
J. Mark Ruhl
Dickinson College

The Nicaraguan army grew out of leftist Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) guerrilla forces and served as the military arm of the Revolution until Sandinista President Daniel Ortega was defeated in the 1990 election. From 1990 to 2006, the army evolved into a non-partisan, professional force respected across the political spectrum. Since returning to the presidency in 2007, however, Ortega has built an authoritarian regime and has attempted to repoliticize the armed forces by reviving the army’s Sandinista sympathies, co-opting senior officers with material rewards, and expanding the military’s role and resources. This study describes the army’s evolution, analyzes President Ortega’s three-part strategy to regain control, and evaluates his relative success.

Military coups are rare in Latin America today, but the region has a long history of military intervention in politics. Analysts of Latin American civil-military relations (Lieuwen 1964; Stepan 1988; Fitch 1998; Loveman 1999) traditionally have focused on the need to subordinate powerful, autonomous armed forces to elected civilian authorities. Nicaragua, in contrast, has no history of interventionist professional armies (Guzmán 1992, 1–3). Instead, this Central American nation has been plagued by authoritarian civilian rulers who have used the military as a partisan political weapon. Civil-military relations analysts have paid much less attention to the partisan civilian misuse of the military in Latin America, although scholars recently have examined the cases of Alberto Fujimori’s Peru (Jaskoski 2012) and Hugo Chávez’s Venezuela (Norden 2014) in which elected presidents employed subordinate

1. The author wishes to thank Robert Gaddis and the anonymous reviewers for their comments on an earlier version of this manuscript.
Repolitcizing the Nicaraguan Army

militaries to help establish authoritarian regimes. Bland (1999, 13) and Luckham (2003, 8–10) observe that partisan civilian misuse of the armed forces is also a neglected topic in the general civil-military relations literature.

The current Nicaraguan army originated in the leftist Sandinista guerrilla forces that overthrew the Somoza dictatorship in 1979. For more than a decade afterward, the Sandinista Popular Army (EPS) served as the military arm of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). When Sandinista President Daniel Ortega lost power in the 1990 election, however, the army began a process of depoliticization that transformed it into a non-partisan institution respected across the political spectrum. The leadership of the renamed Army of Nicaragua (EN) was careful to keep its distance from what degenerated into a dysfunctional civilian political system dominated by two rival patrimonial political bosses—conservative Arnoldo Alemán and Ortega. The 1994 Military Code denied civilian presidents direct control over the selection of the military High Command. This unusual level of legal military autonomy from elected officials is at odds with democratic principles, but some analysts (Ruhl 2003, 134; Gaddis 2009, 44) argued that the neutral army’s relative independence was a valuable stabilizing factor in the polarized Nicaraguan political context.

Daniel Ortega ultimately emerged as Nicaragua’s strongest political actor and regained the presidency in the democratic election of 2006. However, over the next decade, he dismantled the nation’s democratic institutions and constructed an authoritarian regime in their place. President Ortega took full control over the country’s judiciary, legislature, electoral commission, and police. Like his radical populist allies in Venezuela and Bolivia (Norden 2014), he also made a concerted effort to bend the military to his will. This study traces the evolution of the Nicaraguan military, analyzes President Ortega’s three-part strategy for its repoliticization, and evaluates his relative success. A final section speculates about how the Army of Nicaragua might behave in a future regime crisis.

Armies as Partisan Weapons: Nicaragua’s Past

Beginning in the early nineteenth century, competing Nicaraguan Liberal and Conservative caudillos regularly organized their supporters into makeshift armies. Partisan civil wars fought using these forces frequently enveloped the country in political violence well into the 1920s. Nicaragua developed a patrimonial political culture (Close 2016)
dominated by civilian politicians who sought power and spoils for themselves and their clients in a political game with few rules. At the end of yet another civil war in 1927, the Liberal-Conservative Pact of Espino Negro asked the United States to train a neutral, professional constabulary to serve as both army and police. With American support, Liberal politician Anastacio Somoza García won command of the new National Guard when US occupation troops departed in 1933. Somoza soon turned the Guardia into another personal army, overthrew an elected president, and built a corrupt family dictatorship that lasted more than four decades. Moreover, Somoza and the two sons who succeeded him alienated the National Guard from the Nicaraguan people by allowing guardsmen to run criminal vice operations and to solicit bribes from all social classes (Walker and Wade 2017, 35). Instead of providing security after a catastrophic 1972 earthquake, for instance, the venal Guardia infamously looted Managua, the nation’s capital. The 7,000-man force (Millett 1977, 256) reliably and often brutally suppressed opposition to the Somozas until it was defeated by Sandinista guerrillas in 1979.

Once in power, the FSLN formed the Sandinista Popular Army (EPS) and the Sandinista Police (PS) from among its armed militants. The EPS and the revolutionary party were closely integrated. Daniel Ortega’s brother, Humberto, a key member of the ruling FSLN National Directorate, became army commander, while military officers composed about one-fifth of the Sandinista Party Assembly. The EPS officer corps embraced the Revolution’s socialist ideology and established mechanisms for political indoctrination throughout the armed forces. With weapons and training from the Soviet Union, Cuba, and other communist states, the EPS grew into a capable professional force of 86,000 that militarily defeated the US-financed Contra counter-revolutionary guerrilla army of about 18,000 (Torres 2010, 20).

Transforming the Sandinista Popular Army (EPS) into the Army of Nicaragua (EN)

The Contra War, US sanctions, and Sandinista mismanagement destroyed the Nicaraguan economy during the 1980s. The end of the Cold War also left the FSLN without Soviet economic or military support. In this desperate situation, Sandinista President Daniel Ortega agreed to hold a democratic election in 1990 that met the requirements of the 1987 Esquipulas II Central America peace agreement. Unexpectedly, the FSLN leader lost the contest to Violeta Chamorro
and the National Opposition Union (UNO) coalition by a large margin. Shortly after the election, however, the lame duck Sandinista legislative majority passed EPS Military Organization Law 75 that acknowledged Chamorro as Supreme Chief of the Armed Forces but gave effective control over the army to its uniformed Commander-in-Chief (CINC), General Humberto Ortega, and a Military Council of his senior officers. General Ortega refused Chamorro’s request that he resign.

Right-wing UNO legislators backed by the United States demanded radical restructuring or abolition of the army. Despite these pressures, centrist President Chamorro (1990–1997) sought compromise with the EPS. In the weeks following her election, her chief advisor and son-in-law, Antonio Lacayo, and General Ortega held a series of difficult negotiations that produced a Transition Protocol. Under this accord, the Chamorro government promised to respect the army’s institutional autonomy and to accept its current command structure. In return, the military agreed to depoliticize and downsize. In the unfavorable international and domestic political context, General Ortega reasoned that the military could only survive as a non-partisan force (Ramírez 2012, 201). Once the civil-military bargain was made, EPS officers resigned all positions they held in the FSLN, and political indoctrination within the military ceased. The army rapidly demobilized from 86,810 soldiers in 1990 to 15,250 by 1993 (Meléndez 2000, 27), while the defense budget plummeted from $177 million to $36 million. General Ortega and his senior officers convinced the depleted officer corps to accept a fundamental change in its historic mission from the defense of the socialist revolution to the defense of democracy. The EPS commander himself swore a public oath of loyalty to President Chamorro and used his forces to defend the fragile democratic government against both right-wing and left-wing attempts to destabilize it. EPS troops fought rearmed Contras (Recontras) as well as former Sandinista soldiers (Recompas) while also helping police contain street riots by Sandinista-affiliated groups. In this atmosphere, the outspoken General Ortega often acted more like an independent political actor than a subordinate, but he would become a valuable ally of President Chamorro who would lose much of her support in the UNO coalition. For several years, she resisted intense US diplomatic and economic pressure to remove the EPS commander.

2. See chapter 7 in Barany (2012) for comparisons to communist armed forces’ generally rapid post–Cold War adaptation to democracy in Eastern and Central Europe.
After lengthy discussions between the military and the Chamorro government, and with amendments from the National Assembly, Military Code Law 181 replaced EPS Law 75 in 1994. The Military Code changed the name of the Sandinista Popular Army (EPS) to the Army of Nicaragua (EN) and mandated that the military be “national, non-partisan, apolitical, and professional” (Republic of Nicaragua 1996, 5). The Code gave the uniformed EN Commander-in-Chief a single five-year term from which he could be dismissed only for insubordination, disobedience, or other serious offense. At the end of the CINC’s term, the army’s own Military Council would nominate his successor. Although the President could reject the Council’s nomination, she could not impose an alternative candidate of her own. Once selected, the new Commander-in-Chief would have the authority to appoint the Army’s Chief of the General Staff and Inspector General to complete the three-officer High Command. The 1994 Code also created the Military Pension Institute (IPSM) to provide financial support for retired officers. Once the Military Code was in place, General Ortega agreed to resign. President Chamorro accepted the Military Council’s nomination of his longtime second-in-command, Maj. Gen. Joaquín Cuadra, Chief of the General Staff, to succeed him.³

During the next dozen years, the Army of Nicaragua completed its transformation into the non-partisan, professional military force that Nicaragua historically had lacked (Cajina 1996; Ruhl 2003; Millett and Pérez 2005; Pérez 2015). Under General Cuadra (1995–2000), General Javier Carrión (2000–2005) and General Omar Halleslevens (2005–2010), the military sought to avoid partisan entanglements and to concentrate on improving its professional capabilities. The multifunctional army earned broad public acclaim for its work in disaster relief, counter-narcotics, civic action, and environmental protection. In fact, the military became the nation’s most highly respected institution with an 87% approval rate (Garay 2016a). In 2000, the EN signed a cooperation agreement with the US military and began to receive training and financial assistance from its former enemy. Many Nicaraguan officers attended US military schools including the School of the Americas and West Point.


---

soon after his inauguration the EN uncovered a Sandinista plot to assassinate the new President and quietly warned the conspirators not to make the attempt. During his presidency, the autocratic Alemán tried to acquire a measure of personal subjective control over the armed forces by cultivating individual senior officers and by encouraging the army’s growing IPSM business interests (Dye 2000, 14). The Army of Nicaragua, however, maintained its political independence. On several occasions, General Cuadra refused Alemán’s requests for the army to join the police in suppressing Sandinista strikes and demonstrations that the military leadership deemed insufficiently threatening (Cajina 2000, 141–143). In 1999, when it came time to choose the next CINC, the EN commander demanded, in a face-to-face confrontation, that the President appoint Maj. Gen. Javier Carrión, his second-in-command (Guevara Somarriba 1999). General Cuadra had learned beforehand that Alemán preferred a potentially more pliable officer. After assuming command of the armed forces, General Carrión nevertheless developed a good professional working relationship with the president, although the two clashed briefly when Alemán contemplated intervening in a bank with close ties to the IPSM (Ruhl 2003, 127). The conservative president established the nation’s first civilian defense ministry and gave the new institution wide statutory authority to supervise the armed forces. The defense minister gained the legal right to supervise the military budget, military education, defense policy planning, intelligence gathering, and civil defense (Ruhl 2003, 124). However, President Alemán provided too few resources to the small (sixty-person) defense ministry for it to perform these duties. He also frequently changed the ministry’s leadership and never placed the defense minister in the formal chain of command.

Despite their ideological differences, President Alemán concluded a political pact with Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega in 2000 to divide all important political offices between their two parties. Alemán held the upper hand in this arrangement until 2002 when his successor, his former Vice-President, Enrique Bolaños, accused him of stealing over $100 million in state funds. In response, the National Assembly stripped Alemán of his immunity from prosecution. From that point on, Ortega used Sandinista judges to control the weakened former President’s fate

4. Samuel Huntington (1957) contrasts “objective control” exercised by strong civilian institutions over non-partisan armed forces with “subjective control” exercised by civilian politicians who gain command of the military via material benefits or ideological penetration.
Opposed by both Sandinistas and Alemán Liberals, isolated President Bolaños (2002–2007) often relied on the armed forces despite frictions with the army over the deployment of non-combat military personnel to Iraq in 2003 and a US request to destroy ground-to-air missiles in the EN arsenal. The military collaborated with Bolaños’s defense ministry, US officials, and civilian security experts to produce the National Defense Book, the nation’s first national defense strategy document (RESDAL 2017). During a 2004–2005 constitutional crisis over presidential power, senior army officers mediated between President Bolaños and his opponents (Central America Report 2006, 5). In late 2004, Bolaños accepted the Military Council’s nomination of Maj. Gen. Omar Halleslevens, Chief of the General Staff, to replace General Carrión. The following year, General Halleslevens refused a Sandinista request that the armed forces support the unconstitutional removal of President Bolaños from office (Gaddis 2009, 32). The army’s action won praise from US officials who had threatened economic sanctions if Bolaños were overthrown (Levitsky and Way 2010, 144).

The Return of Daniel Ortega to Power

Daniel Ortega (2007–present) regained the presidency with just 38% of the vote in the 2006 election. The Liberals divided their support between an Alemán stand-in and reformer Eduardo Montealegre. Over the next decade, the Sandinista leader established what Levitsky and Way (2010, 144–145, 371) call a competitive authoritarian regime characterized by electoral fraud, judicial manipulation, and the intimidation of opposition. Although the Sandinista government uses force sparingly and permits opposition party and media criticism, Freedom House ranks Nicaragua as the fourth least free nation in the Americas (Freedom House 2017). The Sandinista-controlled Supreme Electoral Council (CSE) helped guarantee a series of lopsided FSLN electoral victories by banning independent foreign observers and by altering voting results (Colburn and Cruz 2012). Gangs of young Sandinista thugs suppressed post-election protests while the FSLN-controlled police watched from the sidelines (Burbach 2009, 34, 37). In 2009, Sandinista judges abolished the constitutional ban on reelection allowing Ortega to run again in 2011 and 2016. Before the 2016 election, Ortega’s judiciary disqualified his strongest opponent, the Liberal Montealegre. The CSE then removed all the Independent Liberal Party (PLI) deputies aligned with Montealegre from the National Assembly.
This personalist “Danielista” regime is constructed very much in the traditional Nicaraguan patrimonial style (Colburn and Cruz 2012; Close 2016, 184–187). Many observers (Torres 2010; Johnson 2014; Shifter 2016; Cruz 2016) describe the regime as a corrupt family dictatorship with similarities to the Somoza dynasty. Ortega’s powerful wife, Vice-President Rosario Murillo, presides over cabinet meetings and handles the daily business of governing while directing a network of grassroots Sandinista community organizations. Their sons Rafael and Laureano manage crucial international relationships with Venezuela, Russia, and China, while other siblings play important roles in the Ortega family media empire (Cruz 2016). Rafael oversees Alba de Nicaragua (ALBANISA), the large private business conglomerate funded by Venezuela that many believe has helped make the Ortega family wealthy (Johnson 2014). Under the Ortegas, Nicaragua’s score on Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) became the worst in Central America (Transparency International 2017). Nevertheless, Daniel Ortega enjoys high Gallup Poll approval ratings ranging from 56% to 75% (Garay 2016b; El Nuevo Diario 2017).

Ortega likely would have won reelection without fraud or manipulation. Over $4.4 billion in financial support from radical ally Venezuela (de Alba 2017) and close collaboration with the private business community he once condemned have enabled the Sandinista leader to oversee both strong economic growth averaging about 5% per year since 2011 (Bejarano 2017) and generous anti-poverty programs. Earlier post-1990 governments did little for the disadvantaged in what is the second poorest country ($5,300 GDP per capita PPP) (CIA 2017) in Latin America. One-third of the Nicaraguan population of six million still lives below the poverty line (Latin American Weekly Report 2015). Strong public support for the Ortegas may also be linked to effective community policing by the Nicaraguan National Police (PNN) that has helped keep crime levels much lower than in most of the rest of the Americas (Corporación Latinobarómetro 2016, 57–59). In addition, President Ortega has avoided confrontations with the Roman Catholic Church, a former adversary, and its many adherents by publicly embracing Christianity and by enacting strict anti-abortion laws.

Ortega Regains Control Over the Security Forces

Ortega knows from personal experience that presidential popularity can be fleeting. No authoritarian ruler can be secure without complete
control over the security forces (Levitsky and Way 2010, 56–58; Schedler 2013, 303). The Sandinista leader remembered the political advantages of commanding an obedient Sandinista Popular Army (EPS) and Sandinista Police (PS) when he was president in the 1980s. Like his allies in the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA), the late Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and Evo Morales in Bolivia, he made the politicization of both the police and military a high priority.

Ortega first concentrated on regaining control over the police. He retained respected, independent First Police Commissioner Aminta Granera but quickly turned the Nicaraguan National Police (PNN) into a partisan political force by placing Sandinista sympathizers in all other top police leadership positions and by retiring politically unreliable professionals (Torres 2010). No Military Code-like legal provisions protected the police hierarchy from such partisan interference. Twice reappointed by Ortega, Commissioner Granera gradually aligned herself with the Sandinista Front. Day-to-day management of the police passed to Subdirector General Francisco Díaz whose daughter is married to one of Ortega’s sons. In 2014, Police Law 872 removed the legal prohibition against conducting partisan activities in police stations (Orozco 2014, 14) where Sandinista posters now appear. The expanded, 11,700–strong PNN became the Ortega regime’s principal coercive instrument (Orozco 2015); police units have used violence against striking miners, peasant protesters, and other groups. In December 2016, the police mobilized to stop protesters from reaching Managua to stage a mass demonstration while the Secretary-General of the Organization of American States (OAS) was visiting. Despite police partisanship, Nicaraguans view the institution favorably; 63% (including 49% of opposition sympathizers) expressed confidence in the police in a 2016 poll (Garay 2016a).

An Army Repoliticization Strategy in Three Parts

President Ortega moved much more slowly in asserting his authority over the more independent and more widely respected Army of Nicaragua (87% approval including 70% of opposition sympathizers). He needed the army’s superior intelligence collection and coercive capabilities to identify internal threats to his regime and to eliminate threats the police could not manage. Ortega also wanted to be certain

5. See Cajina (2017) for a greater depth analysis of the transformation of the Nicaraguan National Police under Ortega.
that the Army of Nicaragua would never itself pose a danger to his regime. Some Ortega opponents initially had hoped that the independent military might intervene to reverse blatantly illegal presidential actions (Torres 2010, 24). Instead, Ortega has sought to establish personal subjective control over the armed forces with a three-part strategy that involves: 1) reviving the Sandinista political sympathies of the officer corps, 2) co-opting officers with government jobs and lucrative business opportunities, and 3) expanding the military’s role and resources.

Despite its revolutionary origins, it was not a simple matter to make the military Sandinista again. The officer corps valued its status as a national, non-partisan institution and wished to continue its professional collaboration with the US armed forces. Army officers felt superior to the institutionally weak police that had so easily submitted to Ortega (Gaddis 2009, 41). Moreover, since the 1990s, the FSLN had become less a revolutionary party of principle and more the personal vehicle of Daniel Ortega and his controversial wife. Most of the FSLN’s intellectual leaders and cadre had long since left the party or had been driven out by the Ortegas. Nevertheless, beginning with his 2007 inaugural address, President Ortega never missed an opportunity to remind the military of its Sandinista revolutionary origins. Rosario Murillo did the same: in her 2014 Army Day speech, she emphasized the pride of the Nicaraguan people in an army that “at its roots is popular, Sandinista, and anti-imperialist” (Nicaragua News Bulletin 2014). Many Nicaraguan analysts (Salinas 2015; Orozco 2015, 16) agree that even after the military’s institutional transformation, much of the officer corps privately continued to sympathize with the Sandinista Front. Although Daniel Ortega and the FSLN are much changed since the 1980s, they have maintained the Sandinista Revolution’s core commitment to progressive social policies. Not surprisingly, Ortega places greater trust in older army officers who fought for the Sandinista Revolution than in younger officers who graduated from a new military academy beginning in 1996 (Silva 2015). In 2009, he directed the army to raise the maximum number of years of service for EN officers from 30 to 35 allowing members of the revolutionary generation to remain in uniform longer.

Ortega has also used his regime’s ample economic resources to offer financial rewards to loyal officers and to the military as an institution.

---

6. An indeterminate number of EN officers who remained on the left did not become Danielistas. Several retired leftist officers who reject the Ortegas have become prominent public critics of the regime (Torres 2010; Romero 2016).
By 2013, he had distributed about thirty executive branch leadership positions to retired military officers (Enríquez 2013a). Wives and family members of other retired and active-duty officers also acquired government jobs. Former Maj. Gen. Ramón Calderón Vindell became general manager of ALBA Generación, an important ALBANISA enterprise that distributes petroleum to power companies. Retired Col. Ramón Sosa took over direction of the National System for Disaster Prevention (SINAPRED). Other ex-officers headed the Free Trade Zone Commission, Social Security, Civil Defense, the Central Bank, and other agencies (Mani 2011, 13–14). The Ortega government also provided attractive business opportunities for the army’s IPSM companies and for private enterprises in which individual senior officers had a financial stake (Envío Team 2014, 5; Orozco 2014, 15). It is not difficult for serving officers, especially higher-ranking ones, to see how loyalty to the Ortegas while in uniform might later pay off for themselves and their families. The military as an institution is also strengthened by the IPSM’s growing economic power under Ortega. The IPSM operates a wide range of business enterprises involved in everything from housing construction to banking and health care with an estimated total net worth of $65 million in 2007 (Enríquez 2014). Like his predecessors, Ortega permitted the military financial institution to operate with little civilian oversight and ignored media criticism of dubious land acquisitions and other questionable IPSM business practices (Mani 2011).

In addition, Ortega expanded the military’s institutional role in a series of legal reforms that culminated in revised Military Code Law 181 in 2014 (Republic of Nicaragua 2014) and the Sovereign Security Law in 2015. The revised Military Code gave the army new missions to protect strategic resources, telecommunications, information systems, and the transportation network. In addition, new Military Code language emphasized the army’s duty to combat any external or internal threats to national security that might put the Nicaraguan state, its institutions, or its principles in danger. The military also lobbied actively for the controversial Sovereign Security Law that was quickly

---

7. No confirmed cases have yet become public, but former General Hugo Torres (2010, 22) asserts that the Ortegas would not hesitate to employ bribery or blackmail to gain cooperation from military officers.

8. The 2015 Sovereign Security Law expanded upon and replaced the 2010 Democratic Security Law. National Assembly consideration of the 2015 law bypassed the Peace, Governance, and Human Rights Committee charged with military affairs. This legislative committee has yet to play a significant role in the supervision of the armed forces.
passed by the Sandinista-dominated National Assembly. This new law made the army dominant over all civilian governmental agencies during states of emergency (Nitlapán-Envío Team 2015, 5–6; IEEPP 2015, 24–25). When the president declares a state of emergency, the military, with almost unlimited authority, becomes the coordinator of the National Security System (SNSS) and the guarantor of public order and democracy. The law designated the military’s intelligence agency, the Department of Defense Information (DID), to serve as the technical secretariat of the SNSS and widened the DID’s legal intelligence gathering range. Critics charged (Cajina 2015) that the Sovereign Security Law created a repressive, authoritarian security structure that gives the military too much freedom to define and to suppress alleged internal security threats. As the armed forces’ institutional role increased, President Ortega nearly doubled the defense budget from $37 million in 2009 to $73 million in 2016 as he enlarged the armed forces from 9,412 to 12,793 soldiers (RESDAL 2016, 188–189).

As part of his plans to expand the military’s resources and to reorient the EN politically, Ortega asked his Russian ally Vladimir Putin to take on a major role in providing security assistance to Nicaragua. Beginning in 2008, Russia supplied new military equipment and training to the expanded army replacing the United States as the EN’s principal foreign military partner. In 2011 alone, total Russian assistance equaled $26.5 million (Rogers 2014) which is about the same amount as the US had spent on the Nicaraguan army during the entire 2008 to 2013 period (Insight Crime 2017a). The Russians have provided a fleet of armored vehicles, mobile rocket launchers, patrol boats, helicopters, and a variety of other military equipment (Fiegel 2014; Cajina 2016). The first batch of 50 promised T-72B1 tanks arrived in 2016. Although Ortega drastically curtailed military training in the US after 2012, the EN still cooperates with US forces in counter-narcotics operations.

**The Army Aligns with Ortega**

President Ortega’s three-part strategy eventually brought the armed forces under his control, but only after initial resistance and considerable bargaining. Soon after the Sandinista leader’s election in 2006, the military High Command balked at his choice of retired Col. Marisol Castillo to be defense minister. Her inferior military rank to senior serving officers and their distrust of her husband, former
state security chief Lenín Cerna, an Ortega confidant, made Castillo unwelcome (Guevara Jerez 2007, 15). Leaving the post vacant until 2014, Ortega accepted this military “veto,” but appeared perturbed by the rebuff for several weeks. According to Guevara Jerez (2007, 16), the President then held “extremely frank talks” with army commander General Omar Halleslevens whom he had known most of his life. Halleslevens, the last CINC to hold the prestigious title of Guerrilla Commander, grew up in the same rural agricultural town as the President. The General was also a member of the small Sandinista guerrilla unit who in 1974 attacked the home of a top Somoza official and captured hostages who were later traded for Ortega’s release from prison. Soon after their conversations, Ortega transferred legal control over the Department of Defense Information (DID) and Civil Defense from the defense ministry to the armed forces. He also named Halleslevens’s brother executive president of a social insurance institute. In return, the military promised to obey presidential directives and provide Ortega with “a timely and exhaustive supply” of DID intelligence. A few months later, the army took over responsibility from the police for providing security for the Ortegas’ presidential compound. In 2008, General Halleslevens supported the President by publicly dismissing allegations of Sandinista manipulation of the municipal elections despite extensive evidence of fraud.

US officers who worked with General Halleslevens nonetheless believed that he was committed to preserving the Army of Nicaragua’s institutional integrity (Gaddis 2009), a view that was shared by Nicaragua’s foremost security analyst Roberto Cajina (Vásquez 2017b). Despite Ortega’s rumored preference for an alternative senior officer (Silva 2009), General Halleslevens persuaded the president to follow tradition and to accept the Chief of the General Staff, Maj. Gen. Julio César Avilés, as the next CINC. General Avilés, like his mentor Halleslevens, is a military intelligence specialist. Disregarding protocol, however, Ortega used an FSLN party rally to announce Avilés’s appointment after asking the crowd for its assent (Enríquez 2014). A little over a year later, Ortega surprised many political analysts when he selected retired General Halleslevens to be his vice-presidential running mate in 2011. Some commentators suggested that he added the well-known Halleslevens to the ticket to attract peasant voters because of the retired general’s agricultural background, but others saw the nomination as another move to solidify military support (Vásquez 2017a; 2017b). Surprisingly, Halleslevens played a largely ceremonial role as
Vice President as the influence of Ortega’s wife, Rosario Murillo, in
the Sandinista government grew. She herself replaced him in that office
in 2016. Halleslevens’s political stock fell further when he was then
passed over for National Assembly President in favor of a Murillo asso-
ciate after being widely expected to receive the position.

Ortega accelerated his efforts to win control over the military after
his easy 2011 reelection with 62% of the vote (Close 2016, 135). Armed
with a questionably obtained legislative supermajority, he now domi-
nated every state institution except the Army of Nicaragua. The military
leadership, which had previously expected Ortega to serve for only a
five-year presidential period, now had to come to terms with the long-
term entrenchment of his regime. Army Commander-in-Chief Gen-
eral Avilés, who had initially emphasized the military’s neutrality in his
public statements, soon appeared to become a close political ally of the
Ortegas. Roberto Cajina (Cerda 2017) argues that the younger Avilés
lacks the political stature of his predecessors all of whom played his-
toric military roles in the revolutionary era and could more readily stand
up to presidents. Observers (Enríquez 2014) also noted that relatives
of General Avilés recently have benefited from government business
contacts. The long banished red and black Sandinista Front flag has
reappeared at military events where no partisan banners had flown since
the army’s 1990s depoliticization. Some months later, Ortega used his
influence over Avilés to begin changing the composition of the mili-
tary High Command. In September 2012, Ortega broke precedent by
appointing the Inspector General, Maj. Gen. Denis Membreño to be
director of the Financial Analysis Unit (UAF), an anti-money launder-
ing agency, before the officer’s five-year term concluded. General Avilés
relieved Membreño of his duties as Inspector General, although the
new UAF Director remained an army officer in contravention of the
1994 Military Code’s prohibition against service in civilian administra-
tive posts. Avilés named intelligence chief Brig. Gen. Adolfo Zepeda as
his replacement.

9. Reportedly (Vásquez 2017a), Vice President Murillo is uncomfortable with
individuals such as Omar Halleslevens and Lenín Cerna who played important
roles in the original Sandinista revolutionary period; she has removed these two
individuals and others from positions of influence. Murillo was not a significant
political actor in the 1970s-1980s era. Her controversial political views today mix
elements of socialism, Christianity, and New Age philosophy. She has been viewed
with skepticism within the EN officer corps.
This first unusual change in the High Command attracted less attention than it deserved, but Ortega then shocked Nicaraguan political analysts in November 2013 when he announced that Maj. Gen. Oscar Balladares, the Chief of the General Staff, and, according to tradition, next in line to be CINC would also be transferred to a civilian position. Former guerrilla Balladares was one of the army’s most distinguished officers, having led EPS special operations forces during the Contra War and having completed many other commands with distinction. The Ortegas, however, considered him politically unreliable (Envío Team 2014, 3). General Avilés retired Balladares from the military as Ortega created a new civilian position for the former officer as a presidential advisor on infrastructure. Brig. Gen. Oscar Mojica, head of the IPSM, an officer with little troop leadership experience but wide business contacts, replaced Balladares as second-in-command of the army. These abrupt changes in the military hierarchy upset both retired and active-duty officers (Enríquez 2014). Cajina likened the EN’s concession to Ortega in this matter to the National Guard’s submission to the Somozas (Enríquez 2013b). The trend toward military subordination under General Avilés continued with the army’s uncharacteristic public endorsement of Ortega’s 2014 constitutional reform package that contained the principle of indefinite presidential reelection and reinforced the President’s exclusive legal control over the armed forces.

General Avilés, President Ortega, and their staffs negotiated extensive reforms to the Military Code (Law 181), which passed the Sandinista-controlled National Assembly with little discussion in early 2014. In addition to expanding the military’s missions, as discussed earlier, the reformed Code (Republic of Nicaragua 2014) virtually eliminated the weak civilian defense ministry’s oversight role. For example, the military no longer is required to consult with the defense ministry on the annual armed forces budget. In addition, Article 26 of the new Military Code gave the army’s DID exclusive responsibility for collecting strategic intelligence on national security, territorial integrity, and constitutional order. Although the Military Code still prohibits the DID from conducting “political espionage,” the publisher of a leading opposition journal, Confidencial, recently accused military intelligence of collaborating with FSLN agents to try to penetrate its operations (Latin American Weekly Report 2016a). Army officers also gained increased career flexibility under reformed Law 181 as maximum military service reached 40
years with mandatory retirement at age 65 unless extended by the President (for general officers) or the CINC (for all other officers). Legalizing the earlier appointment of General Membreño to a civilian post, the 2014 Military Code allows officers to serve temporarily in civilian positions in the executive branch. If invited by the CINC, retired officers may also now return to the army at their former rank on temporary contract.\(^{10}\)

Ortega gave the military wider authority in the 2014 Military Code, but the reform also increased his own control over the armed forces. By removing the single term limit for CINCs, revised Law 181 gave Ortega the ability to keep a compliant army commander in place for more than five years. In January 2015, Rosario Murillo, citing a unanimous Military Council recommendation, announced the reappointment of General Julio César Avilés to an unprecedented second five-year term. In dismay, every former EN Commander-in-Chief except then Vice President Halleslevens boycotted General Avilés’ reappointment ceremony (Salinas 2015). In March 2017, with President Ortega’s approval, General Avilés again unexpectedly shook up the military High Command by removing both the Chief of the General Staff and the Inspector General appointed in 2013 and 2012, respectively. Brig. Gen. Marvin Elías Corrales Rodríguez became Inspector General, while Brig. Gen. Bayardo Ramón Rodríguez Ruíz, the husband of Ortega’s Sandinista defense minister, Martha Ruíz Sevilla, became the Chief of the General Staff, second-in-command to Avilés. Both new appointees are Ortega loyalists (Romero 2017). Ortega made former Chief of the General Staff Mojíca president of the Nicaraguan Energy Institute (INE) for several months before naming him Minister for Transport and Infrastructure.

The reform of the Military Code did not strip the Military Council of its right to nominate future CINCs nor give the President the \textit{de jure} authority to make changes in the other two most important army positions. Ortega, however, appears to have gained \textit{de facto} control over the composition of the High Command by working through

\(^{10}\) The 2014 Military Code also formalized the military’s practice of providing security and logistical support to the CSE during elections and permitted the armed forces to charge for security services supplied to public and mixed capital business enterprises. The EN also gained the authority to establish a reserve force in the future.
This development constitutes a major concession by the Nicaraguan military, although it is important to note that civilian chief executives in most Latin American countries have the legal authority to make far more drastic changes to the military hierarchy (for instance, shortly after taking office in Bolivia in 2006, Ortega’s ally, Evo Morelos, immediately retired 28 generals [Jaskoski 2013, 204]).

**Future Uncertainties**

Daniel Ortega appears, for now, to have won control over the Army of Nicaragua, but the depth of the military’s political loyalty has not been tested. The popularity of the Ortegas’ economic and social policies and the weakness of the divided opposition have meant that the Army of Nicaragua has seldom been asked to deploy its coercive power in defense of the regime. Army units have pursued small bands of armed regime opponents in the rural North since 2010, and, in a very few instances, the military has joined with the PNN to suppress large demonstrations. In December 2014, armed soldiers and police used violence to oust hundreds of peasants who had occupied the Managua-San Carlos highway in southern Nicaragua to protest an interoceanic canal project (IEEPP 2015). Since Ortega has so rarely called upon the army to use force, it is difficult to know just how subservient the institution has become. Some Nicaraguan observers fear that the Army of Nicaragua is now so obedient to the Ortegas that there may be no limit to how the President could employ the military in the future. Retired Maj. Roberto Samcam claims that the army “has converted itself into the military arm of the dictator” (Romero 2016, 1). Former Guerrilla Commander Mónica Baltodano (Envío Team 2014, 7) of the left opposition Movement for the Rescue of Sandinismo says that the armed forces “are coming very close to that praetorian guard (the Somoza dictatorship’s National Guard) we destroyed in 1979.” Even scholars like Cajina (Silva 2015, 3) state that “[t]he army is an institution in total submission to Ortega. It’s in favor of Ortega and his political projects. Of this there is no doubt.”

---

11. Through his control of the High Command, President Ortega, no doubt, also hopes to influence promotions and assignments below the three top leadership positions. According to Article 8 of the 2014 Military Code, all such decisions formally rest with the CINC, except for promotions to the rank of General, which the President awards on his advice.
Roberto Orozco (2014, 15), on the other hand, believes that the Army of Nicaragua is a pragmatic institution whose leaders have decided to back Daniel Ortega in return for a variety of benefits particularly involving institutional and individual business interests. Ortega has done more for the military than the three previous presidents combined, and, at present, there is no viable political alternative to his patrimonial rule. Orozco does not think that the EN shares the Ortegas’ political vision, and he doubts that the army would remain loyal to less respected Vice President Murillo if Ortega (now age 71) were to pass from the scene. Similarly, Elvira Cuadra of Managua’s Institute of Strategic Studies and Public Policies (IEEPP) (Enríquez 2015) argues that the army has not become Sandinista again, but that it simply collaborates with Ortega because of a coincidence of interests. If the views expressed by Orozco and Cuadra are correct, the military’s current obedience to Ortega does not predict how the EN would behave if, in the future, the Sandinista leader were to lose his popularity and face prolonged mass demonstrations demanding his ouster (or especially if that scenario were to substitute Rosario Murillo as chief executive).

When radical left twenty-first century socialism was in ascendance in Latin America a few years ago, General Ávilés and some other older officers may have renewed their former ideological commitments. Restored contacts with Cuban military colleagues and an alliance with charismatic Hugo Chávez’s radicalized Venezuelan armed forces may have revived memories of their revolutionary youth. However, other older officers may simply be pragmatists, and some senior officers, whatever their political leanings, may be as unhappy with Ortega’s manipulations of their institution as were the former CINCs who absented themselves from General Ávilés’ reappointment ceremony in 2015. The President’s own brother, army founder and retired General Humberto Ortega, has publicly warned against the repoliticization of the military (Envío Team 2017, 7). Moreover, a majority of the 1,800-member EN officer corps has no revolutionary recollections. Graduates of the military academy and not of the guerrilla or Contra wars, most current Nicaraguan officers have spent their professional lives in an institution dedicated to non-partisan national service. Today, these younger officers compose the entire EN officer corps from the rank of major down (IEEPP 2010, 23). Quite a few of the younger EN officers have trained at US military schools, and some have come from non-Sandinista families attracted by the prestige and low cost of a military academy education. It is not surprising that retired General Hugo Torres (Enríquez 2016; Enríquez
2014) and others have heard dissent in the officer corps over President Ortega’s repoliticization campaign. General Avilés has been quick to stamp out any overt sign of political disagreement within the military, making it difficult to estimate how widespread discontent may be. In 2015, a military court punished Army First Lt. Yader Montiel with three months in jail for his public criticism of the violent repression of anti-canal protesters (Sequeira 2015). A defiant Montiel refused to plead guilty to having violated “military decorum” in a case Cajina (Silva 2015) says was intended to intimidate the entire EN officer corps.

From a comparative perspective, the Army of Nicaragua would seem to be a less reliable tool for mass repression than either the Somozas’ National Guard or the Venezuelan armed forces who today protect Ortega’s Chavista ally Nicolás Maduro. The old National Guard was destroyed in its loyal attempt to defend the Somoza family dynasty against Sandinista guerrillas. A corrupt, brutal force, estranged from the Nicaraguan people, the Guardia was entirely the Somozas’ creature (Millett 1977). It would have been difficult for such a discredited institution to find opposition political allies if its senior officers had ever sought them. The Army of Nicaragua is in no such position. EN officers are highly regarded professionals in an organization that has earned a reputation for low corruption (Gaddis 2009, 33, 37) and has seldom used force against ordinary Nicaraguans. Should the current Sandinista regime ever falter, the Nicaraguan army would have many choices besides joining the Ortegas in defeat. Many opposition groups would seek EN collaboration.

The contrast to the situation in Venezuela is stark. The ultimate test of the Venezuelan armed forces’ loyalty to the Chavista movement may come soon. The opposition majority continues to grow as the Chavista regime becomes ever more dictatorial. Thus far, the military has strongly backed the Maduro government despite its wide unpopularity, its disastrous economic policies, and its illegal treatment of opponents. The Venezuelan military, however, is very different from the Army of Nicaragua. In the years after the failed 2002 military coup against him, former Col. Hugo Chávez thoroughly purged the Venezuelan officer corps and instituted a program of political indoctrination and surveillance (Norden 2014, 169–170). His regime also permitted a significant number of senior officers to engage in embezzlement, narcotics trafficking, and other forms of corruption (Insight Crime 2017b). Although one cannot know in advance how Venezuelan regular soldiers will behave if called upon to fire on crowds of their fellow citizens, many Venezuelan officers either believe in the Chavista Revolution or are too complicit in
Repoliticizing the Nicaraguan Army

Repoliticizing the Nicaraguan Army

corruption not to follow orders. In Nicaragua, by contrast, there has been no wholesale purge of untrustworthy officers, although General Balladares and likely a few other suspect individuals have been removed. In addition, Sandinista ideological indoctrination has not been reimposed in the military and few senior Nicaraguan officers have been implicated in either drug trafficking or embezzlement.

Ortega clearly hopes that he will be able to count on the Army of Nicaragua should he ever confront mass protests large enough to threaten his regime, but Pion-Berlin and Trinkunas (2010) suspect that most Latin American militaries may stay in their barracks and shirk their responsibility to defend governments in such future crises. These authors believe that fears of internal divisions and of human rights prosecutions should the besieged government fall may keep most armies quartered. In a comparative study of ten recent cases from Latin America, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe, Pion-Berlin et al. (2012) found that armed forces obeyed orders to suppress mass demonstrations only when five factors were present: 1) the military was well-funded by the government, 2) the military had the legal authority to maintain internal security, 3) the military’s professional identity did not preclude its use to support the police in suppressing internal opposition, 4) the military was internally cohesive, and 5) the military identified its primary obligation as defending the government rather than protecting the mass public. The Nicaraguan case may not meet the last two conditions. The Ortega government has been very attentive to the EN’s material needs, and Article 6 of the 2014 Military Code as well as Article 92 of the Nicaraguan constitution (Republic of Nicaragua 2000, 28–29) permit the chief executive to deploy the armed forces against serious threats to public order. The EN’s professional identity also does not preclude such duties; the Nicaraguan army is not primarily an external defense force. Admittedly, the EN also has always been a highly unified, disciplined institution, but Ortega’s efforts to repoliticize the armed forces appear to have caused some dissention within the officer corps. Although General Avilés and his closest collaborators may have committed themselves to the Sandinista regime, other officers, especially younger ones, may feel a greater duty to the Nicaraguan public. As long as the Ortegas enjoy high public approval levels, there is no obvious contradiction between serving them and serving the nation, but the Army of Nicaragua could fracture if confronted with mass protests against a no-longer-popular Ortega regime. Former Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS) presidential candidate Edmundo Jarquin
recently asserted that “[t]he armed forces know that at the end of that road they’ll have to face the decision to fire on the population” (Envío Team 2016, 5). Doubts about the morality of such an action, fears of prosecution if it were to fail, and concerns about institutional disunity could keep the army quartered in that situation. A significant number of Nicaraguan officers might understandably view an order to suppress largely non-violent protestors as a partisan act that would violate their constitutional requirement to be politically neutral. Like other militaries before them in Latin America (Argentina 2001) and elsewhere (e.g., in Indonesia in 1998) (Lee 2009), Nicaraguan officers may keep their soldiers in their barracks.

Will the Nicaraguan army ever be tested in this way? In mid-2017, most Nicaraguans still view Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo favorably, and the opposition is in disarray. Anti-canal protests that have increased in recent years may subside in coming months as declining Chinese interest makes clear that the Nicaraguan interoceanic canal will never be built. However, the generous Venezuelan funding that has been so critical to the Ortega regime’s success is drying up quickly as the Venezuelan economy implodes. Petroleum deliveries declined by two-thirds after 2015, and total financial support from Venezuela fell by half between 2014 and 2016 (Latin American Weekly Report 2016b). With less money from Venezuela, popular social programs, like Zero Hunger, have contracted sharply. In addition, the United States government and the OAS are paying closer attention to the authoritarian behavior of the Ortega regime and are contemplating action. In September 2016, the US House of Representatives unanimously passed the Nicaragua Investment Conditionality Act that would instruct US representatives to oppose international loans to the Ortega regime until an independent electoral commission conducts free elections and an independent judiciary is established. At the very least, the Ortega regime faces a much more difficult future.

Throughout its troubled history, Nicaragua has been ruled by civilian political strongmen who have used the nation’s armed forces as political tools. Like his patrimonial predecessors and his radical populist counterparts in Venezuela and Bolivia, autocrat Daniel Ortega has tried to bring the military under his personal subjective control. He has reminded the army of its Sandinista revolutionary origins, expanded its governmental role, and co-opted officers with material rewards. Over the last decade, this three-part strategy has won him more power over the armed forces than any other Nicaraguan president has wielded in the post-revolutionary period. With the close cooperation of EN Command-
er-in-Chief General Julio César Avilés, the Sandinista leader has gained the de facto ability to alter the composition of the military High Command. Nevertheless, it is difficult to know how loyal the armed forces would be to the Ortegas in a future regime crisis. Thus far, Ortega’s successful economic, social, and anti-crime policies have made him a popular chief executive despite his authoritarian actions. But, rapidly dwindling financial support from Venezuela is making it harder for Ortega to maintain his success. In addition, the United States and the OAS may soon react more forcefully against Ortega’s gross manipulation of elections and courts. The wily Sandinista leader and his wife may well weather these storms, but if changed conditions one day swell the size of the opposition and send many thousands of pro-democracy protesters into the streets, the Ortegas will need to be able to call on the army they have so carefully cultivated. This analysis suggests that there is a significant possibility that the Army of Nicaragua would not answer that call.

References


