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## Autonomy and the Miskito Indian Community of Nicaragua

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*The following article continues ALB's comparative examination of the struggles of other indigenous peoples. Penelope Andrews places the Miskito Indian fight for autonomy within the historical and political context of the Sandinista revolution. Much can be learnt from the recent initiative of the Sandinista government in drafting the **Autonomy Law** which recognises the right of its indigenous peoples to self-determination.*

## Introduction

In 1979 Nicaragua experienced a national revolution when the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) captured the capital, Managua, and the dictatorship of President Anastasio Somoza abruptly came to a halt. The Somoza family had ruled Nicaragua for many decades and had during that time unleashed great suffering and misery on almost the entire Nicaraguan population.

The official policy of the Sandinista government was based on the introduction of a more egalitarian system into Nicaraguan society, and indeed the victory of the Sandinistas brought a host of radical changes to the country. These changes were most prevalent in the areas of health, education and land reform. (1) Unfortunately, attempts on the part of the government to institute these changes in Nicaragua were met with a hostile response by the administration in the United States; an administration bent on undermining the plans of the Sandinista government,

The American government was displeased with the Sandinista government's official policy for a whole host of reasons, and these reasons all pointed towards Washington's fears about losing influence in Central and South America. The administration in the White House therefore set in motion a sophisticated and concerted ideological

enthusiasm for progressive change in Nicaraguan society has all but been halted.

The Nicaraguan government and people have in the last few years utilised valuable resources in an attempt to survive amidst the economic and social chaos and suffering that have resulted as a consequence of the contra war. Human rights and civil liberties (of individuals and groups) have been a heavy casualty of this war.

The focus of international attention on developments in Nicaragua in the last few years has, inter alia, highlighted the plight of certain indigenous groups. More specifically the rights of the Miskito Indian population on the Atlantic Coast has engendered considerable

debate as the community has found itself emeshed in the conflict between the contra rebels and the Nicaraguan government (3) The Reagan administration has found it propitious to focus on the tensions between the Sandinista government and the Miskito communi-



A Miskito woman at Tasba Pri, 1982 (Photo: Cordelia Dilg)

and material effort to thwart the legitimacy and the very existence of the alleged "Soviet backed communist government" in Managua (2) The Washington-orchestrated war by counter-revolutionary forces or contra rebels has meant that the initial spurt of

ty as an example of their (the Sandinista's) oppressive policies and have touted this as a flagrant violation of human rights. This opportunistic and simple explanation ignores the very complex political reality of the Atlantic Coast and its historical relationship with the Pacific Coast. (4)

### A Brief History

The Atlantic Coast comprises half the land mass of Nicaragua. Tensions between the country's two main regions (the Pacific and Atlantic coasts) have their origins in the 17th and 18th centuries when the Miskitos allied themselves with the British to defend against incursions by the Spanish. Both parties saw the alliance as expedient: the British to protect their commercial domination of the Caribbean region; and the Miskitos sought protection from the British against the ravages of Spanish imperialism. (5)

The British secured their position in this alliance by entrenching the position of the Miskito monarchy and for several decades a line of Miskito kings, educated in England and loyal to the British crown, served British interests on the Atlantic coast. Britain supplied the Miskitos with arms and ammunition; all the while the resistance of the indigenous peoples was channelled against Spanish colonialism in favor of British interests. At the same time the seeds of distrust and prejudice against the Pacific coast, which was to linger for several decades, was being sown. (6)

In 1838 Nicaragua gained its independence and in 1860 the Treaty of Managua was signed between Britain and the new republic. This effectively meant that the Atlantic region came under the sovereignty of the government of Managua. The area was designated a Miskito reserve and the Miskito King retained the authority to grant land titles. In 1894 the Miskito reserve was abolished and the Atlantic coast incorporated fully into Nicaragua. (7)

Between the late 1890's and the early 1900's, United States companies

obtained permission from the Miskito king (who still had the authority to grant land titles) for the expansion of banana plantations throughout the Atlantic Coast region. This heralded the beginnings of United States economic and political involvement, which soon came to dominate not only the region, but Nicaragua itself. In fact, as an insignia to their intentions, the United States Marines invaded Nicaragua in 1912 and remained there on and off until the Somoza dynasty came to power in 1936. (8)

Over the succeeding decades, United States companies and the Somoza families business interests plundered the region's natural resources, which involved massive quantities of gold, silver, lumber and seafood. Resistance to the pillage was met with brutality (on the part of Somoza's agents) or co-optation (access to United States goods and relatively high wages) and United States cultural values were reinforced by missionaries and the intense campaign provided by the Alliance for Progress in the 1960's and 1970's. (9)

### The National Revolution In Nicaragua

By the time the Sandinista government came to power in 1979, the Atlantic Coast legacy was one of abandonment and dire deprivation. The standard of living of the majority of the inhabitants was miserable, there was hardly an infrastructure and in fact the indigenous population had no concept of, and in fact, no faith in the central government in Managua. These decades of neglect had a dual consequence: firstly, because they were so isolated, the coastal peoples were able to develop their own traditions, customs, language, religious and cultural patterns which were distinct from those developed on the Pacific Coast. Secondly, there developed a justifiable mistrust for the authorities in Managua, which was to prove problematic for the Sandinista government when they attempted to introduce their national agenda for development on the Atlantic

Coast. (10)

One of the first activities that the Sandinistas undertook with the indigenous people was the establishment of an organisation, MISURASATA, which brought together the Miskito, Sumu and Rama people on the Atlantic coast. In 1980, MISURASATA, put forward its programme and claims in a document entitled General Directions, a document which affirmed Nicaraguan sovereignty over the Atlantic Coast. (11)

In the first year after the setting up of MISURASATA relations between it and the government were good. In 1981, however, problems began to surface. The reasons were complex and varied, but it appears that a fundamental source of the conflict was the perceived insensitivity of the central government towards the indigenous peoples. When Sandinista representatives arrived on the Atlantic Coast they assumed the social and economic policies devised in Managua could apply to the Atlantic Coast. In their enthusiasm and zeal to implement these policies, they ignored the traditions and indeed the complex history of the region. Their narrow focus on redressing economic and social problems came to a clash with a growing sense of ethnic identity among the Miskito community, an ethnic identity which in fact burgeoned during the days of the struggle for liberation led by the Sandinistas. This conflict was immediately utilised by indigenous leaders, who, playing on traditional animosity between the country's two coasts, promoted a separatist movement (which the Reagan administration found expedient to encourage and support). (12)

It is important to point out that even though the Sandinista government appeared insensitive to the cultural and related needs of the Miskito community while implementing their policies of national development, they did achieve significant improvement in the material conditions of the community. For example, for the first time in Nicaraguan history the central government genuinely took full responsibility

for the education and health system of the Atlantic region. (13)

To certain sections of the Miskito leadership, however, this was not sufficient and in 1981 armed Miskito and other indigenous groups, with the help of the C.I.A. carried out a series of attacks against communities and government posts on the Honduran borders. The government responded with the evacuation of several communities; these measures were criticised strongly in anti-Sandinista quarters and used substantially in Washington's propaganda campaign against the Sandinista government. The armed confrontation continued for a few years.

During 1984 negotiations began between the indigenous people of the Atlantic coast and the central government. These negotiations revolved not only around solving the armed conflict, but initiatives were also set in motion for the discussion of regional autonomy for the region. A general amnesty was declared shortly thereafter by the government whereby Miskito Indians who had joined the contra rebels could return to Nicaragua without reprisals. (14) The autonomy project was initiated by the setting up of an Autonomy Commission which prepared a draft autonomy proposal containing, inter alia, a statement of general principles, the objectives of regional autonomy and a proposal for the structure, functions and organisation of the autonomous regional government.

Consultation on the autonomy proposal began in earnest in 1985 (15) and in 1986 a multi-ethnic assembly was held with representatives of all ethnic groups and communities of the Atlantic Coast. At that assembly consensus was sought on crucial issues such as the borders of the autonomous region, the use of natural resources and the structure and electoral system of the regional government. Thereafter the Autonomy Commission set to work on the draft of the Autonomy Law to be ratified in a later multi-ethnic assembly in 1987, and further debate and ratification by the National Assembly. The Autonomy

Law was passed in 1987.

### The Autonomy Law

The principles on which the Autonomy Law was based were encapsulated in the Autonomy Commission's proposals. Amongst others, it stated that,

*'...Our political Constitution holds that Nicaragua is a multi-ethnic nation and recognises the right of the Atlantic Coast Communities to preserve their cultural identity, their languages, art and culture, as well as the right to use and enjoy the waters, forests and communal lands for their own benefit. It also recognises their rights to the creation of special programs designed to contribute to their development while respecting their right to live and organise themselves according to their legitimate cultural and historical conditions.'*(16)

The main provisions in the law are outlined thus:-

the setting up of autonomous regime for the regions of the Atlantic Coast, within the unitary Nicaraguan state. The law specifically provides for two autonomous regions to exercise jurisdiction over the indigenous peoples. (Articles 1-6)

although Spanish is the official language of the Nicaraguan state, the languages of the communities of the Atlantic Coast will be official within the autonomous regions. (Art. 7)

The general functions of the autonomous regions were to include:-

1) Participation in the planning process and programs of national development within the region;

2) Administration in co-ordination with the corresponding ministries, the programs related to health, education, culture, basic goods distribution and communal services, as well as the establishment of economic, social and cultural projects in the region.

3) Promotion of the rational use of

the waters, forests and communal lands for the benefit and enjoyment of the Atlantic peoples.

4) Promotion of national culture, as well as the study, preservation promotion, development, and dissemination of the different cultures and traditions of the Atlantic Coast's communities.

5) Promotion of the traditional exchange with the Caribbean countries in accordance with the national laws and established procedures.

6) Establishment of regional taxes. (Art. 8)

Article 11 outlines rights to which the inhabitants of the Atlantic Coast are entitled. They include the right to promote their languages, religions and cultures and to be educated in their own language. They are also entitled to their own forms of communal, collective or individual ownership and transfer of land and have the right to utilise and benefit from their natural resources in accordance with national development plans. Article 36 defines communal property as land that has traditionally belonged to the indigenous communities and specifically provides that communal lands cannot be sold, seized, or taxed and that their communal status cannot expire. The law also sets out in detail the administration of the autonomous regions, clearly outlining how the various authorities are to operate, their functions, their representation, their electoral procedures and particularly their co-ordination with and accountability to the central authorities in Managua.

Article 32 outlines the operation of the budget of the autonomous regions. It makes provision for the setting up of regional taxes, an earmarked fund from the general budget of the country, and the establishment of a Special Development Fund which will be composed of national and foreign donations, as well as extraordinary monies not included in the budget.

### Conclusion

The law in its draft form represents

a unique and important step in the search for a just solution not only for Nicaragua's indigenous Miskito community, but also for all societies seeking a just and progressive solution for the aspirations of their indigenous populations. For Australia this is particularly pertinent, as the government tries to grapple with various demands put forward by the Aboriginal communities throughout the continent.

What I have outlined is a very brief and incomplete sketch of an obviously complex and dynamic evolution of Nicaraguan history; a history which is still unfolding. But the endeavour has been to highlight the struggle of the indigenous Miskito community, and attempts by the Nicaraguan government to deal with their demands sympathetically and fairly. The law has only been in operation for a few months, and as is the case with legislation of this kind, the teething problems will be immense. But the trial has just begun - it is a model worth scrutinising.

**Footnotes**

1. Black, George **Triumph Of The People; The Sandinista Revolution In Nicaragua** Zed books, London (1981) 190-222; See also Harris, Richard L. and Carlos M. Vilas **Nicaragua; A Revolution Under Siege** Zed Books, London (1985) 1-9

2. See Grossman, Karl **Nicaragua; America's New Vietnam?** The Permanent Press, New York (1984); See also **Human Rights And U.S. Foreign Policy: The First Decade 1973 - 1983** Report of the American Association for the International Commission of Jurists (1984).

3. The population of the Atlantic Coast is made up as follows:- 182,000 Mestizos, 67-70,000 Miskitos, 26,000 Creoles, 5-7,000 Sumus, 15,000 Garifonas or Black Caribs and 700 Rama. See Burger, Julian **Report From The Frontier; The State Of The**

**Indigenous Peoples** Zed Books, London (1987) 238; See also Ortiz, Roxanne Dunbar **Indians Of The Americas; Human Rights And Self-Determination** Zed Books, London (1984)

4. See generally Dozier, Craig L. **Nicaragua's Mosquito Shore; The Years Of British And American Presence** The University of Alabama Press (1985)

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid. See also Burger op cit.

7. Burger op cit. 238.

8. Ortiz op cit, 210-217

9. Walker, Thomas W. **Nicaragua; The First Five Years** Praeger (1979) 15-16 See also Zwerling, Philip and Connie Martin **Nicaragua; A New Kind Of Revolution** Lawrence Hill & Company (1985) 153.

10. See generally Ortiz op cit.

11. The document contained a series of recommendations which were

related to land, education, political participation, economic integration, cultural, linguistic, social, religious, economic and political rights. See MISURASATA document **Linamentos Generales** 1982 cited in Burger op cit. 239.

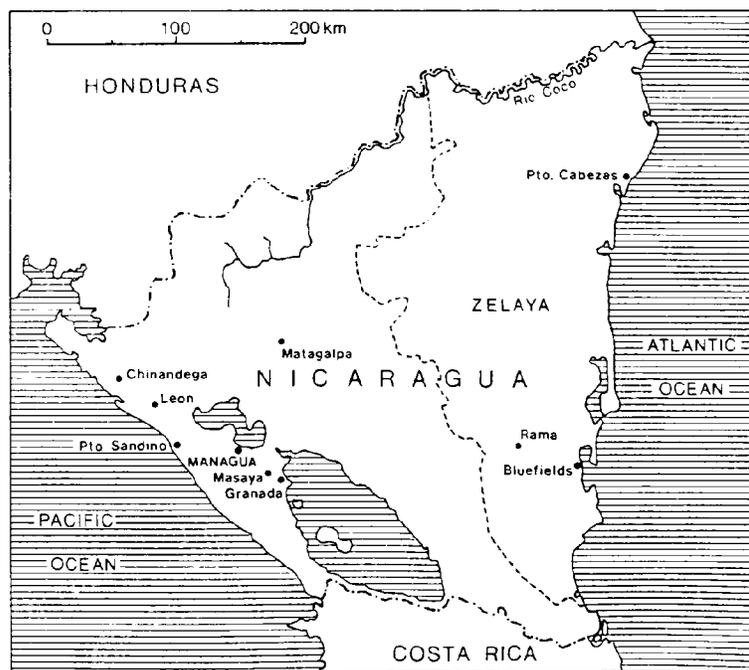
12. See generally Dixon, Marlene (ed) **On Trial; Reagan's War Against Nicaragua** Zed Books, London (1985)

13. Zwerling and Martin op cit, 162

14. taped interviews with Miskito women: ABC National Radio, Late Night Live April 1988.

15. An extensive consultation process using local volunteers was conducted to ensure that all members of the local communities were able to voice their opinions on the question of autonomy. House to house interviews were conducted, pamphlets were distributed in the workplace and peasant communities in the outlying areas were approached.

16. Autonomy Commission Report preamble to proposed Autonomy Law (April 1987).



Map of Nicaraguan Atlantic Coast