



Study of Internal Conflict (SOIC) Case Studies

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Study Acceptance Date: August 2024
Study Sequence No. 19

Nicaragua (Contras) 1978–90

Executive Summary

The Sandinista Front for National Liberation, a Marxist guerrilla group inspired by the Cuban Revolution, was formed in the early 1960s to promote Nicaraguan sovereignty in foreign affairs and oppose the US-backed Somoza dictatorship.¹ Following numerous attempts to topple the Somoza regime, popular support for the revolutionary movement grew. This growth led to the seizure of power by a coalition of Sandinistas and ideologically different anti-Somoza allies on July 19, 1979, two days after President Anastasio Somoza Debayle resigned and fled the country. A five-member Government Junta of National Reconstruction, led by future President Daniel Ortega, was established with promises of national reconstruction and the implementation of political pluralism, a mixed economy, non-alignment policies, and social and agrarian reform.²

The Sandinistas' attempt at political domination and approximation to Cuba, the Soviet Union, and other Eastern bloc countries brewed internal discontent and domestic and international opposition.³ Counterrevolutionary forces known as the contras emerged, initially led by former Somoza National Guard members. In August 1981, the CIA met with its leaders in southern Honduras and established the Nicaraguan Democratic Front, the main contra fighting force. The contras garnered support from some of the peasantry in the north-central regions and indigenous people of the Atlantic Coast, but internal differences caused factions to emerge.⁴

When the conflict escalated in 1983, the government substantially increased its military budget and dealt with popular resistance through violence and political repression.⁵ The government's refusal to give in to the Nicaraguan Democratic Front's demands indicated a resolution to hostilities at this stage of the conflict was improbable.⁶ The subsequent US-contra mining of Nicaragua's ports in 1984, increasing opposition to the conflict in the United States, and the Iran-Contra Affair resulted in the cessation of US military support to the contras in 1987. With the contras losing their main source of support and with an economically indigent Sandinista government, the conflict reached a stalemate.⁷

Central American states initiated peace negotiations in the mid-1980s, initially without including Nicaragua in the talks. Newly elected Costa Rican President Óscar Arias Sánchez provided a framework, the Arias Plan, which later became the Procedure for the Establishment of a Firm and Lasting Peace in Central America. This treaty was signed on August 7, 1987, and in March 1988, a temporary ceasefire was reached through the Sapoa Accords. Despite some de-escalation, hostilities continued until a new government, elected in 1990, reached an agreement with the contras to demilitarize.⁸

Assessing the Five Factors

1. Was the country at the time of the conflict a nation?

Yes. The country was ethnically heterogeneous, with mestizos (of indigenous and Spanish descent) as the main ethnic group (69 percent), followed by White (17 percent), Black (9 percent), and indigenous (5 percent) segments. Roman Catholicism was the predominant religion (95 percent), and the official and most-spoken language was Spanish. Despite the cultural and ethnic isolation of Black and indigenous Atlantic Coast minorities, a large majority of the population identified as Nicaraguans.⁹

2. Was the government perceived as legitimate by 85 percent of the population?

Yes → No. The Sandinista victory in ousting the Somoza regime in 1979 relied on massive support across the ideological spectrum. Despite increases in political opposition in the first years of the new government, the 1984 presidential election, with approximately 67 percent of valid votes going to Ortega, showcased initially strong popular support for the Sandinista government. Of the approximately 1.5 million people registered to vote (93.7 percent of the total voting-age population), 1.1 million cast ballots in the elections. Support and trust in the Sandinistas waned, however, with the escalation of the economic crisis and the war against the contras, which resulted in the Sandinistas' defeat in the 1990 elections.¹⁰

3. Did the government maintain or achieve security control over roughly 85 percent of the country's overall population?

Yes. Despite the Sandinista revolution and contra war causing between 45,000 to 65,000 deaths between 1978 and 1990, the contra rebels' attempts to garner broad internal support for the counterrevolution and to establish permanent bases in the country failed.¹¹

4. Did the rebel movement have persistent access to external sanctuary in a neighboring country to a militarily significant degree?

Yes. Honduras served as a strategic staging area for the contras. The CIA provided funding, training, and military equipment and created a transnational paramilitary force to assist in the conflict.¹²

5. Was there a government army or armed constabulary force in existence at the start of the conflict?

No. When the Sandinistas consolidated power in 1979, their rebel army would not be classified as an existing, sustainable government army. With Cuban and Soviet assistance, the government organized the former guerrillas into various security forces and substantially increased their size and capacity from approximately 5,000 soldiers in 1978 to more than 119,000 by early 1985. The Sandinista Popular Army was the government's main military body, with additional support from naval, air, militia, and civil police forces. At the end of the 1984 fiscal year, the government allocated approximately 5.6 percent of its central budget to maintaining the military and its activities.¹³

Outcome

Government defeat. Shortly after the Sandinistas' rise to power, opposition to the new government grew and escalated into a counterrevolutionary war supported by the CIA, which had an unprecedented economic and humanitarian impact on the country. Eventually, both sides reached a stalemate on the battlefield. The Sandinista government's loss was not marked by the end of hostilities and peace agreements but by an economic crisis, the continuation of a devastating conflict, and the population's disillusionment with Sandinista policies. This discord led to the Sandinistas' loss in the 1990 elections to former junta

member Violeta Barrios de Chamorro.¹⁴ The contra insurgency brought a change of government not on the battlefield but at the ballot box; nevertheless, the government in power at the start of the conflict was not in power at the end of it. This case study supports the Five Factors Theory.

NICARAGUA 1978–90	
NATIONAL IDENTITY	YES
GOVERNMENT LEGITIMACY	YES → NO
POPULATION SECURITY	YES
EXTERNAL SANCTUARY	YES
EXISTING SECURITY FORCES	NO

Endnotes

1. Stephen M. Gorman, “Power and Consolidation in the Nicaraguan Revolution,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 13, no. 1 (May 1981): 134–35, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0022216x00006192>; and Alfred G. Cuzán, “Resource Mobilization and Political Opportunity in the Nicaraguan Revolution: The Praxis,” *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 50, no. 1 (January 1991): 71–83, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3487034>.
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7. Philip W. Travis, *Reagan’s War on Terrorism in Nicaragua: The Outlaw State* (Lexington Books, 2017), 65–67; and Merrill, *Nicaragua*, 46–48.
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10. *The Electoral Process in Nicaragua: Domestic and International Influences*, Report of the Latin American Studies Association Delegation to Observe the Nicaraguan General Election of November 4, 1984 (Latin American Studies Association, 1984), 1–14.

11. Deborah Tyroler, “Sandinista Army Expels Contras from Northern Nicaragua,” Latin America Data Base, May 15, 1987, <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1646&context=noticen>; Viron P. Vaky, “Positive Containment in Nicaragua,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 68 (Autumn 1987): 43–44, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1148730>; and Elizabeth Dore and John Weeks, *The Red and Black: The Sandinistas and the Nicaraguan Revolution* (Institute of Latin American Studies, 1992), 30, https://sas-space.sas.ac.uk/3398/1/B10_-_The_Red_and_the_Black_The_Sandinistas_and_the_Nicaraguan_Revolution.pdf; and Bethany Lacina, *The PRIO Battle Deaths Dataset, 1946–2008, Version 3.0 Documentation of Coding Decisions* (Simon Fraser University, September 2009), 404–6, https://wayback.archive-it.org/all/20171019151706/https://www.prio.org/Global/upload/CSCW/Data/PRIObd3.0_documentation.pdf.
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