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# Nicaraguan students campaign against government, 1944

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## • Latin American Democracy Campaigns (1944)

### Timing

Time period notes:

Beginning of campaign is unclear - scattered PLI activity existed before June 1944, but it began in earnest in June 1944.

27 June

1944

to:

14 July

1944

### Location and Goals

Country:

Nicaragua

Location City/State/Province:

Managua and León

[View Location on Map](#)

Goals:

To prevent Somoza from continuing to extend his presidency.

## Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support>Students, farmers, and professionals wrote a letter to Somoza, urging him to release the prisoners
- 013. Deputations>Labor leaders met with him demanding prisoner release.
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors>March of women dressed in black
- 038. Marches>2,000 person march; ends in front of the military academy
- 038. Marches>March of women dressed in black

Methods in 2nd segment:

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 001. Public speeches›speech by Carlos Pasos at demonstration in front of U.S. Embassy
- 032. Taunting officials›Protesters jeered Somoza when he attempted to give a speech, preventing him from speaking
- 038. Marches›Demonstration of 20,000 people in front of the U.S. embassy
- 085. Merchants' "general strike" ›Managua shopkeepers threatened not to open shop in response to protester's arrests
- 113. Strike by resignation›Government ministers resigned posts in opposition to Somoza

Methods in 4th segment:

Methods in 5th segment:

- 038. Marches›Small protests held in the streets of Managua and Leon
- 113. Strike by resignation›Government ministers resigned posts in opposition to Somoza

Methods in 6th segment:

- 038. Marches›Small protests held in the streets of Managua and Leon

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 104. Professional strike ›Two major newspapers stop reporting to protest arrest of reporters

Segment Length:

3 days

## Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Democracy

Group characterization:

- Conservatives
- Liberal Dissidents
- Middle and Upper Class Students

## Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Democratic Youth Front, also Carlos Pasos and Carlos Castro Wassmer from Independent Liberal Party (PLI)

Partners:

Some conservative parties

External allies:

Not known

Involvement of social elites:

Not known

## **Joining/exiting order of social groups**

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Organized Labor

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Organized Labor (exit)

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Additional notes on joining/exiting order:

Because the Independent Liberal Party (PLI) was already comprised of a number of individuals with disparate backgrounds, there was little support from outside groups. Although individuals not affiliated with the PLI came to the demonstrations, any group that would have supported the demonstrations would have already been affiliated with the PLI.

The PLI had a complicated relationship with organized labor in Nicaragua. Somoza actively courted the organized labor groups in Nicaragua; he was mostly successful. The major organized labor organizations in Nicaragua petitioned Somoza to release workers jailed in the June 27 protests, but the same organizations refused to endorse the July 4 protests or the merchant's general strike.

Segment Length:

3 days

## **Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence**

Opponents:

Anastasio Somoza

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Counter-demonstration by Somoza supporters when women in black marched.

Somoza attempted to make a speech at the July 4th protest, but was jeered before he could effectively speak.

Campaigner violence:

None known

Repressive Violence:

National Guard (under Somoza's orders) using tear gas to break up demonstrations; arresting hundreds of citizens.

Somoza holding PLI leaders in the Mexican Embassy for over a week.

## **Success Outcome**

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

3 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

1 point out of 3 points

Total points:

5 out of 10 points

Notes on outcomes:

Somoza did not seek re-election in 1947, although he retained control over Nicaragua via puppets until his assassination in 1956. The 1947 elections are widely considered to be among the least fair elections ever held in Nicaragua. The PLI still exists as a political party today.

In 1936, Anastasio Somoza was elected president of Nicaragua. He ran under the the Liberal Nationalist Party, or PLN. He was elected with broad support among liberals in Nicaragua, although, soon after his election, small numbers of Nicaraguans started to gather in opposition to his presidency. In 1937, a small group of university graduates formed a discussion group that was highly critical of Somoza; the members of this unnamed group would go on to found the Independent Liberal Party, or PLI - the organization that led the campaign against Somoza in 1944. Although this group of dissidents met throughout Somoza's time as president, prominent organized resistance to his regime was negligible until 1944.

Although Somoza was elected to the presidency, he realized that the Nicaraguan constitution forbade him from seeking re-election. Unhappy with this, in 1939, Somoza encouraged the Constituent Assembly to vote to give him an eight-year term as president. The Assembly voted in favor of Somoza, extending his presidency until 1947. In Leon, a university town, students gathered in opposition to the Assembly's act, but no strong anti-Somoza campaign resulted.

In early January 1944, three leading members of the PLI - Carlos Pasos, Carlos Castro Wassmer, and Manuel Codero Reyes - wrote an indictment of the Somoza regime, criticizing it on political, economic, and moral grounds. Their indictment was of Somoza's dictatorship in particular, rather than a blanket moral indictment of dictatorship in general. Shortly after the three leaders wrote the document, Manuel Codero Reyes died. At his funeral, Carlos Pasos, Carlos Castro Wassmer and other liberal dissidents handed out leaflets denouncing Somoza's regime. They signed the leaflets as the Liberales Independientes; this led to the official formation of the PLI.

The PLI consisted of a diverse group of Nicaraguans. Many people in the group were liberals formerly supportive of Somoza's regime - including Manuel Codero Reyes, who served as Somoza's foreign minister before his death. Others were liberal dissidents who were not initially supportive of Somoza. Another large segment of the organization was comprised of conservatives who were upset with Somoza for some of the same reasons as the liberals, but also for many different reasons. Because the PLI was comprised of people with so many viewpoints and perspectives, one of the few points of agreement between the organization's members was opposition to Somoza's attempts to hold onto the presidency of Nicaragua.

Within the PLI, there was one particularly important sub-group: the Democratic Youth Front, or FJD. The FJD's role was to galvanize support among young people and students. Many of the students in the FJD - and in PLI in general - were from upper and middle class backgrounds, since higher education was not widely accessible to people in the lower classes at the time. The FJD was often the most radical part of the PLI; indeed, students catalyzed the initial campaign against Somoza in June 1944.

On June 27, 1944, university students in Managua held an assembly to demonstrate solidarity with students in Guatemala, who were organizing against the right-wing junta that took control over the country after Ubico fell

from power (see “Guatemalans overthrow a dictator, 1944”). Although there were only 300 students at the university in Managua at the time, over 2,000 people gathered to support the students in their demonstration. The students rallied in the streets of Managua, and, in the early evening, protested in front of the military academy. The National Guard, which was directly controlled by Somoza, dispersed the protesters using tear gas and arrested about 500 of the demonstrators. The next day, most, but not all, of the protesters were released from jail.

Two days later, on June 29, 1944, a number of women - many of whom were relatives or friends of the arrested demonstrators - marched the streets of Managua demanding the release of all of the protesters. The march ended when the women encountered a counter-demonstration of Somoza supporters.

Also on June 29, 1944, a group of students, farmers, and professionals in Leon wrote and signed a letter to Somoza urging him to release the jailed protesters. Additionally, labor organizers - from whom Somoza was trying to gain support - met with Somoza and asked him to release 60 workers who were jailed following the protests.

On July 1, 1944, Somoza held a press conference detailing that the protesters still in jail would be entitled to civil hearings, even though he believed their actions to be disruptive enough of the public order that they warranted court-marshaling. Around this time, Somoza also closed the universities, citing threats to the public order.

On July 2, 1944, Somoza released a number of jailed students. Upon their release, he spoke with them personally, telling them that he thought it unwise to criticize him personally when he had dedicated so much effort into building the universities at which they studied.

On July 3, the minister of education and an early Somoza supporter, Geronimo Ramirez Brown, resigns from his post in protest of the closing of the universities. A number of other government officials also resigned their posts.

Also on the 3rd, the PLI leadership met to determine their course of action. Some members of the leadership wanted to continue to apply pressure on Somoza to suspend his campaign to extend his presidency, while others encouraged moderation.

On the morning of July 4, 1944, protesters held a gathering outside of the U.S. embassy. Carlos Pasos gave a speech to over 20,000 demonstrators while the National Guard staged a counter-demonstration in a show of military prowess. Somoza desired to address the crowd from the balcony of the U.S. embassy, but the U.S. refused to let him do so; instead, Somoza spoke from a nearby grandstand. Both he and the National Guard were jeered by the protesters. The protesters then marched for a number of blocks before the National Guard dispersed the crowd. The demonstrators were in front of the Mexican embassy when the National Guard began to break up the protest; about 500 protesters sought refuge in the Mexican embassy. After the demonstration broke up, Somoza let most of the protesters in the embassy go, but held 20 of the organizers - including Carlos Pasos - in the embassy.

The following day, shopkeepers in Managua threatened not to open their shops in protest over the government's response to the previous day's demonstration. The government Junta de Control de Precios y Comercio warned business owners that any business closed on the 5th would be subject to seizure and liquidation by the government. Additionally, they warned foreign shopkeepers that they risked deportation if they did not open shop.

Around this time, two prominent Nicaraguan newspapers - La Prensa and La Notica - shut down in protest of the arrests of many of the newspaper's staff members.

On July 7, 1944, Somoza declared that he would not seek re-election, and that he would veto the Assembly bill that would allow him to run for re-election. He also stated that following this concession, any further protests would be completely unwarranted and met harshly by the government.

On July 10, 1944, Leonardo Arguello - the minister of the interior - and Alberto Reyes - the mayor of Leon - both resigned in protest of Somoza's autocratic decision-making processes after the demonstrations.

Following these events, Carlos Pasos met with Somoza to discuss a "liberal reconciliation" between the PLI and Somoza, but they reached no agreement. Small protests continued in the streets of Managua and Leon. On July 14, Carlos Pasos, Carlos Castro Wassmer and other liberal dissidents left for exile in Costa Rica. The next day, Somoza held a press conference indicating that the exiled dissidents could return soon, once the political situation cooled down. Nonetheless, Somoza would effectively run the Nicaraguan government until his assassination in 1956.

## Research Notes

Influences:

The initial student-led demonstration was held in solidarity with student organizing in Guatemala (see "Guatemalans overthrow a dictator, 1944"). (1)

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