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Sandinista Co-founder Tomás Borge, 81, Dies In Nicaragua

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

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Nicaragua bid farewell this month to one of Latin America’s consummate 20th century revolutionaries: Tomás Borge Martínez. Poet, statesman, and the last surviving founder of the leftist Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN), a guerilla movement that overthrew dictator Anastasio "Tachito" Somoza Debayle, the last of the Somoza family dictators who ruled Nicaragua from 1936 to 1979, Borge was laid to rest May 2 in Managua’s Plaza de la Revolución.

Borge passed away on the evening of April 30, reportedly from respiratory complications. He was 81. The controversial ideologue leaves behind a wife, his second, and four children. Borge’s first wife died in 1979 at the hands of the Somoza regime’s Guardia Nacional. He is survived politically by Nicaragua’s powerful President Daniel Ortega, with whom Borge worked closely during the first Sandinista government (1979-1990).

"I’m certain that Tomás is bursting with joy for these youth, these people, these workers, this united and social Nicaragua we’re building, of which Tomás was one of our older brothers," President Ortega said during Borge’s memorial service.

Ortega led the FSLN’s post-revolutionary junta before being elected president in 1984. He lost a re-election bid in 1990 but returned to the presidency in 2006 (NotiCen, Nov. 9, 2006). In a landslide, Ortega won an unconstitutional third term in November 2011, obtaining twice as many votes as his closest challenger, former Parlamento Centroamericano (PARLACEN) deputy Fabio Gadea (NotiCen, Nov.17, 2011).

Several of Gadea’s PARLACEN colleagues attended Borge’s memorial service, as did Guatemalan Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú, Salvadoran Asamblea Legislativa (AL) leader Sigifrido Reyes of the leftist Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN), and Puerto Rican independence movement head Rubén Berríos. Prominent leftist leaders including the cancer-stricken Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez and Ecuadorean President Rafael Correa did not attend but sent letters, which Ortega read during his speech.

"Latin America will remember [Borge] as a tireless freedom fighter, anti-colonial thinker, and champion of continental sovereignty," President Correa wrote. "We say thank you, Tomás, for your tenderness, your strength, and your struggle for the coming better days of our America. Now, somewhere in the infinite, in [Augusto César] Sandino’s glad embrace, know that the weight of your human journey was worthy, honest, and revolutionary."

There were some notable absences as well, including former FSLN comandantes Víctor Tirado López, Jaime Wheelock Román, Henry Ruiz, and Luis Carrión, who served with Borge in the party’s original post-revolution national directorate but later parted ways with the Sandinistas.

Many one-time FSLN insiders have become vocal critics of President Ortega. In the lead-up to the last election, Tirado López blasted the Sandinista leader for willfully ignoring the country’s constitutionally enshrined term-limit laws, which cap at two the total number of periods a president...
can hold office. The Constitution also bars presidents from serving back-to-back terms. The moment will come when "nobody’s going to agree with what the current government is doing," Tirado López told Nicaragua’s La Frensa in mid-2010. "[Ortega] is arbitrarily replacing articles in the Constitution. He’s arbitrarily issuing decrees."

Borge, in contrast, stuck with Ortega and the FSLN to the end, serving the government most recently as a deputy in the unicameral AN and as an ambassador to Peru. "I’m proud that I’m still a Sandinista, that I’m still loyal to the black and red flag of our party, that I’m still loyal to our revolutionary organization," he explained in a 2010 interview with the online news site El 19 Digital.

**Plotter, prisoner, poet**

Borge began organizing against then Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio "Tacho" Somoza García during the 1940s, while still a teenager. He was imprisoned in 1956 following the US-backed leader’s assassination. Somoza was succeeded by his two sons, first Luis Somoza Debayle (1956-1967) and then Anastasio Somoza Debayle (1967-1979).

Borge escaped from prison in 1959 and fled into exile, spending time in various countries including Cuba. Two years later, together with Carlos Fonseca, Silvio Mayorga, and several others who died before the revolution succeeded, he founded the FSLN. Borge was jailed again in 1977, spending nine months in prison before being released in a hostage trade orchestrated by Edén Pastora, also known as Comandante Zero, who together with approximately 20 other commandos seized control of the Nicaraguan Palacio Nacional in August 1978.

Following Anastasio Somoza Debayle’s overthrow in July 1979, Borge served as the Sandinista government’s interior minister, a position that gave him control of the police, prison system, immigration apparatus, and even the country’s firefighters.

The famed revolutionary was also a writer of some repute. His autobiographical La paciente impaciencia (The Patient Impatience) earned him a Casa de las Americas prize. Other titles by Borge include, Carlos el amanecer no es sólo un sueño, La ceremonia esperada, and Un grano de maíz," based on a series of conversations with Cuban leader Fidel Castro.

**The stain of "Red Christmas"**

Borge was a divisive figure as well—and not just because of his open admiration for Castro or for the communist regime in North Korea. Particularly controversial was his tenure as head of the first Sandinista government’s Ministerio del Interior, an institution that proclaimed itself the "Guardian of the People’s Happiness." Often referred to as the most "hard-line" of the junta government’s nine-person national directorate, Borge is remembered by his critics for employing repressive tactics against political prisoners, the media, and the church.

The powerful interior minister shuttered various media outlets, imposed censorship on others, and expelled several priests from the country. He was accused as well of organizing the response to the "Navidad roja" (red Christmas) contra operation in 1982 on Nicaragua’s Atlantic Coast. Sandinista authorities forced thousands of Miskito Indians living near the Honduran border in northeastern Nicaragua into refugee camps. Rights groups like the Managua-based Comisión Permanente de los Derechos Humanos (CPDH) claim that Mikitos were killed and tortured during the operation, which was planned as a way to prevent the indigenous communities from collaborating with US-funded contra fighters.
"For those of us with the CPDH, given how many accusations we received against [Borge], there’s a real connection there with human rights violations. Even though justice was never done for the tortures and disappearances that occurred when he headed the Ministerio del Interior, there’s always divine justice," CPDH President Marcos Carmona told La Prensa earlier this month.

Although Borge denied it, critics also suspect he benefited greatly from the 1990 piñata, when the outgoing Sandinista government—after losing the presidency to Violeta Chamorro (1990-1997)—parceled out millions of dollars worth of properties to the FSLN’s key leaders.

"Neither a good example nor a bad one"
Not surprisingly, Borge’s death triggered mixed responses: from Ortega and his allies, an outpouring of accolades; from some regular citizens, messages of "good riddance" left on news-site comment boards. "Borge was a liar, an egocentric, manipulative, ambitious man who was notably disrespectful, especially toward women," wrote one El Nuevo Diario reader.

Reactions from Nicaragua’s minority opposition were more tempered. Deputy Eliseo Núñez Morales of the center-right Partido Liberal Independiente (PLI) told the Associated Press that Borge deserves respect for fighting for his ideals, "regardless of whether one agreed with him or not." Mauricio Montealegre, also of the PLI, stuck a similar note. "It’s difficult to talk about the history of Nicaragua over the past 50 years without mentioning Borge," he said.

One of the more nuanced responses to Borge’s death came from fellow poet and novelist Gioconda Belli. Once an FSLN insider who worked directly with Borge in the first Sandinista government, Belli later broke from the party and is now an outspoken critic of the Ortega regime.

"Who history absolves or not is something only time will tell. He did not live to see it. I may not either," Belli wrote on the night of Borge’s passing. "As a leader in the spotlight, Tomás’ shortcomings were perhaps more obvious. But so were his magnificent gestures. He wanted to surround himself with art, with poetry....He wanted to be a poet, to be a writer. It didn’t matter that when it came to editing La Paciente Impaciencia he changed the stories of his friends to ignore heroic actions he’d previously acknowledged. That’s how he was: contradictory. Neither a good example nor a bad one. He was a man with his passions and his curses. That’s how he lived."

-- End --