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"Somos el Pueblo"
Resilience and Nationalism in Nicaragua's Political Struggle

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Abstract
Amidst the tumultuous echoes of *"No somos oposición, somos el pueblo"*, resonating across Nicaragua's streets during the April 2018 protests, a nation grappled with a crisis of identity and governance. What began as a grassroots outcry against perceived injustices quickly burgeoned into a nationwide upheaval, triggering a state of emergency that lasted for months, marking the gravest challenge since the Contra War era. At the heart of this crisis lies a clash between the self-proclaimed *"Unidad Nacional Azul y Blanco"*, dressed in national colors, aiming to free the *"patria"* from a repressive regime, and, on the other side, the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN), which came into power through the 1979 revolution in the name of national sovereignty. This paper analyzes the strategic use of nationalism in shaping the crisis discourse, drawing on the works of Hobsbawm, Smith, and Anderson. It examines how both factions compete to mold the narrative of an authentic "people" through the appropriation of narratives, symbols, and historical figures, as well as the mechanisms employed to embed the national *imaginario* within the collective consciousness. In doing so, it delineates nuanced typologies of nationalist fervor and their interplay, revealing the complex web of actors navigating the terrain of allegiances and antagonisms. Finally, the paper will assess the movement's resilience and current status in 2024, providing insights into its lasting impact on Nicaraguan society.

Keywords
Nicaragua, Sandinism, "Los Azul y Blanco", Nationalism, Imagined Community.

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Resumen
En medio de los tumultuosos ecos de "No somos oposición, somos el pueblo", resonando por las calles de Nicaragua durante las protestas de abril de 2018, una nación luchaba con una crisis de identidad y gobernanza. Lo que comenzó como un clamor popular contra injusticias percibidas rápidamente se convirtió en una convulsión nacional, desencadenando un estado de emergencia que duró meses, marcando el desafío más grave desde la era de la Guerra Contra. En el corazón de esta crisis yace un choque entre la autoproclamada "Unidad Nacional Azul y Blanco", vestida con los colores nacionales, con el objetivo de liberar la "patria" de un régimen represivo, y, por otro lado, el Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN), que llegó al poder mediante la revolución de 1979 en nombre de la soberanía nacional. Este documento analiza el uso estratégico del nacionalismo en la configuración del discurso de crisis, basándose en los trabajos de Hobsbawm, Smith y Anderson. Examina cómo ambas facciones compiten para moldear la narrativa de un "pueblo" auténtico a través de la apropiación de narrativas, símbolos y figuras históricas, así como los mecanismos empleados para incrustar el imaginario nacional en la conciencia colectiva. Al hacerlo, delinea tipologías matizadas de fervor nacionalista y su interacción, revelando la compleja red de actores que navegan por el terreno de las lealtades y antagonismos. Finalmente, el documento evaluará la resiliencia del movimiento y su estado actual en 2024, ofreciendo perspectivas sobre su impacto duradero en la sociedad nicaragüense.

Palabras clave
Nicaragua, Sandinismo, "Los Azul y Blanco", Nacionalismo, Comunidad Imaginada.

Introduction

For decades, Nicaragua and the Sandinista Revolution of 1979 stood as symbols of socialist Latin America's resistance against U.S. imperialism in the pursuit of national sovereignty (Villacorta 2018: 8). However, since April 2018, the Central American nation has found itself embroiled in one of its most severe political crises since the Contra War. The crisis was sparked by devastating fires in the Indio Maíz Nature Reserve, which prompted accusations of President Daniel Ortega and Vice President Rosario Murillo's inadequate response. These accusations ignited the initial wave of protests. Shortly thereafter, the government announced a reform of the Nicaraguan Institute of Social Security (INSS), which dramatically exacerbated discontent and protests. As the police, their *antimotines*, and the so-called *"turbas"* – parapolice groups tolerated by the state – responded to the demonstrations with violence (CIDH 2018: 7, 22), protests erupted across the nation, demanding the immediate resignation of the presidential couple. According to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), the protests resulted in at least 355 deaths, 2000 injuries, and 1614 arrests (Amnesty International 2023: 6).

Figure 1. Protesters in an anti-government protest on the road to Masaya, Managua, on May 9, 2018 (Wikimedia Commons).

The inspiration for this research paper originated from my astonishment at the omnipresence of the Nicaraguan flag during the protests (Fig. 1). In a display of unity, the opposition flooded the streets, clad in blue and white, identifying themselves as *"Los Azul y Blanco"* and launching an extensive media campaign to liberate the patria.

The term *"pueblo"* has since become a focal point of contention (Aguilar Antunes 2018: 143). On one side stands the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN), originally a left-wing, socialist, revolutionary party that propelled Daniel Ortega, one of its "national heroes", into the presidency to govern in the name of the *"pueblo"* after decades of foreign domination by the Somozas dictatorship and U.S. imperialism. Today, on the opposing side, a nationwide protest movement coalesces under alliances like *Unidad Nacional Azul y Blanco*, laying claim to the mantle of the true *"pueblo"*. Consequently, my analysis revolves around the negotiation of the Nicaraguan nation and the legitimate representation of the *"pueblo"* within Sandinism and the *Azul y Blanco* movement. How do both factions employ strategic nationalism to differentiate themselves in the ongoing crisis discourse? Furthermore, I pose the question of how both sides demonstrate resilience in their nationalist strategies – the FSLN over decades of political transformation, and the *Azul y Blanco* in the face of the brutal repression they have encountered over the past six years.

Theoretical Framework

I base my theoretical framework on the nationalism theories of Eric Hobsbawm, Anthony Smith, and Benedict Anderson. While these scholars primarily focused on European contexts, their models are applicable to Latin America given the region's historical connections with the political developments of the Global North through colonial legacies, exchange in the 19th century, and dependencies during the Cold War. Anderson's concept of nations as "imagined communities" (1983) is especially relevant in understanding Latin American nationalism, where national identity did not emerge from ethnic homogeneity, but rather from diverse groups united against colonial rule (Miller 2013: 390). Initially, nationalism in Latin America was a top-down project led by creole elites seeking independence from the Spanish Crown, driven more by a desire to escape colonial financial burdens than by popular mass mobilization (Anderson 1983: 57).

Over time, Latin American nationalisms evolved from this elite project into various state-building efforts by political parties, invoking an economic nationalism aimed at resisting imperialism, particularly U.S. intervention. This form of nationalism sought to assert sovereignty over natural resources, as seen in Mexico's 1917 Constitution, positioning the "nation" as the defender of the people's economic interests (Miller 2013: 387f.). Hobsbawm's idea of "invented traditions" explains how Latin American elites then sought to construct national identities (Hobsbawm 1990: 110) with deeply homogenizing intentions, at best acknowledging indigenous and Afro-descendant identities within paternalistic frameworks (Cadena 2007: 98f. Rivera Cusicanqui 2010: 100). At the same time, nationalism from below emerged, particularly in guerrilla movements and civil uprisings, where marginalized groups redefined national identity in opposition to both external and internal oppressors. Thus, Latin American nationalism was

not a singular, uniform identity but rather a complex interplay of elite-driven state projects and grassroots movements that reflected the region's ethnic, social, and political diversity (Miller 2013: 392).

Central to my analysis is thus the recognition that nationalism transcends ideological boundaries and has historically been embraced by diverse actors ranging from the right to the left, from states to separatists, from ethno-linguistic groups to conservatives and revolutionaries. I begin by offering a historical overview of early Sandinism as a manifestation of revolutionary nationalism from below. Subsequently, I categorize the methods employed by the FSLN as a ruling party, exemplifying state nationalism from a top-down perspective. Next, I examine the characteristics and strategies of the *Azul y Blanco* movement, representing civic nationalism following Anthony Smith (1998: 93). Finally, I will use core concepts from resilience theory (Bracke 2016; Folke 2016; Hanisch 2016; MacKinnon and Derickson 2013) to discuss the survival, transformation and legacy of nationalism and political entities in Nicaragua.

Methods

This paper emerges from my undergraduate thesis based on a 10-week research stay in Nicaragua (September 26, 2018 - December 2, 2018). I conducted semi-structured interviews with seventeen individuals selected through snowball sampling, in an attempt to counteract distrust towards me as a researcher in such a conflict-laden context through social networks (Cohen and Arieli 2011: 425-427). Among them, eleven identified with the opposition, four expressed support for the government, and one interviewee refrained from taking a clear stance in the politically charged atmosphere. To safeguard their anonymity and safety, all names have been anonymized, and no further details regarding their occupation, residence, or organizational affiliations are provided.

Given that six years had passed since my initial fieldwork, I set out to investigate changes in protest symbolism, language, and visibility since my last visit in 2018. Unable to return to Nicaragua and to engage with individuals on the ground due to safety concerns, I instead conducted online follow-up interviews in the beginning of 2024 with three former participants. They now live in exile in Spain, Costa Rica, and the USA, like many other Nicaraguans. While these anecdotal interviews lack representativeness, they offer glimpses into the current lives of Nicaraguan exiles and their perspectives on events in their homeland. Drawing upon these interviews, I conducted a qualitative content analysis, supplemented by newspaper articles and Facebook posts from both political camps. Additionally, I explored the manifestation of the conflict in public spaces and the arts, analyzing graffiti, music, and poetry.

Revolutionary Nationalism: Sandino and the FSLN

For Augusto C. Sandino, sovereignty was synonymous with "national honor", a belief forged through personal experience with the U.S. intervention in 1912 (Links 1992: 11). To him, a country's right to independence was sacred, and it was a patriot's duty to defend it (Hodges 1986: 74). He rallied a force of 2000 to 6000 illiterate peasants, artisans, and workers, known as the *"pequeño ejército loco"* (crazy little army), to combat U.S. occupation from 1926 until his assassination in 1934 (Links 1992: 12).

As a self-proclaimed son of Bolívar, Sandino dreamed of a Latin American union (Hodges 1986: 77). He embraced an anti-imperialist nationalism with an internationalist outlook oriented toward Latin America. At the same time, he expressed a strong *nacionalismo popular*, advocating against the national oligarchy and championing the rights of Nicaraguan workers and peasants (Hodges 1986: 74; Links 1992: 12-14). Sandino drew inspiration from Mexican revolutionary nationalism, which aspired to turn all inhabitants into citizens through "the establishment of formal equality" (Michael 2007: 18). Another significant ideological influence from Mexico was José Vasconcelos' concept of the *raza cósmica*, rooted in the ideology of *mestizaje*, that is, the amalgamation of Latin American *"razas"* (Bendaña 2016: 51, 353). The accompanying attempt at homogenization, however, left little room for difference and thus the indigenous (Alonso 2007: 178). Marisol de la Cadena suggests that Sandino held an inclusive yet paternalistic view of indigenous peoples, envisioning their liberation through national integration and education (2007: 98f.).

After the withdrawal of U.S. troops, control of Nicaragua fell into the hands of the National Guard, led by Anastasio Somoza. His family's dictatorship lasted until 1979, keeping Nicaragua economically and politically dependent on the United States. Inspired by Sandino's legacy, the FSLN emerged in Tegucigalpa in 1961 as a militant guerrilla movement, ultimately leading the 1979 revolution that overthrew the Somozist regime. A key ideological influence for the FSLN was liberation theology, also known as the Church of the Poor and Oppressed (Hodges 1986: 272). This shows that Latin American nationalism does not necessarily replace other affiliations and identities (Miller 2013: 390ff), unlike in Europe, where nationalism often filled the void left by declining religiosity (Anderson 1983: 42). Spirituality, seen as a radical interpretation of the Bible as a pamphlet for justice (Links 1992: 16), and internationalism, expressed as solidarity with socialist sister states, were core principles for both Sandino and the FSLN. The FSLN saw *"el pueblo"* as a class, positioned itself as its vanguard, championing the interests of the oppressed (ibid.: 38). It embraced the myth of the *"pueblo en armas"* to guide its guerrilla efforts (Lacaze 2012). These themes echo Anderson's idea of a "comradely confederation of equals" (Anderson 1983: 17) and exemplify a traditional form of "leftist" nationalism, though this became increasingly ambiguous over time.

Simultaneously, the antagonism to U.S. imperialism and the Somoza regime provided the dichotomy necessary for identity formation; echoing historical Latin American nationalism rooted in independence movements that emphasized a common enemy – the dependence on the Spanish crown – over a unified "us" (ibid.: 58f.). The persistent emphasis on sovereignty reflects a profound economic nationalism (Miller 2013: 387). In conclusion, the ideology of the early FSLN aligns with the framework of revolutionary nationalism (Capetillo 2019: 14). Nationalist rhetoric and militant strategies were deployed with the aim of overthrowing and fundamentally transforming the established state apparatus, thereby enabling "the sovereign people themselves" to exercise authority through the state (Hobsbawm 1990: 105). This, at least, was the avowed objective of the revolution.

Transformation to State Nationalism

Following the FSLN's democratic ascent to power in 1984, a significant shift occurred in its approach, marking a transition from revolutionary nationalism to state nationalism. The FSLN initiated various policies in line with Sandino's legacy, including expropriations, property redistribution, free access to education and health care, and the establishment of cooperatives and unions (Bothmann 2014: 77; Calvo Ospina 2009: 16-17). These policies aimed to advance Nicaragua towards socialism while also initiating a comprehensive effort towards nation-state integration. This shift signaled a departure from the guerrilla movement's revolutionary nationalism towards a more traditional state nationalism, aspiring to construct a Sandinista nation through centralized governance.

One pivotal post-revolutionary objective was the construction of a unified nation through national integration and "modernizing development policies", particularly in historically marginalized regions (Baracco 2011: 136). With the establishment of Misurasata (Miskito Sumo Rama Sandinista Asla Takanka - Miskito Sumo Rama joined with the Sandinistas) in the 1980s, the FSLN aimed to "sandinize" the coastal regions and integrate them into the national agenda. However, the organization's objectives gradually shifted away from fundamental anti-imperialist and socialist principles, evolving instead into an ethnic opposition organization. The coastal communities were resistant to the Sandinista narrative of the *"pueblo"* as a unified class, as ethnicity held greater significance as a social identifier for them (Vilas 1989: 99). They perceived initiatives such as the Spanish literacy campaign as efforts towards further cultural assimilation (Diskin 1991: 161ff.). This critique reflects a broader tension within the Sandinista project, where the goal of a unified nation often marginalized indigenous identities,

raising concerns about the exclusion of indigenous communities from meaningful participation in the national discourse.[1]

According to Hobsbawm and Anderson, education in schools and universities serves as a central tool to foster state patriotism (Anderson 1983: 76). Free state education, exemplified by the FSLN's literacy campaign, was designed to cultivate political awareness and raise a new collective consciousness of a Sandinista nation (Baracco 2004: 341f.). To this day, state education remains a central means of nationalist indoctrination, extending beyond the indigenous population. During a visit to a rural community, I was provided with the state textbook *"Conociendo mi mundo"* (Paiz Blanco et al. N.D.) by a second-grader. Issued by the Ministry of Education (MINED), the textbook contains information on Nicaraguan history, its heroes and martyrs, national symbols, songs, traditions, and cuisine (ibid.: 140ff.), alongside party propaganda. Throughout the textbook, Sandinism is portrayed as the sole valid form of patriotism. For instance, regarding Sandino, it asserts:

> Sandino is one of those men, of Nicaraguans, of patriots who should never be forgotten, and his feat should be known by generations to give General Sandino the recognition he deserves and follow his example of love for the homeland. To imitate his humility, nationality, wisdom, and knowledge of the history of our beautiful Nicaragua. (ibid.: 31; translation by author)

According to Catherine Lacaze, Sandino epitomizes the archetype to be followed by all those who truly want to call themselves Nicaraguans and be recognized as such. She contends that the FSLN crafted a new national narrative in Sandino's name, marginalizing those who did not acknowledge the inherent symbiosis between revolution and nation, portraying them as outsiders and adversaries (Lacaze 2012).

Anderson describes how elites attempt to instigate and harness nationalist fervor through a culture of martyrdom, manifested in symbolic monuments and tombs dedicated to fallen soldiers (1983: 18). On the schoolbook page about Carlos Fonseca, children are asked to contemplate how they can emulate the FSLN co-founder (Paiz Blanco et al. N.D.). Another task involves explaining the significance of the Sandinista Revolution for the Nicaraguan *"pueblo"* (ibid.: 103). The state's reverence for revolutionary heroes, evident in school curriculum, holidays, monuments, and even the renaming of streets, neighborhoods, and parks after martyrs (Bothmann 2014: 77), as well as the Revolutionary Museum in León (Fig. 2), has profoundly permeated the collective consciousness:

[1] While this issue highlights important questions about the participation of indigenous groups in nation-building, it is not the focus of this study. Further questions regarding the role of indigenous groups in today's protests should be explored in greater depth in future research.

Figure 2. *Museo de la Revolución*, León (Foto: Sophie Vey, 2017)
(Graffiti: *Death to the [imperialist invader], Daniel president 2012-2017, Genocidal Bush, enemy of humanity*.

Lucía told me: "Well, as heroes, I recognize all those who have fought for the sovereignty and independence of Nicaragua" (personal communication, Nov. 26, 2018; translation by author). Ana, an outspoken Sandinista, similarly emphasizes those who stood up to the "Yankees".

> Well, among the heroes [...] there's Andrés Castro, Rafaela Herrera who fought [...] when the Yankees came and wanted Nicaragua to be subordinate to them. Our great hero is Sandino, Carlos Fonseca, well, I don't know if he's considered a hero but our great poet Rubén Darío also represents and is a great symbol of ours (personal communication, Nov. 7, 2018; translation by author).

However, the curriculum for second graders does not solely focus on past heroic deeds but also highlights ongoing government initiatives. For instance, students are tasked with identifying community improvements resulting from projects undertaken by the "Government of National Unity and Reconciliation" (Paiz Blanco et al. N.D.: 150). This is followed by a lesson on the significance of taxation in facilitating the construction of infrastructure such as roads, hospitals, and bridges by the FSLN government (ibid.: 151). In the chapter addressing health, rather than providing information on health care, the emphasis is placed on the government's utilization of tax funds to procure vaccines and medication for the populace, as well as providing access to clean drinking

water and electricity (ibid.: 21). Isabell, a former guerrilla who distanced herself from the FSLN, articulates her discomfort with Sandinista education:

> As a teacher who was still in this government system, I felt that many things were imposed on us. [...] And on the other hand, education became politicized. [...] Students were brought to partisan activities whenever they wanted and I didn't like that, because I believe we should respect. We must respect, I cannot go to a study center and bring young people as if assuming that they agree with their thinking (personal communication, Oct. 26, 2018; translation by author).

Resilience and Strategic Nationalism in the Wake of Crises

The FSLN underwent a radical transformation in the 1990s after its electoral defeat to Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, leading to its relegation to the opposition. Resilience, commonly defined as the ability to withstand crises and recover, includes not only survival but also the ability to adapt and evolve (Folke 2016: 1). While the previous section focused on the transition to state nationalism primarily as the scaling up and top-down institutionalization of prior bottom-up ideologies, the following discussion will explore the evolution of Sandinism in response to crises and setbacks.

The US-financed Contra War of the 1980s was a direct response to the Sandinista government's anti-imperialist policies, economic reforms, and expropriations, which challenged U.S. interests in the region. Along with the war, the resulting financial crisis created widespread dissatisfaction in Nicaragua, leading to a strong desire for peace among the population. This dissatisfaction played a significant role in the 1990 election of Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, who promised to abolish conscription and end the conflict. Her election marked a shift toward neoliberal economic policies and a rupture with the Sandinista agenda (Bahrmann 2016: 129f.). In response, the FSLN, now in opposition, faced internal divisions that lead to the 1995 split that formed the "Movimiento Renovador Sandinista" (MRS). From that point, Daniel Ortega and his loyalists consolidated control over the party, steering it toward more pragmatic and conciliatory politics, such as forming a controversial pact with conservative forces, which fundamentally altered the FSLN's ideological and political direction (Links 1992: 30f.).

From its new position as an opposition party, the FSLN adopted a strategy of forming broad alliances and fostering national unity, a trend that became especially prominent during their 2006 re-election campaign. After years in opposition, the FSLN, led by Daniel Ortega, sought to reframe its image and appeal beyond its traditional base. The campaign prioritized peace and reconciliation, positioning the FSLN as a party capable of governing for all Nicaraguans, not just the revolutionary faithful (Ayerdis 2018:

55). This marked a significant shift from the party's earlier revolutionary rhetoric. In a symbolic break from its past, the FSLN replaced the iconic black and red flag on campaign materials with a bright pink, softening its image. The language of the campaign revolved around themes of love and unity, aiming to attract voters who had previously been less committed to the Sandinista cause (Torres-Rivas 2007: 8).

In order to broaden its appeal, the FSLN sought to build alliances that transcended traditional class lines. The party, which had once been selective in recruiting its members, now aimed to reach a wider audience, reflecting a more inclusive strategy. By 2007, only two of the original nine Sandinista leaders remained with Ortega (ibid.: 9), highlighting the party's internal transformation. Ortega's government came to be referred to as "Alianza Unida Nicaragua Triunfa", a coalition comprising diverse political groups, from Christian movements to indigenous organizations from the Caribbean coast (Ayerdis 2018: 55). This alliance, while presenting the FSLN as the primary force, downplayed its dominance by showcasing a broad representation of *"el pueblo"*. At the same time, the government implemented social programs for the rural poor while aligning with international financial institutions like the IMF and the World Bank to attract foreign investment and gain the support of the private sector through favorable policies (Martí I Puig 2016: 251f). This balance between social welfare and capitalist economic strategies was seen as a pragmatic approach to maintaining power within Nicaragua's established political system.

The 2018 political turmoil, however, opened old wounds, revitalizing the age-old dichotomy between "us" and "the enemy" that had somewhat faded over the years. The crisis discourse unfolds alongside old antagonisms, revitalizing old Sandinista imagery. Firstly, with both the Superior Council for Private Enterprise (COSEP) and the Catholic Church supporting the opposition, the narrative of a classic class struggle is exacerbated. This portrays the peaceful, everyday *"pueblo"* as resisting against a coup orchestrated by the *"derecha golpista"* (right-wing putschists). During a speech on May 30, 2018, in response to the demands for resignation, Ortega insisted: *"Nicaragua no es propiedad de nadie"* (Nicaragua is nobody's property) (Rueda-Estrada 2018: 102), thus positioning himself discursively against private entrepreneurs.

Secondly, alongside the old domestic enemies of large landowners and the Catholic Church, the image of an authentic Nicaraguan people under external attack is also upheld. In this sense, sovereignty has again become a focal point in the current government discourse, accusing the United States (Deutsche Welle 2018; Midence 2018: 50), Costa Rica (Estrada Galo 2018), and various foreign journalists (Estrada Galo 2018; Miranda Aburto 2018a,b) of interference. The crisis allows the FSLN to refer back to Sandino's ideals of defending national self-determination and engaging in class struggle against local elites in league with the United States.

Murillo pejoratively labeled the opposition as "vandalic groups, tiny group, toxic people, blood seeking vampires, criminals, gangsters and the vandalic right wing" (Rueda-Estrada 2018: 98; translation by author). This quote demonstrates the government's attempt to blend the image of the right with that of common criminals, even terrorists. References to practices such as human burnings are frequently made to draw parallels with Islamist terrorism (Ayerdis 2018: 55), thereby justifying the anti-terrorism law (Ley N° 977), which came into effect on July 16, 2018 (Asamblea Nacional 2018). By discursively situating the opposition as a threat to the nation, the state asserts its right to wield exclusive control over the use of force and, in extreme cases, even execute suspected terrorists. According to Carlos Midence, the opposition appropriated the concept of the *"pueblo"* to justify their criminal activities. However, he argues that none of these actors truly represented the Nicaraguan *"pueblo"* or had any legitimacy or proximity to it. Instead, he professes, their terrorist acts inflicted immeasurable harm on the "real *pueblo*" (Midence 2018: 44).

> The street blockades generated a fatal delinquency. [...] And insecurity for whom? For the *pueblo*, for the *pueblo* and we don't see that. Where are the Nicaraguans who want peace? (Nicole, personal communication, Nov. 11, 2018; translation by author).

This clearly shows the contentious nature of the term *"pueblo"*. On one hand, the opposition's appropriation of this category is viewed as deeply objectionable; yet on the other hand, the Sandinista side employs it just as naturally to support its own narrative of events. The FSLN is depicted as the defender of peace against a small faction of elitist former Somozists and traitors, from whom the Sandinista nation must be shielded. Consequently, *"Nicaragua Quiere Paz"* (Nicaragua wants peace) became a central mantra in government rhetoric in response to the protests.

Of particular interest is the Sandinistas' current stance toward the Nicaraguan flag. Three out of the four Sandinistas I interviewed find it deplorable that the opposition identifies itself as *Azul y Blanco* and appropriates the national colors and symbols. They view the movement as orchestrated by a minority of the population, represented in political parties that seek to exploit patriotic sentiments to disguise their true objective of seizing power.

> They said that this was the people of Nicaragua, that the people were suffering and they covered themselves with a blue and white flag – and behind this blue and white flag there are political parties. This was my pain as a Nicaraguan because the blue and white flag covers all of us Nicaraguans, not a minority of the population (Nicole, personal communication, Nov. 11, 2018; translation by author).

Ever since the flag was declared subversive by the opposition and thus became the emblem of the protests, and there have been numerous reports of individuals being arrested for displaying the national colors (ElNuevoDiario 2018). Electricity poles, painted blue and white during the protests, were immediately covered in black and red by FSLN supporters (Fig. 3). A symbolic power struggle is thus being waged on the streets through the manipulation of colors. Naturally, the FSLN, which also asserts itself as the legitimate representative of the nation, cannot entirely disassociate itself from national symbols. To do so would ultimately cede interpretive authority over them to its adversaries. Thus, the national flag continues to be hoisted at political rallies, but always alongside the red and black party banner. The message is unmistakable: the FSLN upholds the image of the Sandinista nation it leads, while deviating interpretations and alternative national designs are not tolerated.

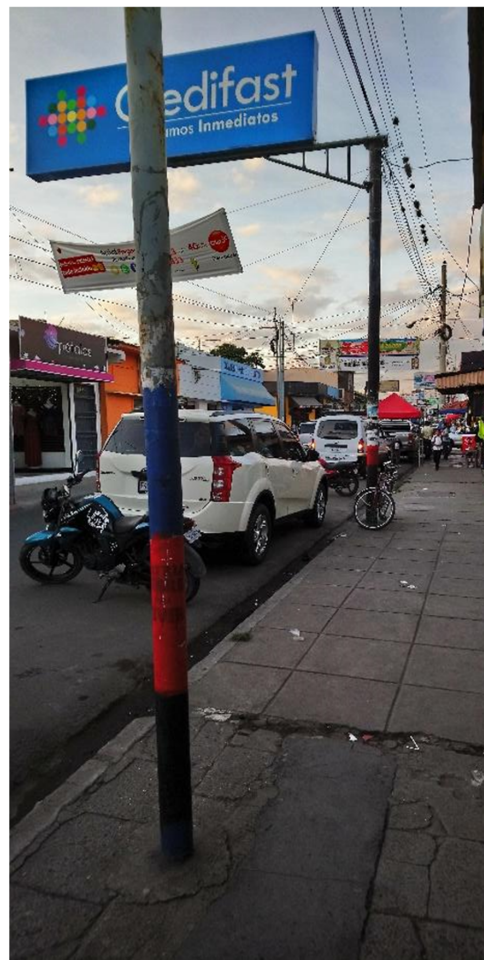

Figure 3. FSLN Sympathizers overpaint blue and white
painted power poles in red-black, Estelí (Foto: Sophie Vey, 2017).

The contest over the interpretation of Nicaraguan identity extends beyond symbolic representations to tangible repercussions for numerous Nicaraguans: Nicaraguan citizens living abroad are now routinely denied entry to the country, a policy influenced by official propaganda branding political dissenters as "non-Nicaraguans" (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024: 7). José, one of the interviewees I spoke with again this year, had to flee the country in secret, taking dangerous routes, because the government refused to issue him a new passport. This was in retaliation for a lawsuit he filed against abuses by members of the Juventud Sandinista. To this day, he still hasn't received a passport from the embassy in his country of exile. Last year, this stance reached its most dramatic expression when the government initially released 222 political prisoners, revoked their citizenship, and deported them to the USA. Shortly thereafter, the Ortega-Murillo government revoked the nationality of an additional 94 public figures, most of whom were already in exile. Among those affected are prominent names in the Nicaraguan literary and activist circles, such as Gioconda Belli and Sergio Ramírez (Maldonado 2023). The accusation of treason, which they face, vividly illustrates the extent to which the government is willing to go to defend its interpretation of the national narrative and what happens to those who oppose it.

In recent decades, resilience has been applied across various disciplines to diverse units of analysis and levels, including individuals, organizations, technical components, and societies (Hanisch 2016: 1). When discussing resilience, it is imperative to inquire about what exactly is meant to be resilient. If we consider the FSLN as a political entity and assess its ability to survive and adapt to changing circumstances and external shocks –such as the Contra War and the subsequent electoral defeat –then the answer would unequivocally indicate that the FSLN has demonstrated remarkable resilience in the face of crises, successfully adapting its political strategy as needed. However, when we contemplate Sandinism as a concept, a political idea or aspiration, the situation becomes more complex. Can we speak of resilience when the fundamental identity of an idea or movement has undergone such significant transformation that it is no longer recognizable? Various approaches within resilience research diverge on whether a system must revert to its original state after a shock or whether resilience can also be acknowledged when it transitions into a new form (ibid.: 2). Alternatively, if we examine Sandinism as a concept separate from the political entity that carries its name, we might argue that Sandinism has persisted, albeit not within the FSLN. Instead, it is currently being upheld by factions of the protest movement, seeking to infuse it with renewed significance and meaning.

The Emergence of the *Azul y Blanco*

Why did the once-revered leftist revolutionary leader, the liberator and champion of the poor, lose his legitimacy as the voice of the *"pueblo"* among a large segment of the population? This rupture is best explained by the shift from Sandinism to "Danielism" as

a key transformation in Nicaragua's political landscape. Over time, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) centralized around Daniel Ortega, leading to a form of governance heavily characterized by personalist rule. This "Danielism" or "Orteguism" created a cult of personality around Ortega, which gradually replaced the broader Sandinista revolutionary ideals with Ortega's own political dominance. The institutional framework of the FSLN became secondary to Ortega's leadership, as he altered election laws and consolidated power through controversial alliances, such as the 2006 pact with former President Arnoldo Alemán, which lowered the percentage of votes needed to win the presidency. This concentration of power extended further when Ortega sought—and obtained—a constitutional amendment allowing his re-election in 2011, despite widespread allegations of electoral fraud (International 2011).

Ortega's consolidation of power also involved appointing his family members to key state positions, blurring the line between family, party, and state. His wife, Rosario Murillo, became vice president in 2017, and their children hold powerful roles across media and state-owned enterprises (Weiss 2016: 11). Key state institutions, like the National Police and military, are now seen as loyal to Ortega rather than the Nicaraguan people, often referred to as the "Policía Orteguista" by critics. The police and military, once officially apolitical, have been deeply integrated into the Ortega regime, silencing dissent and enforcing Ortega's grip on power.

This fusion of Ortega with the party, the state, and ultimately the nation created a reality where Ortega's government embodied the state itself (Bahrmann 2016: 130). The Sandinista slogan *"El pueblo, presidente"* (The people are the president) has, in the eyes of the opposition, been reversed. They now dress in the national colors to reclaim the state apparatus, which they believe has been co-opted, and return it to the *"pueblo"*. By embracing the national blue-and-white flag, the opposition seeks to redefine Nicaraguan identity and to assert a democratic narrative distinct from the one controlled by the FSLN.

> In one way or another, we got used to the fact that in government places [...] you had to enter and see a flag of the FSLN. [...] So I think we were Nicaragua, the Sandinista country. And not Nicaragua, the democratic country. I believe that one of the great struggles here in Nicaragua is the exact representation of what a true *pueblo* is, it is to have appropriated the national flag again. Just by identifying yourself as blue and white is a complete blow to the political state of Nicaragua [...] towards its ego, towards its power, towards its domination, towards its dictatorship. So, I think this struggle has been more about reclaiming our rights as Nicaraguans [...], our rights had been lost, our national identity had been lost, we had forgotten who we Nicaraguans are (Brenda, personal communication, Oct. 19, 2018; translation by author).

The opposition is now reversing the Sandinistas' claim to represent the nation. With their chant, *"No somos oposición, somos el pueblo"* ("We are not the opposition, we are the people") (Rueda-Estrada 2018: 103), they transfer the political to the national. Rather than an ethnic group seeking political self-determination, the *Azul y Blanco* constitute a political entity rejecting the label of "mere opposition" and asserting their identity as the "pueblo," thereby claiming universality. This projection of a political idea onto a collective identity strongly echoes Ernest Gellner's definition of nationalism, wherein the political and the national are seen as congruent (Gellner 1983: 1). But who exactly are the self-proclaimed *Azul y Blanco*?

In the media's anti-government narrative, the opposition is regularly equated with the students, as if they were the sole participants in the protests (Fernández Ampié 2018: 197). The slogan *"No eran delincuentes, eran estudiantes!"* ("They weren't criminals, they were students!") went viral after the presidential couple deemed the protesters criminals (ibid.). However, upon closer examination, it becomes clear that the composition of the opposition, operating under the banner of the *Alianza Cívica por la Justicia y la Democracia* during the unsuccessful National Dialogue, is extremely heterogeneous and contradictory. Students, who initially rallied in support of pensioners demanding social security, marched alongside feminists and LGBTQIA+ activists, who in turn stood in line with the ultra-conservative Catholic Church. Furthermore, indigenous peoples, peasant movements, and environmental activists opposed to the controversial interoceanic canal project found themselves in the same political camp as the COSEP, the Association of Private Enterprises. Former Sandinistas who broke away to form the Movimiento Renovador Sandinista (MRS) in 1995 stood alongside ex-militarists seeking a return to the original Sandinism, as well as former *Contras* who have long opposed the Sandinista cause. However, the protesters prefer to identify themselves as "spontaneous *autoconvocados*", distancing themselves from any political party affiliations (Rueda-Estrada 2018: 97).

> From the beginning, the students marched with the Nicaraguan flag because it is the *pueblo* that takes to the streets for Nicaragua. We are not any political party to carry a party flag but we are the entire people (Renato, personal communication, Oct. 26, 2018; translation by author).

Without exception, all interviewees affiliated with the opposition hoped for an immediate abdication of the presidential couple but were unable to express any tangible plans for the future or name a suitable counter-candidate. There is a notable absence of charismatic leadership capable of uniting and galvanizing the opposition (Fernández Ampié 2018: 197f.). This remains unchanged today, partly due to the government's successful efforts to suppress any legitimate opposition candidate by imprisoning them on false corruption charges or forcing them into exile (Human Rights Watch 2021: 17). The diversity and apparent decentralization within the opposition might suggest that this is indeed a movement that comes close to a legitimate representation of a *"pueblo"*, as

Brenda elaborates below. At the same time, she acknowledges that technically also the numerous Sandinistas and Orteguistas do belong to the *"pueblo"*.

> And I believe that the Civic Alliance has helped a lot because it is representing in one way or another all the demands of Nicaraguans because it is formed by different segments. [...] So I believe that the people are the ones speaking today, they are the ones expressing themselves today. We are the ones here fighting. I'm not saying that those who are in favor of the government are not part of the people [...] I believe we become like them when we want to repress those who support them. [...] The people are all of us *[El pueblo somos todos]* (personal communication, Oct. 19, 2018; translation by author).

Appropriation of National Symbols

For an imagined community to become tangible, physical manifestations are needed. National symbols, heroes, and martyrs thus play a central role in emotively binding a community together (Hobsbawm 1990: 63). When questioned about national heroes and symbols, strong resemblances emerged in my interviewees' responses. Fifteen out of 17 were familiar with all three national symbols—the national flower Sacuanjoche, the national Madroño tree, and the national bird Guardabarranco—as well as the three *"símbolos patrios"*: the flag, the emblem, and the anthem. This widespread knowledge is a result of the strong patriotic imprint in public school education. For the majority of the population, regardless of political creed, national symbols hold significant importance. In fact, one interviewee even bears them as tattoos. However, the current politicization of these symbols is contentious. Symbols meant to embody an entire nation are now being appropriated by the opposition and reinterpreted through their lens. They have come to symbolize struggle and resistance and are considered subversive (Saballos 2019).

> At the moment, we are not any political party but what we have done is to fight for our country, our blue and white flag, always our national symbols, because the perspective we have is truly love for our country. We want freedom of expression, respect for human rights. [...] And what do we use? Our blue and white flag, our symbols of the coat of arms, the guardabarranco, to feel more Nicaraguan, because this is what bothers the government completely (Renato, personal communication, Oct. 26, 2018; translation by author).

The national symbols are thus deeply morally charged and are discursively wielded by the *Azul y Blanco* to reassert a "Nicaraguan morality" distinct from that of the FSLN. Interviewees highlighted diverse methods of expressing their political allegiance through

the use of the national colors, such as releasing blue-and-white balloons onto the streets early in the morning or painting power poles (Fig. 4; 5).

Figure 4. "La Pelota" in Estelí, painted blue-white in the course of the protests, (Foto: Sophie Vey, 2017).

Figure 5. Electricity poles painted blue and white in the course of the protests, Estelí (Foto: Sophie Vey, 2017).

Old and New Heroes and Heroines

In my interviews, it was noticeably common, even among oppositionists, to invoke the traditional national heroes and heroines who fought (or wrote) for independence. However, within the *Azul y Blanco*, there are divergent perspectives on how these esteemed figures should be regarded today. Above all, there is a divide between those who once identified with Sandinism but have since turned away from "Orteguism", and those who have always leaned towards the liberal or conservative camp. The former advocate for a return to Sandino's ideals, which they perceive the FSLN to have betrayed. Conversely, critical voices insist on the necessity of breaking free from the populism and heroism of the past.

> What should differentiate this peaceful revolution from all previous ones is leaving behind [...] heroes, martyrs, because martyrs are those who don't die [...]. So, I believe that the current and enduring symbol from now on has to be the flag, the blue and white alone. All that other stuff, out. And as for heroes, we are all heroes (Matteo, personal communication, Nov. 16, 2018; translation by author).

This perspective also reveals a new self-image: within the mass of protesters, each individual is considered a hero. Nevertheless, new, tangible heroes are being forged; there are emerging myths surrounding the initial casualties, the political detainees, or political leaders who have transformed into heroines or martyrs for the movement. Alejandra says:

> I believed that someone whom I could now call a hero or a symbol, are the children, like Alvarito, a child who went out to help and innocently died [...]. And he is a symbol now. One of the purest symbols one could have (Alejandra, personal communication, Nov. 16, 2018; translation by author).

Other interviewees named political prisoner Amaya Coppens, spokesperson for the *Movimiento Estudiantil 19 de abril* from León, as well as Léster Alemán. Alemán, now in exile, delivered an impassioned speech during the National Dialogue, exclaiming *"Ríndase ante todo este pueblo"* (Surrender to all these people) (ConfidencialTV 2019). The controversy over the first victim of the protests sparked a heated debate. For the *Azul y Blanco*, it was 17-year-old Richard Pavón, who is now exalted to martyrdom (Estela Reyes 2018). However, the government maintains that the first fatality was a police officer, whose death prompted the police to defend themselves (Midence 2018: 46).

Furthermore, celebrities have assumed highly politicized roles. Miller emphasizes the significance of sports in creating a shared national moment as well as settling national rivalries (2013: 391). The boxer Román "Chocolatito" González was long considered a national hero in Nicaragua, whom the FSLN purposefully capitalized on for its own image-building, as evidenced by this quote from the Sandinista online magazine El19digital:

> Thousands of capital city residents gathered at the Augusto C. Sandino International Airport to joyfully welcome the second three-time champion of the *pueblo*, Román "Chocolatito" González, who raised the Blue and White flag of the nation and the Red and Black flag of the Sandinista Front in Japan after defeating his opponent. With marimba music and the joy of the Sandinista Youth, the welcome was a true celebration of the *pueblo*, a *pueblo* proud of its athletes (Cerón Méndez 2014).

Given his apparent indifference in the wake of the crisis, his non-Sandinista fans accused him of political cooptation (Salazar 2018). Brenda laments:

> How do you think an internationally recognized boxer like Chocolatito would step into the Boxing Ring with the red and black flag when he is Nicaraguan? (personal communication, Oct. 19, 2018; translation by author).

Meanwhile, the opposition hailed former Miss Nicaragua 2018, Adriana Paniagua, as *"Reina Azul y Blanco"* ("Blue and White Queen"). When Sheynnis Palacios became the first Nicaraguan to win the Miss Universe contest in the beginning of this year, a new shining star emerged for Nicaraguan beauty pageants and the country as a whole. In my follow-up interviews, I inquired about the political significance of this event. José described the moment of victory as follows:

> People took to the streets again with the blue and white flag. And since it was something that happened suddenly, that she won, no one expected it. So they couldn't control that weapon, that massive crowd in the streets. [...] People came out with their flag and also took the opportunity to express themselves and speak their minds in the street against the government, because there were a lot of people on the streets that day. [...] and I think they're afraid of Sheynnis because she mobilizes masses in Nicaragua and outside of Nicaragua. And there's an issue pending that she can't return to Nicaragua (José, personal communication, 2024; translation by author).

He already hints at the repression Palacios faced subsequently to her victory. Since she had participated in the 2018 protests, Ortega accused her nomination as an "antipatriotic conspiracy" against his government (Wagner 2023). This extreme politicization of international sporting and beauty events goes hand in hand with their inherent nationalist component since the national in Nicaragua is currently highly political and international attention is of great importance for the power struggle. Both sides want their heroes to represent their *"pueblo"* at home as well as abroad. El Chocolatito, Paniagua and now Palacios are all national heroes, some for the black-and-red nation, and others for the self-proclaimed blue-and-white one.

Old and New Slogans

To explore the self-perception of the *Azul y Blanco* movement, it is worth examining the array of protest slogans employed, blending both old and new motifs. Some slogans, rooted in Sandinista history, are repurposed to craft a new national narrative distinct from the FSLN. During the *"madre de todas las marchas"* in April 2018, Carlos and Luis Enrique Mejía Godoy serenaded the crowds with "Nicaragua, Nicaragüita", the coun-

try's unofficial anthem originally written for the revolution (Rueda-Estrada 2018: 98). Part of the lyrics reads, *"Ay Nicaragua sos más dulcita, que la mielita de Tamagás, pero ahora que ya sos libre, Nicaragüita, yo te quiero mucho más"* (Mejía Godoy and Mejía Godoy 1980). Mejía Godoy went on to state that Nicaragua is undergoing a second revolution, this time against the excesses of the first (Salinas 2018).

Amid protests against the Indio Maíz forest fire, the phrase *"Cuando la patria se quema, uno verde la sueña"* (When the homeland burns, one dreams of it green) emerged as a widely quoted slogan. Drawing inspiration from national icon Rubén Dario's poem *"regreso"*, it echoes the famous line, *"Si pequeña es la patria, uno grande la sueña"* (If the homeland is small, one dreams of it big) (Rueda-Estrada 2018: 103). This underlines the importance of nature, poetry, and literary depictions of landscapes in evoking national sentiment, fostering community, and rendering it palpable (Miller 2013: 391). Within this context, opposition to the proposed construction of an inter-oceanic canal by the Chinese company HKND, feared to cause environmental degradation, gained momentum (López Baltodano et al. 2016). Dubbing Ortega as *"vende patria"*, the anti-canal movement has long rallied around the slogan *"Nicaragua no se vende"*, (Nicaragua is not for sale) (Perez 2015) showing that the opposition is also resorting to economic nationalism and the classic Sandinista discourse of sovereignty to delegitimize the government. Against this backdrop, Brenda accuses:

> Remember that one of the worst things Daniel Ortega has done is to sell national sovereignty (Brenda, personal communication, Oct. 19, 2018; translation by author).

The incorporation of the historic rallying cry *"El pueblo unido jamás será vencido"* (The people united will never be defeated) situates the protests within the ongoing legacy of Latin American leftist liberation movements (Castro Iraheta 2018:179). Particularly intriguing is the appropriation and reimagining of historical Sandinista slogans by the protesters. One such example is the traditional FSLN motto *"Patria libre o morir"* (a free Motherland or death) (Lacaze 2012), which has been reinterpreted as *"Patria libre para vivir"* (a free Motherland to live) (see Fig. 6), underscoring the peaceful essence of the current "liberation of the *patria*" in contrast to past guerrilla warfare.

Moreover, among the most prevalent slogans was *"¡Que se rinda tu madre!"* (Let your mother surrender!). This phrase traces back to a pivotal moment during a live radio broadcast of a battle in 1970, when young guerrilla fighter Leonel Rugama defiantly shouted these words at the Somozist Guardia Nacional, thereby becoming an emblematic figure for Sandinistas. Now, this same exclamation has been repurposed as a resistance slogan against the FSLN, adopted by government opponents irrespective of their political past (Rueda-Estrada 2018: 99f.). In light of this, I queried my interviewees about their associations with the phrase *"lucha de liberación nacional"*.

Figure 6. Graffiti on a light post in Estelí,
“Patria libre para vivir” (Foto: Sophie Vey, 2017).

> The goal was to free oneself from the Somoza dictatorship. [...] But now we can also be in national liberation because we are freeing ourselves from a system (Isabel, personal communication, Oct. 26, 2018; translation by author).

Former Sandinista Isabel sees no issue in employing the slogan that lent its name to the ruling party in the present context and wielding it against its “originators”, whereas the student movement is divided regarding the adoption of traditional Sandinista slogans:

> I feel that we would not use that phrase, or at least I would not feel comfortable saying this is a national liberation struggle. When I hear the term struggle, I think of two forces fighting each other, with weapons, body to body, and we are not doing that. [...] One of the things that is requested is the opening to dialogue again. Because we do not want to get to one, to one, to an armed civil war. We want to take everything through the path of civilized people, of dialogue, of the, of reaching a common, an agreement. (Alejandra, personal communication, Nov. 16, 2018; translation by author)

The younger generation finds itself torn over how to approach Sandinista rhetoric and symbolism. While certain slogans like *“¡Que se rinda tu madre!”* are less controversial and generally accepted by the majority, others, such as *“lucha de liberación nacional”*, carry heavy ideological weight and evoke memories of armed struggle. Applying

Smith’s framework of nationalisms, this places the *Azul y Blanco* movement less within the realm of traditional revolutionary nationalism associated with FSLN guerrilla tactics, but rather within civic nationalism, aimed at reforming existing power dynamics toward a participatory nation that ensures citizen rights (Smith 1998: 125).

Furthermore, social media platforms were flooded with countless posts featuring statements like *“Mamá me fui a defender la patria ... Si no regreso me fui con ella”* (Mom, I went to defend the homeland... If I don’t return, I went with it) and *“nos están matando”* (they are killing us) (Castro Iraheta 2018: 170). These posts evoke patriotic sentimentality while also highlighting the violence perpetrated by the police, *Juventud Sandinista*, and paramilitary groups against an “us”, that is, the imagined community of peacefully protesting students. In commemoration of the crisis anniversary, the *Unidad Nacional Azul y Blanco* alliance organized a demonstration under the slogan *“todos somos abril”* (we are all April) (La Prensa 2019). Thus, the imagined community transcends the “us” and is projected onto a totality.

Resilience and Resourcefulness in Times of Crisis – What Remains of the *Azul y Blanco*?

It has now been six years since my original field research, and the pressing question arises as to the extent to which the theses from that time still hold true today. Since the initial protests, the democratic situation in Nicaragua has further deteriorated. The 2021 elections, which confirmed Ortega’s power, were overshadowed by allegations of manipulation. On May 4, 2021, the National Assembly approved an electoral reform that consolidated government control over the electoral process (Human Rights Watch 2021: 11f.). Prior to this, opposition candidates were arrested if they could not flee into exile in time. Additionally, many international and local NGOs, along with newspapers, were shut down or forced into exile. When I last visited Nicaragua in December 2022, some of my acquaintances only dared to whisper about politics even within their own homes. Alejandra summarizes the situation as follows:

> The only policy implemented by this government is the policy of fear [...] Today 80% of the blue and white population does not agree with them, and may revolt. But why don’t they revolt? Because they [the government] have the weapons. They have all the institutions of the State. They have perfectly demonstrated that they are not afraid to imprison you, to order your disappearance, or to order the confiscation of your goods. [...] If you are going to say something against Ortega [...], they will cut your head off (Alejandra, personal communication, 2024; translation by author).

How can a protest movement survive in such a repressive context, where expressing political dissent is already grounds for arrest? Ojeda (2005) delineated the critical

attributes of resilient communities, including collective self-esteem, cultural identity, recognition of available resources, adaptive capacity, and effective governance. While my interviewees affirmed the continued existence of group consciousness and pride within the opposition, they acknowledged its waning visibility and eroding morale amidst the prevailing climate of fear and repression. Alejandra is the only one of the three exiles I interviewed again, who is still politically active. José and Miguel both chose to focus on their personal safety and wellbeing.

> The seed of change has remained in the majority of Nicaraguans and this will bear fruits in the future. [...] For privacy and personal well-being, I don't want to do it because in the future, like all migrants, I want to return to my country, and adding more comments against Nicaraguan politics can have repercussions for each of us, so sometimes one has to remain silent for a greater personal good (Miguel, personal communication, 2024; translation by author).

Nevertheless, all three emphasized that while public protests may have quieted, there still exists a spirit of resistance, evident in everyday, seemingly innocuous expressions:

> The citizens still, in one way or another, try to show their disapproval. But this manifestation is not so explicit, but it is a little bit eh covered [...] And also people don't talk about politics. But what do you say? "I hope to God that this gets better" *(Dios quiera que esto mejore)*. I mean, there are certain comments that people make to you, that tell you that they are waiting for a change, but they are not acting. Why? Out of fear (Alejandra, personal communication, 2024; translation by author).

To assess Ojeda's category of cultural identity for community resilience, I asked my interviewees about the continued use of nationalist symbolism. They noted the maintenance of these aspects by the Nicaraguan exile communities, while their visibility within Nicaragua has diminished due to fear of persecution, which is congruent with my own observations from 2022. In reference to Ojeda's delineation of resources and adaptive capacity, as well as governance capability, Alejandra underscores that the most promising advancements are occurring abroad, with efforts to organize internationally:

> So, well, internally, it's complicated and complex to carry out some actions – outside the country in countries like Costa Rica, the United States, Spain, and several other countries, there is a presence of Nicaraguans who belong to political organizations connected to the territory, meaning we have links with people still in the country. We obtain firsthand information from them about what's happening in their communities and departments, and through them, action strategies can be developed. In the framework of political parties, this would be like territorial extension. However, while we are

> political organizations, we are not yet political movements or parties, but we do have a territorial reach that extends precisely into the departments with people inside the country. But this structure is weak because the dictatorship has set out to dismantle it, to persecute and imprison it, and to make people go into exile. So, I must tell you that the network works, but it's weakened. It's a network that needs to be strengthened, that needs to keep working because the connection between the leadership outside the country and the leadership inside the country must be maintained, as ultimately they are the ones who can tip the scales in Nicaragua (Alejandra, personal communication, 2024; translation by author).

She referenced the pluralistic Monteverde process, which was founded three years ago in Costa Rica with the aim of achieving a peaceful transition to democracy and which is considered the most ambitious Nicaraguan opposition organization today. Although they announced in January of this year their intention to become a "long-term political alliance" through merging with seven other organizations (El Confidencial 2024), assessing the organizational and resilient potential of the Monteverde movement is currently beyond my capacity. Therefore, I would like to conclude with a theoretical consideration instead.

Resilience has faced substantial criticism as a form of neoliberal governmentality, placing the burden of enduring adversities, adaptability and rebounding against structural pressures on individuals or communities rather than addressing systemic structures (Bracke 2016: 851). MacKinnon and Driscoll further critique resilience, asserting its conservatism in maintaining existing power dynamics and hindering social change (2013: 254). They propose "resourcefulness" as a more appropriate analytical framework for opposition groups, which aims to challenge systemic norms and transform social relationships, contrasting with resilience's tendency to maintain the status quo (MacKinnon and Derickson 2013: 255). Considering the critique of the *Azul y Blanco* movement against the FSLN's top-down decision-making and reproduction of social inequality, resourcefulness appears as a more transformative concept, emphasizing both local empowerment and systemic justice concerns. Additionally, as I laid out previously, assessing the resilience of the *Azul y Blanco* movement remains challenging due to limited visibility, particularly within Nicaragua. Since the authors advocate for viewing resourcefulness not as quantifiable but as a relational concept, representing the political aspirations of groups rather than a measurable outcome (ibid.: 264), it seems a fruitful framework for future investigation into Nicaragua's pluralistic and civic efforts towards democracy.

Conclusion

The concept of *"pueblo"* has long been a central, yet contested, theme in Nicaraguan political discourse. From Sandino to the early FSLN, invoking classic Latin American revolutionary ideals, anti-imperialism, and economic nationalism, the term has carried significant weight. This revolutionary sense of *"pueblo"* as an agent of change, a collective unified by class struggle, was central to the guerrilla warfare era and framed Nicaragua's national identity for decades. Yet, with the consolidation of state power, the FSLN shifted from a revolutionary vanguard to a state-centered top-down nationalism, molding the image of the Nicaraguan nation around Sandino's legacy.

However, in 2018, escalating discontent with Ortega's policies brought the question of nation and *"pueblo"* back to the forefront. Various sectors of society coalesced to form an opposition coalition known as *Azul y Blanco*, drawing on the national colors and claiming to represent the *"pueblo"* to present a cohesive and legitimate front, despite its diverse composition. Given the widespread distrust in Nicaragua's established political parties, the rejection of party affiliations and the invocation of the *"patria"* as a space to be peacefully liberated from authoritarian rule constitute important political strategies. Through the appropriation and reinterpretation of heroes, martyrs, national symbols, and slogans, coupled with an extensive social media campaign, the *Azul y Blanco* are forging a new imagined community. The symbolic potency of the ubiquitous national flag, which has been deemed subversive, allowed for the projection of unity onto an imagined whole, suggesting that all of Nicaragua stood united in civil disobedience against Orteguism. By emphasizing the peaceful nature of the protests, the movement seeks to distinguish itself from both the guerrilla warfare era and the Contra period, leading me to classify *Azul y Blanco* nationalism as "civic", in contrast to the revolutionary nationalism of the early FSLN.

But is this distinction between civic and guerrilla nationalism as clear-cut as it seems? It is worth asking whether this shift from violent to non-violent forms of struggle truly represents a break with the past, or if it reflects a broader evolution of nationalism in Nicaragua. Civic nationalism, with its emphasis on inclusivity and peaceful protest, might appear as a stark contrast to the militarized nationalism of the FSLN. Yet, both forms share a common nationalist foundation—a claim to represent the authentic *"pueblo"* and the right to define national identity. In this sense, the *Azul y Blanco*'s appropriation of national symbols to forge a new imagined community is not entirely new, but rather an evolution of older strategies used by the FSLN during its revolutionary period. The success of the *Azul y Blanco* movement lies not only in its peaceful resistance but also in its ability to harness the power of Nicaraguan nationalism, just as the FSLN did before it. This dynamic reveals that nationalism in Nicaragua is far from monolithic. The FSLN and *Azul y Blanco* represent two poles of a much broader and more complex nationalist spectrum, encompassing various factions that form different alliances and adapt discourses and interpretations of what it means to belong to the Nicaraguan

"pueblo" as needed. Moreover, both sides resort to essentialist claims in constructing an allegedly authentic *"pueblo"*, sanctioning any deviations through defamation, denial of national belonging in discourse, expatriation, or, in the most extreme cases of the crisis, through physical violence and homicide. While for Sandino and the revolutionary FSLN, class defined the *"pueblo"*, and for the indigenous population of Nicaragua's Caribbean coast, ethnicity played a defining role, the current discourse reveals a new frontier: political affiliation. Once again, after the Contra war era, a deep divide has emerged within the Nicaraguan population.

Ultimately, I examined resilience on three levels: the resilience of the FSLN as an impressively adaptable and survivable political entity, which over time, however, has lost its core essence. The *Azul y Blanco*, who currently appear significantly weakened, albeit with glimmers of hope from exile communities. At this point, I proposed, drawing on MacKinnon and Derickson, to speak of resourcefulness rather than resilience to underscore the transformative necessity of the protest movement. Lastly, I also became acutely aware of the resilience of nationalism as a political force in Nicaragua. Rather than viewing civic and guerrilla nationalism as distinct and mutually exclusive categories, it is more accurate to see them as variations within a broader continuum of nationalist sentiment that has been reinterpreted over time. It has been appropriated from various quarters and reshaped in different historical contexts, infused with new contents, and has thus been able to endure. Some vestiges of early Sandinista ideology persist in the current *Azul y Blanco* nationalism, which stands opposed to the party-political heirs of Sandino. This continuum of nationalism allows for flexibility, adaptability, and resourcefulness—qualities that have enabled both the FSLN and the *Azul y Blanco* to endure in the face of political crises.

The *Azul y Blanco* movement has successfully mobilized around a civic nationalist framework. They draw strength from old and new symbols and myths to foster solidarity and cohesion as an imagined community in the face of repression and fear. My interviewees assured me that they will not lose hope, that they are waiting in exile until change occurs, but that they will all eventually return to a democratic homeland. Nevertheless, it should be cautioned that the movement's civic approach might reinforce, rather than challenge, the underlying logic of nationalism itself as something essential, natural, and unquestioned. By drawing on national myths and symbols, both the FSLN and the *Azul y Blanco* continue to engage in a battle over who has the authority to speak for the *"pueblo"* and shape Nicaragua's national narrative. Any such narrative, no matter how progressive and peaceful it may appear, always relies on the delineation and exclusion of others. Especially the attempt to define a politically unanimous *"pueblo"* fractures the sense of national belonging. The challenges ahead lie in moving beyond exclusionary nationalism altogether. Nicaragua's future will depend on its ability to develop a truly inclusive, flexible, permeable and resourceful collective imaginary, one that respects and transcends political, ethnic, and class divisions. Only then can the

fractures within the Nicaraguan *"pueblo"* be healed, allowing for a more just and equitable society to emerge from the shadow of authoritarianism.

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