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The Return of Sultanism and Political Repression in Nicaragua*

El retorno del sultanismo y la represión política en Nicaragua

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ABSTRACT

The article examines Nicaragua's transformation towards a sultanistic regime. Describing the Nicaraguan developments in 2023 through the sultanistic perspective is useful for understanding the type of repression unleashed by the regime, the political strategy of the Ortega-Murillo governing couple, as well as for understanding the possible future fate of the regime which faces succession dilemmas due to its evident dynasticization. The article focuses on the modes of repression carried out by the regime, including the proscription of the remaining opposition parties as well as the intensified harassment of the Catholic Church, leading opposition figures and the business community. Demonstrating that the current political context satisfies the core attributes of sultanism, the article suggests that these features solidified in 2023. The article elucidates potential future trajectories for Nicaragua based on a comparison with similar regimes.

Keywords: Nicaragua, sultanistic regime, Daniel Ortega, political repression

RESUMEN

El artículo examina la transformación de Nicaragua hacia un régimen sultanista. Describir los desarrollos nicaragüenses en 2023 desde la perspectiva sultanista es útil para entender el tipo de represión desatada por el régimen, la estrategia política de la pareja gobernante Ortega-Murillo, así como para comprender el posible destino futuro del régimen, que enfrenta dilemas de sucesión debido a su evidente dinasticización. El artículo se centra en los modos de represión llevados a cabo por el régimen, incluyendo la proscripción de los parti-

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dos de oposición restantes, así como el acoso intensificado a la Iglesia Católica, a los principales líderes de la oposición y a la comunidad empresarial. Al demostrar que el contexto político actual satisface los atributos centrales del sultanismo, el artículo sugiere que estas características se solidificaron en 2023. El artículo elucida trayectorias potenciales futuras para Nicaragua basándose en una comparación con regímenes similares.

Palabras clave: *Nicaragua, régimen sultanista, Daniel Ortega, represión política*

I. INTRODUCTION

Nicaragua has witnessed a process of deepening and tightening of its neopatrimonial autocratic regime over the recent years, abandoning any features of a hybrid regime and finalizing an authoritarian lockdown by 2021 (Martí i Puig 2013; Martí i Puig, Rodríguez, Serrá 2022). The previously relatively stable neopatrimonial and corporatist setting - almost a perfect neopatrimonial dictatorship, to paraphrase Mario Vargas Llosa - was severely shaken by the 2018-2019 crisis, followed by the COVID-19 calamity, after which the regime threw off any pretensions of a competitive facade. It organized sham elections in November 2021 with all real challengers imprisoned (Thaler and Mosinger 2022) and went through a process of internal reformulation[1] that created an autocracy with increasingly bizarre and surrealist features. A writer and the country's former vice-president, Sergio Ramírez, commented that it reached a level when novelists "have to lower the profile of reality so that it does not seem so exaggerated", because "if we say that a regime makes its decisions based on the designs of a sorcerer, of palmistry... no one will believe this" (El País 2023a). The analyzed deepening and tightening of the government's control over the society converts Nicaragua into a second most closed dictatorship in Latin America after Cuba. Even the Venezuelan regime remains more competitive and less repressive, in spite of its frequent moves towards a dialogue with the opposition being followed by sudden returns to its previous harsh treatment.

We argue that the developments in 2023 solidified the regime transformation towards sultanism. Originating in the writings of Max Weber who referred to sultanism as a traditional form of domination which *"develops an administration and a military force which are purely personal instruments of the master"* (Weber 1978: 231), the concept was further refined by Juan Linz to denote a specific type of non-democratic regime (Chehabi & Linz 1998). This added further conceptual dimensions beyond Weber's original distinction between patrimonial authority, typical of sultanism, from modern rational-legal authority (see Weber 1978: 232). Sultanism as a non-democratic regime also encompasses personal rulership exercising power without restraint and at their own discretion, arbitrary personal decisions unconstrained by ideological justifications, widespread corruption, the personal submission of the ruler's staff to the ruler,

[1] A term originally coined by Alfred Stepan for a possible path toward redemocratization (Stepan 1986)

and the familial and dynastic character of the regime (Chehabi & Linz 1998). We argue that analyzing the Nicaraguan developments through the sultanistic perspective is useful to understanding the type of repression unleashed by the regime, the political strategy of the Ortega-Murillo couple, as well as to understanding the possible future fate of the regime.

As for the character of the regime repression in 2023, the regime completed the elimination of political opposition, mostly by exiling it, and directed its attacks on civil society actors, parts of the business community (its partner until the 2018-2019 crisis), and the Catholic Church. The Ortega-Murillo family tightened its grip on power, which reinforced the highly personalistic rule supported by the governing party and security forces, who in turn were cooperating with paramilitary activists that the government could mobilize. Furthermore, the international context became highly conducive to the tightening of the dictatorial and strongly repressive features of the ruling regime. Although the regime appears to be successful in overcoming the internal crisis of 2018-2019 and neutralizing most political, economic and societal opposition, the very nature of Nicaragua's personalist and neopatrimonial rule presents future challenges common to any sultanistic regime in an economically dependent country. The advanced age and fragile health of Daniel Ortega (Despacho 505 2023b, La Prensa 2023b) and the allegedly low popularity of his vice-president and wife, Rosario Murillo, among part of the high echelons of the governing party (Treminio 2021; Divergentes 2023b) may provoke a crisis of succession. The developments during 2023 also seem to indicate that Ortega's son Laureano was chosen to become the heir of the political dynasty. Yet, this dynasticization of executive power and the creation of a family business empire may provoke a negative response not only from the population but also from other ambitious actors and armed forces, as occurred in other contexts (e.g. Zimbabwe, Angola, partly Egypt).

The structure of the article is the following. First, we focus on the modes of repression carried out by the regime throughout 2023. That year witnessed not only the proscription of the remaining opposition parties, intensified harassment of the Catholic Church and of the business community, but also the bizarre act of depriving many opposition figures of their citizenship and exiling them. Second, we focus on the changing nature of the Nicaraguan regime from the perspective of sultanism, arguing that it satisfies the core attributes of this regime type and that it has solidified these features in 2023. Third, comparing and contrasting with other personalist/personalized dictatorships, we draw comparative lessons for Nicaragua in terms of the solutions to the sultanistic problem of dynastic succession.

II. AUTOCRATIZATION AND REPRESSION IN 2023

Throughout 2023, the existing authoritarian features of the Nicaraguan regime deepened. Exiling, arresting and banning were the three main processes that placed Nicaragua at the helm of Latin American autocratization, turning it into

a highly repressive country. The sham November 2021 elections were held with all relevant opposition candidates behind bars, stripping the regime of any electoral facade and placing it firmly in the category of full autocracies. Later developments in 2022 included a takeover of all municipalities and further repression of the remaining opposition, media and NGOs (with the legendary former Sandinista fighter Hugo Torres dying in prison in February 2022 and over 2000 NGOs being closed down; see HRW 2023). By 2023, the regime's main targets were the Church, universities[2] and certain segments of the business sector. By the end of 2022 there were at least 235 prisoners defined as political in Nicaragua (FIDH 2022) and the repression started to affect even members of the opponents' families (El País 2023b). The use of torture seems to be widespread (CNM 2023). This repression went hand in hand with the growing control of the governing family over the country. The circle of growing repression developed bizarre characteristics such as the decision to prohibit tourists from entering the country with binoculars and video cameras, a measure that was taken and quickly reversed in January 2023. The permits to use such equipment were to be issued by the National Cinematheque, an organization directed by Idania Castillo, ex-wife of Juan Carlos Ortega Murillo, son of the ruling couple (Confidencial 2023a). After Miss Nicaragua won the title of Miss Universe 2023, the regime exiled the director of the enterprise, Karen Celebertti, accusing her and her husband and son of being traitors against the motherland and stripping them of their Nicaraguan citizenship. The police claimed they had evidence that Celebertti had turned the beauty pageants into "political traps and ambushes, financed by foreign agents" (Reuters 2023). The real motive, however, were the photos of the contest's winner, Sheynnis Palacios, participating in the 2018 protests that appeared after her win.

A milestone in the repressive trajectory of the regime occurred in February 2023 when 222 political prisoners, including many high ranking leaders, were forcibly exiled - being sent to Washington in an airplane - and deprived of Nicaraguan citizenship and their property shortly thereafter.[3] This does not have a precedent in modern history and confirms a tendency of contemporary autocrats in economically dependent countries to use political prisoners as bargaining chips when facing Western sanctions. As a result of this move the regime literally removed all political opposition by moving it abroad. Rolando Álvarez, a former bishop of Matagalpa under house arrest since August 2022, refused to be deported/liberated. He was finally exiled in January 2024 after being condemned to 26 years in prison. After the mass deportation of February 2023, 94 further Nicaraguans were stripped of their citizenship, including religious

[2] The government had already canceled the legal status of 18 universities, between December 2021 and February 2022 (HRW 2023).

[3] This group was formed by well known sandinista guerrilla fighters Dora María Téllez and Víctor Hugo Tinoco, student leaders Lesther Alemán and Max Jérez, former potential presidential candidates Juan Sebastián Chamorro, Miguel Mora, Félix Maradiaga, Cristiana Chamorro, Arturo Cruz, journalists Pedro Joaquín Chamorro and Juan Lorenzo Holzman (both from the banned newspaper La Prensa), peasant leaders Pedro Mena and Freddy Navas, and other arrested political and societal leaders.

authorities, diplomats, former state officials, human rights defenders, Sandinista dissidents, journalists, academics, students, businessmen and others, all declared "traitors" of the motherland (Despacho 505 2023a). The most specific target group of the repression were journalists. Since the 2018 crisis at least 242 of them have fled the country, and only in 2023, there were 83 cases of aggression against reporters. Among those attacks are deportation, illegal stripping of nationality, confiscation of assets, and forced exile (Castillo Vado 2024).

Throughout 2023, the Ortega regime escalated its attacks on the Catholic Church, one of the few remaining organized platforms outside of the regime. In August, it stripped the Society of Jesus of its legal status and ordered the expropriation of its assets. The Ortega-Murillo regime carried out 667 attacks against the Catholic Church between 2018 and August 2023 (Molina 2023). Among those acts are the prohibition to enter Nicaraguan territory and the expulsion of priests and bishops. Other attacks involved the banning of religious processions. During public acts, Ortega accused the bishops and the priests of being "golpistas" or coup mongers (Miranda 2023c). By December 30th of 2023, 13 priests and two bishops were imprisoned (DW, 2023; Pullella, 2024) and between February and October 2023, 20 Catholic priests were sent into exile (Confidencial, 2023g). One of the imprisoned bishops, Isidro del Carmen Mora Ortega, was detained on December 20, one day after he commented that the Episcopal Conference was praying for the imprisoned bishop Rolando Álvarez. Bishop Mora Ortega was in charge of a parish church in the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua, where the Sandinista regime had recently gained more influence and where it had concentrated disproportionate repression compared to the rest of Nicaragua in 2023. Both bishops are the second most important hierarchs of the Catholic Church in Nicaragua, behind only Cardinal Leopoldo Brenes (Miranda 2023b)[4].

The Church also faced other bizarre activities of the regime, such as the ban on public vigils for the Stations of the Cross and Easter. The Nicaraguan embassy in Rome (following the Pope's comparison of the Nicaraguan regime to Hitler's dictatorship) was closed down. While Ortega referred to the Church as a "mafia," Rosario Murillo has frequently called the bishops and priests "devilish", "Satans", and the "representatives of demons" (Confidencial 2024), employing a terminology which is highly unexpected from someone who previously formed part of Marxist groups. The next step against the Catholic Church was the confiscation in mid-August 2023 of the property of the highest-ranked university in the country, Universidad Centroamericana - UCA) run by the Society of Jesus, accusing it of "terrorism". Renamed to Universidad Nacional Casimiro Sotelo,[5] it has reportedly faced many problems recruiting students since the seizure (Divergentes 2024). UCA played a significant role during the

[4] In January 2024, a group of clergymen released from prison was sent to exile in Rome, including Rolando Álvarez and Isidro Mora.

[5] The institution is named after an anti-somocista student activist, Casimiro Sotelo, assassinated in 1967.

2018 protests. It was an important headquarters where the main leaders of the protests, i.e. university students, gathered and demonstrated their discontent. The university was also the last bastion of critical thinking among the higher education institutions across the country (Baires 2023).

Further steps to remove any remaining sources of potential opposition, were directed towards economic actors, most of whom had been previously incorporated within the corporatist governance. This was intended to provide a mutually profitable system of relations between the government and the business class prior to the regime crisis in 2018-2019. On March 6, 2023, the Ministry of Governance (later in the year renamed the Ministry of Interior, an explicit flashback to the 1980s) canceled the legal personality - along with 17 other business organizations - of the crucial business association, COSEP. The argument for such a resolution was an administrative shortcoming, not having completed the registration validation process and presenting inconsistencies in the information to the authorities (La Prensa 2023a). In June, the police confiscated the properties of Piero Coen Ubilla, an exiled businessman stripped of his Nicaraguan citizenship, and the head of the Coen group active in money transfers (Western Union) and agribusiness. By doing this, the government crossed another virtual red line in its approach to repression, targeting for the first time a truly wealthy person. This conforms to a pattern known from sultanistic regimes in which the ruler acts independently of any autonomous organized social sectors interfering even with elite business interests. This is all the more intriguing as most of Nicaragua's economic class had been a fourth pillar of the regime until the 2018-2019, alongside the FSLN, its "militantes" (including the paramilitary groups), the incorporated "opposition", the Sandinista-dependent state bureaucracy, and the armed forces (above all the police, while the army kept at least a semblance of neutrality).

III. THE REPRESSION OF POLITICAL OPPOSITION

Throughout 2023, the regime continued to target the remaining political opposition. It has used both coercion against individual opposition figures as well as tactics to eliminate the legal and organizational presence of the remaining groups. The repression affected those who participated in the 2018 protests, a sign of the regime's vindictive character. In a wave of detentions taking place across the whole Nicaraguan national territory in May 2023, the Police arrested at least 57 citizens and the prosecutors accused 30 of them of committing treason (Confidencial, 2023b).

As for collective repression, the last internal opposition party - YATAMA - was finally proscribed in October 2023. YATAMA previously had a past as a co-opted party allied with the FSLN. It represented indigenous voters in the two Caribbean autonomous regions. Its leader, Brooklyn Rivera, was arrested despite his legal status as a deputy protected by immunity (Divergentes 2023c).

Rivera's fate represents a political trajectory which is not unusual in Nicaragua. Fighting against Sandinistas during the 1980s as a representative of the moderate faction of the Contras movement, Rivera later reached an agreement with his former enemies and became a supporter of Daniel Ortega after 2006. He was deprived of his parliamentary seat by the Sandinistas in 2015, when facing accusations of illicit sales of land and causing violence in the Caribbean region. Reelected in 2016 and 2021, he remained the only YATAMA's deputy. Rivera has remained under surveillance by the government since April 2023, when he returned irregularly to the country after participating in the United Nations' forum on indigenous peoples in New York and the regime denied his entry back to Nicaragua (Cultural Survival, 2023).

YATAMA's fate only followed earlier party bans, such as the canceling of the legal personhood in 2021 of the *Citizens for Liberty* (CxL) party, a relatively conservative group in comparison to other groups within the oppositional alliance *Blue and White National Unity* (UNAB). Regarding the fate of the UNAB, one of its members, Donald Alvarenga, a former official of the Ministry of the Interior in the 1980s who became a dissident and leader of the opposition in Chichigalpa, Chinandega, became the first person to be condemned under the law against cybercrimes, passed by the end of 2020. Alvarenga openly criticized the government on WhatsApp and Facebook, and was among the 222 political prisoners who were expelled and stripped of their Nicaraguan citizenship (Divergentes, 2024). Thus, for the moment the UNAB has been dismembered and most of its members are in exile and struggling to survive in other countries.

An important member of the UNAB, the party UNAMOS which included former dissident Sandinistas, was similarly targeted. Most of its leaders are in exile or are stateless. The recently elected party president, Luis Blandón, a young activist is in exile in Spain, while its vice-president, Dulce María Porras Aguilar, has been exiled to Costa Rica since 2018 and had her Nicaraguan citizenship removed. In 2021, most UNAMOS political leaders were incarcerated and spent over 18 months in the infamous "El Chipote" prison. Among the political prisoners were its president, Suyen Barahona, along with other well-known political opposition leaders and members of the party, including Ana Margarita Vijil, Dora María Téllez, Victor Hugo Tinoco, and Hugo Torres, who died in prison on February 12, 2022. Several other members from the municipal and department structures of UNAMOS were released and expelled from Nicaragua as part of the group of 222 in February 2023. The former president of the party, Suyen Barahona expressed that they should continue with a strategy of international isolation and weakening of the Ortega-Murillo regime through the imposition of more sanctions and pressure (Artículo 66, 2023). Thus, the party UNAMOS is operating mostly from abroad.

With past opposition parties banned, exiled and dispersed, the forming of a new oppositional alternative started taking place in 2023. The *Monteverde Group* appeared as the spearhead of the political opposition, although its members recognize that this is an incipient movement and that it does not pretend to rep-

resent all the diverse movements and parties that oppose Ortega-Murillo rule. This organization, whose existence was publicly revealed only in June 2023 and which operates mostly from exile, gathered members of the UNAB, Civic Alliance, CxL, Unamos (formerly Sandinista Renovation Movement), and the peasant movement, among others (Divergentes 2023a). Among the most notorious members who have publicly recognized their involvement in this group are Eliseo Núñez (former liberal MP and technical advisor to the Civic Alliance), Alexa Zamora (member of the political council of UNAB), Luciano García (president of the organization Hagamos Democracia and former councilor of Managua by the Liberal Independent Party), Francisca Ramírez (leader of the peasant movement), and Ana Quirós (feminist and activist of the LGBT+ movement), among others (Miranda, 2023a). In some ways, the Monteverde Group is the continuation of the UNAB. By the end of January 2024 they invited seven more organizations to join their alliance and have as their main objective to achieve a democratic transition in a peaceful way (González, 2021). The Monteverde Group has clarified that it does not pretend to be an electoral platform but that it seeks to unify the political opposition (Despacho 505, 2023c). The viability of this opposition platform remains to be seen as it will face the same challenge as did in all the previous attempts at common coordination: achieving unity while facing fierce coercion by the regime. Even if the opposition succeeded in unifying its heterogeneous voices, it will run the risk of becoming an isolated voice of exiled groups (similar to the Cuban opposition in the US). In any case, the ability of the opposition camp to achieve unity is a crucial issue. Not only do the strategies of opposition parties - institutional or extra-institutional - matter for democratic outcomes (Gamboa 2023), but also the historical fragmentation of opposition parties in Nicaragua - and other recent cases, especially Venezuela - contributed to the democratic erosion and the eventual establishment of autocratic regimes.[6] The only viable oppositional strategy in Nicaragua at this point seems to be extra-institutional.

IV. THE RETURN OF SULTANISM TO NICARAGUA

Whereas the repression of 2018-2019 marked a full transition from a competitive authoritarian regime to a fully authoritarian one, the 2023 developments suggest further shifts within the category of non-democratic regimes. In many respects, the regime now satisfies the "sultanistic" or rather neosultanistic label (Chehabi, Linz 1998). Whereas some real existing features of the Nicaraguan regime (such as the role of its ideological justification and the character of the party) are situated further from the core of the concept, we argue that it is in fact currently conceptually embraced by the ideal-typical definition of sultanism. This is defined by the following criteria that distinguish it from other

[6] Despite some significant differences in the paths towards autocracy with the Venezuelan regime (esp. opposition party building, response to protest movements), the Nicaraguan regime became the second example of a full autocracy arising from a formerly hybrid regime (Corrales 2023).

non-democratic regimes: (1) the blurring of the line between regime and state, (2) personalism with a tendency toward dynasticism, (3) constitutional hypocrisy by maintaining a constitutional facade to cover arbitrary power grabs, (4) the narrow social bases of sultanism, (5) distorted capitalism (Chehabi, Linz 1998).

The *blurring of the line between the regime and the state* refers to the classical Weberian treatment of patrimonialism where the ruler directly and arbitrarily intervenes in the structure of governance disregarding internal norms in a context of widespread corruption and an absence of legal-rational norms, and where deprofessionalized armed forces are converted into instruments of personal power (Chehabi & Linz 1998: 10-13). These neopatrimonial regime features have been abundant in Nicaragua and intensified during 2023. The ruling family has continuously, arbitrarily and unexpectedly purged the state bureaucracy, diplomacy, judiciary and armed forces. November 2023 saw a police intervention in the headquarters of the fully loyal Supreme Court of Justice (CSJ) and a large purge within the justice apparatus, affecting almost a thousand personnel. This included Alba Luz Ramos, a historical Sandinista and president of the CSJ, accused of covering up corrupt behavior. The purge was carried out on Murillo's orders by the presidential "advisor", former policeman and bodyguard of ex-president Alemán[7], Horacio Rocha (El País 2023; Confidencial 2023d). Earlier, another historical Sandinista and Ortega's former vice-president, general Halleslevens, was purged from the Nicaraguan Council of Science and Technology (Conicyt), an entity attached to the Vice-Presidency, under Murillo's oversight (Divergentes 2023b). These purges limit the influence of important figures in the FSLN and increase the power of the ruling family[8].

The armed forces were similarly affected by the personal decisions of the ruling family, reversing earlier trends. During the 1990s, the Nicaraguan army went through a process of professionalization carried out by the Sandinista veterans. This was similar to other armies that had previously been involved in international crises that ended poorly and where the armies were depoliticized as a result (White 2017). Ortega reversed this trend and the army went through a process of de-professionalization and neopatrimonialization following the changes of the Military Code in 2014. This increased age limits for retirement for the officer corps and left the retirement of the generals to the discretionary

[7] Arnoldo Alemán, president between 1997 and 2002, was a crucial figure in Ortega's return to power, by changing the electoral laws and reaching other informal arrangements in the infamous pact in 2000 (Schwartz 2023). Alemán later played the role of "loyal opposition" with his Liberal Constitutionalist Party (PLC) within the system, which overturned the sentence to 20 years in prison for corruption for the ex-president. Yet, Alemán's wife - a deputy to the National Assembly - is one of the victims of political persecution in 2022 and figured among the group sent to the US in February 2023. On the other hand, Alemán's daughter, María Dolores Alemán, was ratified in October 2023 as a member of the Superior Council of the Comptroller General of the Republic by the National Assembly, a position she has held since 2014, which was proposed by Ortega.

[8] One of the victims of these internal purges has been Alfredo Marenco, an experienced intelligence and state security officer, former head of investigation and intelligence for Nicaragua's police, imprisoned in the early 2023.

decision of the commander-in-chief (La Prensa 2014; Martí i Puig 2016). There are 20 generals named by Ortega in the active service and the current commander-in-chief, general Juan Avilés, benefited from the change in the 2014 Military Code that allowed him to serve for more than one term (Confidencial 2023h). The army saw its budget increased by 380 % between 2007-2023, augmenting its number of enlisted troops from 10,553 to 15,705, obtaining also multiple benefits from the regime, including 184 pieces of agricultural land (Connectas 2023a). The regime has also created space for economic activities involving the army and even included it into many public acts connected with the ruling party and its symbols, thereby diminishing its institutional autonomy (Cuadra Lira, non dated).

Other armed entities have also been incorporated within the sultanistic logic. The main instrument of repression, police, grew substantially between 2007 and 2020 from 9,290 to 16,909 persons. However, the coercive power of the regime does not only rest in the hands of the formal armed forces but also in the hands of the paramilitary thugs (see Divergentes 2020a; Connectas, non dated, a), in a way similar to "colectivos" in Venezuela or even *Tontons Macouts* in Duvalier's Haiti or Batallones de Dignidad in Noriega's Panama. While the army has not been openly involved in the repression so far, it has provided the material for the paramilitary activists who brutally crushed the anti-government protests in 2018 (Klein, Cuesta and Chagalj 2022, Cuadra Lira, 2020). Informally, the paramilitaries in Nicaragua are connected to the governing FSLN and their membership largely overlaps.

Furthermore, consistent with the inner workings of sultanistic regimes, Nicaragua further witnessed a general deterioration of the institutionality and efficiency of its state. Considered for a long time as exceptional compared to the Northern Triangle states affected by violent crime and inefficient and corrupt administrations (see Francis 2020; Schrader 2017), the Ortega-Murillo family rule has reverted away from this positive situation. The state capture in alliance with organized crime has reportedly reached a kind of "drug settlement" between the state and the drug trade (Rocha, Rodgers, Weegels, 2023). Nicaragua also began to serve as a safe haven for several foreign political leaders accused of corruption and other criminal offenses in their countries. Nicaragua offered asylum to the former presidents of Panama (Martinelli), Salvador (Sánchez Cerén, Funes), collaborators of Honduran ex-president Orlando Hernández, and dozens of other fugitives from justice. Ortega's support for the invasions and land occupations of the - mainly - indigenous land on the Atlantic Coast, carried out with the tacit approval by the government is another dimension of the collusion of the state with illegal activities. The regime increased its repression on the Caribbean Coast throughout 2023 through its allies known as "colonos", i.e. the pro-government peasants, mostly mestizos, attacking indigenous communities for the control of lands (Artículo 66 2024). These "colonists" have been establishing agro-business in the natives' lands, as in the Bosawás Reserve.

Personalism indicated by a pronounced cult of personality around the leader and a tendency toward dynasticism is the second defining feature of sultanism. While lacking any more elaborate cult of personality, personalism has accompanied the Ortega government since his return to power in 2007 (Colburn & Cruz 2012). While dynastic strategies accompany politics even in some Latin American democracies (Behrend and Whitehead 2023), the prominent role of the Ortega-Murillo family members in the Nicaraguan state administration, economy or the media, as well as signs of future hereditary succession, has reached extreme levels. In this respect, Nicaragua follows past cases of sultanistic regimes, including the paradigmatic case of sultanism embodied in the dynastic succession of the three members of the Somoza family in Nicaragua until 1979. The changing role of Rosario Murrillo and Daniel Ortega's children since 2007 conforms to a pattern of progressive *dynasticization of the regime* which is typical of sultanism. This pattern is not too different from the ruling position of the erstwhile Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceauşescu and his wife Elena. They also gradually subdued the party leadership, launched reprisals against challengers, enhanced the cult rituals, and arbitrarily removed members of the party apparatus (Tismaneanu 1989), although both the economic structure of Romania and its linkages to USSR did not allow for a fully sultanistic government. Similar to pre-1989 Romanian Communist Party, the central apparatus of FSLN in Nicaragua became an extension of the ruling clan. Yet, during the crisis in December 1989, the Romanian army turned its arms against the ruling family instead of the society.

The growing importance of dynasticization in Nicaragua is clearly evidenced by the pattern of choosing Ortega's vice-presidential running mates. The earlier choices - in 2006 and 2011 - were carefully guided by strategic and electoral considerations. Jaime Morales, Ortega's Vice President between 2007 and 2012 was a former organizer of the Contras during the 1980s and a prominent Liberal politician during the 1990s standing in opposition to FSLN. This conforms to a Latin American pattern where running mates are often chosen strategically from other parties to appeal to a broader set of voters and construct alliances with other political forces (Marsteintredet & Uggla 2019). As a first visible step towards sultanization, Ortega converted his wife to his Vice Presidential running mate in his later reelections of 2016 and 2021. Furthermore, the eight children of the ruling family have also been assuming ever more public and official functions within the regime. Laureano Ortega has been involved in Nicaraguan diplomacy and cooperation with crucial allies in China, Iran and Russia, dealing publicly with the officials from these countries, including Sergei Lavrov (it was Laureano Ortega who signed an agreement in 2021 that switched Nicaragua's diplomatic allegiance from Taiwan to China) (Confidencial 2023e). His name frequently appears as a possible heir to the dynasty, yet the question remains if this will be an immediate rise to power and what role will his mother play in such a context. Although it is uncertain whether Murillo will be a viable and acceptable successor to her husband - or

whether the successor will be another member of the family - the dynasty is set to outlive Daniel Ortega.

Engaging in *constitutional hypocrisy* - by paying lip service to the constitutional provisions - is a third distinguishing feature of sultanistic regimes. On the one hand, personalist rulers of the past - including the Somozas in Nicaragua or Manuel Noriega in Panama - did not necessarily occupy the position that is constitutionally the most powerful, but served in less formally important functions such as heads of the military (Chehabi & Linz 1998: 17). The blurring of the distinction between official responsibilities between president Ortega and his vice-president Murillo in contemporary Nicaragua goes far in this direction, as there are many indications that the real locus of power does not reside with the presidency. The continuous power of Ortega's wife, since 2016 vice-president, Rosario Murillo, who is frequently called "co-president" (for her political trajectory see Salinas Maldonado, 2023) is striking. Partly due to Daniel Ortega's several health issues and a lack of charisma, it is Rosario Murillo who has taken the role of the visible head of the government (even in the negative sense as it is her who faces a lot of the internal discontent and is target of the brutal verbal hate speeches). The use and abuse of sham elections - most recently during the 2022 local elections in which FSLN gained all 153 mayoralties - is yet another facet of constitutional hypocrisy. Organizing, yet manipulating, the electoral process and even maintaining a semblance of a competitive process leveraging the "decorative functional pseudo-opposition" to prove the democratic legitimacy, has been an integral strategy of sultanistic regimes of the past as well (Chehabi & Linz 1998: 18).

The actions of the regime have increasingly *narrowed the social basis of the regime*, the fourth typical feature of sultanism. The relative stability of the regime prior to 2018 was built on a series of bargains with important actors and social movements. The political developments in 2023 further underscored the termination of such bargains with multiple actors. Not only the bargains with the business sector, the Church or the remaining opposition were cancelled by the regime, but facing the acute 2018 crisis and resorting to violent repression, the bargain with Indigenous, Afrodescendent or *campesino* anticanal movements also came to an abrupt end and has not been restored since (González 2023). Overall, contrary to pre-2018 trends when the FSLN government enjoyed sizable genuine popularity buoyed by the relative economic prosperity (Cruz-Feliciano 2021) during times when economic factors provided a robust prediction of its support (Perelló & Navia 2022), the regime's more recent actions have reduced this support substantially. Although we should treat any polls coming from Nicaragua very carefully, the Gallup polls indicate a very low support for the FSLN (16 %) and a high disapproval of Ortega's presidency (Confidencial 2023f).

The fifth and final attribute of sultanistic regimes concerns their particular political economy. Sultanism introduces a version of *distorted capitalism* that blurs the lines between the ruler's private wealth and the public treasury, establishes a kleptocratic state and makes arbitrary economic interventions. In Nicara-

gua, the ruling family has amassed economic and political power in a classical neopatrimonial way, with the Ortega's son Rafael as the main coordinator of the clan's economic activities. He acts as a person with the rank of minister but without any defined portfolio. Rafael Ortega had already administered the money that the family obtained from Gaddafi during the 1990's (La Prensa 2020). According to several sources, a significant part of the Venezuelan subsidies was privatized by the regime (Batis, Enríquez and Olivares, not dated). The ruling family controls the network of oil, advertising, media, mining and construction companies. The regime seems to be heavily involved in several illicit activities such as selling gold on the international market, a gold proceeding from either illegal mining and/or from Venezuela (Batiz, Enriquez and Olivares 2023). The president's children control media companies such as Canal 4, 8 and 13, and a grandchild is involved in the management of the football team.

Although the aforementioned attributes move the current Nicaraguan regime closer to the sultanistic category, there are also important divergences from the ideal-typical core. The tendency towards personalization in autocracies has been identified as the major trend in contemporary authoritarian politics (Leber, Carothers, and Reichert, 2022) even in highly institutionalized countries with a strong one-party tradition (as China). However, the Nicaraguan case is striking in the way that the Ortega-Murillo regime managed to control an ideologically strong, traditional and formerly well-institutionalized party, the FSLN, as well as to eliminate the internal dissent and control the armed forces. Ortega, who lacks personal charisma and cannot be compared to strong and popular "populist" leaders[9] (see Buben and Kouba 2023), managed to eliminate gradually most obstacles to his family's power. Yet, there are still visible sources of discontent with the concentration of power in even fewer hands, as has been manifested by the massive purge in the judiciary dominated by the Sandinistas where about ten percent of the personnel were dismissed, including magistrates.

Although a full sultanistic dictatorship is synonymous with personalist rule, the Nicaraguan regime still coexists with a historically strong and symbolically relevant political party, the FSLN, which was originally based on a Marxian (not Marxist) ideology and whose identity and discourse continues to be based on the historical legacy of opposing a capitalist personalist autocracy. However, the increasingly neopatrimonial features of the regime have transformed its discourse in unexpected ways, relying on patriarchal, conservative and undemocratic discursive mechanisms (Awadalla 2023). Moreover, as in any autocracy, the Ortega-Murillo dictatorship is dependent on the loyalty of the armed forces. As for its relations with the party, Ortega does not face the dilemma of other personalist autocrats whose political rise owes itself to a broader polit-

[9] Yet, the lack of personal charisma is partially compensated for by the charisma provided by the mystique of the Sandinista Revolution and the party, the FSLN. We owe our gratitude to Jeffrey L. Gould for this comment.

ical movement (see Leber et. al 2022). FSLN's exit from power in 1990 and its subsequent internal struggles removed important cadres from the party and triggered its "danielization". Still, the dilemma for many party cadres is the succession in the presidential office and the acceptance of either Rosario Murillo as a formal political leader, or another member of the family (presumably Laureno Ortega).

Finally, the sultanistic nature of the regime is somewhat weakened by its inclusionary discourse and its relatively broad network of patronage that it developed before 2018. Although this conciliatory and distributive way of governing gave way to a highly repressive one, it still is rooted in this previous experience of a decade-long inclusive neopatrimonialism. According to Richard Snyder the sultan's network can either be "inclusive, penetrating deeply into society", where the "vertical patron-client linkages both co-opt elites and extend the reach of the state's surveillance and control", or the state penetration into society is "relatively shallow" (Snyder 1998: 55-56). The retrospective historical research of cases identified as sultanistic has in many instances showed that even the prototypes of this type of regime achieved significant levels of popular support, did not govern without broader legitimacy and were relatively compatible with people's expectations and imagination of expectable behavior of power holders (see Derby 2009; Turits 2022; Gould 1987). Although Ortega has left behind the former corporatist and conciliatory features of the regime, the turn towards sultanism should not be considered without the legacy of a more inclusionary way of administering the country.

V. COMPARATIVE LESSONS FOR NICARAGUAN SULTANISM

What does the characterization of the Ortega-Murillo rule as sultanism reveal about the future trajectory of the regime? The accumulated experience with other personalist regimes or regimes where there was a tendency to secure a familiar succession, around the world provides some lessons in this respect. Crucially, the fates of other sultanistic regimes suggest that their peaceful transformation is unlikely and that they tend to collapse only when the sultan is violently overthrown (Eke & Kuzio 2000). As the demise of the sultanistic regimes during the Arab Spring has demonstrated, their apparent unshakability is only a mirage, while actually they are highly vulnerable due to the very strategies that they use to maintain themselves in power (Goldstone 2011). In the case of Libya, for example, the sultanistic features of the regime under Muammar Qadhafi's rule prevented its peaceful collapse because of non-existent institutional channels to mobilize the public and to organize authority (Tunesi 2023). The Latin American experience suggests that this type of regime more easily succumbs to concerted - often broad-based and multiclass efforts to overthrow the regime - relative to other types of non-democratic regimes (Wickham-Crowley 1992). In the case of Somoza's downfall, it was the patrimonial character of the regime - closed to all but personal favorites and characterized by increasing

ownership and seizures of the economy - that motivated a cross-class resistance that eventually toppled it in 1979 (Wickham-Crowley 1992: 271).

Apart from their structural weakness, the key to the survival of sultanistic regimes lies in their ability to project a dynastic pathway to political succession based on familial ties. In the few cases where sultanistic regimes managed to orchestrate a smooth power transfer following the death of the ruler, this has occurred in contexts where the rulers were unable or unwilling to push for dynastic succession. The cases of Niyazov's Turkmenistan and Karimov's Uzbekistan are instructive in this sense. While both failed to elevate their daughters to positions of power, the former leader's son harbored no political ambition and the latter *"missed the biological opportunity to orchestrate father–son succession"* (Anceschi 2021: 663).

The most recent successful dynastic succession and sultanization of the previously competitive authoritarianism in a neopatrimonial setting (Un 2020), occurred in Cambodia, an interesting case of such internal reformulation, taking place in a monarchy, i.e in a regime with a hereditary head of state (and not in a presidential setting). The long-term Prime Minister Hun Sen, a former revolutionary commander, managed in August 2023 to get his son Hu Manet elected unanimously as the prime minister by a parliament, after stepping down as head of the government, while keeping the leadership of the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP). Similar to Ortega, Hun Sen gradually obtained a full control of a once factious and internally divided left wing CPP, outlawed all genuine opposition, suppressing protests and civil society (Sutton 2018, Conochie 2023). Hun Manet was first named a Chief of the Joint Staff of the armed forces in 2018, being announced as the next PM in 2021. This dynastic transition can hardly be mitigated by the fact that, according to Hun Sen, in reality Hun Manet may be a child of a powerful spirit (The Cambodia Daily 2013).

Conversely, there are personalist and neopatrimonial regimes where hereditary "solutions" were pursued and where the autocrats' tendency to choose their successor from their family circle led to their fall, or where the supposedly successor beyond the family didn't respect its status. Robert Mugabe, a man of charisma acquired by a revolutionary struggle, tried to impose his second wife, Grace Mugabe, as the next president of Zimbabwe. However, detested by many revolutionary cadres from the governing ZANU-PF party (as well as by a significant part of society due to her lavish lifestyle and control over the president), Grace Mugabe was eventually unacceptable to other regime actors, and her husband was removed from power in a military coup in November 2017. In a complex economic and international context, the attempt to impose his wife as his successor was an important factor in Mugabe's "graceless" fall (Nyarota 2018; Asuelime 2018; Noyes 2020).

The apparent and resented plan by Hosni Mubarak in Egypt to make his son Gamal, deputy secretary-general of the ruling National Democratic Party, a civilian pillar of the regime, the next president (Brownlee 2008), augmented

the discontent inside the politically powerful army, and made it easier for the military to *de facto* remove Mubarak from office during the broad popular uprising (Henderson and Ganguly 2015). Although regime in Egypt was far from being sultanist, and it was dominated by the powerful military, the tendency to dynasticize it, seen as a threat to the army's old guard business (Giampaolo 2021: 10), caused more discontent and debilitated the loyalty of several regime actors. Angola represents yet another context comparable to Nicaragua that combined personalism, crony capitalism by the ruling family and a *de facto* single-party regime originating in the revolutionary struggle, even without a plan to secure dynastic succession. Jose Eduardo dos Santos, leader of the former guerilla MPLA party, allowed his children to achieve influential business positions, with his daughter Isabel becoming the head of the state oil company Sonangol and his other children controlling the sovereign fund, media and advertising (Dos Santos's second wife was involved in diamond mining). Yet, the country's next MPLA president, João Lourenço, also a former member of an anticolonial guerilla and a former president's ally, chosen by the party and initially considered dos Santos's puppet, managed to push the Dos Santos family out of business, even prosecuting Isabel for corruption) after his 2017 election (Roque 2022: 169-202).

In the aforementioned cases, the struggle within the triangle formed by ruling person, the party, and the army (see Geddes 1999), the ruling person was either deposed, or its ambitions were kept at bay, by either of the two other actors (or both of them). The level of personalization in Egypt, Angola and Zimbabwe did not reach the Nicaraguan level and both Angola and Zimbabwe are still governed by "revolutionary" parties, i.e by the most resilient type of one-party regimes (see Levitsky and Way 2012). The FSLN differs from both ZANU-PF and MPLA in that it allowed genuine elections in 1990 and spent the following 16 years in opposition within a competitive electoral democracy. This allowed the party dissidents to abandon the party and still participate in politics, criticizing both the government and the personalization of the FSLN. While the "old cadres" in ZANU-PF and MPLA could use all three mechanisms against personalist ambitions identified by Leber et. al. (2022) - i.e. coordination among themselves, information about the personalizing moves and the mobilization of networks and constituencies (Leber et. al 2022) - in Nicaragua they abandoned the party and confronted it - unsuccessfully - in democratic elections.

In Egypt, the army ceased to defend an unpopular leader willing to impose his heir during the popular uprising thanks to its historical strength and autonomy. In this respect, the Nicaraguan army has lost most of its precarious autonomy in recent years and its commanders seem to be grateful for the possibility to remain on active duty and enjoy access to the system's spoils and patronage networks. But this settlement could break either as a consequence of internal discontent with the high command by younger and middle-ranking officers and/or by the growing pressure to repress the society.

Compared to Mubarak's Egypt, Angola and Zimbabwe, there are fewer within-regime obstacles to a personalist rule in Nicaragua. The FSLN and the army have lost most of their autonomy, both have accepted the persecution of their historical leaders and have permitted the abandonment of most of their ideological roots even in public discourses. The party structures in Nicaragua are not as institutionalized as in the Angolan MPLA and the question is if they will be willing and/or able to challenge the personalist leader's evident dynastic hereditary solutions as in ZANU-PF.

Why did Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo construct the sultanistic type of governmental arrangement, use repression so harshly and apparently stake the future of the regime on a hereditary succession? They obviously felt threatened by the 2018 protests and saw a window of opportunity to reformulate the structure and logic of their government in the permissive international context. The stake on the repression and abandonment of the previously relatively consensual neopatrimonialism did not backfire. However, the underlying cause of the sultanization lies in the nature of their personalist and familiar power mixing economic and political influence, with the former depending on the latter. Ortega and his family have accumulated such a level of economic influence that cannot be sustained without an adequate political support structure. Crony capitalism, corruption and the misuse of foreign aid have become so chronic that their judicial prosecution in the context of the rule of law would be inevitable. The power concentration has been achieved by many punishable means, including the open and violent repression from 2018 onwards that ended the relatively mild and conciliatory style of governing. Ortega surely sees the fate of many Latin American presidents facing justice after leaving office even in contexts where they did not undermine democratic norms and did not commit crimes against humanity on a large scale. For him, leaving power does not imply carrying on with his political career or spending his final years in a deserved retirement. Instead, leaving power would either entail being prosecuted, putting broader family interests at risk, or having to go into exile. The construction and maintenance of the sultanistic edifice has become a zero-sum game for the Ortega-Murillo family.

VI. CONCLUSION

Nicaragua's path towards sultanism during 2023 was driven mainly by the growing power of the ruling family and its control over the state and economy in a permissive international context. As a country with a small population, a relatively tiny elite, and with a historically-based oligarchical structure and crony capitalism, Nicaraguan politics, society and economy, has always been dominated by a handful of families, the infamous Somozas certainly not being the only one. The current opposition is crowded with members of the Chamorros and Cruzs. While the 1979 Sandinista revolution brought a new set of elites

to the high echelons of power - and ended the archetypal sultanistic regime of the Somoza dynasty - the country has again been gradually drifting back to rule by a political family since 2007.

Intensifying the repression of social organizations and movements (especially the Catholic Church) and eliminating, exiling and banning political opposition throughout 2023, the Ortega-Murillo regime further undercut its ties to society and narrowed its social support basis. Together with other sultanistic features, especially personalism and neopatrimonialism, this insulation from society constitutes the Achilles heel of the regime. The sultanistic features of the regime make unlikely any genuine transition to democracy that would include Ortega and his family, since they can hardly expect any success in the context of free and fair elections. Analogously to recent bleak conclusions regarding Venezuela (Marsteintredet 2020), the cards in Nicaragua are currently stacked against pacted democratization. The low popularity of the regime makes it uncompetitive in the electoral arena, the quantity of crimes would make any pact based on forgiving hardly sustainable, and the character of the rulers' economic conglomerate makes it non-viable in a regime based on the rule of law. The fact that Nicaragua has recently re-entered the family of sultanistic regimes - which are prone to breakdowns, military coups, and revolts (civil society coups) (Geddes 1999, Svolik 2012) - is therefore eminently consequential, and the continued neopatrimonialization of the Nicaraguan state will probably affect the character of any future political regime (see Munck 2024).

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