, hopes ran high that the timeline of that 1979 Final Insurrection could be redrawn. Protest signs not only read “Ortega and Somoza are the same thing”, but also “Every dictator is met by its 19th” (referring to respectively the start date of the 2018 protests, 19 April, and 19 July, the date the Sandinista triumph over Somoza is celebrated). The police, who prided themselves on being “born from the people” were met by protest signs and chants calling them “traitors of the people” – equalling them to Somoza’s National Guard.⁸ By May 2018, memes circulated online that reinstated León as “indomitable” and Masaya as the “cradle of insurrection”. While Managua’s universities became the student-occupied sites of contention, Monimbó – Masaya’s indigenous “neighbourhood” – was recast as the epicentre of popular resistance, just like “back then”.⁹ Its residents erected dozens of barricades and they even managed to cut off the Masaya central police station, encircling it with roadblocks and locking the police in for nearly a

month. Though the police did not surrender, many young protesters expressed the hope that Masaya would be the “first liberated city” of this insurrection – they even set up an intermediate city council. In Monimbó, older generations shared with younger protesters forms of insurrectional knowledge that amplified their capacities for resistance, including the manufacturing of artisanal mortars and explosives (*bombas de contacto*). Though a brutal incursion was unleashed to quash Masaya’s barricades, which was most violent in Monimbó, local protesters prided themselves on causing the first interruption ever of the Repliegue Táctico’s anniversary, marking the start of annual FSLN celebrations of the revolution’s victory.¹⁰ Monimbó has refused to receive the FSLN caravan at its central square (*la placita*), the Repliegue’s historical endpoint, since.

By invoking an insurrectional past to foment an insurrectional present, protesters not only reimagined possibilities for liberation, but also called into question the FSLN’s legitimacy on the basis of its proclaimed ownership over the popular forms of resistance that had helped it achieve Somoza’s ousting. Following Ortega’s populist rhetoric, if they were *El pueblo presidente!* (The People President!), who was he to deny the people’s will? Collectively putting their lives on the line for this “liberation of Nicaragua”, frontline protesters mobilised claims to justice and freedom (*justicia y libertad*) once forwarded by the FSLN itself, not only during the armed insurrections of the 1970s, but also in its democratic oppositional period (1990–2006). In fact, another phrase that was repurposed by the protesters came from a video fragment of Ortega rallying against then-President Arnoldo Alemán. In 1997, the right-wing Alemán had attempted to violently quash and disqualify the 6% student strike by calling the protesters delinquents and deploying the police against them (Cuadra). In the heat of that battle, then in support of the students, Ortega had vociferated: “when those who govern break the law, the people have the right to do justice!” Seeing themselves in a similar position, criminalised by the sitting president and attacked by the police, this video fragment was circulated across protest movement platforms in 2018, mobilising Ortega’s words against him.

Yet as protesters invoked symbols of insurrection and liberation, they also reappropriated and altered their premise of violent self-sacrifice to one of justice. This was for a “Free fatherland to live in!” (*patria libre para vivir*) as student-protesters shouted, drawing on but radically altering the revolutionary call for a “free fatherland or death!” (*patria libre o morir*). In doing so, they not only reconfigured local narratives of liberation but also embodied a transnational feminist protest praxis countering state violence and impunity by way of an ethics of collective care (Bran Aragón and Goett). Interestingly, this call would manifest in a very similar way during the Cuban protests of July 2021, where artists and protesters converted the independentist, revolutionary cry for “fatherland or death” (*patria o muerte*) to one for “fatherland and life” (*patria y vida*). Transnational connections between Cuba and Nicaragua – as well as other countries that make up the Bolivarian Alliance of the American Peoples (ALBA) – are manifold and have provided both rhetorical and operational assistance in support of the Nicaraguan government before, during, and after the 2018 protests (González Bergez). In some ways, this is reminiscent

of Cold War alliances and parallels, when the Sandinistas received extensive support from their (pro-)Soviet allies, particularly toward the development of their state security apparatus (see “Tropical Chekists”). At present, this translates into continuing transatlantic alliances between Ortega’s party-state, Cuba, Venezuela, Russia, and Iran,¹¹ as well as a share of old European solidarity groups that did not defect following the FSLN/MRS split, allegations of electoral fraud throughout the 2000s, or the brutal repression of the 2018 protests. However, due to their enormous political diversity and often very personal prior ties to Sandinismo (both within and beyond the FSLN as a party), protest movements were similarly able to establish transatlantic alliances with old solidarity groups, new internationalists, and the Nicaraguan diaspora. On the one hand, this hinged on their projection as victims of grave human rights violations perpetrated by the state’s regular and irregular armed actors. On the other, it related to their capacity to speak both *for* and *as* “the people” – that is, to their popular sovereignty. This was demonstrated in the protests’ capacity to mobilise people from all social classes and walks of life, and their rejection of sitting political parties as valid representatives (due to their corruption and instrumental role in the establishment of Ortega’s hegemony).

Peace and *plomo*

Faced with young and vocal protesters gaining media support by the day (and largely winning the battle for online and international support), the government struck back hard under the banner *vamos con todo* (going all out, #VamosConTodo). While they explicitly legitimated the use of force throughout and beyond “Operation Clean-Up” (authoritarian), they discursively justified this in the name of “the people’s peace” (populist). Though this may sound contradictory in view of the massiveness of the protests and protesters’ claims to popular sovereignty, they argued that in doing so they were “defending the revolution’s gains” from what they framed as a “coup attempt” (Ayerdis; Midence). In doing so, they defined the protesters in opposition to the “true people” (*their* people) – the loyalist, Sandinista-identifying “popular masses” instrumentalised to protect the revolution against this “imperialist attack”. Protesters were criminal pawns in a foreign, conspiratorial plan to oust the government. Organising under the #VamosConTodo banner, the regime called in not only their institutional supports (riot and regular police, with the tacit backing of the military), but also drew on their party militants, deputising them into so-called para-police or paramilitary groups to use arms to quash the protests at any cost. Perched in the cargo beds of police pick-ups and unmarked Toyota Hilux trucks, hosts of masked (para-)state operatives openly toting party flags, thus fired their state-endorsed handguns, shotguns, AK-47 assault rifles, and even Dragunov sniper rifles at largely unarmed protesters (Bellingcat). In spite of these open displays of violence, they dubbed these “caravans of peace” and hashtagged their social media posts with slogans like “united for peace” (#UnidosPorLaPaz), “Nicaragua wants peace” (#NicaraguaQuierePaz), and “they couldn’t and will never be able to [oust the revolution]” (#NoPudieronNiPodrán). Among protesters, who shared numerous videos of the trucks making their way from city to city, these

caravans became known as “the caravans of death”. In a desperate attempt to stop the massacre, protesters tagged the Organisation of American States and United Nations in their posts, calling for international support and even foreign intervention. On their part, the government and its supporters used these calls to justify their recourse to violence as, according to them, they demonstrated the protesters’ relations to imperialist international bodies (e.g., Ayerdis).

In an effort to redraw their own historical timeline, the FSLN went out of its way to regain its control of the streets by 19 July. Even as the abovementioned caravans ramped the death toll up to over 300 (GIEI Nicaragua), government supporters legitimised their brutal response by pointing to the ways in which the protests attacked the revolution and its legacy. Following its typical *pars pro toto* reasoning, the regime reminded its followers that if they were removed, the revolution would be trampled and lost. All the efforts and bloodshed of the past would have amounted to nothing. They, therefore, reinstated the revolutionary call for a free fatherland or death as “PLOMO” – supposedly its acronym, but also the Spanish word for bullet. PLOMO thus figured as the armed protection of the “revolutionary project” from an internal enemy supposedly reeled up by foreign interventionist actors. These “criminals”, their “coup attempt”, and “destruction of the people’s peace” *had to* be stopped (Ayerdis). In resorting to the foreign intervention trope, the Ortega-Murillo government recast the protests in the light of the 1980s Contra War – a civil war that cost the lives of more than 50,000 people. In that light (rather than the light of Latin America’s present), 300 deaths became a small price to pay for the revolution’s survival.

On the government’s end then, the only “people” that mattered were those on their side. From their centre of power, all those who did not align with Ortega and Murillo were dubbed “traitors of the nation” – *traidores, peleles, pitiyanquis* – terms historically informed by longer traditions of anti-U.S. imperialism and the Contra War, during which treason was punishable by execution. This embrace of authoritarian populist rhetoric exacerbated an “Us” versus “Them” divide, where the minority pro-government “Us” was still projected as representative of “the nation” (Rheindorf). Based on the logics of treason (which are worse for defectors than “honest” opponents), the repression took on a particularly vindictive character in former Sandinista strongholds like León, Estelí, Masaya, and Monimbó (Thaler and Mosinger). As the last barricades were dismantled, the Sandinista-majority National Assembly passed a law against terrorism on 17 July 2018 with a definition so ample that anyone who pries a cobblestone from the street could be imprisoned – and anyone who participated in solidarity *recolectas* (fundraising campaigns) could be prosecuted for “financing terrorism”.

Over the next months and years, replicating tactics of autocratic legalism (de Sa e Silva), the government developed a set of reforms and laws to stop and persecute protesters in their tracks. By the end of 2018, hundreds of protesters were arrested and prosecuted by the heavily politicised judicial system (Amnesty International). Testimonies of torture began to re-emerge from within the same infrastructures of repression that once held Sandinista guerrilleros – particularly the infamous El Chipote jail (UPPN-RIDH).¹² Though the government strategically deployed

amnesties to negotiate international pressures, they gradually ensured the legal framework legitimated all the instruments for political persecution they needed. This way, the National Assembly approved a carbon copy of Putin's cyber-control law in October 2020, to ensure control over the digital realm in the run-up to and aftermath of the 2021 presidential "elections". During those elections, cyber-control "Operation Danto" was rolled out, in direct reference to the Contra War's Operation Danto in 1988, when the Sandinista army embarked on its heaviest attack yet against the Contra, massacring and burning down dozens of camps, all the way into Honduras. Dozens were arrested around the 2021 "elections", including the oppositions presidential pre-candidates. Early 2023, the new "Law for the Rights of the People to Independence, Sovereignty and Self-Determination for Peace" (no. 1055) would allow for the National Assembly to revoke the citizenship of Nicaraguans accused of

leading or financing a coup, disrupting the constitutional order, fomenting terrorist acts, undermining national sovereignty, or inciting foreign interventionism in internal affairs by calling for military intervention, boycotts or sanctions against the Nicaraguan state, its citizens or the supreme interests of the nation contemplated in law

deeming them "traitors of the fatherland" (art. 1). That same week, 316 Nicaraguans, 222 of which were political prisoners (among which the opposition's presidential pre-candidates) who were flown out of the country to the United States under false pretenses, leaving them stateless, were stripped of their citizenship. Heavily drawing on (the protection of) its revolutionary past under the guise of an authoritarian populist rhetorical strategy of imperialist intervention, the Ortega-Murillo regime thus literally expelled emerging grassroots, peasant, feminist, religious and political leaders in the name of the "reestablishment of peace".

Conclusion

In this chapter, I zoomed in on the ways in which both the Ortega-Murillo regime and those opposing it intentionally drew parallels with historical events or reproduced historical narratives of insurrection to justify their actions and garner support for their cause during and in the aftermath of the 2018 protests. While the protesters deemed their opponents *sapos* (toads, or snitches) for their support of a "criminal government", that government in turn referred to its opponents as criminals, coup-mongers and eventually "traitors of the fatherland", using populist rhetoric and repressive authoritarian tactics to punish them for muddying the revolution's legacy. I approached these teleologically, as they foster an "Us" versus "Them" divide, with both sides claiming to speak and act on behalf of "the people". In spite of a clear power imbalance, the protesters and their sympathisers drew on and reappropriated local, historical narratives of insurrection (precisely from the era that brought the FSLN its revolution) to cast Ortega's government as an illegitimate dictatorship, based on their overt use of lethal force and state terror. Not only did the protesters then seek historical legitimacy for their use of both counterviolence

and non-violent practices, they also attempted to oust the Ortega-Murillo regime by making visible the violations it was committing, amply denouncing them on digital media. In spite of the criminalisation of their appeals, this is how they sought protection with the “international community” (drawing on the global human rights framework), while also rekindling transnational solidarity with the struggle for popular autonomy in the face of an openly authoritarian regime.

Notes

- 1 As per the constitutional amendments passed by the Nicaraguan Congress on 22 November 2024, Murillo is formally “co-President” of Nicaragua.
- 2 In this analysis, I largely leave out the historically transnational anti-Sandinista camp, composed of former Somoza followers (Somocistas) and counterrevolutionaries (ex-Contra), as I did not have the same level of access to them and their social media production as I did to (former) Sandinista and left-leaning protesters.
- 3 Supported by the University of Amsterdam research priority area “Global Digital Cultures”. See <https://globaldigitalcultures.org/2021/01/04/protestas-the-politics-and-aesthetics-of-digital-authoritarianism-and-protest-in-the-global-south/>. Accessed 23 May 2023.
- 4 Including hundreds of teenagers and young men conscripted into the Sandinista Popular Army (EPS).
- 5 See Carrión (216–18) for a detailed description of this process.
- 6 Neighbourhood-level political councils in charge of executing the government’s social aid programmes, in effect operating a vast clientelist network (C.F. Chamorro; Collombon and Rodgers).
- 7 In protection of their personal economic and political interests, these sectors of the opposition are largely proponents of an *atterrizaje suave* (soft landing), which has been a divisive topic for the opposition as a whole.
- 8 For more, see e.g., Díaz and Weegels; Mosinger et al.; Rocha, *Provocation and Protest*; or Seijan.
- 9 For Monimbó’s role during the Final Insurrection, see, e.g., Sussman.
- 10 The Repliegue originally took place on 27 June 1979, with about six thousand guerrillas silently moving from Managua to Masaya to confuse Somoza’s National Guard, making them believe the FSLN had been defeated three weeks before the country’s liberation.
- 11 As manifested, for instance, in the U.N. security and human rights council votes on the adoption of resolutions to investigate Nicaragua’s government for crimes against humanity.
- 12 For historical accounts of El Chipote under Somoza’s rule, see e.g., Chamorro Cardenal.

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