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## **Nicaragua: Controversy & Indefinition Within Sandinista Party Rank & File**

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. Robinson Two years after its defeat at the polls, Nicaragua's Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) faces growing unrest among the rank and file, and for the first time, disagreements among top leaders over the future of the party. In recent weeks, several informal "currents" on competing visions of party policy and conduct have emerged. The first of these "currents" went public on Feb. 6, when 18 well-known Sandinistas presented a "Proposal for a National Project" to the FSLN's top leadership body, the national directorate. Led by former national assembly secretary Rafael Solis, the 18 described themselves as a social democratic "centrist" group representing the "silent majority" of FSLN members. The "centrist" proposal said they aim to "distance [the FSLN] from radical minorities, and place a national project above partisan interests by finding common ground with the government, other parties and private enterprise." Next, the proposal authors said they were not interested in forming a "faction" within the FSLN, but rather that the proposal was intended to stimulate internal debate. A few weeks later, about 350 grassroots cadre and mid-level party militants from Managua participated in a three-day "open forum" to debate the party's future. The militants vented their anger at the party leadership for participating in the "pinata" (the alleged distribution of government-owned property to Sandinista officials prior to leaving office); top-down, anti-democratic decision-making; and "lack of policy coherence." According to a statement released at the end of the forum, described by some participants as the party's "renovation" current, militants want to "recover and rehabilitate the revolutionary movement...[T]he way to begin...is through fomenting debate among the membership, renovating party leadership and proposals, and generating an alternative project for society....We are convinced that the *raison d'etre* of the FSLN is to be a revolutionary and anti-imperialist party which defends the interests of the dispossessed majority in our country." Some observers say these recent developments are natural and healthy signs of a more broad-based and frank debate among Sandinistas as the party opens up and moves towards more democratic structures. Others take a less sanguine view, insisting that such divergent ideological positions will ultimately lead to formal splits within a party which has historically been anchored in unity. Neo-liberalism breeds political apathy Nearly everyone involved with party agrees that the FSLN must be transformed from a "revolutionary vanguard" into a modern political party able to compete in the electoral arena. The challenge is how to achieve such a transformation while maintaining the ability to operate at the level of mass mobilization, while also offering a viable national program, and providing leadership to the country's poor majority. However, despite widespread recognition of the need for such major transformations, in practice the FSLN has remained lethargic and resistant to change. Since the move to opposition party status almost two years ago, the Sandinistas have been unable to make significant progress in recovering their broad social base, seriously eroded during years of hardship and privation brought about by the contra war and the US economic embargo. The Chamorro government's neo-liberal program of drastic structural adjustment has left over 50% of the labor force unemployed, and nearly 80% living at or below the poverty line. The daily struggle for survival has left the vast majority of Nicaraguans, including Sandinista sympathizers, with little time or energy to devote to political involvement.

Under these conditions, FSLN militants have expressed concern over widespread apathy and alienation among the party membership. Party activists refer to an "inorganic base" of 50,000 registered members and a huge reservoir of followers, which has simply withdrawn from political activities. The apathy is not only the result of economic hardship. Although the FSLN is the main opposition party, and continues as the single most influential political force in Nicaragua, the Front faces a paradox which has inhibited the party's ability to operate as an organized or coherent force. The FSLN's primary objectives are contributing to social stability and economic recovery in the war-shattered country, and defense of popular sector interests. Events have demonstrated that these two objectives are often contradictory. The first objective, now closely associated with the "centrists," has translated into support for structural adjustment and other government policies adopted under the banner of national reconciliation, stability and defense of the constitutional order. The FSLN leadership is often thrust into a position of using its influence to contain social protest. In practice, these efforts boil down to close cooperation with the government, a position which Nicaraguans from both the left and the right have denounced as Chamorro-Sandinista "co-government." Sandinistas critical of this approach agree that stability and economic recovery would benefit all Nicaraguans. However, they say such goals should be achieved by sacrificing the welfare of the majority of Nicaraguans in the name of "national" interests. These critics are particularly prominent in another "current" based in the trade union movement. Former president Daniel Ortega, identified with this current, strongly criticized the "centrists." He said, "Sandinismo has one single commitment, and that is with the popular sectors." However, the FSLN has been unable to articulate a coherent alternative to the neo-liberal project, a predicament faced by the left throughout Latin America. For the FSLN, the absence of an alternative has meant political vulnerability, indefiniteness, and an apparent incoherence in policy. As a result, popular protest is often narrowly focused on spontaneous militant actions or unrealistic demands divorced from a larger program. Consequences are a generalized weakening of the trade unions and erosion of the FSLN's authority. It is not clear whether the FSLN's paradox is surmountable. Some argue that the dual objectives of achieving national stability and defending popular interests are compatible and even complementary. Others insist that because the two are ultimately antagonistic, the party can't "have it both ways." Underlying the polemic are divergent views on the role and conduct of a revolutionary party in Nicaragua and in Latin America in these times of change. Debate postponed The need for unity, first against Somoza, and then against US aggression, meant not only deferring internal debate, but papering over real differences among party members for many years. These differences burst out into the open following the Sandinista electoral defeat in February 1990. Months of sharp and divisive polemics were followed by expectations of party renewal and redefinition as party members prepared for the FSLN's first-ever Congress, which was held in July 1991. However, debate on pressing issues was postponed, justified by the old argument of the need to sustain unity and continuity. Pressing issues included the replacement of the top leadership members of the national directorate were reelected in what some described as a "steamroll" , the party's role as opposition, definition of a new party program, ideological definition, and disciplinary measures against party members involved in the "pinata." The FSLN came to power as a revolutionary party leading a multi-class nationwide struggle against Somoza, and then against US aggression. Diverse factions of social democrats, marxists, marxist-leninists, liberation theologians and nationalists have been housed under its roof. Party ranks incorporate workers, peasants, middle class professionals and administrators, and a not-insignificant number of nationalist- minded representatives of the landed, industrial and commercial bourgeoisie. This heterogeneity gave the FSLN strength and coherence when the Sandinistas governed in the

context of a national program based on mixed economy, political pluralism and international non-alignment, and governed by "the logic of the majority" principle. National and international circumstances have dramatically changed. The current government operates according to the logic of social minorities. In the countryside, the Sandinista-dominated army negotiates with a new campesino alliance of rearmed former contras, former soldiers and peasant producers. In the cities, businesspersons belonging to the FSLN call in the police to repress striking Sandinista workers. Sandinista property owners and others in high-level government posts (such as National Assembly members) are doing well economically, while Nicaraguans are experiencing a violent polarization into a large majority of impoverished and a tiny rich elite. According to party analyst Orlando Nunez, there are now "two Fronts": a comfortable "moderate" sector and a much larger one being forced to cope with grinding poverty. At present, he said, there is no "overall project which would contribute to articulating an alternative, characterized by greater legitimacy and conviction that the revolution is still possible." Other sources of controversy Another source of controversy is the FSLN's effort to redefine relations with the United States. Most Sandinistas agree that after years of confrontation, the FSLN must construct harmonious relations with the US. Not only does the international environment limit anti-imperialist confrontation, but the possibility of the FSLN returning to power depends on its ability to demonstrate to Nicaraguans that re-election would not signify a new war with Washington. Henry Ruiz, national directorate member and head of the FSLN's international relations department, said: "A victory for the FSLN [in future elections] must not rekindle fears in the US of a threat to national security or revive the previous US government's policies of confrontation." In January, Ruiz received an invitation by the US State Department to meet with Asst. Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Bernard Aronson. Ruiz's visit caused little controversy. However, the decision a few days later by army chief Gen. Humberto Ortega to award US military attache in Nicaragua Lt. Col. Dennis Quinn the "Camilo Ortega" gold medal the army's highest distinction triggered a massive uproar within Sandinista ranks. Scores of combatants who had been awarded the distinction during the 1980s threatened to repudiate their medals and numerous party militants publicly lambasted Gen. Ortega. National directorate member Luis Carrion joined the fray, calling the decision a "political error" because the medal "has a profound moral and sentimental value for thousands of Nicaraguans who fought for their homeland." [Ed. note: Camilo Ortega, brother of Daniel and Humberto, was killed in combat with Somoza's National Guard prior to 1979.] Gen. Ortega referred to his critics a "radical ultra-left minority attempting to manipulate patriotic sentiment...who do not understand that times have changed and that the United States will not be Nicaragua's eternal enemy." He said Quinn deserved the medal because he has "helped build dignified, civilized relationships based on mutual respect...the kind of relationship which Nicaraguans have been historically seeking with the US." In a protest of Ortega's action, Carlos Fernando Chamorro, editor of the FSLN newspaper Barricada, wrote: "Few people disagree with the idea of a symbolic act to seal a process of normalization [with the US]. What has been criticized is not the action as much as the way in which it was done, using this particular medal, which holds deep historical symbolism and represents the highest revolutionary values." The medal affair highlights the dilemma of the Sandinista-dominated army in its search for institutional recognition and reduced pressures from the right and the US, while attempting to maintain a precarious balance in a polarized society. Above all, the sensibilities aroused in this matter underscore the difficulties of a revolutionary party in Washington's "backyard" trying to build and manage non-confrontational relations with the US. Still another challenge facing the FSLN is how to operate under new international circumstances. This challenge was manifest with the recent decision by party leaders in favor of FSLN membership in the Socialist International

(SI). The FSLN first established relations with the SI in 1978 and has maintained observer status since the early 1980s. Some Sandinistas are opposed to the idea of joining the SI in principle. But most criticism is centered on the anti-democratic way in which the decision was adopted, i.e., without any prior consultation or discussion among the party membership. Time for debate and democratization For many grassroots party members and sympathizers, the FSLN's dilemmas are not solely, or even mainly, due to difficult external circumstances the economic crisis and an adverse international setting, nor to this or that specific incident. The main problem, they argue, is the absence of critical debate within the party over the burning issues facing the FSLN and all leftist parties in Latin America in these times of change. Failure to carry out such debate, they say, reflects the lack of party democracy, rigid internal structures and authoritarian behavior by the leadership. Twenty years of functioning as a clandestine guerrilla organization and 10 years of struggle against US aggression required tight internal discipline and centralized decision-making. According to Victor Hugo Tinoco, deputy foreign minister under the Sandinista government, "These methods of decision-making are no longer viable. The base of the party must be persuaded, and the leadership must negotiate with the base rather than make decisions on its own...The need for persuasion and negotiation and the disdain that leadership sectors of the FSLN have for this need are the real causes of a large part of the recent avalanche of criticism. "The problem is that Gen. Ortega continues to think that peace, revolution, democracy, and development can be directed, steered and advanced through 'audacious' decisions made by a small group of leaders, with very little consideration for what the rest of the society, Sandinista and non-Sandinista, thinks...Unity and coherence in the FSLN cannot be attained through bold decisions made by a small group, but through a serious and sustained dialogue process, persuasion and negotiation in the Sandinista assembly, and with our middle class and grassroots sectors." Party analysts and Nicaragua observers now speak of three active but loose currents disputing the party's future: the "centrists," the "trade unionists," and the "renovationists" who seek new programs and modalities of revolutionary practice for Nicaragua in the post-Cold War world. A multi-current party is a potentially viable formula, as demonstrated, for example, by the experience of the Brazilian Worker's Party. But unless the FSLN can garner enough internal cohesion to activate and provide leadership for the "inorganic base," then the party is unlikely to achieve its most basic goal: regaining a majority consensus in Nicaragua around Sandinismo as a viable alternative.

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