4 Sandinismo and War: Dynamics of Militarism in Revolutionary Nicaragua
Humberto Belli

Ever since the Sandinista revolution triumphed on 19 July 1979, the intentions of its leaders, as well as the dynamics of its political process, have been the subject of considerable controversy. While in the eyes of some observers the Sandinistas were clearly Communists, to others they appeared as revolutionaries embracing a novel blend of Marxist and Christian values.

Eight years later the view of the Sandinistas as Marxist-Leninist has come to prevail. The gradual disclosure of many of the Sandinistas’ internal writings and speeches, their crackdown on dissent and their close friendship with Cuba and the Soviet Union have contributed to their characterization as communists or Castrists. Exceptions to this widespread awareness are still found among a few US scholars, as among some militants, church organizations and members of the radical left. It is very plausible, however, that in some cases such views are more the expression of disingenuous attempts at defending the Sandinistas before a rather anti-communist audience that of genuine convictions about the uniqueness of the Nicaraguan revolutionaries.

In this regard, Donald C. Hodges, a well qualified scholar who has provided the most comprehensive study of the Sandinistas’ ideological roots from the perspective of the left, makes this observation:

Although there are as many different roads to socialism as there are separate national states, the important point is that they are headed in the same general direction. Those
North American scholars who look askance at the Soviet Union while insisting that the Nicaraguan Revolution is unique because of its political pluralism and a mixed economy are apt to forget that a multiparty system is also a feature of such Soviet-bloc countries as the German Democratic Republic and Czechoslovakia as well as Poland. A small but significant capitalist sector survives in several of those countries, including Yugoslavia, which makes them mixed economies also. Thus Nicaragua already shares features common to these kindred revolutions in Eastern Europe.¹

Yet, even among those who categorize the Sandinistas as communists or Marxist-Leninists, uncertainty still exists in regard to their flexibility or pragmatism, their susceptibility to influence, and their capacity to change or accommodate their course in view of adverse circumstances.

The round of peace negotiations, sparked by the so-called Esquipulas agreement of August 1987, (or the Arias plan) has brought a renewed relevance to questions such as: can the Sandinistas settle for a Nicaragua more similar to the one-party-dominated but non-totalitarian type of society that we find in countries like Mexico, instead of following the Cuban model? Are the Sandinistas irrevocably committed to the construction of an expansionistic, militaristic and totalitarian kind of state?

It is obvious that for the Arias plan to work, the answers to the first of the two questions should be positive and the answer to the last one should be negative: such a plan demands from its Central American signatories the full restoration of freedom of expression, political pluralism and individual rights. The questions, then, are not only whether the Sandinistas are really willing to democratize Nicaragua, but whether they can do it.

To some extent, these questions about Nicaragua are similar to the ones being asked in relation to the Soviet Union’s glasnost and to China’s overtures toward free-market arrangements. How far can they go?

The case of Nicaragua, however, is compounded by what seems to be its greater vulnerability and by the belief that its Sandinista leaders are in a near-desperate situation which