

enhancing. Their findings leave ample room for optimism about the eradication of poverty in the region.

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REFERENCE

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David Close, *Nicaragua: Navigating the Politics of Democracy*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2016. Bibliography, index, 231pp.; hardcover \$69.95, ebook \$69.95.

This book aims to analyze the process of political change that took place during the last four decades in Nicaragua. In this sense, the book talks about Nicaragua, yet it is not a descriptive work but a political science analysis of regime change and political instability based on a case study, although comparative logic is employed.

With this objective, the book begins with a definition of a political regime as the matrix of institutions and processes—formal and informal—that mediate between citizens and institutions. Thus, Close argues that political regimes—as Chelabi and Linz point out—indicate who has the right to govern, the instruments that are used to govern, how and by whom the political class is constituted, what are the interests for which the state operates, and what constitutes the ultimate end toward which the state operates. From this analytical base, the book points out and classifies the different types of regimes that Nicaragua has had from the 1930s until today, differentiating the characteristics of leadership, the years in which each was established and in which it collapsed, and who led each new regime. At the same time, these different regimes are also compared using the classification models created by the most prestigious academic institutions and think tanks.

In this analysis, Close's concern is not only the fact of the change itself but also the fact that throughout this intense process a democratic regime has not been consolidated in Nicaragua, although it seemed feasible during the last decade of the twentieth century. And that indeed, it did work for 16 years. Moreover, during the 1990s, many scholars believed that the transition processes from authoritarian regimes to democracies would bring the consolidation of polyarchies. However, it has not been like that in many latitudes, nor, unfortunately, in the country being analyzed. Precisely for this reason, the author warns that it is easy for a country with a society polarized in both political and cultural terms, with political actors who distrust each other, with a deeply rooted tradition of *caudillismo*, and with an extended spoils system, to end up eroding its democratic institutions. This is, to a large extent, what the book shows.

After an introduction on the theoretical premises, the book analyzes (between chapters 3 and 7) the different regimes that Nicaragua has traversed throughout the period analyzed: a personalist dictatorship (1936–79), a revolutionary avant-garde system (1979–84), a pluralistic electoral democracy (1984–2000), a “duopolistic”

electoral democracy (2000–2011), and a personalist-family system (2011 to date). Thus, chapter 3 makes a historical review of politics in the Central American country from independence to the Somoza regime and its collapse, a period in which striking continuities can be observed, such as the preeminence of political violence, the hegemonic will of the incumbent, and a *caudillist* sort of personalism.

Chapter 4 deals with the first five years of the Sandinista revolution (1979–84), which the author categorizes as a “vanguard regime” and which marks the birth and evolution of the FSLN, the construction of a regime born with a transformative, mobilizing vocation, as well as with institutions that give preference to corporate representation. This chapter also points to the effort made by the revolution to change the economic model—with a profound agrarian reform—and to build an integral education model and a universal health service. It is surprising, however, that there are very few references to the war effort of the Contra war.

Chapter 5 is intended to address the period 1984–2000, which Close defines as electoral democracy. The chapter begins by analyzing the electoral process that took place in 1984, within the framework of the Sandinista revolution, and the subsequent writing of the 1987 Constitution. Later, the 1990 electoral process is analyzed, in which the FSLN loses, against all predictions, and the opposition, led by Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, wins. According to Close, this election means the beginning of a new stage called orthodox electoral democracy, which extends until the year 2000. It is administered by the government of Doña Violeta (1990–96) and later by the government of Arnoldo Alemán (1997–2000), although the latter had the intention of eroding it. In this chapter, Close’s choice to group in a same regime the second half of the revolutionary period with the two later administrations deserves special attention, since, according to many academics, the period of liberal democracy did not begin in 1984 but with the 1990 elections, which are usually known as “founding elections.”

Chapter 6, titled “Power-Sharing Duopoly, 2000–2011,” provides an interesting insight into what happened in Nicaragua in the period between the signing of “El Pacto” and the establishment of a personalist regime led by Daniel Ortega. Close points out that during this decade the Nicaraguan regime can be classified as a “turnaround” system, since politics—despite being carried out within the framework of liberal-democratic institutions—ends up generating a political logic of duopoly between organizations that pact with each other and share both influence and resources, as has also happened in countries such as Honduras, Spain, Uruguay, Chile, or Colombia.

As the author points out, the logic behind this form of power sharing is that each of the “partners” benefits from the system and limits the disruptive or even violent actions of the opposition. In this sense, the “turnaround” regime avoids uncertainty, generates a sense of turnover, and is compatible with the celebration of electoral processes. But for this type of regime to work, both formal institutions and informal arrangements are needed, on which basis the “partners” share and negotiate interests. In the case of Nicaragua, such arrangements were established in the famous “Pacto” signed in 2000 by the liberal and Sandinista caudillos. The Pacto

changed the rules of the country's electoral game, "partified" the institutions, co-opted the autonomous agencies, and expelled political and social actors, de-democratizing the country.

But in order to maintain a "Power-Sharing Duopoly" regime, it is necessary to have two relatively symmetrical powers, for when one of them weakens, the system changes logic and the more powerful partner takes over the game. This is what happened when the Liberal Party was broken due to the confrontation between Arnaldo Alemán and then-President of the Republic Eduardo Bolaños (2001–6). The collapse of the Liberal Party meant that the FSLN, dominated by Ortega, won the 2006 election and progressively took control of all sources of power, especially as of its second term of office, which began in 2011.

Thus, chapter 7 analyzes the current regime of Nicaragua, "Dominant Power and Personalistic Rule." Although political science has already coined a remarkable number of names for this type of regime—illiberal democracy, electoral authoritarianism, competitive electoralism, hybrid regime—it is not easy to describe this type of political system. Close defines it by presenting its economic and political bases, as well as its international alliances.

Regarding its economic bases, its links with Venezuela through ALBA are the focus, which entails considering both the provision of resources to fight poverty through targeted social policies and the ability to co-opt traditional economic elites by giving them access to public resources. As for its international alliances, the author stresses the Ortega regime's ability to maintain commercial relations with the United States, Venezuela, Russia, and Iran all at the same time. And at the institutional level, he points out the president's search for control, analyzing the constitutional reforms of 2014 and the elections held since 2008, from which the opposition has been increasingly excluded.

As a result of all the abovementioned elements, Nicaragua is ruled these days by a dominant regime that maintains a democratic formality, although power resides in the presidential couple Ortega-Murillo, their family, and their inner circle. But the drift from a democratic regime to a personalist one is not exclusive to Nicaragua; it has also happened in countries such as Russia, Hungary, and Venezuela. Therefore Close describes how the leaders of the four countries have had the capacity to reshape the political system altogether in order to use it for their own interests. It is at this point that the author presents one of the central reflections of the book; namely, the relative ease with which a leader can transform a democracy into a hybrid or even authoritarian regime if there is a caudillo culture and permanently polarized elites that do not respect the institutions.

Finally, by way of conclusion, Close provides three reflections to understand Nicaragua's recent history. The first proposes that today's Nicaragua is comparable neither to the one that prompted a revolutionary project in 1979 nor to the one that saw, in 1990, a process of reconciliation under the mandate of Violeta Barrios, for today no glimpse of enthusiasm or illusion can be seen in the country. The second reflection shows how some political leaders have had the ability to erode democratic institutions, either from power or from the opposition. And the third reflection says

that if the existing regime maintains the current polarization, divided political elites, and absence of consensus on the rules of the political game, it is difficult to think about regime stability in the medium and long term.

To conclude, it should be pointed out that David Close's work is an excellent analysis of Nicaragua's recent political history, but it is also a guide to interpreting regime changes and, above all, the processes of de-democratization—an issue of great interest in times of posttruth!

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Victor Albert, *The Limits to Citizen Power: Participatory Democracy and the Entanglements of the State*. London: Pluto Press, 2016. Photographs, figures, tables, abbreviations, notes, bibliography, index, 224 pp.; hardcover \$99, paperback \$30, ebook \$30.

In this book, Victor Albert provides a front row seat to the concrete manifestations of the old adage, “all politics is local.” Through an ethnographic comparative account of participatory processes in the Brazilian municipality of Santo André, Albert provides a much-needed bottom-up view of participatory democracy. In doing so, the author pushes this literature forward in important ways and poses fundamental questions that should be prioritized in future research.

The author sets out to probe the realities of participatory democracy on the ground, investigating the administrative and political processes, as well as the power relationships, that determine the extent to which citizens can “partake in the governance decisions that come to influence their communities” (3). To address this research question, Albert adopts a comparative research design that, unlike other studies that compare participatory processes across different cities, examines three different participatory institutions in the same municipality. The advantages of such a design are manifold, not the least of which is that it allows the author to hold constant a whole range of factors that could potentially shape the functioning of participatory institutions.

Albert's empirical approach brings an additional benefit, a profoundly rich account of local governance and politics. The author's account makes an important contribution to our understanding of these processes, elucidating the role, interests, and strategies of state actors and street-level bureaucrats in these participatory spaces. Such a view is absent from much of the existing literature on participatory democracy and urban democracy more generally. Albert's fascinating account of the election process—an example of what he calls “ritualization”—is a case in point. The author, in a sense, opens up the “black box” of participatory institutions, providing a rich understanding of the socialization and collective identity formation process such spaces entail. Moreover, the author's ethnographic accounts and interviews offer another important contribution by prioritizing the voices of the protagonists of participatory institutions, from both the state and civil society. It is through these accounts that we come to truly understand the challenges of partici-