

Political strife flares again in Nicaragua

by Gretchen Small

A new round of internal destabilizations shook Nicaragua at the end of November, as security forces uncovered preparations for armed insurrection and a coup d'état. The plotters were a group of disaffected business leaders and members of the old Somoza regime who planned to assassinate the current leadership and place themselves in power as a new junta.

While this coup attempt, the most serious since the new government seized power in July 1979, appears to have been successfully defused by the Sandinista government, Nicaragua's population is now even more polarized, and the possibility of renewed civil war in the country over the next year is still grave.

The destabilization first surfaced on Nov. 12, when eleven conservative political parties and business and labor organizations walked out of the State Council, in which they shared power with the Sandinistas, in opposition to a government ban on a planned protest rally of an opposition party, the National Democratic Movement. Five days later, the country was further shaken by the announcement that government security forces had killed a leading businessman, Jorge Salazar, during a shootout between security forces and Salazar's bodyguards. The security forces had gone to arrest Salazar, head of the Coffee Growers' Association, at his ranch on charges of arms running to the insurrectionary forces.

Several other leading businessmen were also arrested at the time, and charged with conspiracy to overthrow the government.

The government

A split in the government coalition looked inevitable at the time, but government members moved quickly to cool out the crisis atmosphere. They organized a series of well-attended National Unity rallies throughout the country to demonstrate the continuing popularity enjoyed by the government. Government leaders warned those attending to be prepared to repel a possible armed intervention into the country during the coming months by the foreign allies of the insurrectionists.

Subsequent revelations by the government of the extensive plotting behind the provoked political crisis, and the leading role played by Salazar, managed to

isolate the plotters as a minority faction within the business community—at least for the moment.

Critical to this was the announcement by banker Arturo Cruz, the leading representative of the business sector within the five-man junta, that he continued to feel that a basis for collaboration between business and Sandinista leaders still existed, and that therefore he would remain in the junta.

The Somocistas

Perhaps most devastating of the government's revelations was that of Salazar's collaboration with leading figures of the hated Somoza regime. The documented ties of the arrested coup-plotters to the *Somocistas* discredited their claims that they were merely organizing to assure "democratization" and liberty.

Nicaragua's director general of state security, Lenin Cerna, reviewed the documents, testimonials, and other evidence now in the government's possession on the Salazar and related cases at a press conference Nov. 22. Plans for the overthrow of the government were to include: a simultaneous invasion by a Somocista force, probably from Honduras; armed insurrection from within the country; and the capture and assassination of the members of the ruling junta and the Sandinista Party directorate. Contracts for "truckloads" of arms to be shipped into the country had already been signed on recent visits by Salazar and collaborators to Miami, Caracas, Honduras, and El Salvador, and infiltration of supporters into the Sandinista army had already begun.

Nicaragua's underlying problem remains its economy. Never developed industrially by the previous Somoza regime, the country's agricultural and infrastructural resources were almost entirely destroyed during the 1979 civil war in which tens of thousands were killed, and major sections of the country razed. The new government faced a \$1.6 billion debt and an empty treasury when it seized power, and has received insignificant foreign aid since then. Consequently, only minimal reconstruction efforts have been carried out, and the Sandinista government has generated no visible momentum for development. This has left most business and labor demands unmet, and created an environment where political polarization is easily generated.

This is exactly what has happened, and an increasingly radical mood now prevails. Inflammatory speeches by some Sandinista leaders against the "rich" have created an ugly Jacobin climate in which radical "defenders of the poor" are pitted against the business community as a whole. The coup preparations strengthened the hand of the significant sections within the Sandinista Party who from the beginning argued that the attempt to institute a pluralist democracy with a mixed economy of private business and state enterprises could not work, and a "Cuba model" must be adopted.