The Somoza regime

The Somoza regime is a dynasty in the sense that it is an hereditary regime. It started with Anastasio Somoza Del Bila, the father of the current president of Nicaragua, and he came into power in 1936. First he was commander of the National Guard of Nicaragua and from that position he burst his way into the presidency through a military manoeuvre. His rise to the head of the National Guard had been as a result of US military intervention. The United States intervened repeatedly in Nicaragua, sending marines and the army between the turn of the century, 1900, and their final withdrawal of troops in 1933. The second and most prolonged invasion of Nicaragua was between 1927 and 1933. The US intervened in a dispute between two factions of the upper class in Nicaragua and tried to impose a solution on the two factions. One military leader of the Liberal Party refused to accept that imposition, and that leader was Augusto Caesar Sandino.

What happened then was that Sandino started a guerilla war against the United States and it lasted from 1927 until 1933. By 1933 Sandino had actually defeated the US military, which was very significant in many ways. Firstly, it was the first major struggle of US military against a revolutionary insurgency force and some of the commanders who got their first combat experience in Nicaragua later on played commanding roles in World War 2, and the Korean war. For instance, Matthew Ridgeworth who was the military commander in Korea got his first combat experience as an officer in Nicaragua. The US were unable to defeat Sandino. The more troops they sent in, the more the revolution spread and became a national liberation struggle that reached out throughout the hemisphere and throughout the world. There were meetings against US intervention in Europe, in the United States, and throughout Latin America. President Calles of Mexico denounced the United States opposition in Nicaragua. For a variety of political as well as military reasons, and for international strategic reasons, the United States decided to pull out of Nicaragua. Hoover, who was president at the time, decided the best thing to do was to get out while he still could.

The United States between 1930 and 1933 concentrated on creating an armed force in Nicaragua called the National Guard which replaced the army and the police. It was both an army and a police force. The head of the National Guard was selected by the US and it was Anastasio Somoza. He was chosen partly because he was the dancing instructor of the US ambassador’s wife. So when the US withdrew, Sandino, as he had promised, said that this was a basis for negotiation and his troops stopped fighting and came to an agreement with the National Guard once the US had withdrawn and there was a transitional regime. During this transition,
Sandino came into the capital city of Managua several times and on one of these visits he was picked up by a patrol of the National Guard and he and three of his top commanders were driven out to the airport on the outskirts of the city and murdered. Within two years Somoza had become presidente and ever since then (1936) the Somozas have ruled Nicaragua.

When the older Somoza died, power passed to the older son Louise. He died of a heart attack and was succeeded by Anastasio Somoza junior, the current president. To complete the dynasty, two Somozas wait on the wings: one is Jose Somoza, half-brother to the president, born out of wedlock, who was apparently illiterate until a few years ago when the dynasty felt that they had better educate him because he may have to take over. The other is the son of the present president, also Anastasio, grandson of the first Somoza. He is only 27, and considered too young to run the country. They might need Jose in case Somoza dies of heart disease because he had an attack about 1½ years ago. He is still not well but he’s still promoting vigorous repression. His son Anastasio and his half-brother are both military officials in the National Guard and they both occupy strategic positions.

So in a way, the thing that brought about the current crisis is a crisis of succession, a question of what happens if this Somoza dies — Who is going to succeed him, and what guarantees does the ruling class have for survival if the dynasty is broken? This is one of the things that have led to the opposition organizing.

The nature of the Somoza regime

It’s probably the vigorous survival of the old-style dictatorship, controlled by the US and oriented to the export of products to the United States, paying virtually no attention to the development of the internal economy. Coffee, cotton, gold, bananas, cattle and minerals are produced. Meat is grown by extensive methods for export as low grade meat to the United States for pet food.

The ruling class

Traditionally the ruling class was formally divided into two factions, the Liberals and the Conservatives. The Conservatives were oriented towards Great Britain but Great Britain lost control of Nicaragua around the turn of the century. The Liberals were oriented towards the US and Somoza is a Liberal. Both factions were oriented towards export agriculture but had their base of power in different regions. Leon and Granada were Conservative areas. Managua, the capital, is the Liberal centre of power. The Conservatives because they were pro-British, and because the British were eclipsed by the US, have played a kind of national opposition to the complete sellout to US interests that the Liberals symbolised.

The thing that the Somoza regime has been able to do is to monopolize all the wealth-producing activities in one clan. It’s not just the Somoza family but it’s the family plus those capitalists and pre-capitalist landowners clustered around Somoza in partnership, and licence agreements and favoritism from the State that give them a personal common interest, that ties them together with Somoza. On top of that, the National Guard has an economic role in the sense that National Guard officers and even non-commissioned officers are encouraged to engage in a whole range of illegal activities which undercut State financing. For instance, they have contraband imports and exports without paying taxes and they are immune from criminal prosecution because they are in the Guard and, even though their salaries are not fantastically high, they are encouraged to engage in irregular economic activities which depend on the favoritism of the State which binds them to the Somoza regime because they know if the Somoza regime goes down they have to answer for it.

Social relations in the countryside

There has been virtually no capital investment in the countryside. It’s primitive extraction and pre-capitalist in the sense that there are mostly non-wage relationships. The coffee work is done by people who are coerced to come into it because the land that they live on is too small to survive on so they move into seasonal coffee labour and basically work on credit. They are working off credit that they have already accumulated before they were born. It’s very backward in terms of production, it’s very labour-intensive.

One characteristic of Nicaraguan agriculture is the abundance of land and the
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relative shortage of labour. There are extensive areas of uncultivated land, said to be held by the Somoza family or held by the State for transfer to Somoza, which are now being developed for the first time with a certain amount of capital investment. In other words, it's cattle and lumber. Therefore there are no machines coming in. The most profitable productive agricultural land and real estate land is owned by the Somoza clan. Also the companies outside the agricultural sector are owned by the Somoza group. For instance, cement. They own the banking industry outside the foreign banks. They own the second largest newspaper, the other is owned by the Conservative opposition. They own food processing and control the key export products.

The rest of the upper class has suffered from the fact that you had to be either with the Somozas or be driven into bankruptcy. However, until the 1972 earthquake when the Somoza group moved against private capital in several areas, other capitalist groups had been able to thrive without interference from the State or the Somozas. That was in housing, public works and in certain banking areas. As a result of the reconstruction after the earthquake, the funneling of all foreign aid to Nicaragua for earthquake relief went through the Somoza group. On top of that, instead of rebuilding the centre of the city of Managua, they decentralised it and rebuilt it on the outskirts, where there had just been slums before. The outskirts properties were owned and controlled by the Somozas so they profited personally in the development of those areas and profited from the construction. From then on you heard more and more complaints from groups in the upper class. There's no way they can get a living without getting rid of Somoza. He has cut off all possibilities of expansion of the capitalist groups clustered around the State.

In an uneasy but uncompetitive way, they are beginning to get wiped out. This is why the business groups claim that they have started to become more active against Somoza. There is no room left for them to act. Then in 1974 you had the kidnapping of several high government officials by the Sandinistas who, in return for the freeing of some prisoners, went to Cuba with their hostages. Then in 1977 there was an attack on San Carlos on the Costa Rican border. This was designed to touch off a general insurrection. It failed. The next event was in January 1978 when Pedro Joaquin Chamorro, editor of the opposition paper, was killed. He was a prominent figure in the Conservative party. That event set off the general strike or general lockout by business groups later on in January 1978. Then in July, the Group of Twelve returned to Nicaragua. In August the business groups started another lockout in close co-operation with the labour movement who called a general strike. Later in August, the kidnapping took place in the National Palace, and the general civil war followed in September.

Human rights and repression

There is a variety of repression that the regime uses. For instance, there has been a continual imprisoning of political opposition, accompanied by torture, and this is particularly directed against people involved in radical labour organising and peasant organising and opposition in the middle class. There is a whole history going back to 1936 of political prisoners, torture, repression. In addition to that there has been only a few moments in Nicaragua when there has been even a minimum freedom of the press. During most of the dynasty there has been no freedom of the press, only once in a while usually under pressure from the United States to bring about minimum democratization to justify US support for the dynasty. So that at various times there has been rigged presidential elections combined with limited freedom of the press which usually was taken advantage of by Chamorro's newspaper, which would print information about corruption of the regime and violation of human rights. In December 1977 a slight opening up of freedom of the press was allowed under pressure from the US government and it was at that time that Chamorro's newspaper printed information of the blood scandal.

The blood scandal was a partnership between Somoza and a Cuban exile to export blood from Nicaragua. It was a scandal, so when the information came out the Cuban involved went to the US to avoid prosecution in Nicaragua. Shortly afterwards, in January, Chamorro was murdered. When the Nicaraguan government investigated the murder they came up with people said to
be responsible for it. They had been contracted by an executive of the blood company. I don't know whether they did it, nobody knows, but even the official explanation is particularly damning.

In terms of the constant military actions against the guerilla movement, there has been very widespread repression of the peasantry, in the north-east of Nicaragua particularly. Here, whole villages have been relocated, peasants taken up in helicopters and dropped out, being killed and interrogated that way. The National Guard regularly pillaged and raped women in villages in ways parallel to the things that happened in Vietnam, under advice from those who had experience in Vietnam. Somoza until two months ago refused to allow Human Rights organisations into Nicaragua to inspect on the spot. Recently, under US pressure, he said that the UN Commission on Human Rights could come to Nicaragua at some future date which has never been established.

The United States, particularly under President Carter, has been under pressure to show that they really have a Human Rights policy in relation to countries like Nicaragua which have always been US fiefdoms. That has led to a very contradictory public policy toward Nicaragua in which the State Department and the White House have argued with each other about what the attitude should be and what the realities of Human Rights are in Nicaragua. In April-June this year the presidency came out and said that since Nicaragua had improved its stance on Human Rights, US aid to Nicaragua would be released (not military aid; they claimed that they had ended military aid). That was followed immediately by a statement from the State Department that there had been no improvement in Human Rights and they advised against the release of the aid. So there are contradictions. In the Congress there is a strong pro-Somoza group, one of them was Somoza's classmate at West Point. They say that Somoza is the only one fighting communism in Latin America. On the other hand, a number of Liberal senators are opposed to US aid and are responsive to the campaigns in the US to cut off aid to Nicaragua. They have been trying to determine to what extent aid is continuing secretly and to what extent the US advisers, who, according to Somoza, are “contracted by the Nicaraguan government, but separate from US aid”, are CIA and to what extent they are just mercenaries.

**Pressure on Somoza**

The easiest pressure to document is the pressure on Somoza to change, which is combined with a preparation of alternatives. The main thrust of US policy has been to let the National Guard remain in power as the controller of property rights. That's the principal thing they want and whether Somoza stays in power is negotiable. One of the reasons the US has not already abandoned Somoza, or even arranged for his assassination, is because of the pressure in the US around the whole question of CIA assassinations and interventions. It would be the occasion of a major investigation if Somoza were assassinated and if there was any evidence of US involvement. This has given the CIA a certain inability to manoeuvre as it ordinarily would.

Secondly, the pressure on Somoza to change is clearly in terms of military and economic aid to Nicaragua being blocked. To the extent that Somoza has been willing to allow freedom of the press, to drop charges against “the Twelve” so they could return to Nicaragua (this clearly under US pressure), to talk about an election campaign and that then the presidency would be open for struggle between upper class groups, and to give rights to people to campaign, in order to liberalise the regime before it was overthrown, this is clearly the US tactic.

The US has very definitely been in contact with business opposition groups and people are even promoting the head of INDE (a business group) as the possible head of a transitional government, once Somoza is overthrown. The US would be happy with that sort of person and there is no question that the business groups when opposing Somoza speak as much as to the State Department as to the Nicaraguan public because their feeling is that the key to changeover in power is having a guarantee from the US for a moderate opposition. If they can get that backing and if they can get the US to force Somoza to resign, then they can move into power without having the guerillas defeat the National Guard and that means the Guard stays. That's definitely what's happening behind the scenes.
Opposition groups

There were two opposition groups to the Somoza in the late 30s, 40s and 50s: The Conservative party, a faction of the upper class, of which the most vocal (in the opposition) was Chamorro's paper expressing moderate opposition around democratic rights, freedom of speech. The other opposition was the remnants of the Sandinista movement which went underground in 1936 and almost ceased to exist and sort of became a latent folklore opposition between the early 40s and 1962. But there still were Sandinistas, a small number in the countryside and the small towns who had engaged in resistance. In 1954 there was a student-led guerilla movement which attempted to overthrow the Somoza and there was a muted civil war for about a year, large numbers of people were killed, a lot of student leaders were killed. One of the people involved as an armed revolutionary was Ernesto Cardenal, a poet now very prominent in Latin America. At that time he was a student revolutionary; subsequent to the defeat of the rebellion he became a priest and was influenced by Catholic mystics and returned to Nicaragua and set up a utopian community on an island in Lake Nicaragua. From that base he began to write popular radical poetry. His island was like an island of sanity in a land of repression. He became more and more vocal until last year when he went on a world speaking tour, reading his poetry, denouncing the Somoza regime. All his poems deal with repression, even his poem on Marilyn Monroe was a denunciation of US culture in Nicaragua. So when he was out of Nicaragua, the National Guard destroyed the whole community on the island and killed many of the peasants who were organized into co-operatives, and destroyed it as an insult to the Nicaraguan regime.

The Sandinistas

The Sandinistas became an organized movement again in 1962 and the base was mainly radical middle class students who went into the countryside and set up a guerilla focal along Fidelista lines. In fact it was classical Fidelista as interpreted by radical middle class students. At that time the labour movement was largely under the Nicaraguan Socialist party (PSN), which was the communist party. Ever since the early 40s the communists had been the main force in the labour movement. The labour movement was relatively small because they didn't have a manufacturing sector, but after WW2 there was a growth of light industry, plastic, food processing and a little import substitution. There was no heavy industry, but there were also miners whose traditions went back to the nineteenth century, there were port workers, banana workers and so on. The communist party had been allowed a certain amount of room to manoeuvre by the Somoza regime. In the late 40s Somoza gave the unions a labour charter which was seen by the communist party as a concession to the labour movement because of their political pressure. The communist party was not actively persecuted. You can compare it with the relations between Batista and the Communist Party in Cuba at certain periods where they were allowed a certain immunity.

When the Sandinistas started their movement it was totally separate from the communists in a variety of ways. Firstly, the communists said that these people were adventurists and, secondly, the Sandinistas said, “We cannot use the working class as a revolutionary force in Nicaragua”. They gave two reasons: the communist party controlled the working class and the communist party is not revolutionary. They also said that the working class was looking for favours, was privileged in relation to the peasantry, had been given a certain amount of legislation and was too small. A rather mechanical rejection of, and even competition with, what they saw as a non-revolutionary group in the working class.

The Sandinista movement grew as they were able to attract the peasantry and it became an alliance between radical middle class leaders and the peasants. Between 1962 and 1974 the Sandinistas were an announcedly socialist movement, they said they were leading a socialist revolution, that only a socialist revolution could bring improvements to Nicaragua. The communist position was that they were working for a transitional regime, a national-popular regime which would lead to capitalist development to be followed by socialist development. A two-stage position whereas the Sandinistas had a one-stage perspective.

In 1974 the Sandinistas changed their perspectives and kidnapped a number of prominent people from Managua. This was
followed by an extremely violent counter-insurgency campaign against the peasants' base of support in the north-east. Almost all the original leaders were killed. So when we get to 1975 we have a Sandinista movement headed by young people recently coming into power in the movement replacing the older generation. The older generation, whatever you can say about their ideology, at least engaged in ideological discussion, whereas the new group was very light on ideology. In view of the apparent defeat and setbacks of the movement during 1974 they split into three factions and clearly emerged as three separate factions in 1976.

The most powerful, militarily (which is leading the current fighting), is the “Thirdist” faction. Their position is specifically not socialist. They say at the present juncture it is not realistic that Nicaragua have a socialist revolution. What they are looking for is to get rid of the Somoza regime and replace it with a regime which allows the political organizing that is necessary to build a basis for a socialist revolution. They say that they are eventually interested in socialism but this is not the time for a socialist revolution to happen in Nicaragua. On that basis, they were able to attract the support of the “Twelve” and use the “Twelve” as a basis of negotiation with business groups to the right of the “Twelve”.

The “Twelve” are very prominent people: a priest, a former rector of the University of Nicaragua, a lawyer, the biggest kingpin of business outside Somoza himself. This group of people are clearly opposed to the regime of Somoza and admired the fighting ability of the Sandinistas, but were afraid of its socialist ideology. So when the Thirdist faction of the Sandinistas looked for an alliance of the middle class and the establishment in order to bring down the Somoza regime more quickly, and talked from what they thought was a strong enough military basis of support to negotiate from a position of strength, they brought out the “Twelve” and nominated them in response to Somoza saying, following US pressure, “We should have dialogue with the opposition”. The Sandinistas said, “Yes, we'll have a dialogue and here are the people that we are willing to dialogue with, we nominate these people as the intermediaries”. The “Twelve”, already in exile, immediately had further charges against them as subversives, and if they returned they would be held up on charges. At that point, they had their lawyers go to the Supreme Court and the charges were dropped. In July 1978 ten of them returned to Nicaragua and there was a huge outpouring of mass demonstrations, people walked from the city to the airport because all the buses had been cancelled. They split up and went to different parts of the country where they had mass meetings to commemorate massacres perpetrated by the Somozas, a student massacre, an Indian massacre, a labour massacre, and so on. In each place they got a massive turnout and they not only spoke out against Somoza, but spoke about the Sandinistas as the spirit of the new Nicaragua. They clearly identified with the Sandinista movement. In fact, one of the “Twelve” went to Honduras before coming back to Nicaragua, to meet with his son, a leader of the Sandinistas. His son assured him that the Sandinistas were not struggling for socialism in the short run.

The other two factions who split away still call themselves Sandinistas. The “Workers’ Tendency” considers itself marxist and socialist and sees the main tactic of military confrontation with the National Guard as an ineffective way of building a revolutionary movement. What is missing from the Sandinistas, they said, is the politicization of the workers. Instead of abandoning the urban working class to the communists, they should build a base among the urban working class as a pre-requisite to a revolutionary transformation. So instead of armed confrontation, there should be armed underground organizers. That’s what they did and apparently had particular success in recent times (when Somoza opened up, for instance, with the return of the “Twelve”) with the general strikes. The strikes were initiated by business groups and workers were nevertheless involved, although without their own banners or demands. So it was fertile ground for organizing the working class. Rumour has it that the Workers’ Tendency has made tremendous advances during the last year.

The third faction is called the GPP. Apparently their perspective is long-term guerilla war and they see themselves as maoists. They say only a prolonged guerilla war will bring about victory. They are a bit of a mystery but I gather that they are the least important faction. However, they continued
armed action whereas the Workers’ Tendency” formally abandoned guerilla action, although it’s clear that they were involved in the recent fighting particularly where it related to their own areas of support. There have been rumours that the three factions have been in a tactical alliance since September.

The actual demands and programs of the factions are hard to ascertain. The only concrete evidence we have is the Thirdists’ program. In July and August they didn’t demand that the National Guard be dismantled as a basis for peace. In fact they indicated that they would stop fighting short of destroying the National Guard. However, during the fighting they issued a new three-point program; Somoza must go; the Guard must be replaced by the Sandinista Liberation Front; and that a transitional government be formed which included the “Twelve”.

When they put forward that point on the National Guard it was a point that would divide them from the business groups whose first point was to retain the Guard and that the Sandinistas lay down their arms and negotiate peace. In other words, as the movement seemed to be defeating the Guard, they moved to a more radical position without the moderate business support. Now with the decline of the military success of the Sandinistas they have gone back to the original position.

Opposition fronts

As well as the Sandinistas, there has been a series of opposition fronts. The longest standing one, UDEL, goes back to about two years ago. The centre of this opposition coalition was Chamorro. It included the communists (PSN), the conservative opposition (one group of conservatives went over to Somoza), a split-away group from Somoza’s Liberal party, some elements in the Catholic church, and some business groups. UDEL was seen as a much more moderate opposition than the Sandinistas. UDEL called for moderate reform and the Sandinistas for armed struggle. UDEL’s only popular support was through the communist party (the PSN) and their connections in the labour movement.

With the “Twelve” moving in as an intermediary between the moderate opposition and the Sandinistas, you had the construction of the Broad Opposition Front (FAO). It included many more groups, the “Twelve” who were seen as spokesmen for the Sandinistas but were really intermediaries, UDEL, other business organizations that had been active in the January lockout. It seemed to include everybody except the other two factions of the Sandinistas. However, it was a very shifting and not very disciplined opposition; it was a broad coalition based on a minimum of agreements but it was the broadest umbrella in opposing Somoza.

Another coalition of which not much is known is NPU, a coalition of the National Union of Students and a national coalition of women’s organizations.

Sandinistas activities

There has been concerted work in organizing the peasants, particularly where the Sandinistas have had traditional support. They are also reaching out to other areas. There has been fighting in the countryside for years and in this area the Sandinistas have been relatively successful but at the expense of very many peasant lives who have been killed and tortured. The government has been unable to defeat the Sandinistas in the countryside and so what is new in this offensive is the struggles in the cities in which there has been a certain amount of spontaneity but considerable widespread support.

When the “Twelve” travelled around the country there were spontaneous mobilisations in support of them. The people when asked by journalists, “Who are the ‘Twelve’?” responded by saying, “they are the above ground of the Sandinistas”. They identify the “Twelve” as Sandinistas when the “Twelve” don’t identify themselves as Sandinistas. This was a projection of what the people wanted. The tendency is to think that the opposition is the Sandinistas and so a lot of the rallying against the military is a result of that. The backbone of the military struggle against the National Guard has been organized by cadres who have been able to call on widespread support but not in the same way as in Vietnam.

It’s more an anti-repression, anti-Somoza feeling that is sweeping Nicaragua, rather than any ideological concepts.