

Race and Class in Revolutionary Nicaragua: Autonomy and the Atlantic Coast

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With little international recognition, and despite early difficulties, the Nicaraguan Revolution since the early 1980s has been engaged in a unique and successful experiment to maintain and extend intranational ethnic diversity while at the same time, within the same process, involving itself in a project to redefine national identity.¹

The FSLN's² early 'economistic' approach to the Atlantic Coast has been replaced by a structural analysis which reflects the complexities of class power relations which are mediated through and influenced by a colonially induced racially based system of social stratification.

Historical Separation

It was not surprising that, after 1979 and the victory over Somoza, FSLN leaders had for the most part only a limited understanding of the people and region of the Atlantic Coast. The region is isolated physically and although comprising just over half the national territory, it contains only 10 per cent of the national population. Until 1981 when the revolutionary government built the first ever road linking the two halves of the country, the Atlantic Coast region was accessible only by river or air.

Geographical separation had been consolidated by English colonialism, which from the 1630s till as late as 1905 had a physical presence in the region.³ The English maintained colonial rule not by the use of an expensive, time-consuming and cumbersome apparatus of repression but, as they have done in so many other places around the globe, by means of building alliances. A racially based hierarchical system of status and power developed, with the Miskitos, who derived their political power from English colonial patronage, at the apex of the pyramid. The numerically smaller Indian groups were at the base of this system. Although the English speaking Creoles

replaced the Miskitos as the dominant ethnic group in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, what remained was a social structure based on a racially oriented system of stratification which divided the Atlantic Coast population against itself. In addition, the English encouraged a separation and distrust of all things Spanish, that is emanating from the Pacific Coast region, to the extent that in the Miskito language the word for 'enemy' is the same as that meaning 'Spanish'.

Nineteenth century US government and business interests focused on the often discussed lucrative potential of a trans Nicaragua Canal. However, after 1894 when the Atlantic Coast was 'reincorporated' into the Republic of Nicaragua, US capital flooded into the area, in the form of investment in the banana, lumber and mining industries. US marines occupied parts of the Atlantic Coast in 1912 to protect these investments, and again from 1926 to 1931.

The US companies brought a short lived prosperity, but, after the last major foreign investment boom of the 1950s, left behind only rusted railway lines, despoliation and depletion of natural resources, and a dislocation of what was left of the indigenous subsistence economy. There had been no investment in social infrastructure, and as a result not only was there minimal state support for the unemployed and the impoverished, but former mechanisms of community backup were less effective. Nonetheless the US had become identified not with exploitation and profiteering, but with the 'good times' of consumer durables for those who could afford them.

The Moravian Church

After English colonialism and US imperialism, the third major influence in the region was the Moravian Church, of Germanic origin, whose missionaries arrived on the Coast in 1849. Direction of the Church's international activities was transferred to the US in 1916, but it was not until 1974 that local administrators replaced the overseas personnel.

The Moravians provided funds for social infrastructure, including health and education. They were also the first to write down the Miskito language, developing a Miskito grammar and dictionary. The Moravian pastors became influential community

¹ See interview with Manuel Ortega Hegg (1985), sociologist and member of the National Autonomy Commission.

² Prior to 1979 the 'Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional' (FSLN) indicates the political party. After 1979 the term FSLN is utilised to indicate the government in terms of the majority party's policies as the policy of the government.

³ The scope of this paper does not allow for a more detailed review of the history of the competing colonialisms of Spain and England in the region. For details see Rooper and Smith, 1986.

leaders who wove their experience of religious persecution in Europe by Catholicism into the fabric of the Miskitos' own mythology. Thus the legacy of the Moravian Church was not only positive social achievements but anti-Catholicism, which reinforced the divisions between the 'Spanish' of the Pacific and the inhabitants of the Atlantic Coast.

The FSLN view was that the Moravian Church did more than simply help the *costeños* (coastal peoples) in the provision of an ideological framework in their search for identity.⁴ It was argued that the ideology of the Church had actively assisted US capital in its exploitation of the people and the natural resources of the region.⁵

Population

The total population of the Atlantic Coast, according to a 1981 survey by CIDCA, the independent research institute for the Atlantic Coast, was 282,000.⁶ There are six ethnic groups, each with their own culture, language and ethnic identity.

In post revolutionary Nicaragua the Spanish speaking Mestizos are the largest ethnic group (182,000). Many of these Mestizos were poor *campesinos* who had been displaced from their own land by the expansion of the coffee and cotton plantations of the Pacific in the 1950s. The Miskitos number 67,000, the English speaking Creoles 26,000, the Sumu Indians 5,000, the Caribs or Garifuno 1,500, and the Rama Indians 650.

Somocismo

Beside the historic distrust created and manipulated by competing colonial influences in Nicaragua there emerged in 1936 the US supported dictatorship, or 'Somocismo', which had its own policy towards the Coast. Despite the fact that the natural resources of the region were being stripped bare by the US companies, Somoza made no attempt either to repatriate some of the profits for social investment or to protect the working conditions of the *costeños*. The mining and forestry companies worked round the clock, with no holidays for the workers. The other major areas of waged employment were controlled by Somoza, who also controlled all the most fertile lands as well as being the biggest landowner in Corn Island.

The method of controlling the coast was basically economic, and the National Guard limited their activities to expropriating a proportion of the profits

⁴ See remarks by Luis Carrion, senior FSLN representative responsible for the Atlantic Coast, in [Carrion 1983:241].

⁵ Luis Carrion commented *vis à vis* Miskito response to US imperialism: 'On the ideological front, religion prepared the way for the Miskito to accept the new forms of exploitation without much resistance'. [*ibid.* 1983:247-8].

⁶ The figures are taken from CIIR 1987:102.

made by the foreign companies. Mary Helms reported in her study [1971:174] of the Miskito communities that state officials who were sent to the Atlantic Coast viewed the move as a banishment. Local people avoided the state representatives who were mainly law and order officials, and vice versa.

The Sandinistas

Because of the isolation of the Coast previous to the overthrow of the Somoza regime, many *costeños* viewed the new Nicaraguan government as simply another Spanish government from the Pacific. There was general support for the ousting of the dictator, but the attitude was wait and see.

Conversely, few of the FSLN leadership had experience of the Coast, though there were exceptions. Some Miskitos and Creoles, such as the current FSLN party secretary for the southern part of the region, Comandante Lumberto Campbell, had fought in the mountains against Somoza's private army, the National Guard, and had participated in the revolution.

The 1969 political programme of the FSLN had recognised and supported the struggles of the peoples of the region to maintain their cultural and ethnic identity.⁷ In the immediate aftermath of the revolution the FSLN again confirmed that it recognised wrongs that had a historically specific base and which must be redressed. They also recognised that it had been the self organisation of the people themselves that had prevented the total annihilation of their cultures and customs.⁸

At the same time, initial FSLN theoretical analysis was dominated by a perspective which highlighted the fairly recent US economic exploitation of the people and natural resources. The particularities of the ethnic issues, which were linked to relations of domination and exploitation, were not well understood. FSLN leaders made statements identifying the indigenous communities as possessing 'great ideological backwardness'.⁹ Such a partial analysis resulted in policy prescriptions which favoured a 'modernising' approach, seeing the solution to the problem of integrating the new Nicaragua in huge investment in development projects for the Coast.

⁷ See 'Trabil Nani' published by CIDCA Managua [1984:12] for an outline of FSLN commitments. These included combatting underdevelopment, eradicating discrimination, and assistance to revive traditional cultural values.

⁸ 'Colonialism in general has challenged the very existence of indigenous people by attempting to subject them and change their customs and traditions. So what is surprising is the strong vitality of indigenous peoples, and the sense of pride they retain in their ethnicity through which they have preserved their own identity in spite of the many forms of aggression'. In 'Poder Sandinista' vol 1 no 7, December 1979. Quote is from an extract in Ohland and Scheider, 1983.

⁹ Interview with Luis Carrion in *Barricada*, Managua, 6-7 May 1981.

Massive investment projects were set in train and some completed, despite the effects of the war. The Waslala Siuna road was built. Airstrips at Puerto Cabezas and Bluefields were improved. A new deep water project was initiated at El Bluff. A new hospital was built in Bluefields. Import substitution projects such as the African Palm and the coconut oil projects were started. 12,500 people were taught to read and write in Miskito, Sumu and English. The mines were nationalised, and for the first time social security payments were made to those miners who were suffering from silicosis. The provision of basic foodstuffs such as salt, sugar and rice was made a priority, and prices of these were reduced, in some cases by 100 per cent. \$3.6 mn was provided in credit for agricultural products in the year 1980/81, an increase of 1,300 per cent on the previous year [Carrion 1983:253].

These projects were progressive and involved an historically unprecedented investment in social and economic welfare. However, instead of the grateful acceptance more or less expected by FSLN leaders, the *costenos* and some of their new political leaders were moving sharply away from the revolutionary process and the objective of national integration.

Early FSLN fears that the counterrevolutionaries could bring a base on the Coast were materialising.¹⁰ The difficulties were precisely that the FSLN had underestimated the potential for conflict based on the issue of ethnicity, and misunderstood the intensity of the historic divide between the two regions. In addition, the economic analysis was inadequate for an understanding of the ethnically based relations of class power on the Coast.

The 1979 revolution had been successful because it had involved a revolutionary practice which combined the educational, agitational and organisational role of the FSLN with the spontaneous self-organisation of the masses. The conditions for revolution had not occurred on the Atlantic Coast, and therefore in a very real sense the FSLN was faced with the task of initiating a revolutionary process on the Atlantic Coast after the Triumph of the Revolution had already taken place on the Pacific. This would mean working with indigenous social organisations, such as the village community councils where present, the Moravian Church where possible, and appointing local people to state administrative posts. It also meant a wider project of encouraging the participation of the *costeños* in the political, social and economic development of the Coast.

From a re-evaluation by the FSLN the concept of autonomy was reborn to indicate not counter-revolutionary separatism, but a political project which

could mean self-organisation for the *costenos* within the context of the Nicaraguan revolution. Jaime Wheelock, Minister for Agrarian Reform and member of the FSLN National Directorate, was one of the early advocates of this approach:

In Wheelock's Ministry, INRA, 'integration', the key word of the official policy towards the indigenous peoples was interpreted to mean participation of the local inhabitants in the formulation and execution of state policy for the Atlantic Coast. 'Special Development' meant here a clear rejection of Hispanicisation and assimilation which were considered to lead to the dissolution of the village communities with the collective use of the land and the ethno-cultural identity which goes with it [Rediske and Schneider 1983:13].

The Autonomy project was officially launched in December 1984 by President Daniel Ortega. Intensive consultations took place within the communities in the following two years culminating in the right to autonomy for the region being enshrined in the State Constitution and spelt out, in detail, in the September 1987 statute of autonomy.

To understand how the FSLN were able to synthesise the aspirations of the *costeños* into a project which Indian groups from all over the world were able to commend 'as a means of resolving the ethnic-cultural problems' and as a project which 'offers the indigenous peoples and the Sandinista government the goal of achieving the full unity of the Nicaraguan nation' [CIIR 1986:3], it is also necessary to analyse the activities and changing attitudes to the revolution of the coast population themselves, and of the political organisations which have represented them.

The Regional Political Organisations

After the fall of Somoza, the major political organisation operating in the region was ALPROMISU, an acronym for the Alliance for the Progress of the Miskito and Sumu, which had been founded in 1974. ALPROMISU followed on the heels of the Association of Agricultural Clubs, an organisation funded by the North American Institute for the Development of Free Unions [see Wilkes 1971]. The later organisation had been formed primarily to help those Miskitos who had been ejected from Honduras after the 1960 judgements by the International Court of Justice at the Hague, which decided to draw the disputed Nicaragua-Honduras border through the middle of traditional Miskito territory.

ALPROMISU had concerned itself with social demands emphasising ancient land rights and the right to maintain the ethnic identity of the Miskito and Rama. By 1979 the organisation was virtually

¹⁰ See statement by Carlos Nuñez, later President of the Council of State, in *Barricada*, Managua, 2 August 1979.

moribund partly because the Somoza dictatorship had refused to allow the organisation to operate effectively.

With the revolution and the Sandinistas' eagerness to develop the Coast came the ability of the local political organisations to expand and to engage in negotiations with the new government for what were presented as historic rights. The FSLN leadership may have felt a little taken aback by the sudden strength of these demands, which had never been presented to the dictatorship. For example, just eight days after the victory over Somoza, ALPROMISU handed the government a letter demanding representation in all spheres of the state administration, control over local administrations, control over the Atlantic Coast territory, and authorisation to organise the Miskito and Sumu workers.

Nevertheless, it was the revolution which opened up the space for these demands, and it was perhaps an expression of what Tomas Borge had referred to as 'naivety' that the results were so unexpected to the FSLN leadership [Borge 1985:348]. These demands were the product of long held grievances, although it was not long before genuine grievances were transformed into maximalist demands in a conscious attempt to destabilise the new Nicaraguan government.

ALPROMISU's fifth congress, held on 15 November 1979 in Puerto Cabezas, saw the launching of a new political organisation MISURASATA — a Miskito acronym for 'Miskitos, Sumu and Rama with the Sandinistas'. MISURASATA participated in the literacy campaign and the MISURASATA representative in the Council of State proposed the law that states that bilingual teaching should be introduced in the primary schools of the Atlantic Coast.

The first disturbances on the Coast, however, took place not in the Indian communities but in Bluefields, where the Creole population demonstrated against Cuban doctors and teachers in October 1980. The demonstration was organised by the Southern Indigenous and Creole Community (SICC) and some of its leaders were imprisoned subsequent to the demonstration. Some commentators have suggested that this was not simply to do with the militant anti-communism which had permeated the Coast with the US presence but 'not least the fear of the relatively well off Creoles of the urban petite bourgeoisie, when the government expropriated a number of fishing boats and houses in Bluefields, that they would lose their privileges (over and against the rural population)' [Rediske and Schneider 1983:15].

The government's initial response both to this opposition in Bluefields and to what was to be the more serious opposition in North Zelaya was to send in the army. Historic divisions between the two regions were exacerbated. At the same time, MISURASATA, under the leadership of Fagoth,

worked to engender a separatist programme which would never have been acceptable to the government, and which would have provided a physical base for the counter-revolution in Nicaragua. Such a base is precisely what is needed under international law to both delegitimise the revolutionary government and provide an internationally acceptable rationale for direct US intervention.¹¹

The result of the historical tensions, the FSLN misunderstandings, the separatist programme of Fagoth and MISURASATA, and the 1980 US election of a militantly anti-Sandinista President, was the consolidation of an armed indigenous opposition to the Sandinistas.

Steadman Fagoth joined the FDN in Honduras in 1981 and formed MISURA, and Brooklyn Rivera, another former MISURASATA leader, formed an armed opposition group based on the Costa Rican border, maintaining the acronym MISURASATA as the name of his group.

That the government saw a very direct connection between even the legal activities of MISURASATA and a counter-revolutionary separatist plan sponsored by the US is clear by its own pronouncements [see Carrion 1983:257]. When Fagoth and Rivera emerged in 1981 directly allied with the ex-Somocista National Guard this seemed a clear vindication of their concerns. In addition the government discovered the 'Red Christmas' plan which 'had as its objective a general uprising of the Miskito population in North Zelaya, following a military take over of the settlement along the Rio Coco by the counter-revolutionary bands' [Carrion 1983:259].

At the same time, government officials were assassinated, tortured and kidnapped by the MISURASATA and MISURA armed forces. Dr. Mirna Cunningham, the FSLN Miskito leader, and her assistant Regina Lewis, were kidnapped, taken to Honduras, repeatedly raped, and then released back to Nicaragua to try to intimidate others into not cooperating with the government.

In the context of the 'Red Christmas' Plan and the escalating violence in the North, the government decided to relocate 37 Miskito communities away from the Rio Coco, the border area and the scene of the worst armed clashes. The primary reason for relocation was defence, although the government also indicated that it could no longer guarantee food, health and welfare facilities for the border communities because of the security problems. Whether or not there could have been a different solution for a government anxious to protect its hard fought revolution is a matter of conjecture.

But it was the relocation of the Miskitos which was to

¹¹ See Margaret Crahan, 1987 for an exposition as to the legitimacy or otherwise of the competitors for power in Nicaragua.

be the turning point for FSLN policy. The massive international reaction, orchestrated in part by the Reagan administration, coincided with an internal reaction by the indigenous people to an experience which few understood. The Rio Coco relocation may have meant short-term security objectives had been achieved, but it had also provided the potential for a social base for the armed oppositional indigenous groups.

The Reagan Administration

The Reagan administration, whether through covert or overt funding, has supported both the FDN forces and the indigenous armed opposition groups. US advisers encouraged Brooklyn Rivera to break off discussions with the Sandinistas in May 1985, although they were not able to stop the limited accords which were agreed with the armed groups at the local level.

In August 1985 and again in June 1987 the CIA organised assemblies of the divided armed oppositional groups in Rus Rus, Honduras. Their aim was to try to unite the groups to make them into a credible armed opposition to the Sandinistas. In mid May 1987 the leaders of the three groups, Fagoth, Rivera and Wycliffe Diego, were flown to Honduras accompanied by the Assistant Under-Secretary of State of Inter American Affairs William Walker, to discuss the unity plans.

Attacks on civilians still continue, in order that the groups can claim to the US that they are getting something for their money. In 1986 the armed indigenous groups were allocated \$10 mn by the Reagan administration.

Re-Evaluation

Helped by the costenos who supported the revolution, the government changed tack on three separate but related areas. It became clear that although the government had prioritised economic development for the region, the 'self-evaluation' of the revolution 'showed us that the degree of participation in these projects was not what it should be'.¹²

The first result of this new approach was the pardon decreed by the government on 1 December 1983 for all North Zelaya inhabitants who had been arrested after 1 November 1981, the 'Red Christmas' period, and an amnesty for those members of the armed opposition indigenous groups who wished to return to Nicaragua.

Strategic changes in policy followed. They included the decision to assist those who wished to return to the Rio Coco, peace negotiations with MISURASATA, and the setting up of the local, regional, and national

¹² Ray Hooker, executive Director of the National Autonomy Commission. Interviewed in *Labour Herald*, 1 November 1985.

commissions to prepare for autonomous self government. In 1984 MISATAN, the Organisation of Nicaraguan Miskitos, was formed. This was a non-Sandinista organisation, but at least until 1985, when it withdrew from the North Zelaya Autonomy Commission, was committed to working with the government.

These three major changes in policy reflected a new flexible and integrated approach to the Atlantic Coast. The results of the 1985 accord signed with some of the commanders of the indigenous armed groups have meant that the CIA-created united armed organisation, KISAN, has split into two groups, KISAN pro-peace, and KISAN pro-war. KISAN pro-peace has been working on the ground with the Sandinistas promoting the autonomy project. It has also been given military responsibilities by the government in the pilot autonomy project at Yulu, inaugurated by Tomas Borge on 17 May, 1986 [CIIR 1986:2].

This new approach was an aspect of re-evaluation and changed analysis: 'The Sandinista Front understood that MISURA and MISURASATA couldn't be put in the same category as the Somocista troops, precisely because there was manipulation of truly legitimate demands. This is why there can be dialogue with the armed indigenous groups but not with the counter-revolutionaries' [Hegg 1985:3].

The government was also assisted by several own goals by the armed opposition. KISAN pro-war blew up a bridge at Sisin in October 1985, destroying the only route for supplies and medicines for the newly resettled Rio Coco communities. In late 1985 and early 1986 heavy fighting continued in the Rio Coco area, along with a campaign of intimidation by KISAN pro-war to try to persuade the Rio Coco communities to cross the border to Honduras. Their objective seemed to have been to try to create a social and recruitment base, but instead, both these events have served to create antagonism, not towards the government, but towards the erstwhile indigenous leadership.

These changes, of FSLN policy towards the Coast, and of costeno perception of the government, have had concrete results. 10,000 Miskitos returned to their homes in the Rio Coco in 1986, and from 12 May 1987, under UNHCR auspices, an average of 100 Miskitos and Sumu have been returning to Nicaragua [CIIR 1987].

Autonomy

The biggest success story of the new approach is undoubtedly the autonomy project. Recognising the mistakes of previous 'top-down' strategies, the 80-strong Autonomy Commission with its five person directorate, including in both bodies representation from the Coast, embarked on a two-year programme

of consultations. House to house surveys were conducted and sectoral community meetings took place. The Commission consulted on the basis of its draft document, 'Principles and Policies for the Exercise of the Right to Autonomy by the Indigenous Peoples and Communities of the Coast', published in the main languages and with a simplified illustrated version for those who had only basic literacy skills. The final draft was presented to a 3,000-strong multi-ethnic assembly held in Puerto Cabezas in April 1987, amended and sent to the National Assembly to enter into law in September 1987.¹³

The autonomous self governments of North and South Zelaya will have economic as well as political power, and the representatives will be elected by a system of proportional representation designed to ensure that the smaller ethnic groups and communities are effectively represented. The hope of the government was that: 'When the autonomy plan was conceived, we thought that it would have an impact on the war situation, and we obviously saw it as a way to underline Nicaragua's desire for peace. However, we considered it fundamentally a strategic measure to resolve a historical problem' [Hegg 1985:3].

The autonomy project has of course engendered high expectations. But there is also a realisation that autonomy will not automatically stop the US financed aggression, and end underdevelopment, poverty and unemployment. What the consultation process has achieved is a growing realisation that autonomy is what the people themselves make of it, and that within the parameters of the revolutionary state, the Atlantic Coast people have the opportunity to participate for the first time as 'first class human-beings'¹⁴ in the national society.

Of course the people of the Coast will expect to see a material improvement to their quality of life and a recognition of their cultural, linguistic, and ethnic rights. The latter have been recognised in the constitution and in particular the bi-lingual, bi-cultural education programme is progressing steadily. As for the former, much will depend on the wider central American peace negotiations and whether the US administration continues to fund the contra forces.

The success of the autonomy project has meant that, as in the Pacific, popular participation has aided an understanding of why the government is not able to fulfil all the material expectations of the population, as well as giving the Atlantic Coast communities themselves the rights and responsibilities of Nicaraguan citizens in promoting peace and development in the

region. As a further positive result of the process of autonomy or popular participation in the Atlantic Coast, the armed opposition groups no longer have a social base in the region.

Conclusion

An analysis of society that poses a backward people against a progressive people, a modern society versus a traditional society, cannot assimilate and comprehend complex historically based social structures which both reflect and shape changing relations of class exploitation and domination. In Nicaragua the outcomes of such relations were different for the Pacific and Atlantic Coast regions, reflecting differing historical forms of the experiences of colonialism and imperialism. In addition, the differing forms (though not the substance) of oppression helped to give rise to differing expressions of resistance. In the case of the Atlantic Coast, the response to exploitation and oppression was mediated through and by the social identities defined by racial affiliation.

For the FSLN, the original solutions to the problems to what seemed at first contradictory projects, those of encouraging ethnic diversity at the same time as reintegrating the Atlantic Coast, were based on what I have described as 'partial' analysis. The first task was to bring massive investment in order to hasten social and economic development. The second, more problematic, policy prescription became to strip away the 'false consciousness' of a racial identity which served to obscure the class power relations inculcated by imperialism.

Although the racially based social identities had been instrumental for the survival and expansion of colonialism and imperialism, they were not a simple expression of economically determined class interests. Manifestations of oppression endemic to such a social structure, for instance in terms of institutionalised racism, cannot be overcome simply by economic development, which in many ways can simply serve to reproduce the existing relations of domination. In addition, the social and historical factors which have been integral to the formation of the culture, aspirations and sense of community of the peoples of the Coast cannot be understood by an analysis which implies that those communities have a 'false consciousness', and therefore an identity which is perhaps invalid.

But a criticism of the early FSLN policy failing should not be used to hide the massive success of the autonomy project. Representatives of marginalised regions and peoples throughout the world have expressed support for the project. Representatives from Catalonia praised the grassroots participation.¹⁵ An international symposium held in Managua in July

¹⁵ *Barricada Internacional*, 20 September 1987 (p.20).

¹³ Over 200 elected delegates were present. The others present included many observers from the region, government officials and a few journalists.

¹⁴ Excerpt from a speech by Ray Hooker in the debate on the Constitution in the National Assembly. Reported in *Central America Update*, CIIR, January 1987.

1986 and attended by Indian delegates from Mexico, Guatemala, Colombia, Honduras, Peru, Bolivia, the United States and Canada was unequivocal:

... the importance and originality of the Nicaraguan autonomy process resides in its integral character in that it recognises the totality of political, economic, social and cultural rights of the Indian peoples and ethnic communities; guarantees equality in diversity, strengthens national unity and the territorial integrity of the state; and expresses the democratic and anti-imperialist principles of the Revolution [CIIR 1986]

Elections to the autonomous governments of the Atlántico Norte and Atlántico Sur¹⁶ are scheduled for 1988. Of course there are no 'quick fix' answers to the problems of the region which can be magically and rapidly resolved by the new governments. The contra war still brings its casualties; through murders, mutilations, rapes, kidnapping and destruction of the social and economic infrastructure. There are no guarantees either that the autonomy project will suddenly resolve the very deep-rooted interregional and intraregional conflicts which are still in evidence. In fact, as with so many other revolutionary projects, one of the much discussed difficulties raised by the project itself, is that expectations are being raised which, because of the poverty of the country and the economic and financial blockade imposed by the US, are going to be very difficult to fulfil.

What can be said, however, is that the process of working towards autonomy has generated a dynamic which could allow for a synthesising of the various demands of the Coast within the framework of the revolution. It would be foolish to imagine that there will never be contradictions in this political project of 'redefinition' of the national identity by strengthening the participation of the minority ethnic groups within the revolution. It would also be foolish to underestimate the gains that have been made so far, gains which continue to be jeopardised most of all by the decision of the US administration to continue to support, financially and militarily, the counter-revolutionary forces in the region.

¹⁶ The region is divided into Northern and Southern zones. Prior to the revolution these were named North and South Zelaya. After 1979, although these names still remained in usage, the two zones, like all other regions in Nicaragua, were renamed with a numerical identity, becoming Special Zones I and II respectively. With the evolution of the autonomy project the zones have been renamed Atlántico Norte and Atlántico Sur.

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