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PERSONALISM AND POPULISM IN NICARAGUA

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Ideological debates in Latin America can sometimes obfuscate enduring styles of governing characterized by personalism and its handmaiden, populism. What explains the persistence of personalism and the allure of populism? How do personalism and populism mesh with either socialism or liberal democracy? Why—or how—do personalism and populism “crowd out” the ideals and institutions of particular regime types, in effect neutering them? The case of Nicaragua—whose citizens in November 2011 returned former revolutionary leader and incumbent president Daniel Ortega to office despite a constitutional ban on consecutive terms—offers a poignant example of the persistence of personalism as well as some tentative answers to these vexing questions. Notwithstanding its Sandinista revolution in the 1980s and subsequent transition to democracy, Nicaragua continues its historical predilection for being dominated politically by powerful individuals.

Scholarship on populism has focused on the ways in which charismatic leaders trade economic benefits for political support and their ability to smother political institutions.¹ But the Nicaraguan case suggests that attention should also be given to the other end of the polity—namely, the absence in the general population of a democratic culture that offers needed support for political institutions. In Nicaragua, the scarcity of informed, engaged, and exacting citizens—participants in politics—is an important part of the explanation for the persistence of personalism and populism.

Nicaragua is nominally a liberal democracy. Yet that label masks the degree to which the nation-state is dominated by powerful individuals.

In all political systems, there are (or have been) charismatic personalities.² When these personalities become all-important and overshadow institutions, however, the polity is altered, inevitably becoming oligarchic. In Latin America, this phenomenon, long-recognized as a “fact of life,” is known as *personalismo* (personalism).³

Personalism is not a regime type but a form of political behavior that can seemingly infect—or even overwhelm—a wide range of regime types. Personalism is most commonly associated with authoritarian regimes; understandably, it seems most compatible with dictatorship. Indeed, Nicaragua offers the striking example of the Somoza dynasty: a father and his two sons who successively governed the country from the mid-1930s until their regime fell in 1979 to an insurrection by the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN).⁴

Personalism is thought to be largely incompatible with other kinds of regime types—above all, those two assumed to bracket authoritarianism on the political continuum, the revolutionary “socialist” state and liberal democracy. Nicaragua today, however, presents a case where personalism is pervasive, undermining the legitimacy (or “purity”) of the revolutionary aspirations of the Sandinistas, as well as corrupting the liberal ideals of the country’s incipient democracy and the Constitutionalist Liberal Party (PLC), whose nomenclature would suggest a great affinity for democracy.

Recent research has highlighted how the transition from authoritarianism to democracy in Latin America and southern Europe during the 1980s sometimes resulted in “hybrid regimes,” a potent *mélange* of populism, authoritarianism, and democracy.⁵ Almost as important as regime type, however, is the style in which politics is conducted, above all when there are significant deviations from what might be considered a norm. The endurance of personalism in Nicaragua is disappointing, especially for those who are either enraptured by the promises of revolution or enthralled with democracy. Students of Nicaragua’s history may be equally disappointed, but they are less surprised. Nicaragua has a long history of political life being dominated by strong personalities. Indeed, ever since it gained independence from Spain, with the exception of a thirty-year period in the late nineteenth century and the Sandinista revolution in the twentieth century, the enduring political question in Nicaragua has been, “Who replaces the king?”⁶ In the last half-century, the country has had three distinct regimes, but the personalism of Nicaraguan politics has persisted and even seems to be in the ascendancy, undermining the constitution and other political institutions, including the country’s two dominant political parties, the FSLN and the PLC.

Formally, Nicaragua meets the standard criteria for a democracy: It has a constitution mandating the separation of powers; it holds open, freely contested elections; and it respects civil and political liberties.

Nicaragua enjoys political pluralism. There are vigorous debates in the media and in Congress, and there are no restrictions on political participation or constraints on the expression of political views. There is, with some flaws, the rule of law. There are no political prisoners. In short, Nicaraguans are not being “suffocated.”

On 6 November 2011, Nicaragua held national elections for the presidency and the 90 delegates to the unicameral Congress. This election was the fourth since the 1990 contest that had effectively brought a close to the Sandinista revolution. The country held open, competitive—and thus “democratic”—elections in 1996, 2001, and 2006. The 2011 elections in Nicaragua might therefore have been expected to further the “consolidation” of an incipient democracy. Yet despite the formal presence of democratic institutions and processes, the election marked the consolidation of an agile populist and personalist regime, one that is beginning to have uncanny and unsettling resemblances to the many autocrats who have paraded through Nicaragua’s history.

The victor in the 2011 elections was the incumbent, Daniel Ortega, who served as head of state during the second half of the Sandinista reign. He was the losing candidate in 1990 and has run for president in every subsequent election. Ortega won the 2011 contest handily with 63 percent of the vote. His main rival, Fabio Gadea, of the Independent Liberal Party (PLI) received 31 percent of the vote. In third place was former president Arnoldo Alemán of the PLC, who won a mere 6 percent of the vote. Two other candidates each received less than one percent. Not only did Ortega win the presidency, but the FSLN, which he now firmly—and personally—controls, won 62 seats in Congress, enough to amend the constitution. While there were doubts about the constitutional legitimacy of Ortega’s reelection bid and allegations of fraud and a lack of transparency in the voting, the results have generally been accepted both domestically and internationally.

In addition to the legitimacy that comes with being a “democrat,” President Ortega has impressive revolutionary credentials: He was imprisoned by the Somoza dictatorship (during which time he penned the poem “I Never Saw Managua When Mini-Skirts Were in Fashion”); he fought in the insurrection, and his title in the FSLN was *Comandante de la Revolución*; he is a confidant of Cuban president Fidel Castro and Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez; and he has a public record of championing the poor and denouncing imperialism. Nicaragua is a democracy with a revolutionary as head of state.

These statements are all true and yet misleading—or at least incomplete. Since the end of the Sandinista regime in 1990, Nicaragua has been dominated by two powerful individuals, which raises two important questions: 1) What are the political and economic implications of personalism? and 2) What in a nation-state permits personalism? In the aftermath of the 2011 elections, these questions have taken on added

urgency: One of the two long-dominant political figures—Alemán—has been mortally wounded, leaving a sole dominant politician—Ortega.

Personalism and Governance

The case of Nicaragua suggests that, at least in small, poor countries, personalism is likely to enhance “governability” by offering a certain degree of stability—someone, after all, assumes clear responsibility for meeting the elementary needs of public administration. There is governance. There is also likely to be at least a crude “social contract” between citizens and governors. The confusion of countless institutions and myriad political transactions is swept aside. Residents know who governs—there is a face and a name (or a handful of faces and names). Those who are dominant are visible and thus can be held somewhat accountable. Yet personalism easily leads to less rule-bound governance and thus creates distrust. Personalism contributes to populism, cooptation, and corruption. Personalism is inherently oligarchic and profoundly antidemocratic—even when practiced, as in Nicaragua, within the framework of constitutional democracy. Finally, and most worrisome, an exaggerated personalism can pave the way for a murky, but very real, “transition” to authoritarianism.

In the poorer countries of the world, elected officials are frequently most consumed with managing fragile economies. They must contend not only with pressing economic needs but also with the constant risk of exogenous “shocks” that could derange the economy. For example, when the price of petroleum surged in 2008, oil imports threatened to consume the equivalent of 45 percent of Nicaragua’s export earnings.⁷ Personalist regimes may be more adept than their more institutionalized counterparts at the “juggling acts” and policy “zig-zags” necessary to stave off collapse, or even at merely enacting stop-gap measures necessary to contain crises. Nicaragua did not collapse when oil prices rose because Ortega was able to secure relief quickly from Chávez.

Likewise, the short-term stability that personalist regimes can offer might boost the needed production of goods and services. The Nicaraguan case suggests—perhaps surprisingly—that there may be economic benefits to personalist political regimes. Yet it also suggests that economies are unlikely to reach their potential under personalist rule, which tends to be mercurial, unpredictable, self-serving, and even corrupt. Personalist regimes may well contribute to narrow, focused discussions on how to resolve practical problems. But they impede broad-based discussions about national development. Thus personalism involves disturbing trade-offs. Still, it is facile to believe that there is always a choice between a personalist regime and governance by rule-bound institutions. Every country has a political history and unique social setting, two factors that may not be all-determining but are still able to mold political choices.

The persistence of personalism in Nicaragua also raises the question of the saliency—and legacy—of the Nicaraguan revolution. The Sandinista revolution had many ambitions, one of which was to break the personalist style of the Somoza regime. The party's governing body was the nine-member National Directorate—formed in part to mend the FSLN's earlier fragmentation into three "tendencies," but also to avoid the cult of personality exemplified by both the Somoza regime and Castro in Cuba.⁸ Moreover, apart from pictures of Sandinista martyrs, the party's iconography featured no images of individual revolutionaries, not even of Daniel Ortega.⁹ The revolution attempted but failed to change Nicaragua's political culture. Time has shown that the revolutionary period was an exception to the historic norm of a Nicaragua governed by powerful individuals.

The Nicaraguan revolution—and counterrevolution—brought economic hardship to the country. Some calculations put Nicaragua's economy in 1990 on par with where it had been, on a per capita basis, in 1942.¹⁰ Nicaragua became the second-poorest country in the Americas, better off than only Haiti. Extreme poverty was—and continues to be—endemic. Despite efforts to strengthen education during the revolutionary period, the level of educational attainment remained low, and continues to be low today. The country's exports were the same as they had been in the nineteenth century, with coffee the most important source of foreign exchange. It is telling that, even today, 60 percent of Nicaraguans cook with firewood.¹¹

Despite the end of the revolution and the embrace of liberalism by successive administrations, the state—recipient of vast sums in foreign assistance as well as loans and tax revenues—has continued to be the major player in the Nicaraguan economy. This potent combination of poverty, a dearth of income and wealth-generating activities in the private sector, and a state flush with authority and resources from abroad, provided fertile ground for populism and personalism.

After the Revolution

The February 1990 elections brought an end to FSLN rule and thus to the Nicaraguan revolution. With 55 percent of the vote, Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, publisher of the newspaper *La Prensa*, defeated Daniel Ortega, who won 41 percent. (The candidates of small parties received the remainder of the ballots.) Chamorro ran for office without a political party of her own. Instead, she was backed by a loose and eclectic coalition of political parties and other organizations keen on ending the Sandinistas' reign.

Her election and the Sandinistas' loss created a political vacuum. The Sandinistas were demoralized not only by their defeat but also by the collapse of socialist regimes in Eastern Europe. A party driven by ideol-

**TABLE 1—PARTY PERFORMANCE IN
NICARAGUAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS BY VOTE SHARE**

	1 st Place		2 nd Place		3 rd Place	
	Party	Vote Share	Party	Vote Share	Party	Vote Share
1996	PLC	51%	FSLN	38%	PCCN*	4%
2001	PLC	56%	FSLN	42%	PCN**	1%
2006	FSLN	38%	ALN	28%	PLC	27%
2011	FSLN	63%	PLI	31%	PLC	6%

Source: Supreme Electoral Council (Nicaragua).

*Nicaraguan Party of the Christian Path (PCCN)

**Conservative Party of Nicaragua (PCN)

ogy suddenly was not only out of power but also without a compass. As for Chamorro, rather than focusing on building a political party during her presidency, she instead concentrated on national reconciliation.¹² Chamorro's chief of staff, her son-in-law Antonio Lacayo, recounts how difficult it was to build a liberal democracy:

In 1990, no one in the country knew anything about democracy. We had four decades of dictatorship and then a decade of something akin to a "dictatorship of the proletariat." This revolutionary government was designed to level social and economic inequalities; it did not teach or foment democratic practices. Moreover, in 1990, we were living with economic hardship. There was talk of democracy, but the natural response of the poor was to ask, "What does democracy do for me?" The answer was a painful, "Not very much, or perhaps nothing." I am convinced that building a democratic culture takes at least a generation.¹³

Lacayo holds that Nicaragua still lacks a democratic culture, and that this absence allows for the rise of strong-willed individuals.

Sensing an opportunity, other Nicaraguans did attempt to build political parties. Indeed, in the 1996 presidential elections there were 23 candidates, each representing a political party or coalition. As Table 1 illustrates, however, only two parties were competitive that year: the FSLN and the PLC.¹⁴ They had been the most effective at building a countrywide party infrastructure during Chamorro's six-year tenure, and they were the only parties able to 1) enlist a charismatic leader and 2) secure the funding necessary to build patron-client relations and establish an image of being able to "get things done."

In the case of the FSLN, it was former president Daniel Ortega who took on the task of preventing the party's collapse. Many of his colleagues, including the party's intellectuals, assumed that it was dead and moved on to other endeavors. Even Daniel's brother, Humberto Ortega, yielded to what was perceived to be a new political reality. He remained head of the armed forces under Chamorro and insisted that army titles be changed to reflect the transition away from revolutionary times. He him-

self went from being *Comandante de la Revolución* Humberto Ortega to *General* Humberto Ortega.

At the same time, Daniel Ortega worked tirelessly to keep the FSLN alive, traveling throughout the country and renewing and strengthening personal relationships. In so doing, he signaled to all that he hoped to return to power. With the desertion of its intellectuals, however, the FSLN became more of a political machine.¹⁵ The party had some financial resources, which it carefully deployed. It also relied on disaffected young people to hold disruptive demonstrations, which were calculated to build—or maintain—support for the party.

Meanwhile, a handful of individuals, some of whom had been in exile during the Sandinista reign, began to revive Somoza's political party, the Nationalist Liberal Party (PLN). Many in Nicaragua assumed that the PLN had completely vanished. Nominally, it had. Yet it proved possible to reincarnate it, including even in isolated rural communities. The name of the party, the Constitutionalist Liberal Party, was practically the same, and the color of the party—red—was maintained. Arnoldo Alemán emerged as its leader. Alemán had led a pro-Somoza youth group during the Sandinista insurrection. A gifted student at the law school in the provincial city of León, Alemán graduated first in his class. He was a talented orator who spoke like a preacher and seemed to know the Bible word for word. Alemán became mayor of Managua in 1990 and used that post as a springboard to national politics. He oversaw the completion of important and visible public-works projects, which always seemed to be accompanied by signs bearing his name and likeness, as well as his slogan *obras no palabras* (works not words).

The PLC, and Alemán in particular, gained traction largely because of widespread disappointment with the Sandinista regime, which many blamed for conflict and economic hardship. No one forgot that Somoza was a dictator, but even from the poor came cutting observations that “life was better under Somoza.” For many, a vote for the Liberals was an anti-Sandinista vote. For others, a vote for the Liberals was a vote for the party most able to deliver needed goods and services. In the end, Alemán won the 1996 presidential election with 51 percent of the vote. Daniel Ortega came in second with 38 percent.

Pacts, Deals, and Uneasy Alliances

What was a surprise to all was the intimate relationship that formed between Alemán and Ortega, whose control of the FSLN never faltered. In 1995, the two leaders induced their respective party members serving in Congress to modify the 1987 Constitution to enable them to distribute among their supporters government positions, including those in the judiciary. With this infamous “pact” (as it became known), Nicaragua was transformed from a winner-take-all presidential democracy, with a

division of power among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, to a crony “consociational democracy”—a coalition of two political parties, firmly controlled by their leaders, colluding for their mutual benefit.

The amended constitution prohibits consecutive presidential terms, and although there was discussion of Alemán somehow finding a way to skirt the law, in the end his vice-president, Enrique Bolaños, led the PLC in the 2001 elections. Bolaños won the presidency with 56 percent of the vote and an even greater margin over his competitors than Alemán had achieved in 1996 (see Table 1). This feat was all the more impressive given that Bolaños was not a charismatic candidate and was widely perceived to be a stand-in for Alemán.

By 2002, Alemán had been revealed as exceedingly corrupt, which proved to be his undoing. In August of that year, Bolaños denounced Alemán on radio and television for allegedly stealing US\$97.6 million from the public treasury. As if speaking directly to his predecessor, Bolaños said: “Arnoldo, you took away the pensions of the retired, medicine from the nurses, paychecks from the teachers.”¹⁶ Ironically, Alemán’s *guaca* (a word used in Nicaragua to refer to a hidden treasure) had helped to finance Bolaños’s campaign. Alemán’s indictment was made possible only by a temporary political alliance between Ortega and Bolaños. Alemán was eventually convicted on corruption charges and sentenced to twenty years in prison.

Nevertheless, the PLC remained loyal to Alemán and kept its distance from Bolaños. A framed portrait of Alemán continued to hang in the party’s national headquarters in Managua. Bolaños, meanwhile, was in a precarious position, having to negotiate with Ortega over the objections of the U.S. government. At the same time, Ortega strengthened his hand by reconciling with his nemesis, Nicaragua’s powerful cardinal, Miguel Obando y Bravo. Bolaños came to be perceived as weak and was barely able to finish his term. Part of his vulnerability stemmed from his “modern” outlook, which focused on the nation and not individuals. Revealingly, Bolaños is remembered as a president who “never did a favor for anyone.”

Prior to the 2006 elections, the PLC split into two factions. Banker Eduardo Montealegre led the breakaway movement “Let’s Go with Eduardo” (MVE) that eventually became the Nicaraguan Liberal Alliance (ALN). The rump of the PLC remained loyal to Alemán, who held on to the party reins. The two “liberal” parties split the anti-Sandinista vote, with Montealegre slightly outpolling PLC candidate José Rizo, who still won more than a quarter of the vote despite Alemán’s corruption conviction.

The Sandinista vote was also split in 2006. A decade earlier, a group of FSLN dissidents formed the Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS). Sergio Ramírez, the prominent novelist and Ortega’s vice-pres-

TABLE 2—DISPOSITION TO ENGAGE IN POLITICAL ACTIVITY (2010)

	FSLN	Opposition Parties	Independent
Vote	83%	75%	57%
Affiliate	56%	42%	19%
Campaign	51%	37%	18%
March	43%	35%	18%
Protest	7%	3%	1%

Source: M & R (a Nicaraguan survey firm), 18–28 June 2010.

ident during the revolution, headed the MRS ticket in the 1996 contest but won less than one percent of the vote. In the 2006 election, the MRS vote share rose to 6 percent, even after its candidate Herty Lewites died of a heart attack and was replaced by Edmundo Jarquín. With the Liberal parties split, however, the MRS's small vote share was not enough to keep FSLN leader Ortega from winning the presidency with only 38 percent of the vote.

The election outcome can also be seen as a divide between two “traditional” candidates—and their parties—and two “modern” candidates. The 2006 results are revealing: The two traditional candidates, of the FSLN and the PLC, received a healthy majority of support from Nicaraguans (65 percent). These candidates received a strong majority of votes despite all the publicity surrounding their backroom dealings, their heavy-handed administration of their respective political parties, and allegations of corruption. The more “modern” candidates, of the ALN and MRS, received only 34 percent of the vote.

Upon assuming the presidency, Ortega made a “deal” with Alemán, the details of which remain undisclosed. As a result, Alemán's conviction was overturned, and he promptly resumed leadership of the PLC. In 2010, polls showed that the reformist liberal candidate, Eduardo Montealegre of the ALN, had slipped in popularity, with more Nicaraguans shifting their support back to Alemán and the PLC. Likewise, although Ortega and his followers had long expressed their determination to remove the constitutional impediment to Ortega running for reelection in 2011, his appeal did not diminish. Indeed, the FSLN, firmly controlled by Ortega, remained the most popular political party by far. Moreover, as Table 2 shows, FSLN supporters are decidedly more likely to vote, join the party, campaign, march, and protest than either the supporters of the Liberal Party or independents.

Nicaraguans seemingly do not punish either corruption or constitutional subterfuge. Indeed, no one seemed shocked when, in May 2010, Alemán registered as the PLC's sole candidate for the 2011 presidential election. There was some protest when Ortega registered as the FSLN's lone presidential candidate in March 2011 after a committee of the country's Supreme Court ruled that the constitutional barrier to his reelection was “unconstitutional.” Nonetheless, subsequent public-

TABLE 3—ECONOMIC GROWTH, 1978–2011

Year	Rate	Year	Rate
1978	-7.8	1995	5.9
1979	-26.5	1996	6.3
1980	4.6	1997	4.0
1981	5.4	1998	3.7
1982	-0.8	1999	7.0
1983	4.6	2000	4.1
1984	-1.6	2001	3.0
1985	-4.8	2002	0.8
1986	-1.0	2003	2.5
1987	-0.7	2004	5.3
1988	-12.4	2005	4.3
1989	-1.7	2006	3.9
1990	-0.1	2007	3.2
1991	-0.2	2008	3.2
1992	0.4	2009	-1.5
1993	-0.4	2010	4.5
1994	3.3	2011	4.5

Note: Percentage growth of the Gross National Product as measured in constant 1994 prices.

Sources: World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and the Central Bank of Nicaragua, *Memorias anuales*.

two poor, middle-aged women in El Crucero: “Daniel identifies with the poor. He has given chickens, pigs, and even cows to the poor. And he has given roofing material and other construction material to others. He helps people like us.”¹⁹ The media in Nicaragua perpetuate this personalist view of politics. Reporting often focuses on what prominent individuals say or do. It is rare to see or hear discussions about the rules, procedures, or institutions of democracy.

Poverty, Personalism, and Populism

Nicaraguans’ toleration of corruption and constitutional subterfuge is difficult to explain, though it certainly stems in part from widespread poverty and low levels of education. Most Nicaraguans know little about the practice of democracy elsewhere in the world or the purpose of the institutional structures of established democracies. Moreover, Nicaraguans have been “worn down” by political conflict and hardship. Table 3 details the annual growth rates in Nicaragua between 1978 and 2011.²⁰ Thirteen of those years saw a negative growth rate, including the catastrophic contraction of 26.5 percent in 1979. In only four years was there growth greater than 5 percent.

Every year, though, the population grows, pushing down per capita growth and income. The birth rate in Nicaragua is twice that of Latin

opinion polls showed Ortega as the candidate with the most public support. A March–April 2011 poll showed Ortega with the support of 48 percent of intended voters.¹⁷ An earlier poll, conducted between 27 November and 6 December 2010, asked, “If a president meets the needs of the population, should he be allowed to run for reelection?”¹⁸ The majority of respondents, 60 percent, replied that he should. These results show that everyday Nicaraguans are willing to tolerate personalism.

Nicaragua’s populace consists more of clients than citizens. When asked how they perceive the country’s politics, poorer Nicaraguans routinely refer to individual politicians, often by their first names (“Daniel” or “Arnoldo”). Typical was the sentiment expressed by

America as a whole.²¹ Nicaraguan women have 3.2 children on average, but women with a higher education give birth to an average of only 1.7 children, while women with no schooling give birth to an average of 5.2

The poverty of most Nicaraguans leaves them preoccupied with immediate concerns, and they ask politicians, “What can you do for me?”

children.²² Nicaragua’s high population-growth rate has been somewhat moderated by emigration (especially to Costa Rica). In a 2004 speech, then-President Bolaños lamented that the per capita income of Nicaraguans had dropped to only half of what it had been at the beginning of 1978.²³ Although there has been some improvement since 2004, Nicaragua remains frightfully poor.

Regardless of who holds the presidency, Nicaragua’s poverty impedes the government’s ability to marshal needed resources to meet the basic needs of the population. In 2009, the government of Costa Rica, Nicaragua’s neighbor to the south, had a central budget of \$7.5 billion, raised almost entirely from taxes. The same year, Nicaragua’s central government had a budget of only \$1.5 billion, of which \$1.1 billion came from taxes and the remainder mostly from foreign donations and loans.²⁴ This difference reflects the enormous disparity in per capita income between the two countries: In the 1960s, Costa Rica and Nicaragua had comparable per capita incomes; today Costa Rica’s per capita income is somewhere between six and eight times that of Nicaragua.²⁵

The poverty of most Nicaraguans leaves them preoccupied with immediate concerns, and they ask politicians, “What can you do for me?” Both Alemán and Ortega have responded with a calculated populism: the exchange of visible goods and services for political support. Alemán likes to remind supporters that “the bell goes ding-dong” (in other words, “I will give you something, but in return you must support me”). Both Alemán and Ortega travel widely, including to the poorest communities. They both cultivate a sense that it is their munificence as leaders, not an impersonal bureaucracy, that is responsible for government assistance. Likewise, both leaders manage discretionary funds that are used to control their respective political parties, cultivate public opinion, and maintain and build public support. As presidents, both men managed to govern Nicaragua—poorly, perhaps, but they governed it nonetheless. The basic institutions of public administration are in place, and all postrevolutionary presidents have strived to “keep things going” and to mitigate crises.

Although neither Alemán nor Ortega has been able to end poverty in Nicaragua, the people are still grateful to the two men for what they have achieved. Nicaraguans in any particular locale may feel that they are poor, and they are, but they appreciate every improvement or offer-

ing—from a soccer field, to an elementary school, to the gift of a cow, to free medicine at the hospital.

Going into the 2011 presidential election, Ortega had a distinct advantage: In addition to controlling state funds, he had secured since the 2009 financial crisis roughly \$1.5 billion in the form of gifts or concessionary loans from Chávez (none of which formally entered into the government budget). These additional resources have been all-important to the Nicaraguan economy, and they “bought” Ortega political acquiescence—or at least political apathy.

Much to Ortega’s credit, though, he has managed these and other resources with prudence and even acumen. Returning to the presidency after his 2006 electoral triumph, Ortega was said to have been haunted by two “nightmares” from the Sandinista epoch: 1) shortages and inflation, manifestations of an economy in crisis, and 2) the sudden collapse of an all-important benefactor, the Soviet Union. Ortega has placated local businessmen, courted foreign investors, avoided conflict with the United States, and even maintained good relations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The IMF, as required by its standard loan procedures, monitored Nicaragua’s economic performance every quarter during Ortega’s 2007–2011 term in office and granted its approval. Ironically, it is only Chávez’s generosity that has enabled Nicaragua to fulfill the IMF’s stringent demands. Still, Ortega’s pragmatic management of the economy has generated economic growth. Going into the 2011 elections, the economy was estimated to be growing at a respectable rate of between 4 and 5 percent, with an even healthier growth in exports. Ortega is said in Nicaragua to practice a “responsible populism,” putting in place social programs designed to alleviate poverty and curry political favor, and backing them with real economic resources.

Nicaragua’s small size (with a population of just 5.8 million) and its acute poverty make it possible to accomplish much—at least politically—with a relatively small budget. An October 2011 survey revealed that the most appreciated government program or service offered by Ortega’s administration was the “Roof Plan” (Plan Techo), with 37 percent of respondents mentioning it.²⁶ This simple program distributes—for free—ten sheets of zinc per family to replace thatched roofs or roofs covered in plastic. Two-million sheets have been given out for a total cost of \$30 million.²⁷

Alemán had no comparable resources to back his reelection campaign. And while he did not appear to have been seriously hurt by his corruption conviction, he has suffered from his pacts with Ortega. Ortega’s detractors now view Alemán as compromised. Others see him simply as the loser in the competition with Ortega. Yet efforts to “remake” the liberal party via yet another splinter party, the Independent Liberal Party (PLI), floundered. The PLI, MRS, and other breakaway factions formed a last-minute “unity” coalition before the 2011 election, and chose as

their standard-bearer Fabio Gadea, a 79-year-old radio personality who lacked both broad appeal and resources. (Gadea has a son who is married to one of Alemán's daughters.)

As the campaign progressed, Ortega balked at the presence of international observers to monitor the election, saying that it was an affront to the country's sovereignty. In the end, international observers were allowed entry but constrained. What they did see led to complaints: the European Union's electoral mission, for example, called the vote tally "opaque and arbitrary." While the voting itself was largely peaceful, there were scattered incidents of violence, most prominently in provincial cities, once Ortega's victory was announced. Gadea refused to concede defeat, claiming that fraud nullified the legality of the election. The opposition to Ortega did not succeed in ousting him as head-of-state, but did manage to undermine his "democratic" legitimacy.

In his first public speech after the Supreme Electoral Council confirmed his victory, Ortega was conciliatory, saying that he would not alter the direction of his government or embark on dramatic changes. He sought to reassure the public, saying, "We are not going to do whatever we want, but instead what Nicaraguans want, and what they want is security, stability, peace, and reconciliation."²⁸ Finally, Ortega said he would not award all public-administration posts to FSLN members. He was clearly attempting to allay fears that his legislative majority—a first for a president in the postrevolutionary era—would embolden him.

Still, thoughtful Nicaraguans of all political persuasions worry about the political strength of their president and the self-serving, capricious, and personalist nature of his governance. Nicaragua's strongest political party, the FSLN, is totally under his control—so much so that the party's headquarters are at Ortega's residence. The "first minister" is Ortega's wife, Rosario Murillo, known for her flamboyant outfits and oversized personality. Appointments in public administration, even in the judiciary, seem to be based largely on a promise of personal loyalty to Ortega. The line between party and state is blurred, and so is the division between private and public. Only 15 percent of government contracts go through an open bidding process. How the other 85 percent of government contracts are awarded remains shrouded in mystery. Nearly half the country's television news stations, which receive significant sums of advertising revenue from the government, are now controlled by Ortega. His children run some of the family-controlled media outlets and other family "businesses" (whose ownership and range of activities are opaque). Ortega sometimes uses his considerable political and economic resources in heavy-handed, if deft, ways to intimidate opponents. The president is a skilled politician, but he is more an autocrat than either a democrat or a revolutionary.

The decade of revolution in Nicaragua, from 19 July 1979 to 25 February 1990, has been exhaustively studied, and the widely agreed con-

clusion is that it was a period of profound change. It was. Still, the two ensuing decades have also been politically significant—not in making a halting step toward an imagined utopia or consolidated democracy, but rather in beating a retreat into Nicaragua’s past of strongman dominance. The postrevolutionary epoch, like the period before the revolution, has reinforced a predilection in Nicaragua for personalist and populist rule. It is an intellectual challenge to understand the personalism of Nicaraguan politics and to incorporate it into an understanding of democracy. At the least, the return of personalism in Nicaragua is a sobering reminder that the institutions and practices of democracy, when welded to the messy realities of individual countries, are compatible with many different outcomes.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Sebastian Edwards, *Left Behind: Latin America and the False Promise of Populism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010). Throughout the book, the emphasis is on leaders, their decisions, and the consequences for the nation-state.

2. Louis K. Harris and Víctor Alba, *The Political Culture and Behavior of Latin America* (Kent, Oh.: Kent State University Press, 1974), 101.

3. Harris and Alba, *Political Culture*, 101–02.

4. See Bernard Diederich, *Somoza and the Legacy of U.S. Involvement in Central America* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1981), and Anthony Lake, *Somoza Falling: A Case Study of Washington at Work* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989).

5. See Thomas Carothers, “The End of the Transition Paradigm,” *Journal of Democracy* 13 (January 2002): 5–21.

6. Arturo Cruz S., *Nicaragua’s Conservative Republic, 1858–93* (New York: Palgrave, 2002).

7. Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), *La crisis de los precios del petróleo y su impacto en los países centroamericanos* (Santiago: ECLAC, 2009), 46.

8. The personal relationships among Sandinista leaders and their decision-making process remain obscure, subject to conflicting reports, but an overview of the chaotic final days of the insurrection and of the early days of the new regime is presented in Shirley Christian, *Nicaragua: Revolution in the Family* (New York: Random House, 1985), 119–60.

9. Otker Bujard and Ulrich Wirper, *La revolución es un libro y un hombre libre: Los afiches políticos de Nicaragua libre 1979–1990 y del movimiento de solidaridad internacional* (Managua: IHNCA, 2009). First published in German in 2007 as *Die Revolution ist ein buch und ein freier Mensch*.

10. See Forrest D. Colburn and Arturo Cruz S., *Varieties of Liberalism in Central America: Nation-States as Works in Progress* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 79–94.

11. Carlos Meza and Carlos Narváez, "Determinantes en la elección del tipo de combustible para cocción de alimentos en asentamientos humanos," *Encuentro* 85 (2010): 5.
12. See David Close, *Nicaragua: The Chamorro Years* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1999).
13. Forrest D. Colburn's interview with Antonio Lacayo, Miami, 30 May 2011.
14. Election data are from the Nicaraguan Supreme Electoral Council, www.cse.gob.ni.
15. For a wide-ranging discussion of the evolution of the FSLN, see Salvador Martí i Puig and David Close, eds., *Nicaragua y el FSLN, 1979–2009: ¿Qué queda de la revolución?* (Barcelona: Ediciones Bellaterra, 2009).
16. "La guaca: Tesoro, sepultura y proceso de maduración," *Envío*, August 2002, 3–11.
17. M & R (a Nicaraguan consulting firm), April 2011.
18. M & R, December 2010.
19. Informal conversation between the authors and two anonymous Nicaraguans, El Crucero, 3 June 2011.
20. Economic data are from the International Monetary Fund (www.imf.org), the World Bank (www.worldbank.org), and the annual reports of the Central Bank of Nicaragua.
21. Instituto para el Desarrollo y la Democracia (IPADE), *Estudio socio-económico sobre el impacto de las políticas del Gobierno Central en el área rural de los municipios con pobreza extrema de: Matagalpa, Madriz, Jinotega y la RAAN* (Managua: IPADE, 2009), 16.
22. IPADE, *Estudio socio-económico*.
23. Enrique Bolaños, "Recuperemos el futuro," PowerPoint presentation, Managua, 2005.
24. Data are from the Central Bank of Nicaragua, www.bcn.gob.ni, and the Central Bank of Costa Rica, www.bccr.fi.cr.
25. Calculations are from World Bank data, www.worldbank.org, and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), www.eclac.org.
26. M & R, October 2011.
27. Central Bank of Nicaragua, *Informe de cooperación oficial externa, 1 semestre 2011* (Managua: Central Bank of Nicaragua, 2011).
28. *La Nación* (Costa Rica), 9 November 2011.