AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Jacob L. Bolotin for the degree of Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies in Political Science, Political Science, and History presented on August 26, 2009.
Title: Examining If And How The Sandinistas Democratized Nicaragua Between 1979 and 1990.

Abstract approved:

Sarah L. Henderson

The Sandinistas embarked on a unique and controversial path of democratization between 1979 and 1990 that focused first on expanding human development due to Nicaragua’s historical underdevelopment before holding elections. This differs widely from methods advocated still today that emphasize expanding civil and political liberties and holding elections. The purpose of this research is to examine if and how the Sandinistas democratized Nicaragua by evaluating and measuring the success of Sandinista programs that sought to increase human development in the areas of health and education, while also measuring and evaluating changes in civil and political liberties between 1979 and 1990 to ensure these traditional measurements of the quality of democracy were not neglected at the expense of human development. The findings of this research will be discussed in detail below.
Examining If And How The Sandinistas Democratized Nicaragua Between 1979 and 1990

by
Jacob L. Bolotin

A THESIS
Submitted To
Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies

Presented August 26, 2009
Commencement June 2010
Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies thesis of Jacob L. Bolotin presented on August 26, 2009.

APPROVED

________________________
Major Professor, representing Political Science

________________________
Director of Interdisciplinary Studies Program

________________________
Dean of the Graduate School

I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

________________________
Jacob L. Bolotin, Author
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all, thank you to my parents for their unconditional love and constant support and encouragement throughout my education and all twenty-five years of my life. It’s really been incalculably unbelievable. Thank you, and I love you.

Secondly, thank you to my advisor Sarah Henderson for your guidance and availability throughout this entire process. You’ve not only challenged some of my preconceived notions, but you’ve also been there to read every draft of my thesis and provide great feedback.

Finally, thank you to all members of my committee: Sarah Henderson, Nicole von Germeten, Richard Clinton, and David Bernell, not just for your support of this thesis, but also for the excellent experiences I have had with each of you in the classroom.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Overview of Nicaragua Prior to the Sandinista Revolution</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature Review</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Data</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy and Education</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil and Political Liberties</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>figure A: Literacy in Nicaragua</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>figure B: School Enrollment</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>figure C: Infant and Under-5 Mortality Rates</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>figure D: Freedom House: Nicaragua Ranking</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>figure E: Nicaragua Polity IV Regime Type</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

After the leftist Sandinistas overthrew the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza in 1979, they attempted to democratize Nicaragua while in office until 1990 by focusing first on human development before holding elections. This method of democratization differed widely from traditional approaches advocated still today that focus first on guaranteeing and expanding civil and political liberties in order to foster free and fair competitive elections. The logic of the traditional approach is that individuals must be free from government restriction of their press, speech, ability to organize, and otherwise dissent in order to promote real contestation in order to make elections democratic. The Sandinistas didn’t necessarily disagree with this; they simply believed that, due to massive underdevelopment in Nicaragua, it was imperative to focus first on human development before embarking on expanding civil and political liberties and holding elections. Stephen Kinzer, in his reporting of the Nicaraguan revolution, *Blood of Brothers*, described the Somozas’ greatest crime as “their refusal to develop the country they rule;” because as a result of their neglect “in comparative surveys that measured living standards in Latin America, Nicaragua had always ranked at or near the bottom, often tied with Haiti for last place.”  

As a result of this reality, the Sandinistas’ “human development first” democratization approach understood that in order for Nicaraguans to make use of civil and political liberties in order to make an eventual election truly competitive, they would first need the basic tools of health and education that had been neglected under the previous regime. The Organization of American States paraphrases future Sandinista

---

President Daniel Ortega making this point in 1980: “by learning to read and write, the
Nicaraguan people would put themselves in a position to obtain the knowledge that
would better enable them to choose their own destiny.” Consequently, the Sandinistas
planned elections for four years later in 1984 after the government had sufficient time to
continue improving human development through a variety of social programs.\(^2\)

Yet, in the midst of this transformational process between 1979 and 1990, the
Sandinistas were hindered rather than helped by the United States because their methods
appeared backwards and foreign to the United States. President Reagan called the new
government “the Sandinista dictatorship” and “the communist dictatorship,” because of
their Marxist-inspired ideology and thus pledged to “do everything we can to win this
great struggle,” which meant funding and arming the counterrevolutionary guerrillas,
the *Contras*, to overthrow the Sandinistas. The purpose of this thesis is to explore if and
how the Sandinistas were able to democratize Nicaragua using their human development
first method. If this form of democratization is effective, it has important implications for
how the United States and the international community should foster democratization
around the world today, particularly in underdeveloped nations like Nicaragua.

\(^2\) The Organization of American States: The Inter-American Commission on Human

\(^3\) The Organization of American States: The Inter-American Commission on Human
VII Political Rights “OFFICIAL STATEMENT BY THE NATIONAL DIRECTORATE
OF THE SANDINISTA NATIONAL LIBERATION FRONT ON THE
ELECTORAL PROCESS IN THE SANDINISTA POPULAR REVOLUTION” Chapter
VII Political Rights, http://www.cidh.org/countryrep/Nica81eng/chap.7.htm June 30,

\(^4\) Peter Rossett and John Vandermeer; Ronald Reagan “President Reagan’s View of
Nicaragua, excerpts from an address at a fundraising dinner for the Nicaragua Refugee

In order to determine if the Sandinistas democratized Nicaragua, it will first be necessary to evaluate the success of their human development programs such as the national literacy campaigns and the national vaccination campaign to determine their impact on literacy and education, and life expectancy, infant mortality, and health, respectively. The purpose of evaluating whether Nicaraguans became better educated and healthier is to discover whether the new government effectively prepared Nicaraguans for the traditional subsequent stages of democratization of promoting civil and political liberties and then, of course, holding elections. So secondly, it is important to measure Sandinista Nicaragua using more traditional methods that examine civil and political liberties and overall regime type to determine whether the Sandinistas neglected or sacrificed these rights in order to promote human development. Thus, in order to determine whether democratization occurred, it is necessary to evaluate both human development and the degree of civil and political liberties.

The finding of this thesis is that the Sandinista human development focused democratization was successful. The Sandinistas greatly improved literacy and education in Nicaragua. The illiteracy rate was more than cut in half, and school enrollment rates in every grade bracket nearly doubled. Similar achievements were made in healthcare, where spending as a percentage of GDP increased dramatically and resulted in better access and quality across the country, with the elimination of diseases like polio, and the effective treatment of common maladies like diarrhea that too often previously resulted in death due to poor care. The under-five mortality rate and infant mortality rate, two important indicators for evaluating the health of the next generation of a population, show massive achievements in reductions of those rates by around 40% each. These significant
improvements in education and health helped prepare Nicaraguans to participate in the more traditional measures of democracy: civil and political liberties. Unfortunately, during Sandinista rule, according to one measurement, no improvements were seen in the areas of civil and political liberties. However, according to another measurement that measures overall regime type by examining civil and political liberties, a clear transition from authoritarianism under Somoza to semi-democracy under the Sandinistas to the beginnings of a consolidated democracy after the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas (and peaceful transition of power) occurred. In light of these findings, the overall evidence suggests that because the Sandinistas began the democratization process by prepping the populace by focusing on human development and, by some measurements, made minor progress in the traditional democratization sphere of improving civil and political liberties, the Sandinistas did in fact facilitate democratization in Nicaragua.
An Overview of Nicaragua prior to the Sandinista Revolution

By all accounts, Nicaragua under the Somoza family that ruled from 1936-1979 was a dictatorship. Freedom House, which will be referred to often in this thesis for their measurements of civil and political liberties, said on the eve of the 1979 revolution in Nicaragua that: “elections are manipulated in accordance with the government’s wishes.” Gary Prevost and Harry Vanden agree and describe the Somoza family dynasty as “an increasingly repressive family dictatorship that—mostly because of its close ties to the United States—would endure until militarily defeated by the FSLN in 1979.” There is little doubt that between 1936 and 1979 that Nicaragua was ruled by a dictatorship.

Opposition to the dictatorship came from all walks of life: the rich and the poor, Catholics and Protestants, businesses and workers; nearly everyone had a reason to be upset with Somoza. Somoza’s incompetent and corrupt response to the devastating Managua earthquake of December 23, 1972, that took upwards of 7,000 lives was the key turning point that turned bubbling opposition to the government into full-fledged mobilized revolution. In the aftermath of the earthquake, rather than begin a speedy search and rescue effort for victims, the United States Geological Survey writes that Somoza simply leveled devastated areas to bury the dead and dying in fear of disease spreading from decomposition. Widespread corruption in the reconstruction effort was also clear when Somoza funneled millions of dollars in reconstruction aid and supplies to

---

himself, family, and political allies. This meant that businesses were left with nothing, and private construction teams that normally would have received work from the disaster were left without jobs. George Black in his chronicle of the Nicaraguan Revolution describes the overall discontent of the middle- and upper-classes by saying: “Somoza was attacked not as a capitalist but as a dictator; not for exercising power against the interests of the Nicaraguan people, but for refusing to spread a little of it around among other capitalists.” In other words, opposition to Somoza was not just coming from the neglected poor but also from the upper-classes who felt left out of the spoils of corruption. In response to the earthquake, Catholic as well as Protestant groups formed neighborhood organizations to care and gather supplies for the wounded, since the government was unwilling. These grassroots organizations came into direct contact with the urban poor and witnessed the effect government inaction had taken on the people. The result was the movement of Catholic and Evangelical Protestant Churches to the side of the opposition. Thus, the 1972 earthquake should be seen as the major organizing point of opposition among all socio-economic groups against Somoza for his incompetence and corruption.

Widespread turmoil engulfed Nicaragua throughout the rest of the 1970s, culminating in the ouster of the dictatorship and the beginning of Sandinista rule in 1979. In 1974 the Sandinistas took a Somoza government diplomatic meeting with US Ambassador Turner B. Shelton and other foreign dignitaries hostage, demanding $5

---

11 Ibid., pp. 136–137.
million ransom and airtime to broadcast their dissent to the Nicaraguan people.\textsuperscript{12} While the government did eventually capitulate to the demands, after paying the ransom it began to further crack down on dissent and imposed martial law. The most prominent victim of the crackdown was opposition journalist Pedro Joaquín Chamorro Cardenal, who was murdered in January 1979 for revealing that Somoza’s son Anastasio Somoza Portocarrero had been selling Nicaragua’s already low reserves of blood plasma abroad for personal profit. For breaking the story against his son, it is widely believed the elder Somoza ordered the murder of Chamorro.\textsuperscript{13} With the news of the journalist’s murder, civil unrest boiled over across the country; a general strike shut down 80% of the country, and protesters were arrested en masse and even gunned down. In one particularly brutal incident in February, 1978, Somoza’s National Guard murdered over 200 protestors in the Indian village of Monimbo for gathering around a vigil for a renaming of a plaza after Joaquín Chamorro Cardenal.\textsuperscript{14} Eventually, due to widespread striking, protests, and Sandinista military victories, Anastasio Somoza fled on July 19, 1979, to Miami and exile in Paraguay. The country was left in tatters for the new government to rebuild.

When the Sandinistas took office they found the country and its people nearly in ruins. Reports conducted by the United Nations and the Inter-American Human Rights Commission after the war concluded that 45,000 people (80% of whom were civilians), had died in the conflict, and another 160,000 were wounded. Somoza’s government had incurred approximately $1.5 billion in foreign debt to pay for the war, on top of $2 billion}

\textsuperscript{12} Booth, p. 142.
\textsuperscript{13} Booth, pp. 159–160.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid
suffered in economic losses during that time.\textsuperscript{15} The task for the Sandinista government was to legitimize a new government through free and fair elections. But for a country and its people who were devastated by war and had, in effect, never participated in a democratic election, this would be a difficult endeavor that would require certain preconditions. That is why the new government chose to focus first on embarking on a massive literacy and vaccination campaign, while simultaneously improving overall education and health in preparation for a scheduled election in 1984. After the enormous success of the social programs and a free and fair election won by Sandinista Daniel Ortega, the rest of the 1980s was primarily defined by the ongoing Contra war that diverted much attention and resources away from continuing to expand human development. In 1990 a second scheduled free and fair election was held. Surprisingly, opposition candidate Violetta Chamorro defeated Daniel Ortega. In a shining example of what democracy had become in Nicaragua in only 11 short years, power was handed over peacefully to the opposition.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{16} Vanden and Prevost, 2006, p. 540.
Literature Review

In order to determine whether or not the Sandinistas “democratized” Nicaragua from 1979–1990, it is first necessary to examine what exactly is meant by the term “democracy” and how, then, it can be measured. The simple definition of democracy that most people hold and most dictionaries provide is inadequate because it lacks any mention of criteria that would be necessary for democracy to function. Most people, when asked, correctly believe democracy is rule by the people, but they often don’t consider what else may be necessary for democracy to function. Many dictionaries also provide a simple definition such as the one provided by the Merriam Webster online dictionary: “1 a: government by the people; especially : rule of the majority.” But this definition doesn’t articulate what mechanism would be necessary to bring about a fair representation of government by the people. That mechanism is some sort of electoral process. Moving into the academic arena, Robert Dahl refines the definition of democracy to include many crucial additional criteria that must be included in a better definition of democracy, particularly elections. That elaboration includes the requirement that elections are held, are competitive, are open to full participation by all people of voting age; and that individuals do not have their speech, press, or ability to join organizations restricted. Samuel Huntington says procedurally, elections are the

most important element of democracy. He says: “elections, open, free, and fair, are the essence of democracy.”

Elections must be competitive to be fair. Technically, an election with only a single party on the ballot, such as in North Korea, is democratic in the sense that the people are choosing their leaders. However, it is not truly democratic because essentially the only choice voters are given is between supporting the status quo or not voting. This is why Dahl’s inclusion in his definition of democracy of competitive elections with organized opposition is so important.

Likewise, the inclusion of all people of voting age, regardless or race, gender, religion, or other social or economic statuses is essential. Just as a vote for only one party in an uncompetitive election is not really democratic, so is a vote by only a certain segment of the adult population where specific groups are disenfranchised. A vote where, say, all women are banned, would result in a less democratic outcome, since it would have been made by only half of the adult population and would likely not be responsive to issues especially important to the disenfranchised group, women. Again, this is where Dahl’s inclusion of the necessity of full participation in an election is essential to making elections democratic.

Outside sources of information, the freedom of press, speech, and organization are also vital for democracy. Individuals must be able to voice their opinion and dissent in order to influence others in society and be able to provide an outside source of

---

22 Ibid
information to the voting public. Without such liberty a government would be able to spread information and influence voters while simultaneously preventing the opposition from doing the same, making for an unfair election where the incumbent would have a clear advantage. The ability of the citizens to form organizations follows the same logic: that it provides a means for the public to discuss, plan, and potentially grow their opposition to a government to mount an effective challenge to government policies. These outside sources of information are critical for democracy to function.

Other scholars propose a thicker definition of democracy. Larry Diamond explains in *Developing Democracy* how the logic of civil liberty as a part of Dahl’s definition is absolutely critical to the expanded definition of democracy. He writes that without civil liberty democratic opposition and participation is meaningless. Essentially, without constitutional protections and the rule of law, the individual right to organize political rallies, publish dissenting articles, or engage in other forms of building opposition may be restricted, thus making a truly competitive election impossible, and, in turn, making the election undemocratic. Essentially, what Diamond is getting at is that Dahl has established that certain preconditions must be in place for elections to be free and fair. These conditions fall into the sphere of what the government will not restrict: press, speech, etc. These are essential for a working democracy with free and fair elections.

However, Dahl and Diamond’s definition of democracy is still not completely adequate. While they include certain classical liberal conditions that must be in place for democracy to function, there are many other preconditions that must exist to enhance

---

23 Ibid., p. 8.
those classical liberal preconditions. Just as Dahl and Diamond have shown that freedom of the press, speech, and the freedom to organize are essential for elections to be competitive and therefore democratic, so too are there certain preconditions that are necessary to allow a population to be able to utilize the freedom of the press, of speech, and the ability to organize. These conditions fall into the broad category of human development so well articulated by the United Nations Human Development Program (UNDP). The UNDP writes in its mission statement that:

The most basic capabilities for human development are to lead long and healthy lives, to be knowledgeable, to have access to the resources needed for a decent standard of living and to be able to participate in the life of the community. Without these, many choices are simply not available, and many opportunities in life remain inaccessible. … People must be free to exercise their choices and to participate in decision-making that affects their lives. Human development and human rights are mutually reinforcing.  

In other words, without human development, many choices and opportunities are not available for individuals. Put another way: without human development first, classical liberalism so essential to making elections truly free, like freedom of the press, speech, the ability to organize, etc., cannot be realized for most people of the world. So, the more educated the population of a country, for example, the more actively they can participate in and utilize the freedom of the press and speech. Likewise, the health of a country is logically linked to how actively the population can participate in organizing opposition. Thus, it is imperative that human development as a precondition is included in a better, broader definition of democracy, particularly in underdeveloped countries where it is especially lacking.

Most definitions of democracy are simply not adequate. An even thicker definition working backwards from traditional definitions is necessary. If it were to be written out as equation it would look like this: Human development + liberal protections + free, fair, and contested elections = democracy. So, for democracy to actually be realized, the citizenry must have certain human development guarantees, such as a right to education and health. Then, with these abilities, the population (and therefore also opposition parties and candidates) must be free from government restriction of speech, press, and the ability to organize in order to mount an effective challenge to offer a truly competitive election where the population chooses between opposing candidates. In order for the election to be competitive, all of the voting age population, regardless or sex, race, religion or other social or economic status, must be allowed to equally participate. With these conditions in place, democracy can be fully realized. This represents both a definition and a formula, especially for a developing or “third world” country like Nicaragua that is about embark on a path of democratization.
**Methodology**

In order to comprehensively evaluate the level of democratization that occurred in Nicaragua under Sandinista control from 1979 to 1990, it will be necessary to look at various indicators of social development and political and civil liberty. Evaluating social development during the democratization process will allow for a greater understanding of the extent to which the people of Nicaragua had the basic tools of good health and education to be able to effectively participate. Similarly, the development of civil and political rights is necessary to understand how freely the Nicaraguan people were able to participate without government repression once they had the tools to participate.

Social development is the most important group of indicators to examine when evaluating the level of democratization that occurred under Sandinista leadership because it is the foundation on which democracy is built and to which political freedom and civil liberty are added in order to build a fully functioning free democracy. Without social development, without good health, the ability to read, or write, or without an education the ability to participate in a democracy is limited. In order to gain a thorough understanding of social development, various indicators will be used to measure the changes that occurred during the Sandinista period. In the realm of health care, life expectancy, infant mortality, the rate of infection from various diseases, and other indicators will be used to measure the social development of the population. The data used for these measurements will come primarily from the United Nations, using World Health Organization data, and from the World Bank, using Health Nutrition, and Population Statistics (HDP) data. In education, data from the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) will be used to measure literacy rates
and educational enrollment rates. As necessary, data from secondary sources from Nicaraguan scholars will be used to supplement United Nations and World Bank data.

Civil liberty and political freedom are the second crucial stage of democratic development because the level of rights and freedom determines the amount of participation a citizenry can have in choosing their leaders. In order to measure how much civil and political freedom the Nicaraguan population enjoyed during Sandinista control, Freedom House and Polity IV data will be used. Freedom House annually measures civil rights and political liberty by assigning a value of 1 (most free) through 7 (least free). These labels correspond with 1-2.5 as “free,” 3-5 “partly free,” 5.5-7 “not free,” based on many criteria such as the openness of the electoral process, political pluralism, and participation in order to evaluate political liberty, the rule of law, personal autonomy, etc. to measure civil rights. \(^{25}\) By examining this data we will see what changes took place under Sandinista control and how it impacted the democratic transition. Finally, Polity IV rankings will also be used as a secondary measurement to examine how Nicaragua changed during Sandinista control. Polity IV measures governmental type by assigning of values between –10 for the least democratic (hereditary monarchy) through a +10 to the most democratic (a consolidated democracy). Rankings of –10 through –6 are autocracies, while –5 through +5 are anocracies (or mixed, semi-democratic regimes).

and +6 through +10 are democracies. The index assigns these values based on criteria such as constraints on executive authority and political competition.²⁶

The Data

The two most important areas where the Sandinistas attempted to change the system were in education and health. The new government improved education by embarking on a national literacy campaign and increasing school enrollment rates. Likewise, the new government improved health through its vaccination campaigns and by increasing the number of health professionals to provide care to the population.

The Sandinista government greatly improved education in Nicaragua by embarking on national literacy campaigns. The Somoza family dictatorship neglected education during their rule, and 1 in 2 Nicaraguans over the age of 10 was illiterate, as the illiteracy rate measured 50.35% in 1979. A number of the Sandinista organizations that had participated in the revolution then became the main vehicle for teaching Nicaraguans to read after the fall of the Somoza government. The literacy campaign was staffed primarily by women, who often lived among their students in rural and urban areas, and the teachers used simple pictures to represent daily objects, ideas, and jobs of their students. By the end of the Sandinista regime, from 1979-1990, the official illiteracy rate provided by the Sandinistas was a mere 12.9%, although experts believe a more accurate figure is around 23% illiteracy. Thus, at the very least, the illiteracy rate had been more than halved through the success of the Sandinista literacy campaigns.

The health of the Nicaraguan population improved greatly under the Sandinista regime. During the Somoza dynasty, the infant mortality rate was 104 deaths in 1975 per

---

28 Ibid., p. 274.
30 Arno and Graff, p. 281.
1,000 live births. By the end of the Sandinista regime, in 1990, the rate had decreased to half that at 52 deaths per 1,000 live births. A moderate improvement was seen in overall life expectancy for Nicaraguans. At the beginning of the Sandinista regime, in 1980, life expectancy was 59.3 years. By 1990 that rate had increased to 62.2 years. This modest increase was likely held back by war between the Sandinista government and the Contra rebels. The overall improvement in health, especially among infants, was due in part to the national vaccination campaign by the Sandinistas. By 1982, for example, the Sandinistas had eliminated polio and greatly reduced measles. These reductions can be attributed to the thousands of healthcare volunteers and workers hired by the Sandinistas immediately after the revolution. Healthcare became a national right after the revolution. In addition to delivering vaccinations, health professionals also traveled to the traditionally neglected rural areas and established rehydration centers to prevent childhood death from simple ailments like diarrhea. Changes in healthcare policies like these resulted in significant improvements in heath during the Sandinista regime.

Nicaragua was by all accounts a dictatorship under the Somoza family regime that allowed little to no civil or political liberty or democratic governance. In the overall

34 Collinson, p. 96.
35 Ibid., p. 98.
picture of holding free and fair elections, Nicaragua held none during the Somoza reign. Polity IV, which ranks regime type from most dictatorial (-10) to most democratic (+10) ranked Nicaragua under the Somoza family at –8 through 1979. With the Sandinista victory, that gradually improved to a –5, and jumped to a –1 upon that country’s first free and fair election in 1984. In 1990, when the Sandinistas held a second open election and lost and transferred power peacefully, that ranking jumped to an astounding +6. 36 Freedom House is not as kind to the Sandinista regime and ranked the civil rights and political liberty before and during the Sandinista regime as only “partly free,” with no significant change between the Somozas and the Sandinistas. However, by 1990, with the country’s second free election those rankings teetered at the edge of “partly free,” although it remained in that category. 37 Thus, civil and political liberty can be said to have mostly stayed the same during the transition between Somoza and the Sandinistas, while it showed minor improvement with the transition of power at the end of the Sandinista regime to the Chamorro regime. However, the overall ranking of regime type by Polity IV shows much greater progress during the transition from Somoza to the Sandinistas to Chamorro that may be summarized dictatorship to democratizing to democracy.

The Somoza dictatorship squandered Nicaragua’s resources and left the population in a poor state of development. The Sandinistas improved many education and health aspects during their 11 years in power. By the end of the Sandinista regime, more Nicaraguans could read, fewer infants were dying, more children were attending school,

and many diseases were eliminated or severely reduced. Nicaraguans were also for the first time participating in free and fair elections, and civil and political liberties were slowing improving. All these elements show the Sandinistas made significant democratic strides.

**Literacy and Education**

In an attempt to democratize the country, the Sandinistas embarked on an enormous literacy campaign to transform society. The inability to read was viewed during the revolution as a primary impediment to human development and national progress, and was thus the first priority of the Sandinistas. Upon entering office, the illiteracy rate was over 50%. In order to teach the population to read, thousands of Nicaraguans were employed to deliver education in innovative ways to the population. By the end of the initial campaign in 1980, the illiteracy rate had been more than cut in half, but minimal progress was made after the first campaign. Overall school enrollment rates also improved dramatically in every age bracket while Sandinistas were in power and have continued since. These significant strides in literacy and education while the Sandinistas were in power represent a significant democratization effort by the new government.

Literacy education was one of the first priorities of the Sandinista government because of its pivotal role in human development necessary for democratization. A census taken in 1980 showed 50.35% of the Nicaraguan population aged 10 years and over was illiterate, with an astounding 75.44% of the rural population unable to read.  

---

Literacy education expert Robert F. Arnowe writes in National Literacy Campaigns that:

““the high illiteracy rate that characterized the country…was an outcome of the feudal system of the Somoza dynasty, one that kept the majority of the population ignorant.”

The Nicaraguan Ministry of Education described the campaign as giving the Nicaraguan people the tools necessary to fight for liberation. 39 Juan B Arrien in his personal report to UNESCO on literacy in Nicaragua in 2006 shared this assessment of the Sandinistas’ goals. He says that the literacy campaign was undertaken because literacy was “considered a human right that was fundamental [and] a necessary means to build a broad, aware, educated, and participatory social base” 40 The Sandinistas believed they had to focus on teaching Nicaraguans to read in order to embark on the first steps of attempting to democratize the country.

Nearlty one hundred and fifty thousand Nicaraguans volunteered and were employed to bring literacy to the Nicaraguan people. Fifty-two thousand, one hundred and eighty (52,180) brigadistas moved to the rural areas in Nicaragua to teach the population. 41 These “brigadistas” were organized into military-like formations, so called because of the brigades they formed, and were a carryover from the successful revolution, even invoking names of fallen revolutionaries. 42 The rural brigadistas experienced the same problems as their students while living in the countryside. They had to cope with poor nutrition, heath problems, etc. But this closeness with their students

39 Arnowe, p. 276.
40 Arrien, p. 3.
41 Ibid., p.10.
likely contributed to the enormous success of the campaign. Similarly, ninety-five thousand, five hundred and eighty-two (95,582) conducted the literacy campaign in urban areas. They were also organized in a similar military-like structure, often utilizing former revolution volunteers. For a population of around 5 million, the literacy campaign employed a huge number of Nicaraguans, approximately 3 percent. Thus, the struggle to end illiteracy was one driven by the people.

Innovative and ideological revolutionary techniques were used to teach Nicaraguans to read in the campaign. Often the words and themes in the lesson plans were related to the revolution. Words like “la revolución,” “liberación” and “masas populares” were a part of the main lesson plans to reinforce revolutionary themes. Literacy teaching was also reinforced through twice daily radio broadcasts and in a weekly page in the Sandinista newspaper Barricada. While these techniques can be seen as propaganda, Arnove believes that most educational systems seek in some form or another to indoctrinate their students to certain values of a society. However, whether or not this can or should be seen as “indoctrination,” the results are undeniable. It is also likely that such themes were used because they were familiar both to students and teachers still in one way or another caught up in the euphoria surrounding the success of the revolution. In other words, if other words and themes had been used, it would seem likely not as many people would be willing or able to volunteer, and students may even

---

43 Ibid., pp. 164–170.
44 Arrien, p. 10.
45 Miller, p. 24.
46 Arrien, p. 10.
47 Arnove, pp. 276–277.
48 Arrien, pp. 10–11.
49 Arnove, p. 276.
have had an even more difficult time learning to read. Whatever the reason or the purpose, the unique techniques used were highly successful.

The first literacy campaign of 1980 was hugely successful. The pre-campaign illiteracy rate was 50.35% for Nicaraguans ten-years-old and above. At the end of 1980 after the campaign, the illiteracy rate was officially cut to 12.96%. Although Arnove notes that this figure includes government subtractions of one hundred and thirty thousand (130,000) people considered to be unteachable for any number of reasons. Thus, he and many others believe the more accurate figure should be considered an illiteracy rate of around 23%.\(^5\) (Figure A) For this extraordinary achievement of more than halving the illiteracy rate, Nicaragua was awarded the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization’s (UNESCO) Nadezka Kruskaya Prize for literacy.\(^5\)

Overall school enrollment rates also increased dramatically once the Sandinistas assumed power in 1979 and have continued since. In 1978, only 9,000 Nicaraguan children attended preschool; by 1984, once the Sandinistas had been in power for five years, nearly 70,000 children attended preschool. In 1978 just shy of 370,00 children attended primary school; by 1984 that number was over 635,000. In 1978 only 98,874 children attended secondary grades; by 1984, that number had nearly doubled to 186,104.\(^5\) UNICEF confirms this report and shows a continual upward trend in pre-primary (preschool), primary, and secondary school enrollment rates even after the

---

\(^5\) Arnove, p. 281.
\(^5\) Arrien, p. 4.
These improvements in enrollment rates help explain the success of the literacy campaign. (Figure B)

The educational record of the Sandinistas is impressive. After the success of the initial literacy campaign, however, the Sandinista government and governments after it have made only minimal gains in literacy. With the illiteracy rate in 1981 at only 23%, little progress was made during the rest of the 1980s to decrease it further. By 1993, according to official government data for Nicaraguans 10-years and over the illiteracy rate was 23.5%; by 1998, it had improved to only 20.9%, and by 2001 it was down to only 20.5%. According to official United Nations Human Development Programme data that measures literacy for ages 15 and above, the illiteracy rate stood at 23.3% by 2005, the last year for which data is available. The minor increase in illiteracy is likely attributable simply to the slightly different segment of the population being measured. However, the initial success of the first campaign that made an additional one quarter of the population literate and the greatly improved school enrollment rates was a huge achievement by any standard and is a significant stride in the democratization effort.

Health

In a parallel attempt to democratize Nicaragua through education and literacy, the Sandinistas attempted to improve healthcare, in particular by focusing on children. Upon entering office, the Sandinistas had to confront a poor healthcare system that dedicated most of its spending on the wealthiest Nicaraguans and was concentrated in urban areas.

---

54 Arrien, p. 6.
It was a system that allowed many preventable childhood diseases to fester and lead to death, contributing to high infant and under-5 mortality rates. The Sandinistas tackled healthcare through increased spending, enormous volunteer efforts, and providing healthcare access to more of the population. By the end of their tenure in office in 1990, enormous improvements had been made in eradicating and reducing childhood illnesses, drastically reducing the infant and under-5 mortality rates, and even seeing a moderate improvement in overall life expectancy, despite the Contra War that prematurely took over 30,000 lives.

Upon taking office, the Sandinistas were faced with a hugely disproportionate healthcare system that neglected poor and rural Nicaraguans. Anthropologist and former consultant to USAID John M. Donahue in his book *The Nicaraguan Revolution in Health* notes that only about 28 percent of Nicaragua’s population had regular access to healthcare, while 90% of healthcare resources went to only 10% of the population. Additionally, 75% of the healthcare budget went directly to Managua where only 25% of the population lived, neglecting the rural areas of Nicaragua. This disproportionate spending and inadequate access helps explain some key statistics in 1980, less than one year after the Sandinistas took power, and the first full year for which most data is available. According to the World Heath Organization, in 1980 the under 5 years of age mortality rate was 112 deaths per 1,000 live births. The infant mortality rate (the probability of surviving to one year of age) in 1980 was only slightly lower at 82 deaths

---

57 Collinson, p. 95.
per 1,000 live births.  

Also, according to World Health Organization data, by 1980 polio was still afflicting many Nicaraguans, and childhood illnesses like measles were still relatively common. Diarrhea and dehydration were also especially common among poor Nicaraguans, particularly in rural areas.

The Sandinistas confronted the massive poor health situation through increased and more egalitarian spending with a huge volunteer effort using the mechanism previously established for the literacy campaign to deliver vaccinations, to build and staff rehydration centers, and to ensure access to healthcare for the entire population. Government spending jumped from 7.5% of the budget in 1977 before the revolution to 12.5% in 1981 after the revolution. Healthcare was now free to the entire population.

The brigadistas previously used for the literacy campaign were given new training to give vaccines and staff rehydration centers focusing in rural areas. In the early 1980s the health brigadistas embarked on vaccination campaigns four times per year focusing on measles, polio, and other illnesses. In 1980 and 1981, 21 and 46 cases of polio were reported, respectively, while up to 3,784 cases of measles were reported in the same years. By 1990, through the success the vaccination campaigns, polio had been

---

61 Collinson, p. 96.
63 Collinson, p. 96.
64 Collinson, pp. 96–97.
65 Garfield and Taboada, p. 425.
completely eliminated, while no cases of measles were reported in 1989 and 1991 before a brief resurgence from 1992-1995 but with no reported cases since. During the same time, health brigadistas established 330 oral rehydration centers across Nicaragua where parents could bring their infants and children suffering from diarrhea or other illnesses causing dehydration to be rehydrated with a proper balance of electrolytes. By 1983, dehydration was no longer the leading cause of death in Nicaraguan hospitals for children under 4 years of age. Clearly, the Sandinistas had taken significant steps towards improving the health of the Nicaraguan people.

The Sandinistas’ method of delivering healthcare focused primarily on prevention and inexpensive simple treatments as evidenced by the use of volunteers providing basic services and vaccinations with a focus on children. Because of this approach, children were the logical focus. Ensuring childhood health is the ultimate preventative medicine, as it essentially builds the foundation of a healthy adult. Yet, despite the simplicity of this approach, the results were very impressive. With hundreds of rehydration centers built to prevent deaths from diarrhea, vaccines given to eradicate polio and measles, and free healthcare provided to all, children’s health improved tremendously by 1990 when the Sandinistas left office. The under-5 mortality rate, which measures the probability of children living to age 5, stood at 112 deaths per 1,000 live births in 1980. By 1990, it had decreased by nearly 41% to 67 deaths per 1,000 live births. Likewise, the infant

---

67 Donahue, p. 57.
mortality rate, which measures the probability of living to one year, measured 82 deaths per 1,000 live births. This dropped by 38% to 52 deaths per 1,000 live births by 1990.\(^6\) (Figure C) This was a huge success in barely 10 years in power, especially in light of the ongoing Contra War with former Somoza soldiers and the United States. Overall life expectancy even improved during the same period from 1980 to 1990 from 59 to 62 years, a notable improvement in light of the war that took 30,000 lives during the 1980s.\(^7\)

Similar to improving literacy through education in order to build a participatory base in Nicaraguan society necessary for democracy, so too was improving healthcare. In this goal, the Sandinistas made significant progress.

*Civil and Political Liberties*

The record of civil and political liberties in Nicaragua under both Somoza and the Sandinistas is mixed at best. One of the best known and most used ranking systems to evaluate civil and political liberties is Freedom House. The methodology Freedom House uses is useful for an overall analysis of the Sandinistas’ impact on democracy in Nicaragua because it measures political rights and civil liberties by examining those critical components of democracy, such as an organized, unrestricted opposition, freedom of the press, the rule of law, etc. However, according to Freedom House, little change was seen in civil and political liberties from Somoza to the Sandinistas (Figure D). Rankings are based on a 1-7 system, with 1 through 2.5 being “free” while 3-5 are “partly free” and

\(^6\) Nationmaster.com. “Mortality Statistics, rate, infant per 1,000 live births,” (compilation of WorldBank data).

\(^7\) Data.UN.Org “Life Expectancy at Birth, both sexes combined (years).”
5.5 through 7 are “not free.” So, in some cases, it will be useful to supplement Freedom House analysis with other data, such as Polity IV, which ranks overall regime type in a –10 (totally undemocratic) to +10 (consolidated democracy) and other writings on the situation in Nicaragua to paint a more comprehensive picture on civil and political freedom in Nicaragua.

Before the revolution of 1979 when the Sandinistas took power, Freedom House regularly rated Nicaragua as “partly free.” From 1974-1979, political rights were rated each year as a 5. From 1976-1979 civil rights were ranked as a 5.\textsuperscript{71} The first year for which a full country report is available for Nicaragua is 1979, meaning it was based on data from 1978, the last full year the Somoza dictatorship was in power. In the report, Freedom House describes elections in Nicaragua as being “manipulated in accordance with the government’s wishes.” It describes power as being split between Somoza’s Liberal Party and the opposition Conservative Party in agreed upon formulas. “Other parties exist but they are not recognized.”\textsuperscript{72} Surprisingly, the report also ranks civil liberties as party free at 5. It says the media are private and often critical of the regime, but that “censorship and violence against the media have been applied intermittently.” It also goes on to discuss how union actively is often free from government restriction but that economic power is concentrated in the hands of the government.\textsuperscript{73} So for these restrictions on and of civil and political liberties, Nicaragua was given a partly free ranking during the Somoza regime in the 1970s.

\textsuperscript{72} Gastil, 1979, p. 269.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., p. 270.
Very surprisingly, from 1979 through 1990 during the Sandinista era Freedom House continued to rank the country as “partly free,” even during and after the monumental election of 1984. The data from 1979-1990 are all partly free, with rankings generally staying the same except changing from a 5 to a 6 in political rights from 1982-1983, and the civil liberties changing from a 5 to a 6 in the year of 1986/87 and decreasing to a 4 in 1988/89.\(^7\) A country report for Nicaragua for the year 1985/86 (data from Nov. 1984-Nov 1985) ranks political rights as a 5 because it reports major opposition parties chose to not participate in the November 1984 election because of Sandinista control of the media and harassment of the opposition campaigns. Still, “there is a small, legal, elected opposition in the legislature.” Civil liberties are also ranked a 5 because “Newspaper and radio stations are mostly under government control” and there is “pressure” on dissident journalists. It also says that while unions are free, pressure is put on them to join a government-sponsored federation.\(^5\) So, according to Freedom House, even though opposition parties were able to compete and win legislative seats in a free election, Nicaragua under the Sandinistas is still ranked “partly free” as it was under Somoza.

Finally, for 1990 after the electoral defeat of Sandinista president Daniel Ortega, Freedom House awarded Nicaragua significant changes in their rankings, although still ranking it as partly free. Political rights and civil liberties improved from 5s to 3s in both

categories in this report. Although significantly improved, the rankings were still only “partly free” because Freedom House believed that, although new president Violetta Chamorro had committed herself to full respect of civil and political liberties, it would be difficult to guarantee full respect for them because the Sandinistas still controlled the military and police forces. However, due to the relative smoothness and peacefulness of transition of power, Nicaragua was ranked at the better end of “partly free.” They remained so throughout the 1990s to the present.

In sum, the story of Nicaragua according to Freedom House is they started out as “partly free” under Somoza, remained so under the Sandinistas, and improved only after being voted out of office. However, other information can help clarify these broad rankings and show that under the Sandinistas progress, although often minimal, was made.

One additional component to evaluate the quality of democracy during this period is by evaluating overall regime type, or how democratic it was. Polity IV does this through the aforementioned −10 (least democratic, i.e. hereditary monarchy) to +10 (most democratic, i.e. consolidated democracy). According to the report, during the Somoza years through 1979, Nicaragua was a −8. By 1982 it had bettered to −5 with the revolution, and improved even further to a −1 after the 1984 election in which the Sandinistas won a democratic victory. Then, from 1989 to 1991, one year before, during,

---

77 Ibid., p. 280.
79 Polity IV Project, “Homepage” and “Methodology”.
and after the second democratic election, Nicaragua improved its ranking to a +6.\textsuperscript{80} This paints a more comprehensive picture of the democratization process than Freedom House because it seems to actually acknowledge significant improvements that happened during Sandinista rule, particularly the 1984 election. (Figure E).

Although Freedom House dismissed the 1984 election as simply a plebiscite because of a lack of any real contestation, Polity IV and many Latin American experts disagree.\textsuperscript{81} Polity IV shows a very significant jump towards democracy in their rankings from a –8 to a –1, and many Latin American experts agree. Nicaragua experts Harry Vanden and Gary Prevost agree with Freedom House that in the 1984 election certain opposition parties organized under the Nicaraguan Democratic Coordinating Committee did not run in the election for what they cited as restrictions on the press and on their organizational abilities. However, Vanden and Prevost also note that the Sandinistas attempted repeatedly to seek a resolution for them to run in the election with the help of mediators from West Germany. They even extended the registration deadline multiple times for them, but they still declined to participate.\textsuperscript{82} Former director of Latin American and Caribbean Affairs for the National Security Council under president Carter writes that in the 1984 election the United States attempted to destroy any bridges leading up to the contest that would have allowed for an election with the Nicaraguan Democratic Coordinating Committee nominee Arturo Cruz participating.\textsuperscript{83} Later, presidential

\textsuperscript{80} Polity IV Project, “Authority Trends, 1946-2007: Nicaragua”
\texttt{http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/nic2.htm} Accessed 8/3/09


\textsuperscript{83} Pastor, p. 205.
candidate Arturo Cruz regretted not running in the election. Vanden and Prevost summarize the election as follows:

There was real electoral competition among seven different parties, three to the right of the FSLN, and three to the left. After a history of rigged elections and limited suffrage, the 1984 elections...helped embed in the Nicaraguan nation a notion of representative democracy.

This is particularly important because it presents the 1984 elections as a stepping stone in the path towards democracy. According to both Freedom House and Polity IV, Nicaragua cannot be said to have been democratic after this election, but what Freedom Houses doesn’t believe is important but Polity IV and Vanden and Prevost show is that the 1984 election was pivotal in the process of democratization for the second election in 1990. The slow but steady improvement in civil and political liberties in Nicaragua under the Sandinistas helped bring democracy to the country. Polity IV best traces this development, showing that by 1990 when the Sandinistas were voted out of office that the country had democratized significantly.

---

84 Ibid., p. 206.
85 Vanden and Prevost, 2006, p. 539.
Figure A

Literacy in Nicaragua

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Literacy Rate (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1980 (before the literacy campaign)</td>
<td>50.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981 (after the literacy campaign)</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>23.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>20.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>20.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Robert F. Arnowe: *National Literacy Campaigns* and Juan B. Arrien: *Literacy in Nicaragua*
Figure B

School Enrollment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Preschool</th>
<th>Primary</th>
<th>Secondary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1978/1979 (Before the Revolution)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>379</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>635</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Instituto Histórico Centroamericano
Figure C

Source: The World Health Organization (Under-5 Mortality Rate) and The World Bank (Infant Mortality Rate)
Figure D

Freedom House: Nicaragua Ranking

Source: Freedom House
Figure E

Nicaragua Polity IV Regime Type

Conclusion

The Sandinistas democratized Nicaragua following a unique method that began by focusing on human development. The success of this type of democratization has profound implications for how the United States and the international community should seek to build democracy in the developing world today beyond simply holding elections.

The Sandinistas showed that by focusing on education and healthcare as their national priorities they could cut the illiteracy rate in half in only one year, nearly double the number of students enrolled in school from preschool, primary school, through secondary school, and decrease the infant and under-five mortality rates dramatically by eliminating polio and reducing preventable childhood deaths from things like dehydration. By improving education and health so extraordinarily, the Sandinistas provided the human development that had been lacking so completely for the overwhelming majority of Nicaraguans. This equipped the population with the tools to more sufficiently utilize the classic preconditions of democracy and elections, like having freedom of the press, speech, the ability to organize, etc. With those freedoms they were then better able to contribute and build the opposition that is critical in making an election competitive. The first example of this was in 1984, where marginal competition existed against the Sandinistas. The second and more profound example was in 1990, where major opposition operated fully and freely against the Sandinistas. This opposition electorally defeated the Sandinistas in a stunningly victory that would have been much less likely to have occurred had not the Sandinistas embarked so ambitiously on human
development focused democratization. In 2006, the Sandinistas with Daniel Ortega as their candidate regained the presidency.

Of course, we know democratization can happen in the developing world without focusing on human development first, but Nicaragua shows that by focusing on human development, democratization has a greater chance of both succeeding and enduring. As a cautionary case of what can happen without significant human development, Haiti’s instability and democratic recidivism provides a warning. In 1980 Stephen Kinzer noted that: “in comparative surveys that measured living standards in Latin America, Nicaragua had always ranked at or near the bottom, often tied with Haiti for last place.” 86 So, clearly both of these countries started out badly underdeveloped. Samuel Huntington notes that both Haiti and Nicaragua were part of the Third Wave of democratization, writing: “meanwhile, back in the Western Hemisphere, … in 1990 the Marxist-Leninist regime in Nicaragua went down to electoral defeat, and in December 1990 a democratic government was elected in Haiti.” 87 Yet, for these two countries, the picture today is starkly different. While Nicaragua improved dramatically first in human development and then democracy, Haiti continues to be plagued both by underdevelopment and instability. The United Nations Human Development Report ranks Haiti on the Human Development Index at 146 out of 177 countries, 88 while Nicaragua is ranked much better at 110. 89 As a result of continuing underdevelopment and Haitians being ill-equipped with

86 Kinzer, Stephen, p. 75.
87 Huntington, Samuel P., p. 24.
the tools necessary for participatory democracy, it is no wonder *Foreign Policy* ranks Haiti as the state most likely to fail in the Western Hemisphere, and the twelfth most likely to fail worldwide. In their rankings of *The Failed State Index 2009*, countries are given scores from 1 (least likely to fail) to 10 (most likely to fail) in different areas such as “uneven development,” “lack of public services,” “refugees,” etc. For Haiti, “uneven development” ranks an 8.2 and “public services” ranks an astounding 9.5; in other words, uneven development and a lack of public services are two of the major causes of Haiti’s instability. Nicaragua does not appear on the list of 60 at all. Polity IV further contrasts Nicaragua and Haiti. Nicaragua today is a solid 8, while Haiti has been all over the map since their democratic transition in 1990 with a high score of 7 after their election, dropping to a negative 7 the very next year in 1991 after a military coup, before the United States intervened in an attempt to restore democracy in 1994. Since then, it has jumped back up and down, getting no higher than a 5 today. Thus, the lesson the Sandinistas provide to the developing world today is that by emphasizing human development a country can improve the chances that democratization will succeed and endure. It’s a lesson the United States and the international community must acknowledge in our effort to foster democracy worldwide.

---

Human Development Report: Nicaragua,”

90 *Foreign Policy*, “The Failed States Index 2009,”

References


http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001459/145937e.pdf


