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## Nicaragua, U.S. Far Apart on Climate Change Despite Similar Positions on Paris Accord

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

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US President Donald Trump's deeply controversial decision last month to break rank with more than 190 nations and pull out of the 2015 Paris climate accord turned new attention, incidentally, to a country that refused to join the agreement in the first place: Nicaragua.

For some critics of Trump's move, the fact that it aligns the US, in a sense, with Nicaragua and with Syria—the only other country absent from the Paris accord—demonstrates just how disastrous the decision was. Syria, with its cruel dictatorship and gruesome civil war, and Nicaragua, with its long history of poverty and less-than-stellar democratic reputation under long-serving leader Daniel Ortega, are countries very much on the periphery—"rogue nations," the logic holds. Certainly not the kind of company the US, an economic and military superpower that considers itself a beacon of democracy, should be keeping.

But as more than a few writers and pundits have pointed out, the "US Joins Nicaragua and Syria" type of headlines that initially accompanied Trump's exit announcement were more than a bit deceiving. "Presented out of context, this comparison is flawed," Helen Yuill of the Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign, a UK-based organization, argued in a letter published June 8 in the British daily *The Guardian*.

Regarding Syria, the context for its absence in the Paris accord is an obvious one: war. The 2015 meetings in France coincided with some of the heaviest fighting in the country's ongoing conflict. Western sanctions, furthermore, made it difficult if not impossible for Syrian leaders to attend the talks. Nicaragua, in contrast, did participate in negotiations, but opted in the end not to join the accord (*NotiSur*, Jan. 8, 2016). That decision too, though, is worth reexamining in light of the recent US withdrawal, Yuill and others insist.

The Ortega government's representative in Paris, Paul Oquist, has never said that climate change is a "hoax," to borrow a word used on occasion by President Trump. Nor did he suggest, as does the US president, that the Paris accord would burden his country economically, that it would somehow hold Nicaragua back from being "great again." Nicaragua objected to the deal instead because the agreement doesn't go far enough toward containing climate change (*NotiCen*, Feb. 16, 2017), and because the pledges that individual countries made toward reducing emissions aren't binding, Oquist told media outlets while the talks unfolded in late 2015.

"We're not going to submit because voluntary responsibility is a path to failure," Oquist told the website *Climate Home* on Nov. 30. "We don't want to be an accomplice to taking the world to 3 to 4 degrees [Celsius] and the death and destruction that represents."

Oquist's argument was that the accord should be strong enough to guarantee the survival of developing countries. "It's not a matter of being trouble makers," he said. "Four degrees is not a survival track in the Sahel with the Sahara advancing. Four degrees is not a survival track for

India or Pakistan with the glaciers melting in the Himalayas. Four degrees is not a survival track for Southeast Asia with the typhoons.”

### *Questions of responsibility*

Nor, Oquist might have added, is it a good survival track for Nicaragua, one of the hemisphere’s poorest nations and a place that, experts insists, is already experiencing negative impacts due to climate change. Germanwatch, a non-governmental organization based in Bonn, Germany, considers Nicaragua to be the world’s fourth most at-risk country as measured by losses over the past two decades from extreme weather events. Only Honduras, Myanmar, and Haiti are more vulnerable to climate change, according to Germanwatch, which publishes an annual “Global Climate Risk Index.”

Adding to frustrations in Nicaragua and other developing countries on the Germanwatch list is that relative to the US and other large industrialized powers, they contribute just a tiny portion of the greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions causing climate change. The world’s biggest polluters are China and the US, which account for nearly 39% of global emissions between them, according to data compiled in 2013 by the World Resources Institute. Nicaragua, in contrast, contributes just 0.03% of total GHG emissions.

And yet, the Paris accord works on the assumption that all countries share responsibility for climate change. That, Oquist explained in a December 2015 interview with Democracy Now, was another sticking point for Nicaragua. The agreement doesn’t, from his perspective, hold the biggest polluters sufficiently accountable for their outsized share of responsibility for the problem. That the biggest polluters also have the greatest share of the world’s gross domestic product (GDP) makes it all the more imperative, Oquist argued, that those countries be obliged to shoulder most of the burden in tackling climate change.

“[The idea of] universal responsibility—[that] everyone is responsible—is a spin on historical responsibility, because everyone didn’t create this problem,” he said. “Nicaragua has 4.8 million tons of emissions a year, and that’s 0.03% of [global] emissions. Do we feel responsible for having caused climate change? No, not at all.”

### *Embracing clean energy*

Responsible or not, Nicaragua has made a significant effort in recent years to reduce emissions by embarking on what some observers describe as a green-energy “revolution.” A dozen years ago, when Nicaraguan authorities introduced legislation aimed at diversifying its oil-dependent energy sector, only a fifth of the country’s electricity came from renewable sources such as hydroelectric dams, wind farms, or geothermic plants powered by subterranean volcanic vents ([NotiCen, Nov. 20, 2014](#)). The rest of the power came from generators operated with imported bunker oil, a pricey petroleum derivative. Now, renewables account for more than half the country’s electricity.

More recently, the pace of the energy overhaul has slowed somewhat. A long-promised hydroelectric facility called Tumarín was supposed to make Nicaragua’s electricity sector 90% green by 2020 ([NotiCen, March 18, 2010](#)). But after delaying the project for years, the Brazilian firms behind the proposed dam finally pulled the proverbial plug last year. Nevertheless, the government thinks that by 2023, 64% of Nicaragua’s electricity could come from renewables. The US, in contrast, derives just 13% of its electricity from renewable sources, according to data released last year by the US Energy Information Administration.

The discrepancy adds more weight to Oquist's complaint that the Paris accord isn't ambitious enough. It also underscores the fallacy of assuming that Nicaragua and the US—now that Trump decided to turn his back on the accord—are somehow on the same page with regards to climate change. In reality, the two country's respective reasons for shunning the deal couldn't be more different.

"Trump's exit from the accord shows that Nicaragua was right in saying that the rich countries responsible for the disaster don't want to make any kind of fair and serious commitment to reversing the damage," columnist Juan Ramón Falcón wrote in the June 4 edition of *El Nuevo Diario*.

Still, not everyone in Nicaragua supports the government's rejection of the Paris accord, a position Rosario Murillo—Ortega's wife, vice president, and chief spokesperson—reiterated in a statement issued June 2. "The government of Nicaragua ... demands a realistic, truly responsible [climate change] proposal," she said. By not signing onto the accord, Murillo added, Nicaragua "took a clear position in defense of the planet and life."

Jaime Incer Barquero, a well-respected Nicaraguan scientist who has advised Ortega on environmental issues in the past, called the decision "aberrant" and accused the government of acting like "a spoiled child." Incer Barquero is among those who think that the Paris agreement, as flawed as it may be, is at least a step in the right direction and an opportunity that Nicaragua is wrong to ignore. The Ortega administration's decision puts the country "in an uncomfortable and ridiculous position," he told the Spanish daily *El País* last month. "We can't look to be resentful because there's no room for that."

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