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In NICARAGUA

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IS NICARAGUA A MARX-ist-Leninist state? Is it another Cuba or is it on its way to becoming one? To find the answers to these questions, I traveled to the heart of the revolution.

En route to Nicaragua, I made a stop in Venezuela, where a friend expressed his amazement. "You? In Managua? That place is practically another Cuba. With your reputation as a right-winger, things could go badly for you. Be careful." (For reasons that elude me, anyone defending freedom of expression, free elections and political pluralism in Latin America is known as a right-winger among the area's intellectuals.)

Actually, I wasn't careful at all. Instead of going badly, things went so well that I was worn out — bone-tired from the hospitality lavished on me by the Sandinistas and by the opponents of the regime. During my monthlong trip in January, I talked to hundreds of people. I traveled through most of the country, where fewer than three million people live in an area somewhat larger than that of Greece. And I found striking differences between Nicaragua and Cuba.

By its fifth year, Fidel Castro's Cuba had become a Soviet satellite. Cuba's economic and military survival depended on the Soviet Union. Every sign of opposition had been suppressed. The private sector was eliminated. The party bureaucracy had extended its tentacles throughout the country and ideological regimentation was absolute.

In Nicaragua, five and a half years after the fall of the dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle, a pluralist society — even though it is under stringent state control — still exists. Private enterprise dominates agriculture, cattle raising, commerce and industry. Political opponents openly denounce the regime through the Democratic Coordinator, a coalition of anti-Sandinista political parties, labor unions and business groups. And despite severe censorship, criticism can be found in *La Prensa*, the weekly *Paso a Paso*, and two or three radio news programs.

There is no doubt that political opposition is tolerated because it is not very effective. As the November elections

demonstrated, the Sandinistas do not allow competition on real terms (they refused to postpone the elections in order to complete negotiations with the popular Coordinator coalition so that its candidates could appear on the ballot). But it is also true that the opposition is not subjected to the terror and paranoia that threaten all dissidence in a totalitarian state.

Nicaragua, which now plays host to thousands of visible and invisible advisers from the Soviet Union, Cuba and the countries of the Eastern bloc, receives military and technical assistance from these countries. But Nicaragua is far from being a satellite of the Soviet Union — not because of a decision by the Sandinistas, who would, I believe, have been glad to place themselves under Moscow's protection, but because of Soviet reluctance to assume the burden of another Cuba or to risk a direct confrontation with the United States. (During my stopover in Venezuela, President Jaime Lusinchi told me that he had asked the Soviet Union if it was planning to send MIG's to Nicaragua; the reply he received through the Russian Ambassador was: "We're not that crazy.") This explains Fidel Castro's speech late last year in which he announced what everybody already knew: that Cuba would maintain a prudent neutrality if Nicaragua were invaded. He urged the Sandinistas to reach a negotiated settlement with the United States within the framework of the Contadora agreement. (The treaty was first put forward last year by the Contadora nations of Latin America as their proposal for a peaceful settlement for Central America.)

Limited aid from Moscow, combined with internal resistance to the establishment of a Marxist-Leninist regime, economic disasters brought on by nationalization and statism in the early years of the revolution, as well as deprivations caused by rebel terrorism and sabotage, have all served to moderate the Sandinistas' Communist stance.

They now appear to be following a vaguely neutral, nationalist and socialist political model — one that they believe will make the regime's survival and the achievement of domestic peace more likely. If this direction is maintained, there is a chance that the Sandinista regime will evolve into a loose socialist dictatorship independent of the Soviet Union. Yet, one cannot rule out the possibility of a sudden return to the Sandinistas' original intentions (to turn Nicaragua into a Marxist-Leninist state) should the external circumstances change — for instance, if the Soviet Union should suddenly decide to take Nicaragua under its wing.

In the meantime, the Sandinistas have boldly announced they would sign the Contadora agreement, devalue their currency, reduce subsidies to transportation and abolish those for certain basic goods. They have also announced a moratorium on arms purchases and promised that 100 of the Cuban military advisers — a fraction of the total — would be sent home. They are declaring that their regime is a nonaligned, pluralist mixed economy. That is now half true, but it could be a reality if in exchange for their concessions, they could obtain peace and guarantees of non-intervention.

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