5-3-1989

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Interview: Nicaraguan Vice President Sergio Ramirez On Current Economic & Political Conditions
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Category/Department: General
Published: Wednesday, May 3, 1989

[Vice President Sergio Ramirez is a possible presidential candidate for the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). The interview below, conducted by Gianni Beretta, was distributed 04/25/89 by the Regional Coordination for Economic and Social Research of Central America and the Caribbean-CRIES, Managua.] Beretta: How can the revolution survive given the present economic crisis? Ramirez: The revolution has survived because it's based on a type of political consensus that relies on factors not present in societies at peace. The past ten years have been marked by aggression, so the moral and political factors that give cohesion to the popular will take hold and become predominant. This would seem romantic or idealistic, if it had not been proven by events. All the economic pressures that would have made a shambles out of any other society have not led to burning vehicles and fires in the streets, nor hundreds being killed in riots and the looting of shops in response to higher bus fares or gasoline prices or because salaries are too low. Beretta: Has the revolution been a political triumph but an economic failure? Ramirez: The economic results of war and political victory are not contradictory, nor can they be viewed separately...Such high inflation because we printed money was not a surprise for us, but rather the natural consequence of factors determining the war. The economy was not only affected by the war but was serving as a support for the war effort. I would find war combined with economic prosperity contradictory, but war and economic deterioration go together. I believe that inflation via expanding the money supply, and the erosion of real purchasing power are lesser evils compared to the disintegration and disorganization of society which the US policy of aggression was trying to provoke. The fact that there can be and has been social peace in the context of hyper-inflation and economic deterioration can also be seen as a victory for the revolution. Beretta: It must be recognized, however, that a society afflicted with such high inflation cannot take much more. Ramirez: That depends on when we evaluate the situation. When we were at war, we couldn't carry out an economic adjustment program to repair the damage caused by the war. Then...all efforts were going towards winning the war. Once we achieved this objective, we started to rebuild the country. Now, we can concentrate all efforts on solving economic problems, and we will do it. But we will continue struggling on the diplomatic and political fronts, in order to clear up the last unknowns of this war situation. The fight against hyper-inflation is succeeding, and the adjustment program has had real results in the past three months. In December we had 130% inflation, 90% in January, 45% in February, and 20% in March. To go from 130% to zero inflation is impossible...but we have achieved a significant decline. Clearly, inflation will continue until the end of the year. But instead of 30,000%, we expect an annual total 600 to 800%. Beretta: You said US aggression caused the hyper-inflation. But what about economic policy errors? Ramirez: Economic policy mistakes and the impact of war can't be weighed on the same scale. Of course we have made errors, but how many of these would have occurred if the country had not been subjected to such open aggression? Running an economy in peacetime and in war is not same. Some errors are caused by the situation. It is not the same to run a country where investments can be made and production developed in an orderly fashion, compared to a situation in which there are guns in every window, markets are closed and credit...
is not available, where goods are not imported on time and output falls, or because we can't work the coffee fields because the contras are there. All this contributes to what we can call economic agitation and leads to making mistakes. Beretta: What can be done toward achieving economic recovery? Ramirez: The mixed economy must be made effective with the participation of private producers, the state sector, and the small and medium producers in cooperatives with everyone having their own role to play in production. We are speaking now of economic "concertation." It isn't that we did not think it necessary previously to combine efforts with the private sector. But in wartime, "concertation" would be much more difficult to attain since the country was more polarized, with many individual producers having more confidence in Reagan's policy than in the possibility of reaching an understanding with the revolution. Now that the dust has settled, things can be seen more clearly and people are accepting the Sandinistas as a reality; and we're accepting them, too. Beretta: You have adopted economic measures often imposed by the International Monetary Fund. Will you ask them for credit? Ramirez: Credit that will restrict the freedom of the country, no. We'll never do that. Beretta: But will you seek contacts with them? Ramirez: We are members of the Monetary Fund. Evaluation missions come from time to time, we receive them, we talk with them, we owe them small amounts, we pay them small amounts. We would always be willing to receive funds from the them if it does not imply adopting programs that, although they may be even softer than what we're doing, oblige us to be accountable to them for what we do. Beretta: Won't it be difficult to deal with the economic problems at the same time as holding elections? Ramirez: Without being boastful, we have always met challenges head on. The 1984 elections were held at the most critical point of the war, when the entire contra force was inside the country killing people everywhere, murdering campesinos in the cooperatives, burning farms. What bigger challenge is there than that? The reality is that there will never be a better time, a moment when we can say that now all the conditions are right to hold elections without problems. Beretta: Some say that the FSLN has divided the domestic opposition. Wouldn't it be better in the elections to have one consistent and credible adversary? Ramirez: In the first place, we didn't have to do a thing to divide the opposition. Their problem is that they are ideologically impoverished. Their proposals don't generate a following. All the proposals for change are what the revolution took up in 1979. What caught the eye of the people (agrarian reform, political participation, literacy, health, popular democracy) were the proposals at the heart of the Sandinista Front. The opposition cannot promote these ideas, since they pertain to the FSLN. Second, the FSLN is the only political party really able to mobilize the country the campesinos, the urban masses, the poor, all the different sectors of society with and without elections. This never occurred in Nicaragua under the dictatorship...Political mobilization occurred around elections but was not a constant way to seek change. In this sense, the FSLN is a novelty as a political party. Third, the traditional opposition was already fragmented and pitted against itself during Somoza's time. They did not have a viable alternative project then either, so they could not get rid of him. When the revolution triumphed in 1979 their proposals did not change and they made the mistake of opposing the FSLN in the same way it had opposed the Somoza dictatorship, when the entire social panorama of the country had changed. Baretta: Doesn't it worry you that some polls say that 30% will vote for the FSLN when you got 67% of the votes in 1984? Ramirez: But the closest opposition party has 7%. And most people expressed no preference. We will win them over. That's what the election campaign is for. Baretta: Do you think that the future of pluralism in Nicaragua lies more in the heterogeneity of the FSLN than in the traditional party pluralism? Ramirez: I think the FSLN is dynamic, very creative and dialectical in and of itself, and because of this has been able to move forward. I have no fear of seeing the FSLN in the future as a blind force that does not deliberate, that ignores the
opinions of its members, that has no democratic base. We are not bound to following other models or experiences. Our revolution was already distinct from others in this way before the emergence of "perestroika" in the Soviet Union. But I don't think that pluralism depends only on how the Sandinista Front runs itself internally. Here the problem is very worrisome to me, because if the opposition is not capable of getting itself together, winning over sectors of society, and presenting some sort of mobilization, it will be difficult to obtain real pluralism. The 1990 elections have to be seen by the opposition as a big opportunity to find a way to bring more people into politics and to win credibility in the country. Beretta: Some feel that the pardon of the ex-National Guardsmen was a publicity stunt that did not change anything. Others argue it was too much of a concession. Ramirez: The social effects within Nicaragua caused by the pardon of these 1,900 Guardsmen don't worry me much. So many were released before. Of course, it is traumatic, because the atrocities of the National Guard are still fresh in the memory of many. But I do not see their release as a gift. The gift that the revolution gave was to not shoot them. We had thousands of prisoners because there were no mass executions as would have been expected what with all the atrocities they committed between 1977 and 1979. Beretta: The opposition and Cardinal Obando y Bravo are unsatisfied and say that an amnesty for all prisoners is still lacking. Ramirez: Yes, we are always lacking. I think that we are always going to lack, not only in freeing more prisoners, but handing over power to the right. There won't be peace of mind for some people until the businessmen have power. This is the real content of the peace that they want for themselves. They don't want peace with the Sandinistas. In Costa Rica and other parts of Latin America there are elections and one or the other party wins, and there is political peace, and the left gets two or three per cent of the vote. Here it's the reverse, with the right receiving two or three per cent of the vote. So here there are different rules to the game; it's a different reality. The FSLN represents a force that politically challenges the old order of Latin America. We are a revolution. Sure, we are using methods within the pluralist gameplan, respecting democratic laws, living together peacefully, but we are a revolution. We cannot at a given moment go back to the right, or the center. We are revolutionaries and we represent a revolutionary idea in Latin America and this is the real problem for coexistence.

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