

Beyond Left and Right: Grassroots Social Movements and Nicaragua's Civic Insurrection

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Nicaragua has become unrecognizable in just a few short months. Those of us who have followed events closely since the April 18 protests against social security reform have witnessed the disintegration of a country through the mechanism of state repression. The standoff between the popular resistance movement and the government of Daniel Ortega and his wife and vice president Rosario Murillo has resulted in levels of brutality not seen since the civil wars of the 1970s and 1980s. Although violence has been documented on both sides of the conflict, national and international human rights organizations have attributed the vast majority of human rights abuses and deaths to the Nicaraguan state. According to these sources, police and parapolice have killed more than 300 men, women, and children, resulting in a massacre of significant proportions in this country of just 6 million people. Thousands of citizens have been injured, and hundreds have been illegally detained or disappeared. In contrast, violence against government forces and supporters has resulted in the deaths of some 50 people.¹

In addition to the astonishing violence, Ortega and Murillo have sought to punish their critics, suppress the resistance movement, and deny responsibility for the bloodshed and instability. For instance, the state funds parapolice forces, or masked gunmen in double cabin pickup trucks, to terrorize communities and obfuscate its role in the violence. Catholic clergy have been threatened and attacked for their efforts to mediate the crisis. Hundreds of doctors and other hospital personnel have been terminated from their positions for providing care to injured protestors, leaving a shortage of medical staff in public hospitals.² In July, lawmakers passed an antiterrorism law that the state has used to

criminalize protesters, grassroots activists, human rights defenders, and journalists. Meanwhile, tens of thousands of citizens have applied for asylum in Costa Rica.³ Claiming divine protection, Ortega and Murillo have responded to international condemnation with a disinformation campaign, labeling the diverse and largely nonviolent resistance movement “satanic,” “terrorist,” “criminal,” “golpistas” who are working at the behest of the US government to overthrow the socialist state.

Despite clear evidence of gross human rights abuses by the government, progressive sectors in the United States remain divided on how to respond to the crisis. Some on the Left are reluctant to disavow a leftist state, even one that has become increasingly violent and authoritarian in the last decade. Others have expressed concerns about US intervention and maintain a healthy distrust of mainstream media coverage of Latin American affairs. A vocal group of solidarity activists and commentators have defended the Sandinista state, reproducing the Ortega/Murillo narrative. These sources suggest the US government has played a lead role in orchestrating the civic insurrection. They label the resistance movement “right wing,” focus on opposition violence, calling into question the findings of human rights organizations, and frequently overstate the progressive achievements of the state. The Sandinista Revolution, as one of the few successful examples of popular national resistance to the long and bloody history of US intervention in the region, looms large in the pieces. They fall short, however, on serious analysis of Nicaraguan politics since the 1990 elections removed the Sandinistas from power.⁴ Thus, as

the standoff continues, there is little consensus on the Left about the origins of the crisis or how to respond to the violence.

This article offers some starting points for understanding the conflict via an account of social movements that oppose the state's plans to build an Interoceanic Grand Canal. The resistance has been represented in the now defunct National Dialogue with the state by the Civic Alliance for Justice and Democracy, an amalgam of diverse interests from the private sector, student movement, grassroots social movements, and civil society. Spanning the political spectrum, these groups make for strange bedfellows, giving the Alliance a certain ideological incoherence beyond the desire to see Ortega and Murillo step down, a restoration of democratic institutions, and an end to the violence. An examination of grassroots social movements, however, provides an often-overlooked entry point into the roots of the civic insurrection. These movements illustrate why traditional ideological and political divisions between the Latin American Left and Right have limited utility for parsing relationships among diverse sectors of the resistance movement and the state. An analysis of the factors that drive grassroots mobilization against Ortega and Murillo, such as Sandinista economic policy, corruption, autocratic rule, state violence, racism, gender oppression, and land dispossession, reveal a Sandinista state that no longer embraces leftist politics and a country that has outgrown its old political categories.

A View from the Caribbean Coast

I first traveled to Nicaragua as a graduate student in 1998. Since then, I have spent more than four years on the Caribbean coast of the country, where my research and activism focus on indigenous and Afro-descendant territorial rights. Most of my work has been with a small Afro-descendant Kriol community called Monkey Point, which since the late-1990s has been at the center of national debates over a series of interoceanic canal proposals that have targeted communal lands for infrastructure development.⁵ The US\$50 billion Chinese-backed Interoceanic Grand Canal, the centerpiece of Sandinista economic policy, is the latest and most controversial proposal to emerge

in 2013. Not surprisingly, my perspective on the crisis is informed by my years of engagement with Monkey Point and other community-based struggles for land rights in the region. What strikes me most about these grassroots movements is the continuity in forces that drove mobilization against the neoliberal Right (1990–2006) and those that now drive resistance to the self-styled socialist Left (2007–2018).⁶ Although each era has seen distinct geopolitical alliances, state ideologies and agendas, and degrees of official inclusion in the political sphere, certain conditions endure. State violence and land dispossession under mestizo racial rule continue to shape the everyday lived experience of community people.

Indigenous and Afro-descendant demands for land and self-determination date back to Nicaragua's military annexation of the Caribbean coast in 1894. Nevertheless, contemporary movements for territorial demarcation emerged after the Sandinista state negotiated regional autonomy as a settlement to armed conflict with these communities in the 1980s. The Sandinista state enshrined multicultural citizenship rights in 1986 with the adoption of a new constitution followed by the passage of an autonomy statute for the region in 1987. After the 1990 Sandinista electoral defeat, however, neoliberal administrations were generally hostile to multiculturalism as a project of the Left and treated indigenous and Afro-descendant lands as little more than vehicles for economic development. Despite state intransigence, international human rights decisions upheld community demands for territorial recognition,⁷ while multilateral development banks sought to reconcile capitalist accumulation with indigenous and Afro-descendant property rights. Both compelled the state to negotiate territorial rights with communities, which it did reluctantly, ultimately resisting demarcation and titling. During these years, demarcation became the central demand from communities that were experiencing extractivist exploitation, megaproject development, mestizo land colonization associated with the advance of the agricultural frontier, and "drug war" militarization.

Given the neoliberal state's resistance to territorial recognition, Daniel Ortega's return to power in 2007 after a 17-year hiatus was met with cautious hope that he would fulfill his campaign promise and title indigenous and Afro-descendant lands. Between 2007 and 2016, the Sandinista state did just that, titling some 30 percent of the country.⁸ As part of this process, Monkey Point and eight other indigenous and Afro-descendant communities received title to the Rama-Kriol Territory in 2009. But after titling, most of the contradictions of state-led capitalist intensification remained, even intensified, as did the repressive strategies used to secure these policies. Like neoliberal predecessors, this new Sandinista state proved unwilling to stop the advance of the agricultural frontier or the intense violence resulting from mestizo settler clashes with indigenous communities on the northern Caribbean coast, where the death toll from settler violence is high.⁹ Moreover, many community people believed Sandinista officials were personally benefiting from land trafficking and extractivist enterprises in the region.

Monkey Point people felt these contradictions acutely. For instance, in the years directly following titling, community leaders denounced counternarcotics forces stationed in Monkey Point for sexually abusing more than a dozen local girls. The military defended itself by using racialized discourses about black criminality and community involvement in the drug trade to delegitimize the accusations. Leaders received threats, and relations with the Sandinista state further deteriorated. Meanwhile, mestizo settlement of the territory continued, and Ortega announced plans to construct the Interoceanic Grand Canal, the largest earthmoving infrastructure project in history, on communal lands. Adding insult to injury, the Sandinista-controlled national legislature passed the canal concession (Law 840) in 2013 without consulting communities in the territory, violating its own multicultural statutes as well as international norms on free, prior, and informed consent for development projects on indigenous and Afro-descendant lands.¹⁰

The Interoceanic Grand Canal

Although communities of the Rama-Kriol Territory have been challenging infrastructure concessions on their lands since the 1990s,¹¹ after the passage of Law 840, the massive and unprecedented scale of the canal project spurred a national protest movement led by mestizo campesinos living along the proposed route. Particularly shocking were the terms of the canal concession, which privatized the venture and authorized subprojects such as free trade zones, tourism resorts, and a petroleum pipeline as well as any other infrastructure deemed necessary by the concessionaire, a Hong Kong-based firm backed by a Chinese billionaire. The state offered these incentives in exchange for a 1 percent share in the canal (to increase 10 percent each decade of operation) and an annual payout of US\$10 million for the first ten years.¹² These unfavorable terms displaced enormous market risk from international capital onto the Nicaraguan people. In a marked departure from 1980s Sandinista agrarian policy, the project would result in capitalist "accumulation by dispossession," transferring lands belonging to tens of thousands of campesinos and indigenous and Afro-descendant people to private foreign capital.¹³ Critics of the project further argued it would undermine national sovereignty, damage an already fragile environment vulnerable to climate change, and bring scant economic benefit to most Nicaraguans.¹⁴

Faced with a national outcry against the canal and a burgeoning campesino movement, the Sandinista state stepped up its repressive response to canal resistance. Some of the most visible instances of state repression occurred in December 2014 after a ceremonial groundbreaking that was to initiate the construction phase of the project. As a harbinger of things to come, anti-riot police and the military violently suppressed demonstrations in Rivas and El Tule, arresting some 50 protesters, including six members of the mestizo campesino grassroots group—the National Council in Defense of Our Land, Lake, and Sovereignty—who were illegally detained for days without charges. In the weeks and months following the repression, the state militarized communities that opposed the canal and surveilled and harassed movement leaders. Still anti-canal protests grew in the

coming years, garnering significant support from progressive sectors of Nicaraguan civil society. As a precursor to the mass demonstrations of the civic insurrection, the anti-canal movement organized dozens of marches, with the largest drawing tens of thousands of participants.

During this period, Doña Francisca “Chica” Ramírez, a 41-year-old mestiza from La Fonseca, Nueva Guinea, emerged as the face of the anti-canal campesino movement. Her leadership was projected onto the national stage as an emblem of popular demands for equality and justice. Sergio Ramírez, literary figure and former vice president to Daniel Ortega in the 1980s, said of Doña Chica, “She is the only true leader in the country, because she has credibility, the people pay attention to her. They trust her ethically, and this is very important. The ethical trust here has been lost.”¹⁵ When asked about her political orientation in an interview with the press, Doña Chica replied, “I have never held public office, and I have never followed any party. We have never liked to go along with politics. We have always been independent of the parties.”¹⁶

Her viewpoints on electoral politics reflected the general distrust and fatigue people in Monkey Point had toward the government and politicians in general, whom they viewed as corrupt and self-interested. Faced with their mutual destruction, some leaders from the Rama-Kriol Territory began to form relationships of solidarity with the mestizo campesino anti-canal movement. In the past, competition over land and the advance of the agricultural frontier had structured relationships of enmity among Caribbean coast communities and mestizo campesinos from neighboring departments like Nueva Guinea. Within the Rama-Kriol Territory, well-established campesino communities that had once felt threatened by the titling of indigenous and Afro-descendant lands now began to view their inclusion in the territory as a political asset in the fight against the canal.

There were, however, some developments that allowed the Ortega government to partially stem resistance to the canal in some communities. Titling brought new systems of territorial governance with far more intimate political and administrative ties to the state than during the

neoliberal era. Using these administrative entities, the state initiated a two-pronged campaign to tamp down dissent and co-opt community leadership. This involved initiating development projects in some communities. For instance, the central government funded a fishing cooperative in Monkey Point, providing boats and constructing a building with an icemaker to chill the daily catch. People living in an indigenous community to the north called Rama Cay received new homes, painted in the bright colors that Vice President Murillo favors. Unfortunately, the houses proved ill-suited to the humid coastal environment and quickly began to deteriorate. These efforts were in keeping with Nicaragua’s “compensatory” or redistributive development model. The approach marries integration into the global capitalist market via direct foreign investment with anti-poverty programs that were funded with billions of dollars in Venezuelan assistance and allocated using Sandinista patronage networks.¹⁷ The projects, however, did little to ease the contradictions of capitalist accumulation or stem mestizo colonization of the territory. Moreover, the diminution of Venezuelan aid in recent years became an additional underlying factor for the current crisis.

At the same time, regional Sandinista officials worked to co-opt community leadership. In some cases, they bribed leaders to gain their allegiance or promised other political and material benefits. When they were met with resistance, Sandinista officials worked to depose community boards and replace them with more compliant leadership. As a result, the state was able to garner enough support from leaders in the Rama-Kriol Territory to pass a consent agreement in 2016, outlining the indefinite lease of 263 square kilometers of territory for canal development. Monkey Point leaders opposed the agreement as an illegal land grab that would permanently dispossess them of their lands, as did people from Bangkukuk Taik, a nearby Rama community slated to become the canal terminus. From their perspective, the state (leftist or not) was in league with global capital and both were bent on destroying their way of life.

The Civic Insurrection Erupts

Grassroots experiences of capitalist intensification and state repression along the proposed canal route provide one window into the roots of the civic insurrection and popular grievances. Events in the Rama-Kriol Territory even helped to precipitate mass mobilization against the state in cities on the Pacific side of the country. Just weeks before the government's violent repression of social security protests in April, the Indio-Maíz Biological Reserve in the heart of the Rama-Kriol Territory went up in flames. The fire was likely caused by a mestizo settler—one of the growing numbers of land colonists in Indio-Maíz who are fleeing land scarcity, drought, and deforestation in the interior of the county. Over 12,000 acres of forest burned in the nucleus of the reserve (some of the last tropical rainforest in Nicaragua) while the central government failed to act decisively. In response, small groups of university students in Managua took to the streets to protest government inaction, initiating a social media campaign #SOSIndioMaiz.¹⁸ A week later university students joined pensioners in León and Managua to protest the social security reforms and were met with fierce repression from anti-riot police and gangs of Sandinista Youth.

Enrieth Martínez, a student leader from the Central American University in Managua, participated in the original Indio-Maíz protests and later formed part of the University Coalition in the National Dialogue. She describes her reaction to the violence: "I was not in León at the moment of the repression, but I felt indignation as I saw the way they attacked the young people that were protesting, the way they attacked the elderly, the way they attacked the feminists who led the protests against the reforms to the social security system there. It was all of that together. It was the feeling of impotency . . . the feeling of being attacked, of feeling vulnerable, powerless and at the same time feeling the anger, the rage at a system that has always done this. . . . And then you realize the spine-chilling reality that this government does not care if it kills you."¹⁹

People from many sectors of Nicaraguan society shared Martínez's shock and outrage. The repression catalyzed demonstrations in multiple

cities throughout Nicaragua in the coming days. Anti-riot police and parapolice shock forces suppressed the demonstrations, killing dozens of protestors and injuring and detaining hundreds. Although the state blocked independent news channels from covering the protests, Nicaraguans watched in horror as images of the massacre flooded social media. On April 22, Ortega withdrew the reforms, but by now the civic insurrection had taken root. The protests had become an expression of popular outrage at the government. More than a decade of accumulated grievances against the Sandinista state flooded to the surface, and tens of thousands of citizens took to the streets to demand Ortega's and Murillo's departure from office.

When the first mass marches began in late April, caravans of anti-canal campesinos joined the protests in Managua in a show of support for the civic insurrection, while members of the movement began erecting *tranques* or roadblocks around the country. In early May, via a communiqué authored by the Alliance of Indigenous and Afro-descendant Peoples of Nicaragua (APIAN), leaders from the Caribbean coast similarly expressed their solidarity with the student movement and the families of those "killed, disappeared, wounded, tortured and imprisoned while exercising their constitutional right to protest." Drawing a parallel between these acts of state violence and their own experiences of forced displacement, the communiqué states: "APIAN knows the vulnerable situation of people participating in social struggles in Nicaragua, since dozens of leaders and indigenous authorities from the indigenous and Afro-descendant territories have been criminalized throughout the country; we also know about the impunity that the assassins of these same people enjoy."

Conclusion

In May, when the Episcopal Conference of the Catholic Church began to mediate the National Dialogue, anti-canal campesino leaders and indigenous and Afro-descendant representatives from the Caribbean coast joined the negotiation as part of the Civic Alliance for Justice and Democracy, where contradictions between member groups were apparent. For instance, members of the Superior Council for Private Enterprise (COSEP),

business interests that had until recently cooperated with the Ortega/Murillo government in formulating national economic policy, joined leaders from the National Council in Defense of Our Land, Lake, and Sovereignty to confront the state. COSEP once supported the state's plan to construct a canal on campesino and indigenous and Afro-descendant lands. Nevertheless, they now found themselves allies in the effort to force Ortega's and Murillo's exit from power.

Now that the National Dialogue has failed and the Ortega/Murillo government continues to repress popular protest, there is little sense of what will become of Nicaragua. In a press conference in late July, Paulo Abrão, the executive secretary for the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, described the state's response to the civic insurrection in three phases. Phase one involved "traditional repression with excessive use of force against protestors." Phase two saw a violent cleansing operation against the roadblocks and barricades. Phase three has focused on the "criminalization of the demonstrators, using institutions and the justice system to arrest people and pursue legal actions and proceedings against them."²⁰ Some of the most chilling images from phase three that I have seen in Nicaraguan media are those of Medardo Mairena, the coordinator of the National Council in Defense of Our Land, Lake, and Sovereignty, and campesino leaders Pedro Mena and Silvio Pineda in police custody on false terrorism and murder charges.

As international reporting on the crisis in Nicaragua wanes, grassroots social movements need our solidarity more than ever as they confront the state's campaign of retribution. The first two political prisoners to be prosecuted and sentenced under this phase, Brandon Lovo and Glen Slate, are Afro-descendant Kriols from the Caribbean coast city of Bluefields. After a trial marked by irregularities, Judge Ernesto Rodríguez Mejía condemned Lovo and Slate to prison for the murder of journalist Ángel Gahona on August 29. Killed while covering the April protests in Bluefields, Gahona's death was live-streamed on Facebook. His widow, parents, and relatives all maintain that Lovo and Slate are innocent and instead blame the national police for Gahona's murder.²¹ Their story is

but one of many cases of ongoing state repression and reprisals aimed at participants in the civic insurrection. For Afro-descendant Nicaraguans, who have long experienced racialized policing in the so-called drug war as well as the criminalization of community land activism, the images of two of their own in prison garb reinforce their preexisting experiences of state violence under mestizo racial rule.²²

An effort to understand the historical roots of the insurrection and the diverse interests that drive the resistance movement is an essential starting point for taking a stance on the crisis. Support for grassroots actors in their struggles against capitalist intensification, dispossession, racism, gender oppression, and state violence does not necessitate uncritical support of all opposition actors regardless of their political motivations or ideological leanings. Nor should it legitimate past or present US intervention. History has provided ample evidence of the suffering caused by US meddling in Nicaraguan affairs. And while an end to the violence and Ortega's and Murillo's departure are important steps in the effort to rebuild the country, neither provide antidotes to the structural violence that plagues mestizo campesino and indigenous and Afro-descendant communities. Whatever happens to the Ortega/Murillo government, global and regional processes of capitalist accumulation, militarization, and ecological collapse are still waiting in the wings, demanding our attention and threatening our mutual survival. An analysis of the material conditions and power relations that drive grassroots activism for justice in Nicaragua can provide us with a valuable guidepost for confronting these deeply entrenched systems of race, class, and environmental exploitation.

Notes

¹ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, "IACHR Calls on the State of Nicaragua to Cease the Criminalization of Protest and Respect Persons Deprived of Liberty and Their Families," August 24, 2018, www.oas.org/en/iachr/media_center/PReleases/2018/187.asp. For figures from the Nicaraguan Center for Human Rights (CENIDH), see "The World Knows What's Happening in Nicaragua," *Revista Envío*, August 2018, www.envio.org.ni/articulo/5522.

- ² Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, "SRESCER Views with Serious Concern Information about Arbitrary Dismissals and Harassment against Medical Personnel, University Professors and Students in Nicaragua," September 10, 2018, www.oas.org/en/iachr/media_center/PReleases/2018/203.asp.
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- ⁴ For critiques of these sources, see Mary Ellsberg, "A Massacre, Not a Coup: A Response to Misinformation on Nicaragua," *Pulse*, August 3, 2018, <https://pulsemedia.org/2018/08/03/a-massacre-not-a-coup-a-response-to-misinformation-on-nicaragua/>; William I. Robinson, "The Nicaraguan Crisis and the Manicheanism of the US Left," *Verso Blog*, August 19, 2018, www.versobooks.com/blogs/3978-the-nicaraguan-crisis-and-the-manicheanism-of-the-us-left.
- ⁵ Jennifer Goett, *Black Autonomy: Race, Gender, and Afro-Nicaraguan Activism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).
- ⁶ For an analysis of Ortega's alliances with conservative sectors and the political Right in Nicaragua during the decade before his return to power, see Jennifer Goett and Courtney Desiree Morris, "Nicaragua's Authoritarian Turn Is Not a Product of Leftist Politics," *NACLA News*, September 16, 2016, <https://nacla.org/news/2016/09/16/nicaragua-s-authoritarian-turn-not-product-leftist-politics>.
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- ⁸ "Comandante-Presidente Daniel entrega títulos comunitarios a pueblos originarios de la Costa Caribe de Nicaragua," *El 19 Digital*, October 29, 2016, www.el19digital.com/articulos/ver/titulo.48337-comandante-presidente-daniel-entrega-titulos-comunitarios-a-pueblos-origarios-de-la-costa-caribe-de-nicaragua.
- ⁹ Laura Hobson Herlihy, "The New Colonization of Nicaragua's Caribbean Coast," *NACLA News*, September 6, 2016, <https://nacla.org/news/2016/09/06/new-colonization-nicaragua-s-caribbean-coast>.
- ¹⁰ The International Labour Organization's Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention 169 (ILO 169) grants indigenous people "the right to decide their own priorities" for development and to "participate in the formulation, implementation, and evaluation" development plans and projects that affect them. Nicaragua became a signatory to ILO 169 in 2010. The 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples guarantees similar rights.
- ¹¹ Jennifer Goett, "In Nicaragua, the Latest Zombie Megaproject," *NACLA News*, May 20, 2016, <https://nacla.org/news/2016/05/20/nicaragua-latest-zombie-megaproject>.
- ¹² República de Nicaragua, "Ley No. 840. Ley Especial para el Desarrollo de Infraestructura y Transporte Nicaragüense Atingente a El Canal, Zonas de Libre Comercio e Infraestructuras Asociadas," *La Gaceta: Diario Oficial* 117, no. 110 (2013): 4973-4983.
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- ¹⁴ Adolfo Acevedo, "The Canal and the Illusion of Development," *Revista Envío* 385, August 2013, www.envio.org.ni/articulo/4932; Jorge A. Huete-Pérez, Manuel Ortega-Hegg, Gerald R. Urquhart, Alan P. Covich, Katherine Vammen, Bruce E. Rittmann, Julio C. Miranda, et al., "Critical Uncertainties and Gaps in the Environmental- and Social-Impact Assessment of the Proposed Interoceanic Canal through Nicaragua," *BioScience* 66, no. 8 (2016): 632-645; Monica López Baltodano, "Truths about the Canal Concession All Nicaraguans Should Know," *Revista Envío* 390, January 2014, www.envio.org.ni/articulo/4805.
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- ¹⁸ "April 2018: An insurrection of the nation's consciousness," *Revista Envío*, May 2018, www.envio.org.ni/articulo/5485.
- ¹⁹ Fabrice Le Lous, "Enrieth Martínez, de la Coalición Universitaria: 'Esta es una revolución,'" *La Prensa*, June 3, 2018, www.laprensa.com.ni/2018/06/03/suplemento/la-prensa-domingo/2428873-enrieth-martinez-de-la-coalicion-universitaria-esta-es-una-revolucion.
- ²⁰ "The World Knows What's Happening in Nicaragua," *Revista Envío*, August 2018, www.envio.org.ni/articulo/5522.
- ²¹ "Proceso viciado mantiene asesinato de periodista en impunidad," *Confidencial*, September 8, 2018, <https://confidencial.com.ni/proceso-viciado-mantiene-asesinato-de-periodista-en-impunidad/>.
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