

NICARAGUA: BACKGROUND AND NDI ACTIVITIES (1992-1997)

Political History

Nicaragua's history from 1909-1933 was dominated by U.S. interference in Nicaraguan political affairs. During this time, the U.S. often sent marines to back leaders loyal to the United States. Any Nicaraguan who was publicly critical of U.S. involvement or intervention was promptly removed from Nicaraguan politics.

The emergence of Somoza Garcia, chief director of the U.S.-backed National Guard, put an end to the long line of unstable governments. Garcia ruled Nicaragua, directly or indirectly, from 1936 until his assassination in 1956. He derived strength from three main sources: the military support of the National Guard, support from the United States, and ownership or control of substantial portions of the Nicaraguan economy. By investing in different sectors of the economy, Somoza created an oligarchy consisting mainly of his friends and family. With support from the U.S. and the National Guard, Somoza was able to control the opposition and force the rubber-stamp Constituent Assembly to elect him to consecutive presidential terms.

Following WWII, however, opposition to Garcia began to grow. He responded by installing different leaders in his place so that he could rule indirectly. In order to thwart any labor opposition, the government placated socialist opponents by promoting liberal labor policies and in some cases paying bribes. Garcia warded off opposition from the Conservative Party by granting them one-third of the congressional delegates and limited representation in the cabinet and courts. He also included clauses in the new 1950 constitution guaranteeing "commercial liberty" which allowed him to win back the support of the traditional elite who managed the economy. Having made numerous enemies, Garcia was assassinated in 1956 and succeeded by his son, Luis Somoza Debayle. From 1956-1974, Luis Somoza Debayle and his brother Anastasio Somoza Debayle ruled the country. From 1957-1963, Luis provided citizens with some freedoms and raised hopes for political liberalization, while his brother, Anastasio, headed the feared National Guard.

In 1967, Anastasio was elected president amidst an oppressive campaign against opponents. His oppressive measures, inability to deal with natural emergencies such as the 1972 earthquake, and growing amount of wealth, drew increasing criticism from the Roman Catholic Church and political opponents. Through political repression, however, Anastasio was reelected President in 1974. At about this time, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) was consolidating its power. A guerrilla movement enjoying support from peasants and students groups, the FSLN was poised to topple the government. Increased oppression by the government and the United States' displeasure with Anastasio increased the popularity of the FSLN. In 1979, Anastasio resigned and went into exile; he was later assassinated.

Having inherited a nation devastated by a Civil War which left 50,000 Nicaraguans dead, 120,000 exiled, and 600,000 homeless, the new FSLN government was faced with the daunting task of rebuilding the nation. The new government sought foreign assistance in order to rebuild the Nicaraguan economy and renegotiate foreign debt. In addition, it nationalized Somoza's family-owned properties. The

Sandinistas developed mass organizations which represented popular interest groups. Most importantly, the FSLN reversed the previous government's pattern of repression and torture. The government, however, established new political institutions to consolidate their control. On August 22, 1979, the FSLN ruling junta proclaimed the Fundamental Statute of the Republic of Nicaragua which abolished the constitution, presidency, Congress, and all courts. Important decisions were made by a nine-member Joint National Directorate and then transferred to the junta for its approval. In addition, the new government created a consultative corporatist representative assembly, which though it was not a rubber stamp assembly, did answer to the junta and was composed primarily of members of the FSLN.

Internal opposition to the FSLN began to grow, largely in part to U.S. efforts. Upon assuming office, President Reagan launched a campaign to isolate the Sandinistas. Convinced that the FSLN government, assisted by Cuba and the Soviet Union, was a communist threat to Central America, the Reagan administration mobilized and unified the Nicaraguan opposition. Largely consisting of minority ethnic groups and disgruntled members of the former National Guard, the Contras as the opposition became known, were funded by the U.S. to overthrow the Nicaraguan government. Operating out of Honduras, the Contras, began to cause damage to the Nicaraguan economy. In addition, the Roman Catholic Church and La Prensa, one of the leading newspapers, began to voice opposition to the government. Although the government held a presidential election in 1984 at the opposition's request, FSLN candidate Daniel Ortega won the election amidst opposition cries that the election was not fair.

Continued U.S. assistance to the Contras caused the Ortega regime to crack down on civil liberties. This act led to increased opposition, which in turn, hurt the government. International trends, however, weakened the resolve of both the Sandinistas and Contras to keep fighting. Costa Rican President Oscar Arias's called upon governments and guerrillas in the region to take steps to end the fighting. Arias's plan was successful as government and guerrilla leaders around the region, including Nicaragua, stopped seeking foreign assistance and granted amnesty to political prisoners. In addition, the Iran-Contra scandal slowed down U.S. assistance to the Contras and the collapse of the Soviet Union eroded the main base of support for the Sandinistas. President Ortega called presidential elections for 1990.

In the 1990 presidential elections, Violeta Barrios de Chamorro of the National Opposition Union, a coalition of fourteen parties, carried 55 percent of the popular vote against Daniel Ortega's 41 percent. Having promised to end the unpopular military draft, bring about democratic reconciliation, and promote economic growth, Chamorro earned a stunning victory. During her presidency, Chamorro attempted to keep peace among the various factions, even appointing Sandinistas to her government. Chamorro reduced the military and privatized many state-owned enterprises. She even set up a judicial board to review property claims which were causing turmoil throughout the country. In the first peaceful transition of power in Nicaraguan history, Arnoldo Lacayo Aleman of the newly-formed Liberal Alliance was elected president in the 1996 elections. President Aleman has been focusing on ending unemployment and poverty and sustaining economic growth.

NDI's Civil-Military Programs in Nicaragua

NDI's involvement in Nicaragua represents one of its most successful civil-military relations programs throughout the world. The success was due to the willingness of both Nicaraguan military and civilian

representatives to make concessions and cooperate with one another. Upon President Chamorro's assumption of power, civilian and military officials had heated disagreements about the status of civil-military relations, institutions, and structures. Although Chamorro's UNO was in power, General Humberto Ortega, brother of former President Daniel Ortega, remained the commander-in-chief of the Sandinista Popular Army (the name given to Nicaragua's "national army"). As a consequence, the army still owed allegiance to the Sandinista Party. General Ortega opposed any attempt to tamper with the military structure and vowed to stay on as commander-in-chief until 1997. Meanwhile, many civilians, emboldened by the emergence of democracy, proposed that the military be eliminated all together and replaced by a national police. Anxious to make democracy work and alleviate the alienation of the Sandinistas, President Chamorro did not ask General Ortega to step down.

Amidst this backdrop, in 1992, Nicaraguan political leaders asked NDI to help decrease tensions and changes the country's legacy of misguided militarism, rigid societal divisions and narrow understanding of the respective roles of military and civilian sectors in a democratic society. NDI responded by initiating a three-year NED-funded program to help strengthen civilian oversight of the military, to promote communication between civilian and military leaders, and to train civilians in security affairs. Members of NDI's first civil-military relations assessment team went to Managua in 1992 and met individually with various political and military leaders to encourage them to meet together publicly to reach a consensus on basic principles.

The first such forum was held in April 1993. The attendees to this forum, who appeared together publicly for the first time, included General Humberto Ortega, Minister of the Presidency Antonio Lacayo, Sandinista congressional leader Sergio Ramirez, President of the National Assembly Luis Humberto Guzman, and Vice President Virgilio Godoy. In this forum, Ortega pledged publicly-for the first time-to support a change in the name of the army. Prior to this forum, the Nicaraguan army, and in particular, Gen. Ortega, publicly and adamantly opposed all efforts to change the politically-charged name of the armed forces. In addition, Ortega also stated that he would leave the army in accordance with any new military law passed by the National Assembly. NDI's April 1993 report on civil-military relations in Nicaragua made strong recommendations regarding the creation of a civilian-led ministry of defense and prompted Ortega's first public acceptance of the need for the ministry. The April 1993 and subsequent forums were important because they provided a neutral setting and relayed the experiences of other countries to both civilian and military leaders. Moreover, the positive response given by the media, civil society, and the public encouraged civilian and military officials to continue joint seminars and workshops for the enhancement of civil-military relations. Most importantly, NDI workshops and seminars generated unprecedented openness from the military.

Following Ortega's two groundbreaking announcements, the Minister of the Presidency and President of the National Assembly requested NDI's assistance in drafting military reform legislation. NDI experts provided technical advice about possible provisions and reforms, as well as comparative legislation from other countries.

In NDI's April 1994 seminar, more than 250 Nicaraguans participated in workshops on the creation of a ministry of defense. Presentations were made regarding the structure of other countries' ministries and the challenges they faced establishing civilian control of the armed forces. During this seminar, Minister of the Presidency Lacayo and Gen. Ortega unexpectedly announced their agreement on military

reform legislation called the Military Code of Organization, Jurisdiction and Military Social Security-Military Code. Most importantly, these two individuals resolved the two most outstanding issues: Ortega's retirement and the renaming of the army. Due to its groundbreaking achievements, this seminar made headlines across the Nicaraguan media. Following the seminar, the executive branch sent a reform package to the National Assembly. After some modification, the Military Code was passed by Assembly on August 21, 1994. As specified by the new law, Ortega retired from military service on February 21, 1995 and the Nicaraguan army was renamed the "Army of Nicaragua."

Nicaraguans from various walks of life expressed gratitude to NDI for its critical assistance in implementing military reforms in Nicaragua. Former President of the National Assembly Luis Humberto Guzman specifically pointed to NDI's role in providing positive reinforcement to General Ortega regarding his decision to retire. A group of NDI international experts, specifically retired military officials and ex-Ministers of Defense, discussed with Ortega the positive and historic role he could play for both Nicaragua and the military institution itself by retiring and helping to establish a democratic system of civil-military relations in the country. Most importantly, the experts explained to Ortega that he could still have a productive life in retirement.

Another strategic focus of NDI's Nicaraguan programs was to provide information on mechanisms, institutions, and practices necessary to increase the ability of civilians to develop security policy and to promote a nonpolitical role for the armed forces. NDI's seminars had educational and training components. Activities included an eight-day course in September 1995 taught by experts from five countries which covered technical issues and provided participants with thousands of pages of resource materials and comparative legislation. Nicaraguan military officials conceded that the NDI seminars were allowing civilians to become more well-rehearsed in security and intelligence affairs.

In addition to familiarizing Nicaraguan civilians with security affairs, NDI also focused on supporting the development of civilian institutions. NDI played a key role in advancing the creation of the country's first civilian-led ministry of defense. First, the Institute prompted the army to agree publicly to the creation of a civilian-led ministry of defense. Second, the program increased awareness about the issue among Nicaraguan political and military leaders and the public at large. Third, NDI trained a core group of civilians to design and create a ministry of defense.

NDI also trained and enhanced the image of the Defense Commission of the National Assembly. When NDI's delegation first visited Managua in 1992, the Sandinista and UNO legislators of the Commission refused to meet together, barely allowing it to function. By the time NDI's April 1994 program took place, however, the Defense Commission was not only conducting weekly meetings with all members participating, but organizing seminars on defense issues and actively taking part in the civil-military debate. In 1996, the Commission had five major security affairs-related legislative projects on its schedule, ranging from a new police law to reforms on military justice and civil defense. Having shed its role as merely a "rubber-stamp" assembly, the Assembly's Defense Commission began to make improvements on security-related legislation that it received from the executive branch. The army, in turn, responded positively to the Commission's efforts to introduce military reform. In 1995, for example, Gen. Cuadra organized for the first time in history a public briefing for the Commission about the defense budget and the army's structure, as well as took members on a tour of the military

installations in Managua. Whereas, previously, the army would only approach the Presidency with regards to future military legislation, it now began to approach the Defense Commission. This response from the military encouraged the Assembly to consider the Army's needs when allocating money for defense.

Finally, NDI sought to provide sustainability to the new dialogue and training by empowering Nicaraguan civilians to promote communication and civilian oversight. To this end, NDI was integral in the development of the Nicaraguan Center for Strategic Studies (CEEN), Nicaragua's first multi-partisan nongovernmental organization dedicated to familiarizing civilians with security affairs and promoting better relations between the armed forces, the government, and civil society. The CEEN is in a position to play an important role in Nicaragua civil-military relations for a number of reasons. First, CEEN has been well-regarded as a local resource and forum for discussions on civil-military relations. Second, through NDI, CEEN has access to international security affairs experts and resource materials that can help Nicaraguan policymakers as they work to strengthen civil-military relations. Third, current and former members of the CEEN—as well as CEEN program participants—have been in high level positions in the newly established ministry of defense and in the National Assembly.

NDI's extensive involvement in Nicaragua continued from June 15-21 1997 when it sponsored the visit of a delegation of Nicaraguans and Hondurans to study the Argentine national security policymaking process and system of civilian oversight of the military. The delegates represented an unprecedented ideological, political, and institutional mix. The Hondurans were included since they were interested in improving civil-military relations in Honduras based on NDI's success in Argentina and Nicaragua. Before the delegation's visit to Argentina, the Argentines were briefed about the state of evolving civil-military relations in Nicaragua. Once in Buenos Aires, the delegation met with defense policymakers, representatives of the ministry of defense, members of congress, academic experts and former political leaders and ministry officials who were involved in the reform of the Argentine ministry of defense following its transfer to civilian control in 1983.

Although the mission's primary focus was on issues relating to the new ministry of defense, NDI hoped the mixed composition of the delegation would help to build channels of communication and consensus about basic structures and powers before the ministry of defense legislation is presented in the Assembly. The Defense Commission, by virtue of receiving defense management legislation from the Presidency, plays a key role in submitting revised security-related legislation to the National Assembly. The inclusion of delegates from outside of the ministry reinforces the concept that well-developed and coordinated national security policymaking reflects the input of various state institutions and political viewpoints.

To build on the results of the Argentina study mission, NDI sent a small team to Managua to analyze the current state of civil-military relations and to develop broad policy recommendations for Nicaraguan political leaders. The team met with political and military leaders, the national police, representatives of nongovernmental organizations and government officials to gather a wide variety of views about the state of civil-military relations in Nicaragua. In addition, the team provided the participants of the Argentina study mission with follow-up advice. One expert from Argentina gave presentations about Argentina's national defense policymaking process to approximately 50 military officers of the rank of captain and major at the military academy in Managua and to the Defense Commission of the National Assembly.

The NDI team found that there have been substantial advances since 1995, especially in terms of the professionalism of the army and its separation from the Sandinista Front of National Liberation (FSLN). Moreover, the Nicaraguans had created a civilian-led ministry of defense and initiated positive constitutional reforms regarding defense. The delegation noted, however, that there were still substantial legal and structural shortcomings and the ministry of defense lacked defined functions and a role in national defense. Based on the team's observations, NDI developed policy recommendations that were communicated to Nicaraguan Ministry of Defense officials. Nicaraguan ministry officials and members of the National Assembly believed that NDI's recommendations provided significant input for the subsequent legislation and the further development of the ministry.

In December 1997, the Nicaraguan vice minister of defense asked NDI to provide additional information about defense ministry functions in other countries. Once this information was provided by NDI, it was implemented in a preliminary law defining the proposed ministry of defense's roles and subsequently submitted to the National Assembly. In addition, NDI also helped the Ministry re-establish contact with the Argentine security affairs think tank, SER en el 2000, which gave policy-makers additional information about defense ministry functions.

The visit to Argentina allowed Nicaraguan civilian policymakers to not only learn about civilian oversight of security affairs but to be given concrete examples of relevant legislation from other countries. The Buenos Aires visit reinforced the importance of coordination and collaboration among the various sectors-civil society, government, congress, and the army-that form civil-military relations. Institutional, political, and personal ties among the delegates were also strengthened by the visit.

There was evidence of a decreased tension among the policymakers as a result of the Buenos Aires and subsequent workshops and seminars. Sandinistas and UNO members often dined and took photographs together. The headline of an article in the widely-read La Prensa declared "distinguished figures of the controversial Nicaraguan political life who, in one moment opposed [to each other], are now united within the current process of democratization."

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