

## Nicaragua in Black and White

Havana Times, August 10, 2019



Demonstration by young people in March of this year at the Metrocentro Shopping Mall. They were surrounded by dozens of riot police. Photo: Carlos Herrera

A friend recently told me: “Ortega doesn’t have a chance. He’s an old man confronting the youth.” He’s not only an old man: he’s sustained by a legion of old men.

**By Jose Luis Rocha** ([Confidencial](#))

HAVANA TIMES – Among the dozens of photos that the days of repression against the “vandalizers” have left us, one of the most iconic shows six elderly men sitting at a table while one on foot paces left to right with a leaden step, as if presenting a tableau of the trajectory of the FSLN leadership. At his back, blue and white flags alternate with red and black ones until there are four of each color.

On the table, there is only one water bottle, in a display of austerity that leads us to infer that the Vice President had no hand in the décor. Two of the men have an absent gaze, and the other two have their eyes closed, perhaps blinded by the sun that’s shining right on them, a condition they must now be unaccustomed to. Another, with a little beard reminiscent of Ho Chi Minh, frowns and practices a fierce gaze.

These are the members of the National Commission for Attention to Historic Sandinista Veterans, whatever hides behind that pompous name. Seeking their 15

minutes of fame, they met in mid-July in the city of San Marcos, Carazo, to announce the creation of the Battalions for the Defense of Revolutionary Power. In other words, to make official the operations of the paramilitary whose existence is denied by the Army Chief and justified as groups of volunteer police by the general chief of the Ortega Police. The photo appeared in the July 14 edition of *La Prensa*, a newspaper that is currently struggling for its basic survival due to the censorship the regime has imposed by retaining vital printing materials [for nearly a year] in the Customs' Office.

The image exudes symbolism, as a representative sample of the spirit and personalities upon which the current embodiment of *Sandinismo* sits. The same is true of the images of those accompanying Daniel Ortega on the stage during the July 19<sup>th</sup> celebration: former guerilla fighters with their livers scarred by cirrhosis; former members of the military who'd been left forgotten, with no thanks from those who sent them into the fields of battle; disoriented internationalists who come to Nicaragua believing hook, line and sinker that they're visiting the nerve center of the anti-imperialist struggle; and even an occasional ex-banker or ex-convict who owes their freedom to the FSLN's control over the judicial power. In short, a gang of the elderly.

With this photo as a starting point, the April rebellion could be sketched in black and white, or in old and young. Of course, there are young people and old people in both bands. But there's no doubt that the old – and one elderly couple in particular – rule over the red and black band, and that the young, with great reticence on the part of the old representatives of large capitalism, have had a prominent role in the blue and white band.

As could be anticipated, such a monochrome version – you can call it Manichaeian if you want – doesn't fit in with more refined narratives. I present my excuses: when the bullets are flying, there's no time or energy for delicate shading. And sometimes, from certain angles, black and white is more revealing, exposing for example, the character of a face, or the aged character of an environment. With the events of April 2018 as a backdrop, the photo in question speaks volumes to us: it's the image of a group of old men who are preparing to continue killing the young.

If we have to seek pasts for paramilitary bodies in Central America that operated with the blessings of the state, we must go back to the death squads that operated in El Salvador. This group of former military members perhaps presume that they're imitating Sandino, Ho Chi Minh, or some other world-class revolutionary figure. But their true ancestor is former major Roberto d'Aubuisson, who founded the death squads in El Salvador and was responsible for the assassination of Monsignor Oscar Arnulfo Romero. From there, there's a direct line of descent, despite the stunned looks, down the branches of their genealogical tree.

More important than discovering their affiliation or confirming their biological age, it's clear that those men in the photo propose the salvation of a revolution that only exists in their heads, and that they want to do it by armed force. They're old men with old

resources, and they haven't noticed that the youth have decided to wage this struggle by other means, in order not to repeat history. It's not that being old is a bad thing in itself, or that youth is a guarantee of moral purity. It's about the inevitable countdown which must take place with any personal project. And it's about the fact that the telegraph can do little against the smartphone.

Doubtless, the youth of the blue and white movement will put forth another accumulation of mistakes in the political arena. However, as the days of protests indicated, it won't go far down the lethal road, or aim to work out the difference with bullets. They're young people with new civic strategies, against old people employing the bloody resources of the past.

A friend who's a historian and very familiar with the time of Somoza, told me a few months ago: "Daniel Ortega doesn't have a chance. He's an old man confronting the young." He's not only an old man. He's sustained by a legion of old men, some who possibly had a lot of merit years ago but are now perplexed by a world that they don't understand and lost in this Nicaragua of young people who neither use nor venerate arms.