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Nicaragua: Lessons from a Country with a Low Crime Rate

Stephen Johnson, Samuel Kareff, and Siremorn Asvapromtada

Unlike its immediate neighbors to the north in Central America, Nicaragua has made admirable strides in the area of citizen security in the last 30 years. While Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras all had been galloping toward greater citizen insecurity since the conflictive 1980s, Nicaragua has managed to keep a lid on crime. With a homicide rate of 12 deaths per 100,000 residents—half the Latin American average of 26 per 100,000 and far lower than 82 per 100,000 in Honduras—Nicaragua appears to be a model for public safety in still turbulent Central America. However, recent erosions in democratic governance in Nicaragua could easily reverse such gains.

Background

To appreciate how remarkable Nicaragua's security profile is, one must understand how unlikely it is. Next to Haiti, Nicaragua is the hemisphere's poorest country, and nearly half its citizens (44 percent) live below the poverty level. With so few people paying taxes toward a big budget in government services, such scarce resources do not support a strong police force, according to traditional measures. Nicaragua has only 180 officers per 100,000 inhabitants, less than half of what the United Nations records as the median ratio of police to citizens in Latin America (284 per 100,000).

Why do these numbers seem so out of whack? Speaking at CSIS on June 18, 2012, Director General of the National Police Aminta Granera provided some hints. She pointed out three factors that have helped achieve Nicaragua's measure of safety: a communitarian approach to law enforcement, the transformation of a partisan police into a nonpolitical service institution, and Nicaragua's unusual migration experience.

From Repression to Social Inclusion

Before the Sandinista era, the National Guard served as a constabulary and defense force that propped up dictator Anastasio Somoza in power. Granera was studying to be a nun, but dropped out to fight in the 1979 revolution against Somoza. Subsequently, she became associated with the police through her work in the Interior Ministry. As she explains it, nobody wanted to copy the Somoza model of a repressive force. And as so many males became involved in

the growing Sandinista army, large numbers of women came into the police ranks and influenced its development.

Under the purview of hard-line interior minister Tomás Borge, who dealt harshly with dissidents and created the famous *turbas divinas* or "divine mobs" to intimidate non-Sandinistas, the police served to both control criminal behavior and extend partisan influence into society by forging close associations with individual neighborhoods. In most cases, this meant organizing them into self-protection and watch groups. And it also meant involving youth in various party-organized activities.

A National Institution

When the Sandinistas permitted a free election and were voted out of office in 1990, Granera stayed with the police, rising from sub-commander to commissioner, and helped it transition from a party organism to a national institution during the administration of President Violeta Chamorro. Shedding its political identity, it, however, retained its preventive and communitarian approach to law enforcement to include establishing special units to prevent violence against women and children. Thus females and young adults continued to fill significant roles. Former domestic violence victims were recruited to persuade women to speak out on rape. Ex-delinquents were called on to mentor youth through sports programs, while senior-year university students in Nicaragua were able to voluntarily intern in police-sponsored public security programs earning credits transferrable to fulfill academic requirements.

Migration

Another reason that Nicaragua was not as heavily impacted by crime as its Central American neighbors was that it did not experience the same patterns of exodus during the conflicts of the 1980s. As Nicaraguans emigrated primarily for political reasons—to escape Sandinismo—their good reception in countries like Costa Rica and the United States prompted them to remain for extended periods. It was not the same experience for El Salvador or Guatemala. When many young Salvadorans migrated, Granera noted, they did so chiefly for economic reasons and intended to stay only briefly.

This created a fairly constant, illegal back-and-forth movement through borders and, as a consequence, promoted the movement of goods and money, which encouraged smuggling. Moreover, when these Central Americans arrived in the United States, they were not as easily assimilated; many youths ended up being educated by street gangs in destination cities such as Los Angeles. In 1985, when gangs were first beginning to appear in El Salvador, most Nicaraguan youth who had stayed behind were involved in state-organized projects.

Nicaragua's Police Today

A constitutional reform in 1995 gave the police its own General Directorate and more independence. Additionally, the National Police have strengthened community bonds through forums where different security problems are identified and solved collaboratively. Granera stressed that “the National Police of Nicaragua works from the community, by the community, with the community, and for the community.” She also says that it serves “rich and poor alike.” Notably, Nicaragua is the only country in Latin America that did not experience a rise in perceptions of insecurity between 1996 and 2010—in fact, they went down.

Today's police force, dressed in blue uniforms, 12,000 strong, and 40 percent female, seems well-led and professional, despite a base salary that is the equivalent of US\$120 per month—the lowest in Central America. Clearly, members know what the chief's vision is—a proactive approach, crime prevention, and community involvement—and how it should apply to their law enforcement mission. They confront the lowest kidnapping rate in the region—7 compared with 133 in Guatemala (2010). Still, Granera admits, lesser crimes against children and women are comparatively high and unacceptable.

Just outside its borders, the region is swirling. Costa Rican authorities are decommissioning illicit drug storehouses. Hondurans are coping with dense networks of illegal landing strips in the depopulated Mosquitia area. In May, the Honduran government announced it was completely rebuilding its police force from the ground up. At the same time, El Salvador's government cut a deal with gang leaders to try to get them to agree to a truce in their internecine warfare. All three northern triangle states (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras) are reeling from gang violence with a combined membership said to number some 70,000.

As for drugs, U.S. radar tracking shows that suspect airplane and boat traffic has largely avoided Nicaragua. Still in the last five years, Granera's police say they have been able to seize 50 tons of cocaine, \$25 million in cash, 1,200 weapons, 1,400 vehicles, 18 airplanes, and 128 properties—all largely thanks

to staying in close contact with Nicaraguan communities at the grassroots level.¹

Conclusions

Some lessons stand out clearly from Nicaragua's experience that can be summed up as follows:

- First, effective policing hinges on leadership. From her days as a Sandinista revolutionary, Granera has spent some 30 years working in law enforcement. In contrast to the revolving door that has characterized the upper ranks of Salvadoran, Guatemalan, and Honduran security forces, she has been around long enough for her vision and sense of discipline to do some good.
- Second, putting police in close contact with the communities helps them become part of the landscape, enabling them to develop confidence and intelligence networks to know when criminal activity is about to take place.
- Third, organizing citizens into programs, a holdover from Sandinismo's communist roots, inadvertently revealed a way to deny time and space for youths to get into trouble. Today, students, ex-delinquents, and battered spouses participate in public forums and recreational programs that help shape neighborhood environments in a positive way.

Apparently colleagues in neighboring countries think these examples may be worth emulating. In May, Granera was unanimously elected president of the Commission of Police Chiefs and Directors of Central America, Mexico, the Caribbean, and Colombia.

Even so, there are dark clouds on Nicaragua's horizon. One is criminal violence that will not be confined to neighboring territory. Already Mexico's Los Zetas have been implicated in local drug movements and could develop operations that Nicaraguans would be hard pressed to control, considering the huge amounts of money, weapons, and drug product they move.

The other cloud is President Ortega himself. In 2008, he packed Nicaragua's electoral commission with partisans who disqualified a number of small parties from participating in municipal elections. At that, the Sandinistas reportedly still had to resort to fraud in order to win 94 of the 146 municipal mayor posts. The following year, Ortega pressed cronies on the Supreme Court to declare the constitutional article banning successive presidential reelection illegal so that he could run again in 2011. Director General Granera herself was reappointed by Ortega in 2011, even though the law did not give Ortega that power. Further departures from

¹ Tim Johnson, “Nicaragua's top cop, who once wanted to be a nun, fends off drug gangs,” McClatchy Newspapers, November 17, 2011, <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2011/11/15/130375/nicaraguas-top-cop-who-once-wanted.html>.

democratic order and legality could compromise her ability to keep the police force committed to fair and equal treatment of all citizens under the law.

Barring an invasion by foreign criminal groups or institutional manipulation by President Daniel Ortega that could impact functionality or political independence, Nicaragua's police will likely motor on. Whether it remains an effective pillar for citizen security depends on the degree to which it has been able to internalize and preserve the lessons of its short, but remarkable past.

Stephen Johnson is a senior fellow and director of the CSIS Americas Program. Samuel Kareff and Siremorn Asvapromtada are CSIS Americas Program intern scholars.

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