

TALKING SENSE

Have the Sandinistas betrayed the Nicaraguan revolution?

That is certainly the feeling of some Nicaraguans, mainly the upper classes, who hoped that after the downfall of Somoza they would have the same prestige and power as before. Most Nicaraguans, however, viewed the overthrow of the dictatorship as the first step in a revolution that would make deep changes to reorganize their economy and society so that the real needs of the majority would be met. Those changes made by the revolution are only the beginning.

Are Nicaraguans better off today because of the revolution?

Some benefits are obvious. During 1980 illiteracy was reduced from 52% to 13%. School enrollment has doubled. Health care has been extended, especially in rural areas. There have been mass vaccination campaigns against measles, diphtheria, and polio, as well as an extensive anti-malarial effort. Infant mortality has been reduced. Many formerly landless peasants have received land.

However, Nicaragua has had to face enormous economic obstacles: a treasury sacked by Somoza and his associates, a foreign debt equalling almost a year's gross domestic product, falling world prices for its exports, and disastrous floods and droughts. There is little new private investment. In addition, the United States has used its veto power in international lending institutions to block development loans to Nicaragua. As a result, ordinary Nicaraguans have seen little or no improvement in their cash income.

Under these difficult conditions, the Sandinista revolution is struggling to meet basic needs while making investments that will provide jobs and greater income. One major accomplishment is that Nicaragua is now self-sufficient in the basic staples of corn and beans.

An unquantifiable but real and visible achievement of the revolution is the people's sense of dignity, pride, and hope in their future.

Haven't the Sandinistas reneged on their promise of free elections?

Again the answer depends partly on your viewpoint. We Americans tend to take our own political system as a model against which to judge democracy. However, the word "democracy" in itself does not refer to elections—it comes from the Greek words meaning "people" and "power." The critical question for judging any kind of

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democracy is whether ordinary people have power to participate in decisions which affect their lives.

In other Latin American countries, real power is held by combinations of the military and the very wealthy: these groups were not voted in and cannot be voted out, even when "free" elections are held. Elections, political parties, and congresses are impotent to bring about basic change.

Most Nicaraguans see their efforts to build a more just society with ongoing grassroots participation (not just at election intervals) as democratic. As a part of this process they plan to hold elections in 1985. Some of the previously existing political parties support this process and some do not. Most observers agree that if elections were held today the results would show vast support for the Sandinista revolutionary program.

Doesn't this sound like the familiar pattern of Marxist totalitarianism?

For many Americans the fact of Marxist influence in Nicaragua is enough. They believe that Nicaragua will inevitably become a police state with one-party control. Nicaraguans who support their revolution, however, are intensely nationalistic. Their hope is that they can forge something new, that their revolution will remain creative and open, self-critical and responsive to the people. That is why the figure of Augusto Cesar Sandino means so much to them—he is the symbol that their revolution should be

Nicaraguan and not a copy of any other model.

