

## **Poverty and Political Empowerment: Local Citizen Political Participation as a Path toward Social Justice in Nicaragua**

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### **Abstract**

As we struggle to find avenues toward greater social justice in our world, we can sometimes learn about the process by viewing events in a small, poverty stricken nation where citizens are trying to improve their own lives.<sup>1</sup> Nicaragua is a nation with a long history of authoritarian governments and it has been the target of extensive imperialism and political meddling from the United States. These events caused and perpetuated severe poverty and excluded average citizens from participation in their own government and from efforts to improve their own lives.<sup>2</sup> Prior to its popular revolution in 1979, Nicaragua was a prime example of long-standing social injustice.<sup>3</sup> To find the nation moving now toward greater social justice and poverty alleviation is a remarkable story indeed and one that warrants close attention. This article describes what is happening inside Nicaragua today and how the nation arrived at its current situation.

The article begins with a brief history of Nicaraguan politics and suggests that dual processes of democratization and de-democratization are underway in this small nation. The

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<sup>1</sup> This paper draws upon extensive field work in Nicaragua between 2006 and 2009. During those years I visited the country numerous times and focused my efforts upon local politics. The nation is divided into 17 departments and 163 municipalities. Each department consists of one major city or large town which is itself the most visible municipality of that department. Each department then also has several other surrounding and less visible municipalities. During my field trips I visited two departments in each of the four quadrants of the country as follows: Estelí and Matagalpa in the northeast, Boaco and Chontales in the southeast, León and Chinandega in the northwest and Granada and Rivas in the Southwest. In each department I interviewed the mayor of every municipality or of nearly every municipality. In a few instances I also interviewed the vice-mayor, particularly in cases where the vice mayor was in charge of a particular project I was investigating. Inside the larger municipalities I also interviewed employees of the municipality so as to receive from them details about specific projects like the adult literacy campaign. I found, for example, that either the mayor himself/herself or one of the municipal employees could tell me exactly how many illiterate people learned to read in the past year. This particular project is called “Yo Si Puedo,” or “Yes, I can.”

My field visits also provided me with an opportunity to look at the projects themselves. I looked at wells that were being sunk, visited basketball courts and baseball fields that were under construction, and walked through new housing construction projects that were underway. The time spent in the municipalities also allowed me to observe local political meetings, many of which lasted for hours, while citizens debated how to solve a specific problem and mayors tried to mediate among the different positions. Once mayors knew that I was doing this project I began to receive calls on my cell phone from mayors who were holding an interesting citizen town meeting tomorrow or the following day. They wanted me to come and observe the meeting. Although it often involved extensive travel, I went to observe those meetings as often as I could.

This article also draws upon a small public opinion survey, conducted in 2007, where citizens were asked to evaluate the work of their own mayor and to assess the contribution of local government more generally to democratic development in Nicaragua.

I am continuing to visit Nicaragua and to collect data there. A second small public opinion survey was completed in late April, 2010 and those data are being analyzed. That analysis does not appear in this paper. I will be visiting Nicaragua later this year and again in 2011 when I will continue the interviews and field work observations used here.

<sup>2</sup> For a study of early colonial imperialism and exploitation and of how those led to extensive poverty today in another small nation .Shepherd (2009).

<sup>3</sup> Téfel, (1978)

article then explains how Nicaragua's revolutionary history has contributed to polarized politics at the national level and extensive citizen participation at the municipal level. I then consider how political science has seen the potential of local politics as a promising source of pragmatic and democratizing politics. The essay ends by noting that the future of Nicaragua's democracy is uncertain and that the international community can play a role in supporting Nicaragua's continued democratization.

### **A Brief History of Nicaraguan Politics**

Like much of Latin America, Nicaragua was originally colonized by Spain. It received its independence in the early 1800s but did not become a democracy at that point. Instead politics was controlled by wealthy elites while average citizens were excluded from political participation entirely. Wealth was unevenly distributed and most citizens lived in extreme poverty. The concentration of wealth and dictatorial control over politics became more extreme with the arrival of the Somoza dictatorship in the 1930s. The United States embraced the dictator as an ally in the Cold War and the Somozas were only removed from power by a mass popular revolution in 1979. That revolution was spearheaded by the Sandinista Party who then founded a semi-socialist regime dedicated to alleviating poverty and bringing citizens into political participation.

The Sandinistas accomplished many positive reforms and average living standards raised considerably during their first eleven years in power. The revolutionary government greatly decreased childhood diseases, expanded schooling and adult literacy, and redistributed land so that average citizens could support themselves on small land plots. The Sandinistas also improved the minimum wage and improved workers rights so that wage earners also had a better life. Despite these improvements, the Sandinistas faced hostility from the United States virtually from the outset. Beginning in the mid 1980s Ronald Reagan funded a war against the Sandinista government and sponsored an economic embargo. The small nation struggled valiantly against this opposition but citizens were eventually worn down by the war, the embargo and by harsh Sandinista decisions taken in the context of crisis.

One positive result came out of US pressure on the Sandinista government: the start of a regular electoral calendar in 1984. While the nation was still within the early euphoria of the revolution, the Sandinistas won the first election but lost the second election, held in 1990. Beginning in 1990 Nicaragua saw three successive electoral victories by the right in 1990, 1996, and 2001. During those years the national electoral calendar moved from a six-year cycle to a five-year cycle. Additionally, and crucially for citizen participation, municipal elections were separated from national elections and placed on a four-year cycle.

The hold of the right on power ended with the most recent national election in 2006 when Nicaragua's citizens re-elected former Sandinista revolutionary and former president, Daniel Ortega. Ortega's supporters celebrated. After 16 years in the opposition, they had every right to their joy. But others were not so happy. Ortega in 2006 was no longer the idealistic revolutionary he had been in 1979. He has become an unscrupulous caudillo determined to take

and hold power by whatever means necessary. With his victory, democrats on left and right held dark expectations about his behavior in power. Intellectual and cultural leaders of Sandinismo, many of whom had left the party to join the dissident Sandinista Renovationist Movement (MRS), predicted that Ortega would abuse power and seek to undermine the nation's nascent democratic institutions.

Nicaragua's right was also displeased. Having won three national elections in 1990, 1996, and 2001 the right had come to take power for granted. Two rightist candidates in 2006 had focused upon their own differences more fully than upon defeating Ortega. They had battled each other and divided their electoral following. Ortega's victory was pluralist and not majoritarian. Had the political right remained united in 2006 as they had from 1990 to 2001 they could have defeated him easily. His electoral support in 2006 was actually one or two percentage points below what it had been in previous elections but by dividing the rightist voters among two candidates, neither rightist candidate could best Ortega's plurality. Now the right had its own political fences to mend while also contending with having been returned to the political opposition.

### **De-Democratization at the National Level; Democratization at the Local Level**

In his 2007 book, Charles Tilly suggested that the progress of new democracies toward democratic governance is not necessarily steady and not always forward. Instead, he suggested, democracies could slide backward toward authoritarianism and "de-democratization." Nations could even slide all the way backward into authoritarianism.<sup>4</sup> At the national level, Tilly's predictions appear to be partially true. Since 2006, many of the negative expectations about Ortega have proven true. He has tried repeatedly to bypass the legislature and other key democratic institutions, usually without success. He has publically reprimanded Managua's Sandinista mayor for disagreeing with him. He has persecuted international NGO's that have projects in Nicaragua and who refuse to yield to his directions or preferences. He has set up citizen councils inside Nicaragua's municipalities which are intended to be separate channels for clientelist funding for his own supporters and political servants.<sup>5</sup> Where local mayors resist his directives, he seeks to undermine their authority through the use of clientelism.<sup>6</sup> He has overseen the passage of a new law forbidding abortion even in situations where the procedure would save the life of the mother. He has tried to undermine Nicaragua's democracy in multiple ways and turn back some of the revolutionary social reforms. He has encountered resistance at every point.

While this disappointing and predictable picture of political events at the national level has received extensive international media coverage, a different picture emerges in Nicaragua's 163 municipalities. This second picture has been almost entirely ignored by both the

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<sup>4</sup> (2007).

<sup>5</sup> Ortega's caudillista behavior is reminiscent of other strongman leaders who have overstepped the bounds of law in their efforts at personal control. In the Nicaraguan case see Anderson, (2006). In the Argentine context see Llanos, (2002). In the Peruvian context see Kenney. (2004).

<sup>6</sup> Hugo Chavez, a close ally of Ortega, engaged in the same effort in Venezuela. See Penfold-Becerna, (2007).

international media and scholars of Nicaragua. The country is divided into 17 departments (states) and each department contains a series of municipalities. Beginning in 1988, Nicaragua began electing mayors for each municipality<sup>7</sup> and in 2000 those municipal elections were separated from national presidential elections. In the first independent municipal election in 2000 the Sandinista left took most major municipalities. In the next municipal election in 2004 Sandinistas gained mayoral seats. In the 2008 municipal elections Sandinistas lost some important urban municipalities and gained others, finishing by holding about two thirds of all municipalities nationwide.

The wide, continuous and growing hold of the left upon Nicaragua's municipal politics reflects policy delivery and successes. In municipalities where Sandinista mayors won power in 2000 they began poverty alleviation programs of many sorts. These programs were and are extensive but a few examples here will provide some sense of the work underway at the local level. Many mayors established housing subsidy programs whereby low income families could apply for low-interest loans to put a tin roof on a thatched hut, replace plastic walls with wooden ones, or substitute a cement floor for a dirt one. Mayors likewise organized citizens to dig ditches along roads to facilitate water runoff and borrowed large machinery to smooth and improve roads into rural municipalities. Mayors mobilized citizens to dig communal wells and latrines, organize sports events as fundraisers, and to build community playing grounds or a rodeo arena. They used a Cuban model to re-establish an adult literacy program that had been in use in the 1980s. The model uses sun-generated electricity to run a video tape that teaches small audiences the basics of lettering and pronunciation. The model was perfectly adapted to rural contexts that lacked electricity and did not require municipalities to hire an additional employee to teach literacy.

Mayors began by drawing upon NGO funding and participation to finance many of these projects. But they soon moved to supplement international funds with domestic sources. Each Nicaraguan municipality receives a stream of funding from the national government. The size of that supplementation is directly linked to the percentage of municipal citizens who are paying local taxes. If 80% of citizens are paying local taxes then the municipality ranks in the top 20% of municipalities and receives the highest level of national supplementation. If only half of citizens are paying taxes the municipality ranks at level 3 and receives a lower level of national supplementation funding. Realizing that local taxation efforts would have a double effect, both in raising funds locally and in raising the size of the national supplement, mayors began enforcing local tax collection efforts more vigorously. They used both the local and the national funding streams to continue their development projects.

Nor were small projects the sum total of their goals. In the northern municipality of Estelí, mayors across several electoral terms drew together local and international funds to set up a municipal-wide sewage system. In the southern municipality of Juigalpa, the largest town in the department of Chontales, the mayor gained support from the Japanese government to build a huge aqueduct that will bring water from Lake Nicaragua many kilometers away to alleviate the

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<sup>7</sup> Nickson, (1995).

long term problems of drought that have plagued the entire department.<sup>8</sup> And in the municipality of Nandaime, in the department of Granada, the mayor conglomerated funds to build a huge bridge across the Medine River. The Medine is but a trickle during dry season but becomes a raging monster during rainy season, dividing the municipality down the middle and endangering the lives of those who try to cross it.

Although many of these projects were put in place or finished by Sandinista mayors, the left was not the only party to deliver development programs and services. After watching their party defeated because of its failure to serve the people, in some municipalities rightist mayors stepped forward with development programs of their own and won political power as a result. In the southern city of Rivas the Liberal mayor oversaw development programs similar to those used by the left. In the northern municipality of La Trinidad, the rightist Liberal mayor built a large local library and convinced local businesses to purchase over a dozen computers to place in the library for schoolchildren to use after school hours.

My field work in Nicaragua was not confined to inspecting projects completed and in progress. I also had multiple opportunities to witness citizen engagement in local politics. In 2006, while interviewing in the far north of the country, I received a call from the assistant to the mayor of Esquipulas, a large rural municipality in the department of Matagalpa. Through his assistant, the mayor wanted to inform me that there would be an important citizen meeting the following day over water rights inside the municipality. If I wanted to observe the meeting, I was welcome.

I traveled to Esquipulas by bus and was on hand the following morning at 10 am when the town meeting got underway. About 40 citizens were present and more kept coming over the next hour. The topic was a discussion of water rights and control with the disagreement being between a medium-sized coffee farmer and a large neighborhood of low-income citizens. Both sides wanted priority rights to water. The discussion over water use continued until early afternoon. The coffee farmer presented legal documents showing that first dibs on the water belonged to him. He also presented tax receipts on the taxes he had paid into the municipality over the past decade. The low income citizens were less organized and turned out to be relying on run-off water access as if it were a legal right, when it was not. Throughout the extended discussion the mayor kept mediating and listening. He kept the people in the meeting room and he kept the dialogue going. After several hours of tense discussion the parties in disagreement agreed to a compromise. The meeting still did not end even then. Another hour was devoted to

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<sup>8</sup> There is more to this project than building a huge aqueduct. Local citizens have substantially worsened the local drought conditions by engaging in wood cutting and deforestation over the last thirty years. Accordingly, the mayor is engaged in a process of public education as part of the project of building an aqueduct. Wood cutting has now been severely restricted and citizens are increasingly aware that they need to rebuild and recover their own ecosystem if they want the drought to end. The aqueduct will bring water to dry households but it will not make it rain. Only the return of the lush forest can reduce the drought conditions themselves.

Rural people have a keen awareness of the needs of the ecosystem around them because they depend upon it more than do urban dwellers. However, if poverty and restricted income opportunities leave them with no other choice, they will destroy their local environment over the long run in order to survive in the short term. Anderson, (1994).

the logistics of a fundraiser that the municipality was putting together: a baseball tournament pitting different municipal teams against each other. A meeting that began at 10 am finally ended close to 3 pm in the afternoon. Throughout that time I had witnessed citizen engagement in local politics and I had seen local policy formulation which reflected direct citizen input. I had watched local democracy in action.<sup>9</sup>

These kinds of meetings take place regularly in Nicaragua’s municipalities. The mayors are required by law to hold one meeting per year, called a *cabildo*, in which they report on the budget for the year. That report includes the amount of taxes taken in and the percentage of citizens who have paid taxes. The report also discloses how tax monies have been used on local projects. But mayors are also called upon to convene ad hoc meetings like the one I attended in order to resolve local conflicts or to organize the logistics for local projects. Citizen participation in these two types of meetings is high, higher, in fact, than local citizen participation in the United States. (See Table 1 below) Even where citizens do not participate, they are aware that a town meeting or *cabildo* took place and they often follow the discussion after the fact.

**Table 1:** Citizen Participation in Local Meetings and Elections (urban percentages/rural percentages): Question: Which of the following have you done?

|            | Attended a <i>cabildo</i> ? | Attended a local, ad hoc meeting with mayor, vice-mayor or councilors? | Voted in 2004 municipal election? | Participated in at least one of these three |
|------------|-----------------------------|--|-----------------------------------|---|
| Yes        | 22.9/20.5                   | 22.2/26.7  | 70.6/68.4                         | 75.2/76.8                                   |
| No         | 74.7/75.3                   | 77.6/73.1  | 27.3/28.9                         | 22.1/20.7                                   |
| NR/DK      | 2.4/4.2                     | 0.25/0.22  | 1.7/1.5                           | 2.7/2.4                                     |
| Not of age | NA                          | NA   | 0.5/1.1                           | NA  |

Source: CINASE nationwide pilot study, March, 2007

Citizens recognize that the local political process helps them. The majority of rural and urban citizens surveyed in 2007 said that their local government did more than the national government to aid the development of democracy. Citizens also said that the local government did better than the national government in resolving conflicts, aiding the local economy, providing leadership and in establishing fair play in government.<sup>10</sup>

In short, while national level leaders have engaged in power struggles, local leaders have rolled up their shirtsleeves and gone to work. Citizens have eagerly joined them in pushing forward development projects and in using the municipal forum for dialogue and conflict resolution. The results are impressive, substantial, and exciting. They show how democracy can

<sup>9</sup> On town meetings in New England see Bryan, (2004). On democratic development in New England in the nineteenth century see Skocpol, (2003).

<sup>10</sup> Anderson and Dodd, (2009), Table 1.

work at the local level to bring participation, social justice and poverty reduction to citizens' lives.

The fact that democratization and extensive citizen participation is ongoing at the local level while national leaders are immersed in their own power struggles does not fit with Tilly's argument. Accordingly, I suggest a revision of his argument: processes of democratization and of de-democratization can occur simultaneously inside the same nation and, taken together, they represent alternatives for the future of the nation.<sup>11</sup> If the process of democratization receives enough domestic and international support and prevails, then democracy will continue to unfold and develop. But if the process of de-democratization receives greater attention and support, then democracy may gradually decline and even disappear. The coterminous presence of trends toward democratization and de-democratization inside one country produces a tension between pro-democratic and anti-democratic forces. The future becomes uncertain and the outcome of the struggle between those two forces determines the nation's future. I suggest that this is what is happening in Nicaragua today. The nation is witnessing a process of democratization at the local level which is exciting and promising for the future of the country. Simultaneously, the country is watching a non-democrat and caudillo seek to undermine democracy at the national level. Ortega is held in check by three countercurrents: 1) the efforts of the single-chamber legislature, the National Assembly, which is currently dominated by the right, 2) the opposition and continuous condemnation of former Sandinistas, and 3) the combined efforts of the mayors themselves. We are watching an uncertain and unfolding struggle at the national level where de-democratization is the president's goal and his success is unknown. In his efforts he has undermined democracy. If he succeeds, he could end democracy entirely.

But at the local level political leaders of either color, but usually leftists, offer poverty alleviation and development programs of many different kinds. The people have listened to those offers and elected the leaders making them. When those leaders have delivered the services promised, citizens have responded by re-electing political leaders of the same party since the mayors themselves face single-term limit restrictions and cannot return to the mayorship once they have finished their four-year term. At the same time, when mayors of either left or right have *failed* to deliver service programs or failed to address local poverty, citizens have voted that party out of power and turned the reins of local government over to the opposition. Through this process of citizen choice and service delivery, Nicaragua's local government evidences a clear process of democratization. We are witnessing a process of democratic development and continued democratization at the local level in Nicaragua.<sup>12</sup>

In the face of simultaneous processes of democratization and de-democratization, Nicaragua's future is uncertain. Ortega, himself, represents a key danger to national democracy but he also threatens democratization efforts at the local level because he seeks to control the mayors. The caudillos on the right also represent significant threats to Nicaragua's democracy.

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<sup>11</sup> An earlier and more limited version of this argument appears in Anderson and Dodd, 2009.

<sup>12</sup> Even in communist and authoritarian China, the advent of local elections has produced positive dynamics such as greater citizen trust and more citizen confidence in local leaders. See Manion, (2006).

But an international community which ignores the efforts of the mayors and local citizens and concentrates only upon Ortega likewise represents a danger for Nicaragua's ongoing local democratization process. We will return to the role and potential contribution of the international community at the end of this article.

### **Why the Dual Processes?**

Nicaragua's revolutionary history left two important legacies: polarization and citizen participation. These twin results explain the ongoing dual processes of democratization and de-democratization. This section explains how this has come to be true and how revolution itself contributed to this outcome.

National politics often include high stakes and extensive visibility. The national political stage lends itself to polarization, ideological position-taking and visionary promises. The power gained through national office encourages political competitors to extreme measures. In nations where democratic means and loyalty are new, it is all too tempting for political competitors to exceed the bounds of democratic restraints periodically or frequently. Moreover, the presidentialist tradition that dominates throughout Latin America encourages presidents to exceed their power. Many of the dynamics at the national level in Nicaragua are no different from those in other new democracies. Although Nicaragua has a key advantage in its strong party competition between at least two parties on left and right, each of which has shown itself capable of governing,<sup>13</sup> the parties themselves contribute to polarization at the national level.

But Nicaragua is even more prone to extremism and polarization than are other developing democracies because the nation's path toward democracy came through revolution.<sup>14</sup> The revolution itself and rightist resistance to it produced a polarized situation, as conflicts usually do. The left favored revolution, including some of the extremes that come with it; the right favored dictatorship with its own extremes. Neither group was inclined to do politics through elections if it could accomplish its purposes through other measures. Both have approached electoral competition by offering ideological visions. The art of democratic compromise is a skill Nicaraguan national leaders are learning only reluctantly. Leaders moved toward elections and liberal democratic political competition only after attempting other measures and only grudgingly then. Both the left and the right include at least some national political leaders who have only limited loyalty toward democratic processes. Examples of this include Daniel Ortega himself as well as rightist Arnaldo Alemán, head of the Liberal Party, Nicaragua's most rightist party. As democracy has moved away from the idealism of the revolutionary years, some national political leaders on both left and right have tried to follow democratic rules and abide by democratic procedures in good faith. Examples include Herty Lewittes and Edmundo Jarquín. But others have pushed the edge, sought to use power illegally, and focused more upon personal control than upon either the democratic development of the country or upon the alleviation of poverty. Thus the presence of non-democratic leaders and

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<sup>13</sup> Anderson and Dodd, (2005) esp Chap 9.

<sup>14</sup> Anderson and Dodd, (2005), Chap 2; Booth, (1985); Walker, (1985).



lukewarm democrats at the national level is partially but not fully the result of the nation's revolutionary history.

Whereas revolution has produced some drawbacks to democratic development at the national level, it has produced primarily assets for democracy at the local level. By coming to power via a mass insurrection, the revolution incorporated citizen involvement long before it turned toward democracy.<sup>15</sup> In this manner, Nicaragua's democratization process resembles that of France. Citizens had already learned that political participation could improve their lives. As local politics has developed, they have incorporated that lesson into electoral format at the municipal level. In this manner revolution has enhanced democratic development at the local level.<sup>16</sup>

Starting with the advantage of grassroots participation, the institutional development of local politics has then further advantaged democracy at the municipal level. Unlike revolutionary movements worldwide, in 1984, five and one half years after winning power through revolution, the Sandinistas also held and won Nicaragua's first genuine election. Beginning in 1984, the Sandinista Party became an electoral party as well as a revolutionary party and Daniel Ortega became the first revolutionary president to hold power first by virtue of revolution and then through electoral results. Nicaragua then held a second election in 1990 and at that point Ortega and his Sandinista Party were defeated at the national level and control of the nation reverted to the right.<sup>17</sup>

Yet the revolutionary history meant that the national defeat of a single leader and the removal of Sandinismo from national power did not and could not eliminate the party itself from politics and from popular loyalty at the grassroots level throughout many parts of the country. Sandinismo was a movement of many leaders and it was guided by revolutionary principles rather than by loyalty to a single leader.<sup>18</sup> Defeating Ortega nationally still left many hundreds of lesser leaders nationwide unconditionally committed to the original Sandinista agenda popular of political involvement, poverty alleviation, development and social justice. While national and international media attention shifted from Ortega to the leaders of the right who were now directing Nicaragua's future, considerable grassroots activity still continued to take place in municipalities nationwide.

At the local level Sandinista leaders still continued to attempt to address citizen poverty, just as they had tried to do while the revolutionary party was in power nationally. The fact that the party was and is based on grassroots involvement and support allowed an entirely different

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<sup>15</sup> This same dynamic occurred before the French Revolution. See Garrioch, (2002).

<sup>16</sup> Even in a non-revolutionary and non-democratic context, the creation of local self-government can release creative new energies. For example, the Prussian state, which did not have a democratic agenda, nonetheless sought to release new levels of participatory energy among workers by creating municipal governments. Bowen, (1947). In the case of the Prussian state worker activism was to be initiated *under the control and supervision of the state* and not as a separate political enterprise in its own right. This is an important difference between the German case on the one hand and revolutionary cases like France and Nicaragua on the other hand.

<sup>17</sup> For an exploration of the reasons for this defeat see Anderson and Dodd, (2005).

<sup>18</sup> In this manner Sandinismo differed from social movements that are driven by loyalty to a single charismatic leader and therefore dependent upon that leader. For a contrast between grassroots movements and charismatic ones see Anderson, (2010), esp Chaps 2 and 3.

political story to unfold undetected at the local level. Ortega may not have comprehended the full magnitude of local dynamics but he certainly did know that a great deal of activity was going on below the level of national politics. When he had the chance, he acted to empower local activists.

As a caudillo focused upon power, Arnaldo Alemán sought to change the Nicaraguan constitution which mandated a single presidential term. In 1995 he approached Ortega and asked for his support for a constitutional change allowing Alemán to run for office a second time. Ortega agreed to support the constitutional change upon one important condition: municipal elections were to be separated from the national election by one year. Ortega also asked that the presidential term be shortened from six years to five. Alemán agreed to these conditions. The next presidential election was scheduled for 2001 while the first independent municipal elections were scheduled for 2000.

As luck would have it, the agreements worked well for Sandinismo but not for Alemán. The 2000 municipal elections witnessed Sandinista victories in many of the major municipalities nationwide, including in the capital city of Managua. Alemán forfeited his coattails power without winning for himself a second presidential term. The municipal elections were seen to have been a negative referendum upon Alemán. His own party began to distance itself from him. By 2001 Alemán's reputation for corruption and power aggrandizement had become so pronounced that even his own party rejected him as a presidential candidate and his own Vice President, Enrique Bolaños, vowed to bring Alemán to trial on corruption charges if he, Bolaños, were to win the presidency in 2001. When the 2001 national presidential election came the following year, the electorate still chose the political right but rejected Alemán himself.<sup>19</sup>

From this point onward, the political picture that had been developing at the grassroots level nationwide now assumed an independent political profile and a separate political trajectory. Municipal elections took place every four years, in 2004, and 2008, while national politics continued to unfold on a five-year calendar. At the general level, the municipal political dynamic has increasingly favored the left in each of these years, with the Sandinista Party gaining mayoral power in a growing number of municipalities and in most of the major cities nationwide. At the national level, however, the right continued in power through 2006 and it was only in that year that the electorate finally returned Ortega to the presidency.<sup>20</sup>

The fact of this dual process advantages democratic development in Nicaragua. Most nations have only the national political arena in which to carry forward the battle for democracy. Nicaragua, by contrast, has a vibrant, separate arena in the form of municipal politics. There party competition is in full swing but without the resources and greater stakes predominant at the national level. At the local level more than at the national level, politicians have stayed close to the people and are aware of what citizen problems and needs are. Whether they vote for leftist or rightist mayors, the popular choice is pragmatic rather than ideological: "Work with us on our problems and we will elect you. Fail to work with us and we will not." It is as if this dictum

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<sup>19</sup> Anderson and Dodd, (2005), esp Chap 8.

<sup>20</sup> Anderson and Dodd, (2009).

guides the popular vote. Politicians on either left or right have been able to win popular support by responding to this basic democratic demand.

As a result, as democracy slides backward at the national level electoral competition, accountability and citizen involvement are alive and well at the local level. In municipalities nationwide at least two parties are fielding candidates in each mayoral election. Candidates are appealing to voters based upon the programmatic policy delivery of their own party over the past four years. And voters are electing mayors who appear more inclined to serve popular needs. It is simple and elegant simultaneously. While Ortega's behavior is repugnant and national politics appear discouraging, local politics appear vibrant, exciting, and responsive to popular needs. The question in Nicaragua will be which dynamic prevails: will the anti-democratic national trends spearheaded by Ortega and Alemán come to dominate Nicaragua? Or will the democratic process at the local level grow to influence and re-democratize trends at the national level?

### **What Political Science Has To Say**

Political science as a discipline and students of local politics in particular would not be surprised by the dynamic described above. Dahl, Downs, and many other theorists argued that effective democratic politics requires, first, institutionalized processes of political contestation over the public policies that affect citizens' lives and, second, open, accessible and fair processes that ensure citizen influence on and choice among policies.<sup>21</sup> The choice by Ortega and Alemán to separate municipal elections from national ones provided precisely these possibilities. Less dominated by polarized, high-stakes national politics, Nicaragua's local elections have come to be determined by everyday democratic concerns. As these elections have extended over more than a decade, the process of party competition, rotation in power, and responsiveness to citizen demands is becoming increasingly institutionalized at the local level. This process has been particularly facilitated by the condition, written into the Ortega-Alemán 1995 pact, that *all mayors serve only one term*. That simple condition has tied local politics into electoral competition among parties and greatly reduced the possibilities of caudillismo and personalistic control at the local level.<sup>22</sup>

Contemporary political science is becoming increasingly aware of the exciting possibilities presented by local political competition. Over the past two decades a growing number of scholars of Latin American politics have concluded that local politics provide a promising route toward democratic development and consolidation.<sup>23</sup> Echoing Tocqueville's arguments in *Democracy in America*, these analysts suggest that local governments may be sufficiently close to the daily lives and problems of citizens that they are more easily subjected

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<sup>21</sup> Dahl, (1956, 1971, 1998); Downs, (1957); Key, (1949); Tocqueville (1969); Tilly, (1995).

<sup>22</sup> This same dynamic exists in Brazil. Where political competition exists and is linked to programmatic differences among candidates, then voters are more able to hold leaders accountable. When differences between candidates are only linked to personalities, then personalistic politics prevail, elections become volatile, and accountability is less possible. See Melo, Pereira, and Figueiredo, (2009). Ian Shapiro (2003: 55) likewise suggests that competition constitutes the best way of limiting power.

<sup>23</sup> O'Neill, (2005); Campbell and Fuhr, (2004); Willis, (1999); Dietz and Shidlo, (1998); Nickson, (1995) Fox, (1994);

than national government to daily pressures from citizens to address practical problems. Faced with the pragmatic problems and demands of citizens who elected them, local parties and public officials will be less concerned with consolidating power behind an abstract ideological vision than with responding to these immediate concerns. Simultaneously, citizens will focus their attention more directly on evaluating and voting on local parties and elected authorities according to their practical policy responsiveness. The focus on policy politics and practical problem-solving can then lead to contestation and deliberation at the local level that yields greater responsiveness to daily problems.<sup>24</sup>

An early student of local politics, particularly in urban settings, was Henry Dietz.<sup>25</sup> He found that the urban poor voted left in local elections due to pragmatic concerns over poverty and to collective issues of service delivery, not because of leftist ideologies. In this view, the dire straits of citizens in impoverished third world settings will lead them to focus on specific policy concerns at the local level and to vote in pragmatic ways to affect such policies.<sup>26</sup> Pragmatic policy voting may be less possible at the national level where policy questions are far removed from immediate daily issues and political choices are framed in more ideological and regime-oriented ways. Another pioneer of the study of local politics is Jonathan Fox whose argument was that elected local governments were doubly beneficial to democratic consolidation because (a) they created conditions in which “voters [pay] greater attention to the practical performance of ... governments” (p. 112) in ways that foster pluralist politics locally, aiding local government responsiveness and public acceptance of democratic problem-solving, and (b) they aided pragmatic and responsive democratic politics nationally because “rising democratic leaders can most credibly challenge the corrupt old ways if they are forearmed with successful records in local government”<sup>27</sup> Similarly, Isabel Licha emphasizes how the emergence of elected local governments in Latin America is creating pressure on local government authorities, particularly mayors, “to make them keep the promises...for which they were elected.” Licha maintains that local self-government fosters processes of deliberation and decision-making that respect different points of view, point towards compromise and consensual actions, and make problem-solving the central issue of politics.<sup>28</sup> As we saw in Esquipulas, this is happening in Nicaragua.

As we see here, students of local democracy who have focused upon local political development outside of and prior to the Nicaraguan context described here have found local democracy to be a promising avenue toward democratization. Local democracy can provide a mechanism by which citizens in newly democratizing nations can focus election politics on specific and severe policy problems affecting their daily lives, thereby inducing local political parties and elites to attend to such problems in pragmatic ways that citizens can oversee, comprehend and assess in future election decisions. In the language of voting studies citizens

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<sup>24</sup> The introduction of local government has transformed politics everywhere in Latin America, forcing popular groups to take into account the nature of local government in the political tactics they use for pursuing their own agenda. See Dosh, (2009:89).

<sup>25</sup> Dietz, (1985).

<sup>26</sup> referred to as ‘simple’ policies by Hill and Hurley (1999).

<sup>27</sup> Cordova Macias and Stein, (1998: 152, 156-7). Also see Stein, (2004:384)

<sup>28</sup> Licha, (2002: 2, 104). Licha is echoing Rimmerman, (1997).

can assess candidates and parties according to retrospective evaluations of concrete actions rather than just relying on ideological postures or prospective visionary promises.<sup>29</sup> In campaigning for office parties and candidates then are encouraged to stress retrospective accomplishments and frame prospective promises in ways that are amenable to practical success. In helping citizens focus on and vote in response to specific and practical policy problems and in encouraging partisan elites to respond to such pragmatic and practical policy problems in their political campaigns and governing efforts, local democracy can create a 'policy politics' that addresses critical problems of democratic consolidation.

More recent studies of local politics have likewise found that democracy and the rule of law can develop at the local level, quite apart from what is happening nationally. Rebecca Bill Chavez finds in Argentina that some provinces have moved forward the process of democratic consolidation through the development of the judiciary, even while national politics continues to be controlled by caudillismo.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, party competition at the local level has facilitated the development of a more autonomous judiciary and the rule of law in some of Mexico's individual states in a manner that is separate from national political dynamics.<sup>31</sup> In both Argentina and Mexico, the example of democratic politics at the local level then creates a standard of comparison against which the national government is held. The comparison produces pressure upon the national government to improve its own performance.

It is not surprising, therefore, to find that local political dynamics in Nicaragua are developing with some considerable success and doing so in a democratic direction quite apart from events at the national level. This reality alerts us to a positive and optimistic outlook about the possibilities for democratization in Nicaragua. Yet the ongoing events at the national level continue to concern us, particularly with respect to the immediate behavior of Ortega himself.

### **Conclusion: The Uncertain Outcome of Nicaragua's Democratization Process**

As we consider the possibilities for social justice and continued democratic development in Nicaragua, the national and local political dynamics stand opposed to each other. Local politics provide important mechanisms advantaging democratization while national politics provide important drawbacks. This dynamic is not limited to Nicaragua. Many new democracies are emerging in nations that lack histories of well-developed electoral party organizations, meaningful partisan loyalties and partisan competition. Moreover, they are developing at a time when media politics limits incentives for political activists and national parties to develop such local parties. The absence of deep roots by national parties yields electoral volatility, political instability and movement to personalistic politics, undermining democratic consolidation.<sup>32</sup> These new democracies inherited deep historic cleavages over the appropriate form of a nation's

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<sup>29</sup> Key (1966) Fiorina, (1981); Lewis-Beck, (1988); Sniderman, Brody, Tetlock, Brady, (1991); Marcus, Neuman and MacKuen (2000); Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde, (2002).

<sup>30</sup> Chavez, (2004; 2007)

<sup>31</sup> Beer, (2006) In his recent book, Scott (2009) argues, along a similar vein, that distance from national state government can enhance autonomy and citizen independence.

<sup>32</sup> Mainwaring and Zoco, (2007).

political-economic regime and the suitable level of state intervention into the economy.<sup>33</sup> Cleavages over these issues produce a polarized, uncompromising, destabilizing national politics focused on choices between divergent regime visions rather than a sustainable democratic politics focused on social development and democratic quality.<sup>34</sup> Finally, new democracies often inherit overly centralized and domineering partisan and state structures from their colonial or authoritarian pasts. Such centralization precludes popular input into policy direction, program planning and implementation and can foster the continuance of anti-democratic traditions of corruption and clientelism.<sup>35</sup>

These national trends make democratization difficult, but not impossible. By contrast, as seen above, the mechanics of local politics may favor democratic development, especially in contexts of term limits. Pragmatic local politics can aid democratic consolidation by countering many of the negative trends found at the national level. They do so by deepening party ties into civil society at the local level in ways that promote national electoral and political stability. They do so additionally by generating a performance-based vision of democratic politics that encourages parties to move beyond polarized ideological politics and personalism at the national level and towards policy moderation and compromise. They do so, third, by generating citizen support for strong local governments in ways that reduce reliance on centralized national government and push towards stronger capacities for local program development and implementation.

Nicaragua is uniquely poised to develop these kinds of grassroots ties into party politics because of its revolutionary heritage. As discussed earlier in this article, the Sandinista Party enjoyed deep citizen support long before it took power through revolution. Much of the “homework” that democratic parties need to do to build a citizen base for electoral politics was already in existence in Nicaragua even before the first national election.<sup>36</sup> That citizen base has then become more clear as the dynamic of local electoral politics has emerged.

Many scholars think that revolution provides a good basis for democratic development.<sup>37</sup> They develop that reasoning based upon arguments that revolution sweeps away the *ancienne*

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<sup>33</sup> Stokes, (2001)

<sup>34</sup> Anderson and Dodd, (2007)

<sup>35</sup> Willis, et. al., (1999); Fox, (1994).

<sup>36</sup> In contrast with the Nicaraguan case described here, where grassroots party ties were created in the revolution, other Latin American parties have failed because they have failed to develop strong citizen ties. When parties fail, the democratic system is threatened. In Argentina, the Radical Party has virtually died because of its inability to build a grassroots base. In Venezuela, both major parties have made the same mistake, with overall negative results for Venezuelan democracy. On the Argentine case see Anderson (2009). On the Venezuelan case see Molina, (2004).

The Brazilian situation more closely resembles the Nicaraguan case. Unlike Argentina and Venezuela, in Brazil the leftist Workers Party spent many years building a grassroots base. Once the party turned its attention to electoral politics, it found itself to be an electoral powerhouse because of the extensive citizen support base it had already developed. On the Brazilian case see Hunter, (2007),

In the United States, the original Whig party, descended from the British Whigs, likewise died a slow death because of its failure to retain a grassroots following while the new Republican Party picked up the popular following the Whigs relinquished. See Holt, (1978).

<sup>37</sup> Hunt, (1984); Woloch, (1994); Wood, (1969).

regime with all its dictatorial dynamics and presents a clean slate from which to develop a new, more inclusive political regime. Yet such arguments have not concentrated upon an additional and separate political dynamic that revolution provides: the power and depth of citizen involvement and how that can translate into party roots into society. This paper points our attention toward this second advantage that can come from popular revolution as an advantageous path toward democratic development. While other nations must build citizen support in laborious fashion through elections themselves, Nicaraguan parties already have citizen support and can now build elections upon the basis of work that was done before the revolution.

### **The Role of the International Community**

As this paper ends, I am concerned about the role of the international community and about the effect of that community upon democratic development in Nicaragua. In a round table setting like this one, where scholars come together with policy providers, it behooves us to look at this dynamic to learn how the international community can act in ways that enhance rather than undermine Nicaragua's democratization process.

Here are some of the causes of my concern. In the 2008 municipal elections, fraud and intimidation contaminated the electoral process in several municipalities. In addition, international organizations like the European Union failed to pay close attention to the municipal elections as they would have done to a national election. Because international attention was lacking, agents seeking to undermine the integrity of the electoral process felt more free to engage in fraud and intimidation. Thus the lack of constructive international oversight interacted with electoral lawbreakers to produce a situation of some fraud in some municipalities. Although the absence of international oversight was undoubtedly an economic decision, it was a serious error with respect to lending support for Nicaraguan democratization.

Subsequently the international community committed yet another error. Ignoring entirely the peaceful, successful electoral contest in the vast majority of municipalities, domestic and international journalists focused their attention entirely upon the instances where fraud or intimidation took place. In the international media the 2008 Nicaraguan municipal elections were presented as a failure. The truth was something different. Most municipal elections took place freely and fairly and fraud was the exception rather than the rule.

Yet the role of irresponsible media coverage combined with a lack of serious international observers produced a negative outcome. The European Union considered cutting all aid to Nicaragua and some aid has been reduced. The United States likewise considered negative sanctions toward Nicaragua. These sanctions were considered or were implemented in a context in which most municipal elections were conducted fairly and the municipalities themselves represent Nicaragua's best bet for continued democratic development and consolidation.

This kind of sanctioning is precisely the opposite of what Nicaragua needs for continued democratic development. Indeed, sanctioning the municipalities and punishing their mayors by

cutting development funds will undermine rather than enhance the possibilities for continued democratization in Nicaragua. The international community ought to be standing steadfastly behind Nicaragua's mayors on both left and right. The EU and international NGOs should be eager to put funds into the municipalities where the mayor is delivering services, regardless of the partisan color of the mayor. As this article has shown, Nicaragua's municipalities and its policy-oriented mayors represent Nicaragua's best bet and its best hope for continued democratization in the future. In fact, strengthening the mayors will work to weaken Ortega and will only serve to fortify democrats in the country. As policy analysts and implementers, our first line of support for Nicaragua ought to go to the mayors and directly to them, in an effort to continue the processes described here and to fortify democracy in this small nation.

Early opponents of democracy opposed mass citizenship because they saw that it would curtail social privileges and redistribute wealth, thus moving society toward a more egalitarian and just distribution of resources.<sup>38</sup> At the local level in Nicaragua, we see this process at work. The citizens themselves, working with their mayors, are improving their own lives and developing policies to reduce poverty in their world. This kind of local dynamic, supported by international actors, is the best path toward social justice in Nicaragua. **References**

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<sup>38</sup> Epsing-Anderson, (1990:10). For an argument in favor of democracy as economic redistribution see Shapiro, (2003), esp Chap 5.



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