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Nicaragua's Ethnic Paths



Nicaragua: Autonomía y Revolución (Nicaragua: Autonomy and Revolution), Héctor Díaz Polanco y Gilberto López Rivas, Editorial Juan Pablos, México, 1986.

Héctor Díaz Polanco and Gilberto López y Rivas are Mexican anthropologists who have specialized in ethnic issues. Their book, **Nicaragua: autonomía y revolución (Nicaragua: Autonomy and Revolution)**, allows an insight into how the FSLN and the Revolutionary Government regard Nicaragua's ethnic groups and their situation. Published in Mexico by Juan Pablos Editor in 1986, the book contains testimonies, official statements and documents that illustrate the process Nicaragua has followed in dealing with these issues. It also contains analyses and opinions on the subject by other qualified sources.

The ethnic question in Nicaragua has been the subject of debate for several years now. When the FSLN seized power in this small Central American nation in 1979 the ethnic question was known only to a very few specialists. In general, the existence of different social and cultural groups in the country was practically unknown. The issue was only "discovered" in 1979, particularly what has come to be known as the "Miski-

to problem."

Yet the Miskitos are by no means the only Nicaraguan Indians. Nicaragua is a pluri-ethnic and multilingual country in which different ethnic groups -Miskitos, Sumus, Ramas, Creoles, Garifones and Mestizos- are scattered throughout the vast eastern regions of the country, covering some 50% of the nation's territory. Thus, the Nicaraguan ethnic question is much more complex than just the "Miskito problem", and its roots go back in history to the clashes between Spain and Britain during colonial times.

Most of Nicaragua's ethnic groups live along the country's Atlantic coast, an area that was held by the British Empire for three centuries. This is a fact that determined social and cultural differences between these groups and the rest of the country's population, living mostly along the Pacific coastline colonized by Spain. The British were replaced by the United States during the 19th Century when the local Creole oligarchy proved incapable of staving off either power.

Thus Nicaraguan society was unable to build a national state capable of truly integrating the country's different regions. Instead, what took place was a process of increasing inter-regional disarticulation between the Atlantic and the Central Pacific regions. The process has social and cultural expressions that are further accentuated by existing geographical barriers. This was the complex situation the FSLN inherited in 1979.

Autonomy and Revolution contains up-dated, concise and objective information. The documents compiled here will be useful to anyone interested in ethnic issues, in the Nicaraguan situation and in knowing more about the subject that international news agencies have dealt with so extensively. Díaz Polanco and López y Rivas have performed the valuable task of compiling the most important documents dealing with the issue. A variety of original and scientific points of view are laid out in this book, allowing the reader a grasp of the real situation of Nicaragua's ethnic groups.

As early as 1969, in its so-called Historic Program the FSLN referred to a "special plan to favor the Atlantic Coast," which, among other things, called for stimulating "a blossoming of the region's local cultural values that have

evolved from original aspects of its historical tradition." The *Sandinista Popular Revolution's Statement of Principles Regarding the Indian Communities of the Atlantic Coast*, issued jointly by the FSLN and the Rev. Reconstr. Gov., contemplated the region's economic problems and the need to fully develop the Indians' cultural values.

The Nicaraguan government proposed a Regional Autonomy Plan in 1984, both in response to demands posed by the different groups and because internal contradictions pertaining to the ethnic issue had become more acute. The Plan underwent broad-based revisions in which even Indian groups up in arms against the Sandinistas participated. It guarantees the rights of the peoples of the Atlantic Coast and lays the foundations for the respect and development of their specific cultural values within the national framework.

The book includes speeches and articles by Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega, the National Autonomy Commission, Minister of the Interior Tomás Borge, Luis Carrión, Manuel Ortega Hegg, and of course, Héctor Díaz Polanco and Gilberto López y Rivas. Three documents from an international perspective are reproduced: the "Manifesto of Latin American Anthropologists and Social Scientists On the Nicaraguan Ethnic Question", the "Statement on the Nicaraguan National-Ethnic Question", and the "Nicaraguan Government's Report to the IX Congress of the Interamerican Indigenous Institute".

All those interested in political, economic and cultural events in the conflictive Central American region will find valuable material in this book to help them develop an independent and well-informed point of view on the subject.★

Pantxika Cazaux