

## Nicaragua – 1990 – Jennifer McCoy

I'm Jennifer McCoy. I was the representative in Nicaragua for the Carter Centre during the 1990 elections, and in that role as Field Representative, I worked to coordinate with the OAS and the UN mission. The three missions together to monitor those elections. So when we think about that election in 1990, it's fascinating because we have to think about the broad international context. This was an election occurring in the middle of a peace process and a democratization process, so it garnered a huge international attention, media focus and government focus. It turned out to be the first time in world history that a revolutionary government peacefully turned over power after an election, and in Nicaragua's history, it was the first time that all parties participating in the election agreed to accept and respect the vote, both before and after the actual election.

Throughout this case, international mediation was critical to make this happen and to help it. The result happened peacefully. It started first with Central American Presidents negotiating an accord to end conflict that was happening throughout the Central American region. And as part of that, forward the Nicaraguan government of Daniel Ortega, which had come to power through the revolutionary effort against the dictator Somoza, this government of Daniel Ortega and the FSLN agreed to have early elections with international observation. Second, international mediation was critical because Nicaragua was actually in the midst of an internal conflict that was with the US backed Contra insurgency. So an armed conflict against the Sandinista government. And it involved support and from neighbours within Central America as well. And so part of the deal was to hold early elections in exchange for demobilization of the Contras and the US backing of them. Now that demobilization didn't actually hold throughout the campaign process, but that was the original agreement and that was to be monitored and assisted by the UN and the OAS. And then the third aspect of international mediation was the role of the Carter Centre and former President Jimmy Carter, along with a group of former Latin American presidents. Who were called the Council of Freely Elected Heads of Government that were supported by the Carter Centre.

With them, and me as the field Rep, the director in the country we actively mediated election disputes throughout the campaign process, Election Day and after the election. So my experience living there representing the Carter Centre for six months leading up to and including the election and then the inauguration after, was, you know, a very intense experience because again, as I said, because of the international focus that I said with many people, so media journalists coming, many government representatives interested, and we have to remember this was the end of the Cold War. So we're talking about the transition internationally with the end of the Cold War and this involved support from both the Soviet Union and the US for various conflicts going on within Central America. We partly because of this interest, one story that I recall was, you know, who is going to win that the Sandinistas, that is the FSLN. Party who is in power,

and Daniel Ortega as president. We're pretty confident that they would win. They held very large rallies. People were turning out and it, and meanwhile the opposition was a coalition, sometimes a very fractious coalition of opposition groups, who finally decided on Chamorro to be their presidential candidate. But they were having, you know, some difficulties in coordinating and mobilizing support at the beginning. And so a lot of people were predicting and in fact. Public opinion polls were predicting that the FSLN was going to win. But there was one public opinion polled by a Costa Rican who predicted the opposite, that the opposition would win. And I myself, travelling around the country talking to people, realised how many people were not expressing themselves, perhaps publicly, but they were very concerned about the Contra war, in particular in the rural areas, and parents and mothers were concerned about their children being drafted to fight in this war against the Contras. They knew that if the Sandinistas won, they feared that the US would continue to support the countries and the war would continue, and that was a very large issue for them, so I was not as convinced as the FSLN would win, and one polling firm was predicting there was a hidden, hidden vote that people were not expressing to the pollsters, so they tried a new method to test this, but. Trying different coloured pencils of the different colours of the parties and then a neutral coloured pencil held by the pollster. And to see if the answers would be different. That is, if people were responding to the pollster thinking what they wanted to hear. Because they were determining who the pollsters might represent.

Another issue was that the electoral management body, the Supreme Electoral Council, was seen as partisan. It was named for these elections, and it did have opposition representation and an independent judge. As a lawyer, as a leader who was meant to be an independent, but the opposition feared that it was dominated by Sandinista sympathisers, so we had to, you know, really focus on trying to raise confidence in this body. And by asking people, and particularly opposition, to look at the behaviour of the body more than their identity, to look at what decisions did they take, how did they act, and the Catholic Church played a very critical role in building confidence in the whole process as well, because they were emphasizing that the vote was secret. They were not saying how to vote, but they were emphasizing that the vote was secret and so. They were kind of giving the message. You can accept whatever benefits may be handed out at rallies or promised, you know, by the campaigns and particularly the government was handing out a lot of, you know, having fun rallies and handing out, you know, prizes. And things. But the church emphasised, was educating the public on the process and the secret vote, and that was critical too, for raising confidence in the process. But the mediation of election disputes along the way was critical, and what I want to emphasise is that at that time.

This was the first election where a sovereign government had invited the UN and the OAS and other private groups like the Carter Centre Group to observe elections and

this was really critical for raising confidence, but we. Took our role at that time as a very active role, not kind of a passive recorder or observer of what was happening, but we practised active mediation, so along the way, during the campaign, President Carter and members of the Presidents from Latin America, members of the Council came, made five different visits and addressed particular election disputes that were arising throughout this time period, such as the participation of [so-called] *Mosquito Indians* on the eastern coast of the English-speaking coast of Nicaragua, media access when the opposition felt like they weren't getting equal time, campaign violence and intimidation, and campaign finance and the ability of the opposition to receive the UNUS funding. Amazingly, international funding was accepted in the rules there and the opposition received funding from the US for their campaign.

On Election Day itself, the turnout was extremely high. 86% of registered voters actually came to vote and 89% of eligible voters had already registered, so it was a very high participation. The voting process actually went very well. The international observers didn't detect major problems. So Election Day was going pretty well. The process was looking pretty good, but about 11:00 in the morning we received a report that the indelible ink could be washed off. Now the rumour started flying that you know the election process was not going to be true and the opposition was worried about this. The indelible ink was used to prevent multiple voting, so people had to dip their little finger in ink after they voted and it was supposedly, you know, you couldn't wash it off, so that then you couldn't vote again. But we tested it and yes, Clorox could wash it off. So we brought together, all the three observer teams brought together, the heads of the campaigns of both sides, and we all agreed that there were other mechanisms to also prevent multiple voting, so, if there were no other indications that people were voting twice, the election would proceed and the opposition accepted this and it went on.

So Election Day completed and people were waiting for the results fairly calmly and we were expecting results to be announced on a rolling basis. After about 15% were counted and received by the election authorities, but what they did was they first posted a few very initial results about 8:00 PM and then nothing. Nothing more. And it approached midnight and we were getting extremely, certainly, concerned and tensions were building what was happening.

So our own quick count, the UN, the OAS and Carter Center, had access to this quick count by our own observers, was showing that the UNO the opposition was winning big and remember the FSLN had been confident that they would win so. We realise that this you know is causing some concern among in within the government and the Electoral Council, Daniel Ortega then actually called and asked President Carter in the heads of the UN and the OAS observer teams to come and he said, you know, was very worried that the UNO was going to declare be elected tomorrow would declare prematurely for victory. You know, it still wasn't clear who would win and could we help with that? And

we said, well, our own quick count sample of the election results indicates that the UNO is in fact winning. So let's try to negotiate a calm process for both sides to accept the results, and Ortega agreed to that. And we, President Carter, talked with the elected Chamorro and she agreed. So over the course of the early morning dawn, Mordeo did give an announcement saying it looks like they're ahead, but please remain calm for the final results and then Ortega spoke and it helped to calm an acceptance of a surprise, particularly for the FSLN, and in fact, the next day, President Ortega, who had by then, you know, personally accepted the results asked us the Carter Centre and the heads of the UN and the OAS to accompany him to visit Chamorro tomorrow in her home to congratulate her, and that was a really, you know, touching moment to see this peaceful acceptance of the results and beginning of transfer of power.

The following day, we, actually President Carter, sponsored transition talks because this is, remember this is still the middle of a war, and in fact the demobilization had not happened, so we still had the potential for violent conflict between the countries and the Sandinistas in the two months leading up to the inauguration. So they all came long trains of cars came to my little house, which was the Carter Centre office in Managua, and sat in my courtyard in, in the rocking chairs that are ubiquitous in Nicaragua, in the courtyard of my house and we negotiated. A transition agreement between the new incoming tomorrow government and. This outgoing Sandinista government that dealt with they agreed on how to address. Three of their major concerns, the major concerns of both sides, which was demobilizing the Contras. Respecting the integrity of the armed forces, which were Sandinista. And what to do about the land reform and the property rights, because there had been a number of properties confiscated by the Sandinistas, but also that the opposition wanted back, but the Sandinistas wanted to keep the agrarian. That they had put in place. So this was a very important role also for the international mediators to help with the future reconciliation of the country and to continue to make the transition smooth.

So I think overall this election, you know, was momentous for the world and for the country. It also required the role the US played a very significant role, and we also dealt, you know, communicated with this was George H. Bush. Administration with Jim Baker as Secretary of State because the US had to agree to support the Contra demobilization between the election and the inauguration. And. That it did agree to do that and the role of the UN and the OAS as the first time. For these large observer delegations invited by the sovereign government really points to this election as momentous in many ways.