

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO NICARAGUA GEOGRAPHY, POPULATION, HISTORY, POLITICS

Nicaragua, a country of lakes and volcanos, is situated in the heart of the Central American isthmus. It has two big lakes and more than 50 volcanos, coasts on the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, and covers 128,000 square kilometers.

The majority of the 3 million inhabitants live in the Pacific plains. A low mountain range running down the center of the country separates this plane from the Atlantic Coast, an area which is scarcely populated. Ninety-six percent of the population is mestiza, decedents of a mixture of Spanish colonizers and indigenous peoples. The remaining four percent, Miskito, Rama, and Suma Indians, and Criollos who speak English, are concentrated on the Atlantic Coast. Close to half of the population is urban and almost a quarter of the people live in the capital of Managua.

HISTORY

The Spanish began to colonize Nicaragua in the 16th century. Later English colonizers came to the Atlantic Coast. Nicaragua became independent from Spain in 1821 but immediately fell under United States domination. Control over Nicaragua was contested fiercely because of the possibility of constructing a canal along its southern border, joining the the Atlantic and Pacific Coasts. After building the canal through Panama, the United States used its influence to assure that no other country would build a canal through Nicaragua.

The first U.S. military intervention in Nicaragua took place in 1855 when the adventurer William Walker invaded, took the capital, and declared himself president, re-establishing slavery and making English the national language. The United States recognized his "government". A Central American united force destroyed it.

In 1912 the United States marines came to Nicaragua and forced a liberal and nationalist president to resign. The President had considered allowing England or Japan to construct a canal through Nicaragua and had refused to renew trade agreements with the United States.

The marines left Nicaragua in 1926 after a 14 year occupation. They returned a year later when a nationalist force began to oppose the government installed by the United States. This time, the marines found opposition from General Augusto Cesar Sandino, General of the Army in Defense of National

Sovereignty.

After six years of continuous fighting, Sandino cleared the occupying forces out of Nicaragua. But the marines left a National Guard trained by the United States and directed by Anastasio Somoza Garcia. In 1934, by Somoza's orders, Sandino was assassinated as he was leaving a negotiating session with the government. This is how the Somoza dictatorship was established with the backing of the United States.

The struggle against the dictatorship continued during the following decades. In 1961 Carlos Fonseca founded the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). Inheritors of Sandino's struggle, the FSLN took on the responsibility of destroying Somoza's military dictatorship. On July 19th, 1979, after 18 years of struggle, the FSLN led the people of Nicaragua to victory.

THE REGIONS

To make the administration more efficient, the 16 departments of Nicaragua have been organized into 6 regions and 3 special zones, each one with its own local government and ministerial offices.

Region I: Esteli, Madriz, Nueva Segovia; 290,000 inhabitants, 21 municipalities. Economic Activity: Cattle and agriculture.

Region II: Leon and Chinandega; 490,000 inhabitants, 23 municipalities. Economic Activity: Cotton, sugar cane, bananas, sesame, sorghum, and corn. Corinto, the most important port in the country, is located in this region.

Region III: Managua, the capital; 870,000 inhabitants. It is the center of the country's economic and political activity.

Region IV: Granada, Masaya, Carazo, Rivas; 260,000 inhabitants, 31 municipalities. Economic Activity: Coffee, sugar cane, cotton, basic grains, sorghum, sesame, meat, and vegetables.

Region V: Boaco and Chontales; 260,000 inhabitants, 19 municipalities. Economic Activity: Principally cattle farming.

Region VI: Jinotega and Matagalpa; 360,000 inhabitants, 19 municipalities. Economic Activity: coffee.

Special Zone I: The north of the Department of Zelaya, located on the Atlantic Coast; 80,000 inhabitants, 6 municipalities. Economic Activity: Forests, minerals, and agriculture.

Special Zone II: The south of Zelaya; 60,000 inhabitants, 3 municipalities. Economic Activity: Fish, sugar cane, banana, coconut.

Special Zone III: Department of Rio San Juan. Its Capital is San Carlos; 30,000 inhabitants. Economic Activity: Basic Grains and Cattle.

THE GOVERNMENT OF NATIONAL RECONSTRUCTION

With the triumph of the Revolution, the Government of National Reconstruction was formed to confront the difficult tasks of reconstructing the country's administrative and political systems. Nicaragua had no police, no judges, no local government, no army, no legislature, and Somoza had left the national treasury completely broke.

The coalition government established a traditional system of three separate powers--an executive branch with representatives of different sectors of the country; a Council of State made up of 50 representatives of political parties, unions, social organizations, and business associations; a judicial branch directed by the Supreme Court of Justice, made up of seven members.

THE ELECTIONS OF 1984

In 1984, in preparation for the general elections, a fourth branch was created to supervise the electoral process--the Supreme Electoral Council, made up of 5 members.

In the November 4, 1984 elections, the Nicaraguan people elected a President, President Daniel Ortega Saavedra, and a Vice-President, Sergio Ramirez Mercado, both from the Sandinista National Liberation Front. They also elected a National Assembly consisting of 96 representatives from 7 political parties.

BASIC FACTS ON ELECTION RESULTS

Number of Registered Voters	1,551,597	
Number of Votes Cast	1,170,142	(75.4%)
Number of non-voters	381,455	(24.6%)

PARTY	% of votes obtained in the Presidential elections	# of representatives in the National Assem
Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN)	62.9	61
Democratic Conservative Party(PCD)	13.0	14
Independent Liberal Party (PLI)	9.0	9
Popular Social Christian Party (PPSC)	5.2	6
Communist Party of Nicaragua (PCdeN)	1.4	2
Nicaraguan Socialist Party (PSN)	1.2	2
Marxist-leninist Popular Action Movement (MAP=ML)	1.0	2
Void Ballots	6.1	
	100.0	96

THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

STRUCTURE

The Directive Board

In each ordinary session a Directive Board is elected. This is made up of a president, three vice-presidents, and three secretaries. The current Directive Board, elected January 9, 1985, includes representatives of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), The Democratic Conservative Party (PCD), the Popular Social Christian Party (PPSC), and the Nicaraguan Socialist Party (PSN).

- 1 President: FSLN
- 3 Vice-Presidents: FSLN, PCD, PPSC
- 3 Secretaries: 2 from the FSLN, 1 from the PSN

Commissions

The representatives are divided into twelve permanent commissions to study and make recommendations about legislation. For the study of specific bills, special commissions are created.

Functions

The National Assembly is the only legislative body. It is elected for a period of six years. In the first two years, the National Assembly will write the country's new constitution.

Other functions of the Assembly are: to decree amnesties and pardons; to ask for reports from high government officials; to ratify international treaties, agreements or negotiations related to national sovereignty; and to designate replacements for the President or Vice-President if either position becomes vacant.

Differences from the Council of State

As opposed to the previous Council of State, the National Assembly is composed entirely of representatives of political parties. The decisions of a majority of these representatives govern the country, especially in the drafting of the new Constitution, where the executive branch does not have the veto power.

Representivity

- Through the quotient electoral system used in the 1984 elections, the true support of each political party is accurately reflected in the number of seats they hold in the National Assembly.

- All of the political parties have the right to join the Permanent and Special Commissions as well as hold positions on the Directive Board.

Parliamentary Fractions

- The political parties that have at least four seats in the legislature are considered "parliamentary fractions". These are the FSLN, the PCD, the PLI and the PPSC. They have a right to administrative space, access to materials, funds from the state, and other prerogatives.

The Minority Parties

- The Nicaraguan electoral system favored the minority parties in the distribution of seats in the legislature. It also guaranteed the smallest parties representation: the losing candidates for President and Vice-President all were given Assembly seats, the presidential candidates as representatives and the vice-presidential candidates as their alternates.

- The minority parties have the right to introduce proposals, hold seats on the Directive Board, and preside over Permanent and Special Commissions.

The Representatives:

- Have the right to introduce bills and have legal immunity for their opinions and votes in the Assembly.

- Receive a fixed salary from the national budget.

The President

• The President can declare a State of Emergency and assume legislative functions. However, the President cannot assume the job of writing the Constitution.

• The President, as well as the Supreme Court of Justice and the Supreme Electoral Council, can introduce legislation in their areas of competence.

Process for Passing Laws:

1. The National Assembly functions in yearly sessions that last from February 22 to December 22. The representatives can be called to extraordinary sessions during their recess.

2. Bills must first be approved by a plenary session, which decides if the bill merits a more detailed study or should be rejected outright.

3. If the plenary approves the bill, it is considered by the appropriate commission. The commission consults with any other appropriate bodies, then makes its recommendation.

4. A general debate then takes place in the plenary session, to discuss all of the bill's articles. The vote is usually by simple majority, and is open and direct. In some cases, a special majority is required.

5. The executive branch can partially or totally veto any bill (except the Constitution). A vetoed bill is returned to the plenary with comments and observations. A presidential veto can be overruled by a 60% majority vote of the Assembly.

Major Laws Approved

Amnesty: Amnesty was granted to all Nicaraguan's involved in counterrevolutionary activities who abandoned their weapons and reported to the authorities.

• Another amnesty law freed all citizens of the Atlantic Coast who had been jailed for counterrevolutionary activities. In the same session, the legislators approved the release of 116 prisoners held for counterrevolutionary crimes.

Salary Regulation: Salaries were revised in accordance to the level of complexity of different occupations.

Drafting the New Constitution

A special commission was formed, composed of members of the seven political parties represented in the Assembly, in proportion to their membership in the Assembly: 11 Sandinistas, 3 Conservatives, 2 Liberal Independents, 2 Popular Social Christians, 1 Socialist, 1 Communist and 1 Marxist-Leninist.

The commission was divided into 3 sub-commissions:

- The sub-commission for a national consultation: will gather the opinions of all sectors of the population about the Constitution.
- The sub-commission on foreign affairs: will study the Constitutions of other countries.
- The sub-commission on constitutional affairs: will provide guidance to the other two commissions and will draft the new Constitution.

The special commission will study the draft of the Constitution in October 1985. It is planned that in December the special commission will submit the draft to the National Assembly for debate.

Once the Constitution is approved, the legislators will work to perfect the legal and political system, until their term expires in 1990.