

– *Nicaragua y el FSLN (1979-2009): ¿Qué queda de la revolución?* edited by Salvador Martí i Puig and David Close. Barcelona: Ediciones Bellaterra, 2009.

The Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua and its aftermath remain a source of inspiration for analysts and academics. The influence of the revolutionary party *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (FSLN) has been substantial in the late twentieth century, within Nicaragua as well as in the whole Latin American region. The party was established exactly fifty years ago and after it led the popular insurgency against General Somoza in the late 1970s, it was in power for over a decade (1979-90). During these historical years of the Sandinista revolution, the FSLN turned into a classical Cuban-style party bureaucracy. The enormous hope it had raised world-wide was shattered in February 1990, with the electoral defeat of the presidential candidate Daniel Ortega and vice-president Sergio Ramírez against the opposition coalition of Violeta Chamorro which had firm US backing.

For the subsequent sixteen years (1990-2006) the party remained a relevant player in Nicaraguan politics, but only survived thanks to negotiated agreements (the so-called *pactos*) with its fiercest right-wing opponents, including the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. In fact, all three presidents of the 1990s (Chamorro, Alemán, and Bolaños) ended up negotiating as *caudillos* with Daniel Ortega to prevent a political stalemate. During each of these three governments, Ortega miraculously managed to maintain his political position, also thanks to a Sandinista majority in the National Assembly. Many traditional followers were fed up with this political pragmatism and gradually abandoned the rigid political party line. By the time Ortega stood up for presidential re-election for the fourth consecutive time, only few of his old comrades of the 1980s were still with him. Thanks to electoral reform, 38 per cent of the votes turned out to be enough for Ortega to win the 2006 presidential elections, providing a second FSLN-led administration in three decades. However, the party had changed substantially and was converted from a genuine grassroots movement into an electoral machine.

The second Ortega administration is almost completed, and it is therefore relevant to wonder what is left of the ideals of the Sandinista revolution, given the widespread controversy Ortega's policies have generated within his own ranks. This is the central aim of a recent Spanish volume by Martí et al., which makes a critical balance of the legacy of the Sandinista revolution. A dozen authors, mostly academics and long-term observers of the Nicaraguan political process, gathered in 2005 to make a balance of how the FSLN has evolved as a movement and as a set of ideas. The contributions, also largely published elsewhere, not only focus on the period of the Somoza dictatorship or the revolution, but also make an effort to explore the continuity of the Sandinista presence in Nicaraguan politics and society over a period of three decades. This perspective is not novel, but the systematic way in which key issues are treated makes this volume into the first thorough analysis of *Sandinismo* currently available in Spanish.

The authors explore the history of the Sandinista ideas and practices from a variety of perspectives: politics, feminism, international solidarity, constitutional changes, electoral system, culture, agrarian and poverty reduction policies. This might sound like a broad focus, but the location of the FSLN in a changing political party system gets primary attention. The party went through a whole range of internal divisions and unexpected coalitions, generating opposition from its own

ranks which at times was violently repressed. The authors show how deeply the idea of single party dominance is embedded in Nicaragua's political system, probably illustrating how difficult it is to fundamentally change a country's political culture. Pérez Baltodano points at one of the essential characteristics of Nicaraguan politics: playing with the right mix of demagogy, manipulation, blackmail, cynicism, corruption, and nepotism. The right-wing parties accused the FSLN of learning how to play this game, most likely because they wanted to keep a monopoly on this way of 'doing politics'. But Ortega and his wife Rosario Murillo realized that a correct application of all these tricks was the only way to return to power in a country in which the Sandinista electoral support never exceeded 40 per cent of popular support.

Therefore, the experience of the FSLN is in many ways a typical lesson in modern Machiavellianism. The editors underline this by pointing at the electoral fraud in the 2008 municipal elections, which gave rise to undemocratic and vertical tendencies in the party, combined with acts of political repression against opponents. Eventually, the defeat of more moderate and reform-oriented tendencies within the recent history of the party gave rise to the dominance of less tolerant views, reinforcing Ortega's position as a caudillo typical of Nicaragua's historical tradition. This can be partly explained by the demise of the Washington Consensus and the rising critique of neo-liberal policies. But the authors of the volume do not manage to really give a proper explanation why the Sandinistas failed to avoid what they call a process of 'Nicaraguanization'. The book does however offer a balanced analysis of the Sandinista legacy and will hopefully circulate widely in Nicaragua.

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– *Electing Chávez: The Business of Anti-Neoliberal Politics in Venezuela*, by Leslie C. Gates. Pittsburgh, PA: Pittsburgh University Press, 2010.

This book offers the most compelling analysis that I have seen of the pivotal 1998 Venezuelan presidential election which brought Hugo Chávez to power. While Gates wants to understand how Venezuelans made up their mind about Chávez the candidate, this book is more than just a study of an election. It delves into the origins of preferences for an anti-establishment outsider, contributes to the debate about the leftward shift in Latin American politics, and refines important theories about state-business relations.

Gates makes two central points. First, the most important factor that motivated ordinary Venezuelans to vote for Chávez in 1998 was his anti-business discourse, more so than other parts of his message. Second, despite Chávez's anti-business discourse, a non-trivial portion of prominent business leaders supported Chávez's campaign. Gates's explanation for the preferences of ordinary chavistas is partly intuitive and partly not. Gates provides evidence of what scholars, working with other sources or speculating intuitively, had already established: the poor voted for Chávez in greater number than any other income groups, and more poor voted in this election than ever. Thus, the proposition that Chávez mobilized low-income folks is confirmed. But Gates's main point is that knowing this much is not