

11-28-1990

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## Recommended Citation

Tyroler, Deborah. "On "the Second Stage" Of The Nicaraguan Revolution: Interview With Alejandro Bendana, Part 1, Section 1." (1990). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/4752>

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## On "the Second Stage" Of The Nicaraguan Revolution: Interview With Alejandro Bendana, Part 1, Section 1

by Deborah Tyroler

Category/Department: General

Published: Wednesday, November 28, 1990

Alejandro Bendana Rodriguez speaks English as eloquently and comfortably as he does Spanish. In either language, his ability to articulate and to analyze makes it clear why he became a principal spokesperson for the Sandinista revolutionary government (1979-1990). Interviewed frequently on Nightline, the McNeil Lehrer News Hour, Meet the Press, the McLaughlin Group, and other US network programs, Bendana became a familiar face to the US public during the 1980s, as Nicaragua came to occupy the limelight of US foreign policy. Less known is Bendana's role as one of the principal architects of Nicaraguan foreign policy during the last decade. Bendana, who holds a doctorate in history from Harvard University, was Nicaragua's Ambassador to the United Nations (1979-1982) and Ambassador to the Non-Aligned Movement (1982-1983), before being appointed as Secretary General of the Foreign Ministry in 1983. From this position, which he held until May 1990, Bendana was a key participant in the design and implementation of Nicaraguan diplomacy, and played a major role in the Central American peace process. Bendana is currently director of the Center for International Studies (CEI) in Managua. This "think tank" was founded by former Nicaraguan government foreign policy experts, under the aegis of the Jesuit-run Central American University, after the Sandinistas lost the elections to Violeta Barrios de Chamorro and the National Opposition Union (UNO). "As the result of the end of the Cold War, there are new possibilities for the attainment of stability and democracy in the areas of the Third World where armed conflict has been the norm," says Bendana. The CEI, he says, has been set up to facilitate "the deepest reflection on the Nicaraguan revolution's international experience." According to Bendana, "Central America was the earliest testing ground: for the first time in history a liberation movement that came to power by armed struggle and with control over the armed forces becomes a legal opposition party. In El Salvador and Guatemala, armed insurrectionary movements indicate they are willing to participate in free elections and to negotiate the terms of competition with the government in office." Bendana was recently invited by University of New Mexico to Albuquerque, where Latin America Data Base (LADB) staff members interviewed him on Nicaraguan affairs since the elections, and on the Sandinistas' perspectives on the new international order emerging in the post-Cold War era. LADB news analyst William I. Robinson and project director Nelson Valdes conducted the interview. [See CAU 11/30/90 for Part 2 of the interview, titled, "The New Post-Cold War Contradiction North & South, Rich vs. Poor: Interview with Alejandro Bendana."] LADB: How do you characterize the general crisis political, social, economic faced by Nicaragua today? BENDANA: The crisis in Nicaragua today can be summed up as that of the necessary adjustment which both the government and the revolutionary forces must make to a new, transitional period. We Sandinistas like to call this the second stage of the Revolution the third one being in 1996, when we expect to return to office. In this second stage, both the revolutionary forces and the government must learn to work within the new guidelines. These guidelines are not simply the product of the advent of a right-wing government, but rather were developed by the Revolution and are reflected in the constitution. They call for respect for genuine pluralism and the exchange of traditional armed methods of conflict for new, political mechanisms of conflict resolution. LADB:

Violeta Barrios de Chamorro has been in power for several months now. It appears the expectations that her campaign generated for people in and outside of Nicaragua have not been met. Is this so?

BENDANA: There were two sets of expectations, which reflected the two general issues before the electorate in February 1990: the war and the economy. The entire Nicaraguan electorate, regardless of how they voted, wanted an end to the war and an end to the economic agony. With regard to the war, these expectations have been met since Mrs. Chamorro's government continued down the path of negotiation and insisted on the contra demobilization that was initiated by the Sandinista government and contained in the Esquipulas Plan. This is to the credit of the government. But a tremendous debit is that they have not been able to do anything positive about the economy. They are reaping the seeds they sowed in the sense that they promised an end to inflation and to restore economic normality in 100 days. They made this promise never believing that they would actually win the elections and thus did not prepare an economic program. But they also made their promise on the presumption that there would be a massive flow of [foreign] economic assistance, which never materialized. In addition, they initially attempted to ram through a privatization [promoting], neo-liberal economic program that was being demanded by the [International Monetary Fund] and the World Bank as a precondition for new loans. This aggravated the country's economic situation even more, further reduced real wages, and resulted in a high monthly inflation rate. Far from having improved, the situation has worsened. There have been two general strikes in protest of economic policies. LADB: Why have significant levels of foreign assistance not materialized? Was this a miscalculation on the part of the Chamorro government? Or is this just duplicity on the part of the US government, which has yet to make real reparations to either Panama or Nicaragua?

BENDANA: I think it is a combination of both. But the sad historical reality is that Washington has always been more disposed to appropriate funding as the result of security, Cold War, anti-communist considerations, rather than as a product of genuine concern for the development of peoples. Seemingly, once the Sandinistas were voted out, the security threat ended. Thus, just when the Nicaraguan people most needed assistance, that assistance was being cut off. The lesson would seem [to be] that peace doesn't pay. And indeed, if Washington had employed only a fraction of the funds that were used to try and overthrow the Sandinista government, the economic crisis could be alleviated. But Washington was also surprised by the outcome of the February elections. It had to scramble in order to attain \$300 million dollars [approved by the US Congress in May at the Bush administration's request]. This was a difficult proposition vis-a-vis Congress [at a time of on-going fiscal crisis]. However, one marvels at the ability to get \$300 million for [Angolan contra leader Jonas] Savimbi, or for the Pol Pot coalition without much trouble from Congress. So we can't really buy the fiscal imperative. What this just may be pointing to is differences between the Chamorro government and the US on account of two basic factors. The first is the reluctance of the Chamorro government to withdraw the World Court suit that found the United States guilty of violating national and international law in its policies towards Nicaragua, and therefore ordered the United States to make reparations. This is severely embarrassing to the [US] administration, because Nicaragua's argument is the same one Mr. Bush is now using against Iraq: disregard for international law, and a larger nation trampling on the sovereignty of a smaller nation. Secondly, Washington seems to be challenging the pragmatism of the Chamorro administration in its dealings with the FSLN, which is the principal opposition [force] and the largest political party in Nicaragua. The Chamorro government has shown a disposition to try and find formulas for coexistence and to rule by consensus where possible. In this context, the pragmatic thinking by the dominant elements in the Chamorro government come into contradiction with the continued Cold War thinking, the anti-Sandinista thinking, in Washington. This may help explain Washington's stinginess. LADB:

Recent events would suggest a political situation in which the Sandinistas are more interested in the Chamorro government's stability than are sectors of the former "contras." BENDANA: Symbolic of this is Vice President Virgilio Godoy, who apparently hates President [Chamorro] more than he hates the Sandinistas. There is an extreme right-wing sentiment against the FSLN, against 42% of the electorate still very much alive and well. Ironically, the contra foot soldiers who are by and large campesinos who simply want the government to give them the land they were offered are not part of this right-wing movement. Instead, there is a coming together of extreme right-wing sectors of the Church, extreme right-wing politicians, the vice president and his party, some local UNO mayors, and the US Embassy, which is coalescing these extreme right-wing forces. This emerging far-right coalition is manipulating the contras' legitimate demands for land in order to pressure the government into taking a hard-line stance vis-a-vis Sandinismo, vis-a-vis the FSLN. They want to roll back the social and legal gains made by the Nicaraguan people over the last 10 years, to violate the terms of the Nicaraguan constitution. This threatens to throw the country into chaos, because the FSLN is an indispensable part of Nicaraguan political culture and we can never return to pre-1979 situation. LADB: Do you see a split within contra ranks between foot soldiers who are seeking the fulfillment of certain socio-economic demands which had been utilized to mobilize against the Sandinistas and the contra leadership? Does the FSLN see some coming together of those contra forces and Sandinismo? Some kind of popular front? What could develop? (cont.)

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