

## Ortega for President: The Religious Rebirth of Sandinismo in Nicaragua

*Henri Gooren*

*Abstract:* This article analyses various connections between Daniel Ortega's surprising victory in the presidential elections of 5 November 2006, his control of the *Frente Sandinista de la Liberación Nacional* (FSLN) party, and the changing religious context in Nicaragua, where Pentecostal churches now claim almost one quarter of the population. To achieve this, I draw from my fieldwork in Nicaragua in 2005 and 2006, which analysed competition for members between various religious groups in Managua: charismatic Catholics, the Assemblies of God, the neo-Pentecostal mega-church Hosanna, and the Mormon Church. How did Ortega manage to win the votes from so many religious people (evangelical Protestants and Roman Catholics alike)? And how does this case compare to similar cases of populist leaders in Latin America courting evangelicals, like Chávez in Venezuela and earlier Fujimori in Peru? *Keywords:* Nicaragua, religion, elections, FSLN, Daniel Ortega.

### **Populist leadership and evangelical support in Latin America**

At first look, the case of Ortega's surprise election victory seems to fit an established pattern in Latin America: the populist leader who comes to power in part by courting – and winning – the evangelical vote. Alberto Fujimori in Peru was the first to achieve this in the early 1990s, followed by Venezuelan lieutenant-colonel Hugo Chávez in the late 1990s and more recently Rafael Correa in Ecuador (Oppenheimer 2006). These three populist leaders came to power thanks to the breakdown of an old party system, which gradually became stagnant and corrupted.

Alberto Fujimori governed Peru from 1990 until 2002. He was among the first populist leaders in Latin America to rise to power by mobilizing sectors of the population that did not feel represented by the traditional political parties: 'By the late 1980s, all of Peru's political parties, including the United Left and APRA [also populist], had lost the capacity to attract broad-based support in a society that remained highly stratified along racial and sociocultural lines' (Levitsky 1999, 80). Before Fujimori, Peruvian politics was dominated by a small, urban, most European – i.e., 'white' – elite, which proved incapable of ending the war against the Maoist Shining Path guerrillas, controlling hyperinflation, or breaking out of the deadlock between the executive and legislative powers. 'Fujimorismo had its social base in the marginal sectors of Peruvian society: non-whites, evangelicals, self-employed or informal-sector workers, and the urban and rural poor' (Levitsky 1999, 81). These groups predominantly supported Fujimori's self-coup in 1992, when the president – supported by the military – closed the Congress, suspended the Constitution, and purged the judiciary power. Fujimori's downfall came over corruption charges and accumulating evidence that security force leaders were running the country, by videotaping and blackmailing political and military leaders. 'When the regime's authoritarian tendencies sharpened, especially around the 2000 elections, a growing percentage of voters, including many evangelicals, abandoned

“Fujimoriismo” (López Rodríguez 2008, 133).

Hugo Chávez's rise to power in Venezuela shared some common elements with Fujimori. Both men came to power after winning elections as political outsiders promising sweeping reform. However, Chávez was already famous for a failed 1992 military coup against President Carlos Andrés Pérez, which landed the paratrooper lieutenant-colonel in prison for two years (García Márquez 2000). He was forced to leave the army as part of a 1994 amnesty and quickly returned to his political movement. The Bolivarian Revolutionary Movement-200 ('MBR-200') was organized by Chávez and other left-leaning military officers in the 1980s to structurally change politics in Venezuela. MBR-200 aimed to become a civilian political movement by involving 'new social and political forces' (Smilde 2004, 79) – specifically the Roman Catholic Church and the 'Evangelical community'. Chávez and MBR-200 were astute in gaining support from evangelical believers without directly contacting their leaders. Evangelicals were often mentioned favourably in Chávez's speeches. Since prominent evangelical leaders never spoke out in favour or against Chávez, 'individual believers were left to their own devices' on how to vote (Smilde 2004, 82). Although some evangelicals were very critical of Chávez (Smilde 2004, 83-84), most trusted him, and many saw him as an instrument of God to achieve stability in Venezuela. Chávez's frequent use of Bible quotes played an important role here to assuage evangelical fears of his authoritarian background (Smilde 2004, 84-85).

Chávez won the 1998 elections easily with 56.2 per cent, capturing the votes of two important groups: people who were fed up with the democracy, which they equated with the old corrupt two-party system, and people who still supported democracy as an institution, but who were willing to give an outsider with an authoritarian past their votes to reform it thoroughly (Canache 2002). Although Chávez was a 'fervent Catholic' himself (García Márquez 2000, 19), relationships with the Catholic Church soon turned sour over a series of conflicts. But Chávez quickly took some steps to make evangelical voters happy. He put someone sympathetic to their religion in charge of the Directorate of Religion and passed legislation which permitted evangelicals to teach their religion in public schools. The Catholic Church sharply criticized these steps, but found its state subsidies cut in half soon afterwards (Smilde 2004, 90).

Relationships between the Chávez administration and the Catholic Church reached a new low after the archbishop and Cardinal Velasco supported the failed coup against Chávez in April 2002. 'Cardinal Velasco himself [...] signed the decree naming business leader Pedro Carmona interim president' (Smilde 2007, 8). Other Catholic leaders, however, strongly opposed the coup attempt. Evangelicals and their leaders were also sharply divided, with some neo-Pentecostal churches supporting Chávez and others actively opposing him. When Chávez expelled U.S. missionaries from the New Tribes Mission for 'spying' on 12 October 2005, however, most Catholic leaders supported his decision whereas all evangelical leaders condemned it (Smilde 2007, 10). Smilde concluded that 'religious discourse and engagement with religious groups' are 'central to the system of alliances and conflicts that the Chávez administration has created as it seeks to break down the power of traditional social and political elites' (Smilde 2007, 10). However, evangelical leaders gradually became more critical of Chávez after the New Tribes Mis-

sion episode and opposed him openly in December 2007. They released a public document to oppose the constitutional reform, which would allow Chávez to be re-elected in 2013 for six more years, as ‘a threat to pluralism and freedom and thereby inimical to Evangelicalism. Chávez responded by condemning these leaders to Hell on national television’ (Smilde 2008, 3).

Hence, evangelicals were initially attracted to Fujimori in Peru, because he was a political outsider promising sweeping populist reform, winning the support of evangelical leaders in exchange for greater religious freedom (López Rodríguez 2008, 134-139). Chávez’s Bolivarian Movement, on the other hand, targeted poor Pentecostals – not their leaders – by frequently using Bible quotes and mentioning evangelicals favourably in his speeches. Pentecostals were part of Chávez’s alliance with new political actors in Venezuela, which helped him win the 1998 elections.

How do the cases of Fujimori in Peru and Chávez in Venezuela compare to Daniel Ortega’s reaching out to evangelicals and Catholics alike during the 2006 electoral campaign in Nicaragua?

### Ortega for President: the 2006 electoral campaign and surprise victory

After losing three elections in a row in 1990, 1996, and 2001, Ortega won the 2006 elections in the first round already (see Table 1). What made these elections different? I think the answer is twofold. First, Ortega staged a very efficient campaign, changing his image into a New Man – although not quite the New Man as originally envisioned by the Sandinista Revolution (1979-90). Second, the social, political, and especially religious context of Nicaragua had changed. The most important religious changes are addressed in detail below.

Table 1: Daniel Ortega’s percentages of votes in presidential elections, 1984-2006

	Daniel Ortega	Opponent	Difference
1984	Ortega 67.1%*	NA	NA
1990	Ortega 40.8%	54.7% de Chamorro*	- 13.9%
1996	Ortega 37.8%	51.0% Alemán*	- 13.2%
2001	Ortega 42.3%	56.0% Bolaños*	- 13.7%
2006	Ortega 38.0%*	28.3% Montealegre	+ 10.3 %

\* Winner

Sources: Anderson and Dodd (2002, 80, 84); Patterson (1997, 380); Torres-Rivas (2007, 9).

Ortega won the first round of the 2006 elections with 38 per cent of all valid votes, against 28.3 per cent for the number two, the liberal Montealegre, and 27 per cent for the number three: Rizo, a liberal from the faction of former President Arnoldo Alemán (1996-2002). Alemán and Ortega are both typical Nicaraguan *caudillos*: strong leaders and sworn enemies until 1998. In 1998, however, they formed the famous *pacto* which neatly divided power between them at all levels of government and administration. At Ortega’s request, Alemán changed the Constitution in 2000 to make it possible for a candidate to win the first round of the presidential elections with only 35 per cent, provided the difference with the number two was at least 5 per cent. Masterful mathematics won Daniel Ortega the presidency in 2006.

But Ortega greatly benefited from divisions among the liberals, too. After being convicted to 20 years in prison for fraud, corruption, and money laundering, Alemán kept dominating his PLC party. Many left the PLC disgusted, including the former banker Montealegre, who started the new *Alianza Liberal Nicaraguense* (ALN). Together, PLC's Rizo and ALN's Montealegre won a majority of 55 per cent of all valid votes, but their feud meant that Ortega ended up winning the elections.

Finally, Ortega also won because of his efficient campaign, projecting the image of a New Ortega, effectively campaigning against his *own* former image of a leftist, anti-American guerrilla leader. Three elements were decisive in Ortega's successful electoral campaign: his new and trustworthy image, his new rhetoric of peace and reconciliation, and his good relations with all churches in Nicaragua (both Catholic and Protestant) and especially their leaders. As a favour in return, Cardinal Obando y Bravo pronounced a sermon on 'the prodigal son' during mass, shortly before the elections (*El Nuevo Diario*, 29 October 2006). This was widely interpreted as Obando's blessing of Ortega's presidential ambitions and constituted a stark contrast to Obando's anti-Ortega sermon right before the elections of 1990. Cardinal Obando's 'counter-blessing' of Ortega persuaded many Catholics and Protestants alike in 1990 *not* to vote for Ortega (Carlos Sediles, personal communication, 3 May 2007).

The 2006 FSLN campaign posters featured merry colours (pink and yellow) and optimistic slogans, emphasizing Daniel Ortega's new and cuddly image. These posters were all over Managua already in April, five months before the elections. The sombre party colours black and red were completely absent. Ortega waged a campaign with many populist promises. But he avoided direct TV debates with his competitors and he did not stoop to the level of insults, as both Rizo and Montealegre did. 'Campaign ads by Ortega's opponents depicted him in army fatigues, a reminder of the war that wreaked havoc on Nicaragua throughout the 1980s. But Ortega fashioned an image makeover, touting reconciliation and solidarity. He spoke often of God, said the country needed a spiritual revolution, and even adopted John Lennon's "Give Peace a Chance" as this campaign theme song' (Miller Llana 2006b). Dressed in white like a prophet, Ortega travelled all over the country shaking hands and kissing children. Like a successful televangelist, he preferred to speak mostly about peace, reconciliation, and Jesus Christ. Ortega made an emotional appeal to the people of Nicaragua to 'for the love of God give him the opportunity to govern in peace'.<sup>1</sup>

The new image of Daniel Ortega as 'a man of peace and a true son of the [Catholic] Church' went back to the 1996 campaign against Arnaldo Alemán, who was both a devout Catholic and a close friend of Archbishop Obando y Bravo (Patterson 1997, 393). Just like in 2006 and 2001, Daniel Ortega's speeches in 1996 had many references to his faith and to God. Gioconda Belli, the writer and former Sandinista militant, commented bitterly: 'The FSLN in its desire to win once again insults religion. If before it denied God, now it abuses Him for political ends. Both approaches are equally profane, equally manipulative' (Belli 1996). Hence, the image of the New Man Ortega has been under development since at least 1996.

Moreover, in 2001 Daniel Ortega likewise ran on 'a platform of peace and love, combined with social reforms. His party covered Managua with posters saying

“Love is stronger than hate”, while the traditional red and black colours of the FSLN were replaced by bright pink with splashes of light yellow and blue. The 55-year-old Ortega appeared serious and pious’ (Anderson and Dodd 2002, 81). Catholic priest Miguel Angel Casco remarked that the presence of Ortega in an evangelical church building: ‘is an electoral political strategy to win votes from a sector where they (the *danielismo*) have not had the capacity to create and guarantee a space for any of its leaders’.<sup>2</sup> In other words: Ortega’s 2006 electoral campaign was almost an exact copy of his 2001 campaign, which in turn repeated the central peace theme of the 1996 campaign (Patterson 1997, 393). Although it actually yielded Ortega a lower percentage of votes – 38 per cent in 2006, compared to 42.3 per cent in 2001 – it was sufficient to gain the presidency in the first round already, thanks to Alemán’s constitutional reform as part of the pact between Alemán and Ortega. The religious vote proved crucial for Daniel Ortega in winning the 2006 election.

### **The Catholic Church in Nicaragua**

The bishops had formed an alliance with the Somoza dictatorship since its start in 1936, in return for continued religious instruction in primary and secondary schools and other privileges (Williams 1985, 347). These privileges included personal financial favours to priests and bishops. With few exceptions, most bishops gave the various dictators from the Somoza dynasty their uncritical support until the early 1970s.

Meanwhile, the international Roman Catholic Church had entered a process of renewal and innovation in the 1960s, with the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and the 1968 Medellín bishops’ conference, which expressed the increasing attention to the situation of the poor and oppressed. These new ideas did not appeal to the Nicaraguan bishops, but a small group among the lower clergy, including Ernesto Cardenal, was eager to play a more active role in promoting social change (Berryman 1984, 7-8, 59-60).

As the Somoza-regime became increasingly corrupt and increasingly repressive in the 1960s, the Catholic hierarchy gradually started to distance themselves from the dictator. The appointment of Miguel Obando y Bravo as archbishop of Managua in 1970 formed the catalyst in breaking the former alliance with Somoza. The pastoral letters of the Nicaraguan bishops became increasingly critical of the regime and the country’s social situation throughout the 1970s. The Catholic Church tried in vain to mediate between Somoza and the Sandinistas. However, the Catholic hierarchy did not show its open support for the Sandinista guerrillas until 2 June 1979 – a mere six weeks before their final military victory on 19 July.

In the 1980s, following the Sandinista Revolution, the relationship between the FSLN and the Catholic Church hierarchy gradually became tenser. The Bishops’ Conference became increasingly critical of the FSLN government in its 1981-83 pastoral letters. Priests with government functions, like the Cardenal brothers, were threatened by the hierarchy with sanctions and often expelled. The conflict was essentially a political power struggle over the control of the Catholic believers and over the role of the Church in Nicaraguan society.

Catholicism has been the official religion of Nicaragua until the constitutional

reforms of 1894 and 1911. In 1963, no less than 96 per cent of the population considered itself Roman Catholic. In 2007, however, the Catholic population percentage has decreased remarkably to almost 57 per cent (see Table 2). During the same period, the population percentage of Protestants has gone up correspondingly from 4 to 28 per cent. Today there are approximately 2.65 million Roman Catholics in Nicaragua and about 1 million Protestants (INIDE, Census 2005, Cuadro 12; see also Appendix). To understand the different kinds of Protestant voters that Ortega was trying to court in the 2006 electoral campaign, a closer look at the history and success of Protestantism in Nicaragua becomes necessary.

### **Protestantism in Nicaragua:** *historical overview*

Between 1963 and 1975, the first boom of Protestant churches took place. The main factors were the high number of missionaries, social turmoil, and various new and successful *Evangelism in Depth* campaigns. During the beginning of the Sandinista decade (1979-90), there was a second Protestant growth period. The years between 1990 and 1995 formed the third Protestant boom period. Protestant membership growth continued at high rates, until 17 per cent of the Nicaraguan population considered itself Protestant by 1995. From 1995 to 2000, Protestant growth was subsiding. Protestant population proportions for the late 1990s varied between 13 and 19 per cent. A modest fourth Protestant boom period took place between 2000 and 2007. In 2007, the Protestant population percentage was 28 per cent and Catholics were down to 57 per cent, according to a representative CID/Gallup national opinion poll.<sup>3</sup>

Table 2. Religious affiliation as a percentage of the Nicaraguan population, 1900-2007

	1900	1950	1963	1970	1980	1990	1995	2000	2005	2007
Roman Catholics	94.6	95.9	96.0	95.5	90.7	85.6	73.0	75.9	58.5	57
Protestants	1.2	4.0	3.8	5.6	8.4	11.4	16.6	18.8	23.2	28
Non-religious	0	0	0	0.2	0.2	1.2	8.4	9.1	15.7	12
Mormons, Witnesses	0	0.1	0.1	0.8	0.6	1.8	2.0	1.4	2.6	2.5
Doubly affiliated										-5.2

Adapted and updated from Gooren (2003, 340), based on Barrett (1982, 522); Barrett, Kurian and Johnson (2001, 544); and Johnstone and Mandryk (2001, 483). The new 2005 Census and 2007 CID/Gallup figures come from *La Prensa*, February 26, 2007 ([www.laprensa.com.ni](http://www.laprensa.com.ni)). See also Appendix.

### *The Pentecostal boom*

It is highly significant that six of the ten largest non-Catholic churches in Nicaragua in 2000 were Pentecostal churches. Looking closely, the four Protestant growth explosions in Nicaraguan history were all Pentecostal booms. In 1965, only 20 per cent of all Protestants were Pentecostals; by 1982, the Pentecostals made up no less than 73 per cent.<sup>4</sup> Being a Protestant increasingly became synonymous with being a Pentecostal. Pentecostalism has become the religion of the urban poor, especially in Managua (Lancaster 1988, 102).

Literature on the Pentecostal boom in Nicaragua is scarce.<sup>5</sup> It mentions only a few possible factors: intensive evangelization activities by an increasing number of churches, the emotional appeal of Pentecostalism (faith healing, speaking in



tongues, singing, swaying), dissatisfaction with Catholicism, different state-church relations, and changes in church leadership. Since the 1970s, the Pentecostal churches, led by foreign (mostly U.S.) missionaries, came increasingly under Nicaraguan leaders. They could communicate much more directly with their friends and neighbours, which contributed to higher church growth.

The Roman Catholic Church may still claim to represent a majority of the Nicaraguan population, but in poor neighbourhoods of Managua, Pentecostals can make up as much as 50 per cent of the population (Lancaster 1988, 102). Unlike the Roman Catholic Church, many Pentecostal (and Protestant) churches have had a good relationship with the new Sandinista government after it disposed of the Somoza regime in 1979.

The cooling relationship with the Catholic Church in 1981-83 caused the FSLN to seek legitimacy with the progressive sector of Protestantism, which also formed a minority (albeit a very vocal one).<sup>6</sup> Various experts estimated grassroots Pentecostal support for the Sandinista revolution at between 20 and 30 per cent in the early 1980s.<sup>7</sup> The Protestant organization CEPAD was already organized after the 1972 earthquake, sympathized with liberation theology, and became directly involved in the Sandinista revolution.<sup>8</sup> The more conservative Protestant sectors, represented especially by Pentecostal leaders, often preferred to remain out of politics altogether. But doing so proved to be very difficult.

The *Asambleas de Dios* (Assemblies of God) was among the oldest and most successful of Pentecostal churches in the 1980s. Although some of its younger pastors sympathized with the *Frente Sandinista*, the majority of its leaders were strongly anti-Sandinista.<sup>9</sup> Some began to openly criticize the Sandinista leaders, particularly their reinstatement of obligatory military service during the Contra War. The backlash was immediate: in 1985, fourteen evangelical leaders were arrested at the Managua airport after returning from a religious conference in the United States. Some were held for only one hour, others for 24 hours, and one for several days.<sup>10</sup> All were interrogated, humiliated, and intimidated – although none were tortured physically.<sup>11</sup>

Calvin Smith (2007, 206-207) concluded that whereas Sandinistas welcomed the support from any group, including religious people, they could not allow any opposition to operate freely as the Contra War became more serious:

Evangelicals (as other groups) were singled out for repression because they were perceived as part of the opposition, and thus a threat to Sandinista hegemony. Yet Evangelicals *were* also mocked and harassed because of their beliefs. While Christians opposing the Frente were imprisoned or expelled, liberation theology Christians participated in government. The Pope was harassed and right-wing foreign Evangelical preachers were nearly always refused entry to Nicaragua, yet many Christians from the religious left were welcomed into the country.

Conservative Pentecostal and historical Protestant pastors, united in their anti-Sandinista attitude, founded new organizations like CNPEN in 1981 and the Evangelical Alliance in 1990. The Pentecostal churches in Nicaragua grew particularly during the general situation of anomie – war, poverty, and hyperinflation – in the 1980s. Later boom periods occurred in 1990-95 and after 2000.<sup>12</sup>

### *Recent developments*

The contemporary religious market in Nicaragua is complex, but four trends are clear. First, the Roman Catholic Church remains divided between a conservative hierarchy and a sizeable minority made up of the so-called ‘popular church’. The Catholic Charismatic Renewal, which, as in Pentecostalism, stresses the work of the Holy Spirit through individual conversion, is among the most successful Catholic groups. Second, the percentage of people who say they are not affiliated with any religion has gone up from 0.2 per cent in 1980 to 12 per cent in 2007, with the biggest decrease during the Sandinista decade of the 1980s.<sup>13</sup> However, these people are not atheists or even secularized: most still consider themselves Catholics or Pentecostals, but they no longer find it necessary to be a member of a church. Third, the Protestant growth explosions of 1963-75 and 1990-95 have gradually subsided. Since the 1990s there is stabilization, with at best moderate growth, although the figures indicate another boom has started in 2000. The Protestant population proportion seems to have stabilized at around one quarter of the population. Fourth, Pentecostalism in Nicaragua makes up at least three-quarters of the Protestant community, but it is extremely fragmented. There is, on the one hand, a sizeable number of denominational, more institutionalized churches. On the other hand, there is a huge amount of (very) small independent churches, with less institutionalization. These ‘mushroom churches’ appear to be very successful, but they have not been studied much in depth. Their members are generally (very) poor and they tend to vote overwhelmingly for Daniel Ortega and his *Frente Sandinista*.

### **The conversion career of Daniel Ortega**

Ortega’s political career has been as dazzling as his religious ‘conversion career’ (cf. Gooren 2010). From the early 1960s until 1979, he lived underground as a clandestine guerrilla fighter during the oppressive Somoza regime. Calvin Smith (2007, 282) described the young Ortega as: ‘A Catholic, but interested in Protestantism. [National] Guardsman and later Church of God pastor Bienvenido López was his jailer during Ortega’s imprisonment by the Somoza regime’ and shared his testimony with the young *guerrillero*. From 1979 to 1990, Ortega gradually became the most powerful of the nine Sandinista *comandantes*. Ortega’s authoritarian control of the FSLN drove many other Sandinista leaders away in the 1990s, but it also allowed him to make a power deal with Alemán, which opened the way for the constitutional reform that finally allowed Ortega to win the 2006 elections and look forward to five additional years in power.

Ortega’s religiosity during the 2006 campaign reflected his desire to capitalize on the general popularity of Christian religions in Nicaraguan society. He had tried to do this before. During the 2001 elections, Ortega had flirted with the Pentecostal religion, which everybody – except perhaps one or two Pentecostal leaders – had interpreted as a campaign move. Afterwards Ortega’s relationship with Cardinal Obando y Bravo, his sworn enemy from the 1980s, became ever more cordial. One can see a pattern here. Cardinal Obando used to be Alemán’s best friend and the Catholic hierarchy was a strong supporter of his government (1996-2001). Obando kept supporting Alemán even when the latter became bogged down in corruption



trials. This unconditional support seriously damaged the credibility of the Catholic Church in Nicaragua, particularly between 2002 and 2004.<sup>14</sup>

The relationship between Ortega and Cardinal Obando y Bravo only seemed to improve between 2004 and 2005, while Obando's ties with Alemán steadily deteriorated. Ortega publicly begged forgiveness from Obando and the Catholic Church for persecuting them in the 1980s. Ortega and his partner for over 20 years, Rosario Murillo, married in the Catholic Church in 2005 in a special cathedral service led by the cardinal himself. Over the last couple of years, Ortega has projected a public image of himself and Murillo as devout Catholics, cultivating good relationships with the bishops Montenegro and Carballo and the new archbishop Leopoldo Brenes.

The *La Prensa* newspaper remained sceptical, however. It noted that although Ortega had asked forgiveness for his persecution of the Catholic Church in the 1980s, he was still surrounded by the same circle of leftist friends, which included Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez. *La Prensa* rhetorically asked: 'Is Daniel Ortega really a new man? According to monsignor Sándigo: "This man has the opportunity for a transformation, the fruit will tell; in the next years I'll tell you if what he's saying is the truth or another one of his lies."' <sup>15</sup>

At the same time, Ortega was also careful to cultivate cordial relations with a politically active sector of the Pentecostal churches. The leader of the *Movimiento de Unidad Cristiana* (MUC), who is not a relative although his name is also Daniel Ortega (Reyes), expected the FSLN to win most of the Pentecostal vote (*El Nuevo Diario*, 31 October 2006). Pentecostals now make up almost a quarter of the population. Most of them traditionally voted against the Sandinistas, because these persecuted Pentecostal leaders in the 1980s (Smith 2007, 272-274). But a Protestant insider, Rector Benjamín Cortés of the *Universidad Evangélica Nicaraguense* (UENIC), estimated that 'about a third of the nation's evangelicals sympathize with Ortega' (Miller Llana 2006a).

The image of the 'new' Ortega may have changed the traditional voting behaviour of many Pentecostals. A major factor here is support from the Ortega-dominated FSLN for the prohibition of therapeutic abortion in late October 2006, to appease Catholic and Protestant leaders and win a big share of the traditional religious vote. Many militant Sandinistas were outraged to see Ortega sacrifice the progressive abortion laws of the 1980s for electoral gain. But most of them had left the FSLN in 1995 and if they had not, they kept silent in public.

### **Ortega's control of the Frente Sandinista**

During the 1990s, many militant Sandinista leaders and intellectuals left the FSLN because they disliked Ortega's authoritarian leadership style and where he was taking the party. In May 1995, former Sandinista *comandantes* like Sergio Ramírez, Dora María Téllez, Henry Ruiz, and Gioconda Belli formed the *Movimiento Renovador Sandinista* (MRS) (*La Prensa* 20 July 2006). However, they never won more than eight per cent of the general vote, and went down to six per cent during the November 2006 elections (*La Prensa* 14 November 2006). Still, many poor people in Nicaragua proudly told me during my fieldwork in Managua in 2006: 'Soy Sandinista, pero no soy Danielista'.<sup>16</sup>

Since 1995, after the most prominent of his critics left the party, Daniel Ortega has enjoyed absolute control of the FSLN, which gradually became his own personal political party: ‘For more than twenty years, Daniel Ortega has insisted on remaining both party leader and presidential candidate. He has driven out his opponents and filled the leadership with his loyalists’ (Anderson and Dodd 2002, 92). This was clearly visible in the pre-campaign period during my 2005 fieldwork research, when Ortega effectively blocked the possibility of having an open vote on who would be the FSLN presidential candidate. Herty Lewites, Ortega’s strongest rival, was attacked in a dirty campaign and finally evicted from the FSLN. During this campaign, Ortega could count on his trustworthy companions of old: Lenin Cerna, the former director of the Sandinista intelligence agency, Tomás Borge,<sup>17</sup> and of course Ortega’s long-time partner Rosario Murillo.

Ortega and the *Frente Sandinista de la Liberación Nacional*, the party he has led in autocratic fashion for more than a decade, can no longer be considered as progressive – much less leftist (cf. Kampwirth 2008). Edelberto Torres-Rivas (2007, 8) decried Ortega’s ‘immorality’ in trying to win the elections at any cost and called it: ‘a Sandinismo of the right’ (‘un sandinismo de derecha’). Kampwirth (2008, 127) concluded that ‘rather than a shift to the right it was a shift to cynicism: after a decade and a half out of power [...] the FSLN was quite willing to oppose its former base in the women’s movement, to say nothing of the vast majority of Nicaragua’s medical establishment, if that is what it took to return to power’.

The evidence indicates that Ortega has converted to neo-liberal policies, while maintaining a leftist rhetoric and close ties to Hugo Chávez. First, there is Ortega’s power pact with Arnoldo Alemán in 1998, which continues to the present. Second, there is the approval of the CAFTA free trade agreement with the United States by Ortega and his FSLN in 2006. Third, there is the change in the abortion laws, outlawing abortion under any circumstances – even when the mother’s life is in danger. This was Ortega’s reaction to a heavy lobby from both Catholic and Protestant leaders, which culminated in an anti-abortion march by 50,000 Catholics and 20,000 evangelicals on 6 October 2006 (Kampwirth 2008, 129; Miller Llana 2006a). Ortega made sure he did not alienate either the Catholic voters or the many Pentecostal voters, both from classical Pentecostal churches like the Assemblies of God and from the newer and currently successful neo-Pentecostal churches.

The favour was promptly returned. Only one week after the 5 November elections, Cardinal Obando led a special meeting in the metropolitan cathedral of Managua to commemorate the occasion of Ortega’s 61<sup>st</sup> birthday. A few hours later, archbishop Brenes led a Eucharist mass in honour of Ortega as the new president-elect (*La Prensa* 11 November 2006). Meanwhile, in an ironic turn of history, the formerly devout Roman Catholic Arnoldo Alemán became a Pentecostal believer in October 2006.<sup>18</sup>

Ortega’s room for political manoeuvring in the coming years faces severe restrictions and limitations. First, Ortega only has the support of, at best, 38 per cent of the electorate. The FSLN has 37 seats in the Asamblea Nacional, compared to 27 for Montealegre’s ALN, 23 for Alemán’s PLC, and 5 for the *Movimiento Renovador Sandinista* (Torres-Rivas 2007, 10). Second, almost one-third of the national budget is directly provided by foreign sponsors and much of this money arrives with strings attached. Third, much of the government spending follows earlier

commitments. Political commentators in Nicaragua, like the conservative Catholic Humberto Belli, considered corruption and nepotism as the biggest threats to Ortega's government.

After three years in power, assessments of the Ortega administration are varied. Ortega demonstrated his tight control by firing three of his cabinet ministers in the first three months of his government, all of them women (*Revista Envío* 2007b). He maintained that he could run for re-election in 2011 by getting the six FSLN judges on the Supreme Court to declare article 147 of the Constitution 'inapplicable' (*Revista Envío* 2009a). Ortega's recurring flirtations with Fidel Castro, Hugo Chávez, and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran have not only irritated the Bush- and Obama-administrations but also provided Ortega with 'a personal fortune and enormous economic power from Venezuela's aid money' (*Revista Envío* 2010). Although European Union aid remains frozen over Ortega's manipulation of the Supreme Court to allow his re-election, official IMF approval of the proposed budget for 2010-11 significantly improved Ortega's chances of obtaining new loans and stabilizing the Nicaraguan economy (*Revista Envío* 2009a). Political stability remains elusive, however, with popular approval of President Ortega plunging from 51 per cent in February 2007 to -10 per cent in June 2007 (*Revista Envío* 2007a). The stabilization of the economy and extensive social assistance programmes caused 44 per cent of the population to express a favourable view of Ortega in late 2009, although 61 per cent nevertheless thought the country was 'going down the wrong road' (*Revista Envío* 2009b). Ortega and his wife Rosario Murillo still 'sprinkle all their speeches, acts, and projects with religious messages and symbols' (*Revista Envío* 2009a).<sup>19</sup> At the same time, Ortega has mobilized FSLN mobs, armed with 'rocks, clubs, and mortars' to use street violence to intimidate the growing opposition (*Revista Envío* 2009b). Nicaragua under Ortega is as polarized as it was in the 1980s.

## **Conclusion**

Daniel Ortega's electoral victory in 2006 – after three failed attempts in 1990, 1996, and 2001 – was not such a surprise after all. Four factors combined to allow him to win the presidency of Nicaragua.

First, Daniel Ortega had to ensure that he could win the presidency in the first round, even when he only received the lowest percentage of votes he could count on from past electoral results: about 38 per cent. The pact with former president Arnoldo Alemán proved to be crucial here. Alemán agreed to change the constitution to make it possible to win the presidential elections with only 35 per cent of the votes in the first round (and a difference of at least five per cent with number two) in return for various favours – including being allowed to serve out his prison term at home, where he could continue leading the PLC liberal party.

Second, the objective of winning at least 35 per cent of the vote in the first round was helped by the fact that his main political opponents – the liberals – were thoroughly divided. In retrospect, one can see why it was to Ortega's advantage to make the pact with former president Arnoldo Alemán and allow him to continue dominating the PLC liberal party. From his own past experience with dissidents in the FSLN, Ortega probably counted on the fact that a popular liberal leader would

arise to challenge Alemán and start his own party. When Eduardo Montealegre did just that, by founding the ALN, Daniel Ortega knew he was one step closer to the presidency.

Third, Daniel Ortega knew that he had to expand the traditional power base of his party: the *Frente Sandinista*. He had already lost most Sandinista intellectuals and activists, who were unhappy with his personal domination of the party. Unlike Alberto Fujimori and Hugo Chávez, who as political outsiders had to build up their populist movements from scratch from below, the challenge for Daniel Ortega was how to win *new* votes. Hence, Ortega actively courted the traditionally more conservative votes of Catholics and evangelicals alike, who together made up a sizeable portion of the population – probably between 30 and 60 per cent. His main methods were using the language of reconciliation and religion during the campaign (see below) and supporting the new and very strict abortion law, which outlawed even therapeutic abortion in case the mother's life was in danger. Daniel Ortega had also reconciled himself with his former opponent Cardinal Obando y Bravo and married his long-time partner Rosario Murillo in the Catholic Church in 2005 – one year before the elections. Ortega's instrumental use of religion as a campaign tool had precedents in his earlier electoral campaigns of 1996 and 2001.

Finally, Daniel Ortega staged a very efficient – and very costly – electoral campaign. The campaign astutely changed his old image of anti-American guerrilla leader into the New Man Ortega, who spoke frequently of God, reconciliation, and peace. This image makeover was also part of his campaigns in 1996 and 2001, but the factors mentioned above were missing in those years. The new image combined with Daniel Ortega's support for the abortion bill probably cost him some votes from militant Sandinistas, but it won him many more new votes in the political centre. Miller Llana provided the following vignette: 'Ilario López, a retired city worker, voted for conservative candidates throughout the 1990s because he always felt they would improve the country's economy. But he has been disappointed. 'I am willing to give him [Ortega] another chance', says Mr. López. 'If we don't have work, we don't have money, and we all suffer. He is not a guerrilla; he is our only hope to live in peace' (Miller Llana 2006b). Only time will tell if Daniel Ortega can live up to the expectations of these new voters, but the global economic crisis will doubtless make his job much harder.

While Fujimori in 1990s Peru targeted and co-opted evangelical leaders and Chávez in Venezuela mostly bypassed the leadership by appealing directly to poor Pentecostals, Daniel Ortega did both. He made promises to evangelical leaders *and* directly appealed to poor evangelicals through his language of reconciliation and his many Bible quotes in speeches. Moreover, Ortega followed the same strategy with regards to the conservative Catholic hierarchy and the mostly conservative Catholic voters, by improving relations with Cardinal Obando y Bravo and changing the abortion laws. This third pattern of populist leadership and religious support, from both evangelical and the Catholic sides, during election times will likely be followed by populist leaders all over Latin America in the future – including Daniel Ortega himself in 2011.

\* \* \*

**Henri Gooren** is an assistant professor of anthropology in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan. His main research interests are the anthropology of religion, conversion, development issues, and religions in Latin America (Catholicism, Protestantism, Pentecostalism, and Mormonism). He is currently working on a book manuscript entitled *Conversion Careers in Nicaragua: Charismatic Catholics, Pentecostals, and Mormons in Managua* and preparing new research on the Pentecostalization process in Paraguay and Chile, supported by a PCRI grant from the University of Southern California's Center for Religion and Civic Culture and the Templeton Foundation. Gooren is also the general editor of the Brill series *Religion in the Americas*.  
<gooren@oakland.edu>

**Acknowledgements:** This article is based on a lecture I gave in Utrecht on 5 October 2007 at the International Conference *Political Parties and Democracy in Latin America: Crisis or Renewal?*, sponsored by NALACS, Utrecht University (Anthropology and Theology), and the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy. Thanks to all the participants at the conference for their comments on my lecture and to Gemma van der Haar in particular.

## Notes

1. 'En sus discursos, Ortega, quien gobernó en el período de 1979 a 1990 enfrentando a Washington, pidió a los Nicaraguenses "que por amor a Dios le den la oportunidad de gobernar en paz"', *El Nuevo Diario*, 30 October 2006.
2. 'Es una estrategia política-electoral, de querer ganar votos de un sector donde ellos (el danielismo) no han tenido la capacidad de facilitar y garantizar un espacio para ninguno de sus dirigentes' (Casco 2001).
3. See Appendix for an overview of religious affiliation percentages in Nicaragua from 1900 until 2007. I put the more reliable percentages in italics. These include various Census figures (1950, 1963, 1995, and 2005) and the methodologically sophisticated CID/Gallup opinion polls of 1989, 1990, 1993, 1995, 1996, 1997, and 2007.
4. Martínez (1989, 34). Niño Chavarría (1992, 47) reported that 85 per cent of all Protestants were Pentecostals in 1990, but gave no source.
5. Lancaster (1988, 110-113), Martínez (1989, 27-37), Niño Chavarría (1992, 47-57), Brouwer and den Hartog-Geluk (2000, 44-47), and Sediles Real (2007). For an extended analysis of Protestant growth in Nicaragua, see Gooren (2003).
6. See Smith (2007, 180 ff) for a detailed analysis of Sandinista-Protestant relations in the 1980s.
7. Smith (2007, 129).
8. Smith (2007, 101).
9. Smith (2007, 115-117).
10. Smith (2007, 184-185).
11. Smith (2007, 191-193).
12. For more information, see Gooren (2003).
13. See Appendix. In various CID-Gallup polls in the 1990s, the category 'No religion' has a low of 0.6 per cent in 1990 and a high of 8.2 per cent in 1993, reaching up to 8.4 and 15.7 per cent in the 1995 and 2005 Census data. The 2007 CID-Gallup poll reported 12 per cent people who were non-religious. Based on earlier CID-Gallup data, Smith and Haas (1997, 444) wrote: 'non-religious respondents reside disproportionately in Managua'.
14. Gooren (2005a, 7-8). See also Appendix: between 2000 and 2007, the population percentage of Catholics went down from 76 to 57 per cent. Meanwhile the proportion of Protestants rose from 19 to 28 per cent and the percentage of people claiming no religious affiliation also increased strongly,

- from 8.4 to 12 (or 15.7) per cent.
15. 'Este hombre tiene una oportunidad de transformación, el fruto lo dirá; en los (próximos) años dirá si lo que está planteando era una verdad o era otra más de sus mentiras' (*La Prensa*, 12 November 2006).
  16. 'I'm a Sandinista, but I'm not a supporter of Daniel [Ortega]'.
  17. Carlos Fonseca, Silvio Mayorga, and Tomás Borge were the original founders of the Frente Sandinista de la Liberación Nacional (FSLN) in 1961. Daniel Ortega joined the Frente Sandinista one year later (Berryman 1984, 59-60; *Encyclopedia of the Nations* 2006).
  18. [www.noticiacristiana.com](http://www.noticiacristiana.com), 31 October 2006.
  19. According to the analysis in Envío (2009a), 'Nicaragua is awash with biblical messages read out of context as revealed and immutable truths, indispensable guides that set the standards for our life today. The Nicaraguan population is "bombarded with" these "simplifying, literalist, fanaticizing, and resigned messages" on a daily basis. These messages encourage them to be submissive, accept what happens as "divine proof" and wait for a miracle or "divine intervention" to free us from a government many call "diabolical"'.

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## Appendix

Combined statistics on percentages of religious affiliation in Nicaragua, 1900-2007\*

Year	Roman Catholics	Protestants	Other	No religion	Source
1900	97.2	1.2	2.0	0	Barrett 1982
1900	94.6	1.5	2.0	0	Barrett et al 2001
1938	nd	2.0	nd	nd	Valderrey 1985
1949	nd	2.96	nd	nd	Valderrey 1985
1950	95.9	4.0	0.1	0	Census 1950
1952	nd	2.58	nd	nd	Valderrey 1985
1957	nd	2.82	nd	nd	Valderrey 1985
1960	nd	1.80	nd	nd	Johnstone et al 2001
1961	nd	2.58	nd	nd	Valderrey 1985
1963	96.0	3.8	0.1	0	Census 1963
1966	nd	3.0	nd	nd	Bastian 1986:56
1967	nd	3.29	nd	nd	Valderrey 1985
1970	95.5	6.1	0.8	0.2	Barrett 1982
1970	83.9	6.6	0.6	0.2	Barrett et al 2001
1975	95.1	7.8	0.7	0.2	Barrett 1982
1978	nd	7.87	nd	nd	Valderrey 1985
1979	nd	12.0	nd	nd	Bastian 1986:56
1980	nd	7.0	nd	nd	Johnstone 1995
1980	nd	7.2	nd	nd	Martínez 1989:61
1980	90.7	8.4	0.6	0.2	Barrett 1982
1980	nd	6.0 [MP 2.5]	nd	nd	Schäfer 1992
1981	nd	12.0	nd	nd	Holland 1981
1985	nd	9.3	nd	nd	Johnstone 1986
1986	nd	13.0 [MP 2.5]	nd	nd	Martínez 1989:61
1989	80.9	7.4	0?	11.7	CID/Gallup 1989
1990	77.9	7.1	2.3	0.6	CID/Gallup 1990
1990	85.6	11.4	1.8	1.2	Barrett et al 2001
1990	nd	13.7	nd	nd	Johnstone et al 2001
1990	nd	15.0	nd	nd	Johnstone 1995

Year	Roman Catholics	Protestants	Other	No religion	Source
1990	nd	16.0	nd	nd	Snoek 2000,209
1993	<i>77.0</i>	<i>11.2</i>	--	8.2	<i>CID/Gallup 1993</i>
1993	79.4	17.3	3.0	nd	Johnstone 1995
1995	<i>85.6</i>	<i>11.5</i>	<i>1.6</i>	<i>1.3</i>	<i>Barrett et al 2001</i>
1995	<i>73.0</i>	<i>16.6</i>	<i>2.0</i>	<i>8.4</i>	<i>Census 1995 INEC</i>
1995	<i>74.5</i>	<i>14.9</i>	<i>nd</i>	<i>nd</i>	<i>CID/Gallup 1995</i>
1996	<i>74.25</i>	<i>13.4</i>	<i>nd</i>	<i>6.7</i>	<i>CID/Gallup 1996</i>
1997	<i>75.35</i>	<i>12.8</i>	<i>1.65</i>	<i>7.75</i>	<i>CID/Gallup 1997</i>
1997	nd	12.2	nd	nd	Samandú 2001
2000	<i>75.9</i>	<i>18.8</i>	<i>1.4</i>	<i>7.7</i>	<i>Johnstone et al 2001</i>
2005	<i>58.5</i>	<i>23.2</i>	<i>2.6</i>	<i>15.7</i>	<i>Census 2005 INIDE</i>
2007	57	28	2.5	12.0	CID/Gallup 2007

\* MP refers to the multiplier of 2.5 that was used to calculate two percentages. I put the more reliable percentages in *italics*. These include various Census figures (1950, 1963, 1995, and 2005) and the methodologically sophisticated CID/Gallup opinion polls of 1989, 1990, 1993, 1995, 1996, 1997, and 2007.