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The Contras & The Nicaraguan Peasantry, Part 2

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In practice, land turnovers on the basis of decrees 10-90 and 11-90 have proceeded at a pace far slower than what COSEP would like to see. Still, it has been more than enough to generate a widespread sense of insecurity in the countryside, leading to protests, farm seizures by members of the Association of Rural Workers (ATC), and a drop in cultivated area by peasants reluctant to plant on lands they fear will soon be taken away. Repeal of the decrees was a principal demand of workers in the general strike that paralyzed the country in July. Meanwhile, the National Union of Farmers and Cattle Ranchers (UNAG), which brings together the country's small- and medium-scale agricultural producers, is protesting the government's macroeconomic policies. The export stimulation strategy involves exchange, credit, fiscal and price policies designed to enhance the profitability of export production, but at the expense of producers tied to the domestic market, for the most part peasants. In this setting, UNAG fears that banks and private lenders will be able to foreclose on those cooperatives and individual peasant holders which cannot pay their debts. The macroeconomic strategy may very well stimulate exports, but threatens to ruin the domestic sector in the process, says UNAG. Peasant producers account for nearly 100 percent of domestic food production. Export crop production, on the other hand, is principally in the hands of large landholders and agro-businesspersons. In terms of social classes, the export stimulation strategy means favoring large landowners, business and the rural rich, at the expense of peasants and the poor, UNAG argues. And, of course, the government's economic policies do not differentiate between pro-Sandinista peasants and ex-contra peasants, who now find themselves facing a common threat. Resentment for the Oligarchy In a sense, the contras are jumping from the frying pan into the fire by disarming and becoming peasants once again. Their demobilization has injected the contras into a complex rural situation already brimming with explosive conflicts of interest. Given this rural minefield, it is not surprising that the government has been unable to fulfill its promises to the former contras. Although up to one-fifth of the national territory was promised for the development poles, only about 25,000 acres of land have actually be granted to date, benefitting a few hundred individuals. Both UNAG and the RN-OC have presented the Chamorro cabinet with detailed proposals for distributing unused state and private lands to the demobilized contras and landless peasants. One obstacle is that the government wants to return the state units intact to private concerns since distributing them as parcels to peasants would mean breaking up efficient large-scale production units. Politically, it is fearful of provoking a backlash from the right if it distributes state properties to peasants. With the government's promise of land unfulfilled, the contras began to lose patience by July. "There is a lot of unrest, frustration and contradictions," warned one contra leader, Eleazar Rivera ("El Colombiano"). "We don't really want to destabilize this government, but some think differently since we've been waiting for three months for an answer and we have received nothing." From virulent anti-Sandinismo, the contras began to express class-based resentment for the new authorities in Managua, whom they accused of representing the old landed oligarchy a resentment indelibly stamped in the minds of the Nicaraguan peasantry from before the Sandinista period. As tensions mount throughout the countryside, two contradictory tendencies are developing: On the one hand, restless, land-hungry contras who for years had known nothing but war and and hatred for anything Sandinista, turn their attention towards lands granted

to peasants by the Sandinistas, in particular the cooperatives. On the other hand, the contras find themselves inexorably drawn into conflict with the government, and in the same boat with the rest of the peasantry vis-a-vis government policies. Eroding the FSLN Base In many of the politically motivated land takeovers, it is clear that right-wing factions within UNO found an opportunity to manipulate the contras and their plight for their own political purposes. These extremist elements have targetted the cooperatives and state farms as important bastions of the FSLN's social base. Most coop members belong to the UNAG, while state farm workers are affiliated with the ATC. Although these two organizations are not formally linked with the FSLN they bring together the majority of the rural population that benefitted from ten years of agrarian reform. Thus the UNO right-wing sees weakening the cooperative and state lands, and those that work them, as a way to erode the FSLN's social base. In one highly publicized case, some 150 people took over the Carlos Fonseca agricultural cooperative in La Concha, to the south of Managua. According to findings by a government commission sent to investigate, only 16 of the occupiers were actually landless peasants from the area. The rest were UNO activists, contras trucked in from other regions, and local merchants in alliance with the pre-1979 owners of the land. Vice President Godoy had arrived a few days before the takeover, and those interviewed by local reporters expressed support for Godoy and dislike for the Sandinistas as the reasons for their participation in the takeover, rather than economic motives. The La Concha cooperative members denounced the take-over as part of a strategy drawn up by the Godoy group to dismantle the area's 11 cooperatives and return the lands to either their pre-1979 owners or to landless peasants who are loyal to UNO, and thus break the political hegemony that the FSLN enjoys in the largely pro-Sandinista area. In other parts of the country, UNO municipal councils (local governments) and mayors have been organizing the land takeovers and provocations. In their efforts, the UNO militants stir up old resentments, blame the cooperatives for the lack of land, and promise rewards to incite restless ex-contras into targetting the cooperatives. "The cooperatives have had the land for a while," said one UNO spokesperson on a national television talk show a few months ago, "and now other people need these lands, so it's time to take them away (from the cooperatives)." Shifting Alliances The new circumstances in post-electoral Nicaragua produce strange bedfellows. Talk of an alliance between the ex-contras and the pro-Sandinista peasants and rural workers, who in the 1980's were shooting it out, was unimaginable just a few months ago. Yet in July former contra leaders held the first in ongoing discussions with UNAG aimed at uniting peasants, irrespective of their political or ideological leanings and past affiliations, around common class interests. In different parts of the country, local UNAG branches have taken the initiative to try and mediate the land takeovers. The former contras "are our class brothers, irrespective of the fact that they have been used by the United States," says UNAG leader Daniel Nunez. The contras remain an organized force in Nicaraguan society. The peasants of the Nicaragua Resistance operated as a proxy force for the United States and for the traditional Nicaraguan elite in the campaign against the Sandinistas. The UNO extremists see them as a new opportunity to once again utilize the peasantry as an instrument in their own agenda of continued confrontation with the Sandinistas. Will the NR-OC now functions as a party defending the class interests of its own base - poor peasants? Or will it act as proxy for the political interests of other sectors? How the former contras and the NR-OC insert themselves into the complex mosaic of realignments and redefinitions taking place in Nicaragua remains to be seen. The contradictions generated by the revolutionary process and prolonged warfare effectively divided the Nicaraguan peasantry as a class during the past 10 years. Now, the former contras are blending in with the peasantry as a whole, a class whose identity is crystallizing in post- electoral Nicaragua. UNAG and ATC warn that, overall, the Chamorro government's agrarian policies build pressures toward

a reconcentration of land, that is, a return to the previous model of land tenure in Nicaragua. That model helped generate the very pressures that led to revolution in the first place. The end of the military conflict has not brought peace to Nicaragua; it has unleashed pent-up social and economic tensions. The election and the transition, rather than stabilizing society, are resulting in a realignment of social and economic actors in which the old conflicts are being replaced by new ones.

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