

Book Review

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David Close. 2016. *Nicaragua: Navigating the Politics of Democracy*. Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Studies of regime change tend to rely on the democratic-authoritarian dichotomy albeit with a messy “hybrid regime” middle. The case of modern Nicaragua shows greater and more nuanced variation, which could broaden the typology used by the regime change literature. Although the country has experienced only one rotation of government since the fall of Somoza, the regime governing state-society relations has seen four transformations. *Nicaragua: Navigating the Politics of Democracy* by David Close explains such changes in state-society relations to scholars of comparative politics as well as to students looking for an introduction to the field. Moreover, *Navigating the Politics of Democracy* offers a timely lesson on how elites can at times reform governance and yet at other times manipulate democratic institutions to secure uncompetitive and personalistic rule for an extended period.

A scholar of political institutions who has written regularly on Nicaragua, David Close seeks an explanation for the puzzle of how a country could experience frequent regime changes and yet maintain a stable government. “Government” refers to the political party currently in power while “regime” is a more profound concept describing the organization of central political power and its formal and informal connection to society. Through four different regimes, the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (Sandinista National Liberation Front, FSLN) has governed at the local and national levels, to a large degree even when the opposition held the presidency and legislature for sixteen years. Since 1979, the FSLN’s influence over formal and informal institutions allowed it to shape not only policy but more importantly the forthcoming regime in which it would next rule. Close traces these “transitions to, through, and from democracy” (6).

Nicaraguan has seen four regimes since the fall of the 43-year Somoza dynasty in 1979. Upon its victory, the Sandinista directorate ruled as a revolutionary vanguard before deciding to transform its rule to electoral democracy, accomplished through its unambiguous victory in the 1984 elections.

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Although there was external pressure to democratize, the FSLN leadership was motivated mostly by its confidence that its historic project maintained voters' support, a need to legitimize the regime domestically, and skillful pre-emption of political rivals calling for democratic reforms. The Liberal opposition's victory in the 1990 elections seemingly relegated the Sandinistas to the loyal opposition for 16 years, but this would be neither ineffectual nor loyal. While accepting his defeat for the presidency, Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega promised to "continue governing from below" through Sandinista control of mass organizations, labor unions, municipal government, the Supreme Court, the electoral authority, the military, and most of the national bureaucracy. Although nominally out of power, the Sandinista leadership was essential for brokering legislative deals, implementing laws and programs through the bureaucracy, and containing political violence. Indeed, the U.S. Congress twice threatened to cut its aid to the Liberal government because of excessive Sandinista influence.

While in opposition, the FSLN negotiated a power-sharing pact to begin a duopolistic power-sharing regime, the third regime since 1979. The two parties institutionalized their freedom to govern without restraints, transparency, or competition from third parties. Regaining presidential and legislative power in 2006, the FSLN consolidated its control over state institutions and rebranded itself to emphasize faith, solidarity, and the Ortega family. Since 2011, the chance of an opposition electoral victory, or even change within the FSLN, has been nil, reflecting a personalistic, dominant power regime. The party (indeed the individuals) that ruled Nicaragua during the last 37 years engineered four changes of regime in accordance with changing interests and challenges. While the first two regime changes improved the quality of democracy, the last two can be criticized as moves away from democracy and towards personalistic rule that tolerates an opposition rendered hopeless.

Similar developments in a few other Latin American countries, some states of the former Soviet Union, as well as the recent failed revolutions across the Middle East, challenge the literature on democratic transitions. This discussion motivates Close in his concluding chapter to compare Nicaraguan regimes to those of Venezuela, Russia and Hungary. Sadly, "even democratic systems that have worked efficiently and provided reasonably good government are not immune to failure" (11). Since the book's publication, the study of how individuals can use the very machinery of democracy to subvert democratic norms while amassing individual power and impunity has become more important. Perhaps if the author had experienced a year's delay, he might have chosen the United States as a comparative case.

Nicaragua: Navigating the Politics of Democracy reaches both advanced scholars and undergraduates, while providing to both an articulate political history of Nicaragua with its unique mass organization features such as "el Pueblo Presidente." David Close engages scholars in a clearly written yet analytically challenging discussion of formative debates in comparative politics. Classifying the Nicaraguan cases by regime type, democratic quality, and the like requires finesse demanding enough to place in doubt many experts' understanding of such terms. Second, undergraduate students of comparative politics find clear, parsimonious definitions of terms with many examples, seminal sources, and repetition, to enforce learning. For both audiences, the description of Nicaraguan political history since 1821 is quite readable, prudent, and interspersed with stories of political intrigue.