

So Near yet So Far: Nicaragua and Costa Rica's Divergent Fate in Pursuing Democracy

Mingxuan Yang^{1,a,*}

*¹The University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam Road, Hong Kong, 999077, China
a. 3468544465@qq.com*

**corresponding author*

Abstract: This paper compared the democratic development of Costa Rica and Nicaragua. Although two neighboring Latin American countries with similar culture, language, and historical root, their trajectories of political development are divergent. While Costa Rica's democracy has consolidated, Nicaragua is still struggling in authoritarian rule with dismal socioeconomic development. The paper found that the two seemingly similar countries' different fates result from various factors from the role of military, and political systems to the disparity of socioeconomic development. Costa Rican's stable democratic environment then enabled the entrenchment of a pro-democratic political culture that is absent in Nicaragua. The multi-perspective analysis of the two similar countries could have further implications on the comparative studies of countries that share similar social, cultural, and political origins but with different outcomes of democratic development.

Keywords: Latin America, democracy, authoritarianism, military, social welfare

1. Introduction

This essay will discuss why the political development of the two neighboring countries in Central America, Nicaragua and Costa Rica, went on two completely different courses. After gaining independence, both countries enshrined democratic principles in their constitutions [1]. However, while Costa Rica successfully maintained its democracy since 1899 under a relative peace environment with political stability and economic prosperity, Nicaragua fell into prolonged civil wars that devastated the country's economy and suffered under several strong-men's authoritarian rule from Somoza to Ortega [2].

The paper will compare the political development of Costa Rica and Nicaragua, especially their democratization process and results. This paper will argue that Costa Rica and Nicaragua's different outcomes in democratization are rooted in their developmental history. Costa Rica's success can be ascribed to the following aspects: stable and effective democratic governance, inclusiveness and responsiveness of the institution, social welfare and service system with relatively equal access, and abolishment of military that could endanger democracy [3]. All these aspects finally created a strong pro-democratic political culture that Costa Ricans generally considered democracy as national pride and the only acceptable set of "game rules" in politics [4]. On the contrary, Nicaragua's stagnation of democratization can also be explained by the significant flaws of institutions and lack of mechanisms that are crucial to Costa Rica's success, including excessive and unchecked clout of military, strong executive power, and failure of improving the well-being of citizens and cultivate a favorable political

culture.

2. Democratization and Its Determinant Factors

Democratization can be defined as a process through which a country transit from a non-democracy to a democracy, establishing democratic institutions, and consolidating democratic rules [5]. There are different paradigms in explaining how democracy could emerge and consolidate in developing countries. The modernization theory contends that industrialization and rapid economic development usually happen before a country can move forward to democracy meaningfully [5]. The rapid economic development could lead to the growth of a middle-class who are generally more favorable to democracy and can become the major force in pushing democratization. Therefore, material development, such as economic growth, education, and urbanization, is the premise condition of democratization [5].

However, modernization theory's account for democratization is also challenged by other theories. For example, the political culture theory argued that modernization theory's thesis is only applicable to a small number of cases, like eastern Asia, but failed to provide a comprehensive account for the failure of democratization in other regions with divergent cultures [5]. They instead argued that political culture plays a more crucial role in democratization. A political culture that is favorable to democracy generally considers democracy is the only acceptable set of "game rules" in politics regardless of its actual performances [6]. On the contrary, an unfavorable political culture may value strongman's leader more than democracy, placing communitarian interests over individuals and consider democracy as means to achieve other kinds of goods like social welfare, economic growth, and effective governance [4]. Under an unfavorable political culture, people participate in democracy relatively passively who are in favor of democracy if it can offer good outcomes, but may support other forms of government if they believe the alternative could perform better than democracy [4].

3. Costa Rica's Case: A Quasi-religious Belief in Democracy

Now the paper will compare and contrast Costa Rica and Nicaragua's ways to democracy by putting it under the background of the two countries' tracks of political development. In Costa Rica's case, neither modernization theory nor political culture theory could fully explain the consolidation of its democracy. It was more likely the co-effect of material and political culture dimensions.

First and foremost, Costa Rica became a democracy in 1899. Since then, its democratic system has been firmly rooted without frequent interruptions of dictatorship or long-term civil wars like neighboring countries [1]. Therefore, a democratically elected government could deliver its policy under a relatively stable and peaceful environment, without the necessity to using authoritarian measures to repress violence and rebellions [2]. Citizens in Costa Rica could then exercise their democratic rights on a regular basis that every successful election could be a civil education to Costa Ricans. Therefore, the democratic awareness of Costa Rican citizens was generally higher as a survey showed they could better identify the core feature of democracy, associating it with civil rights and political accountability instead of economic demands and profits [3].

The accountability resulted from democracy, in return, promoted the material and living well-being of Costa Ricans. Modernization theory stresses the economic development as a precondition to democracy. However, in Central America's cases, the equal distribution and universality of public goods seemed to be more important than increasing the overall economic output. Franzoni & Sánchez-Ancochea found that the establishment of democracy was crucial in the appearance of "social states" in Latin America that maintained an effective social insurance system with higher quality and more generous transfer compared with non-democracies [3]. However, most Latin American countries' systems, including those that are democracies, were biased towards certain

occupations, like civil servants, by allowing them to receive more benefits [3]. Costa Rica's system is different. It permitted most citizens to receive similar level of healthcare services provided by the governments' agency [3]. This measure solidified Costa Rican citizens' support to democracy because the popularly elected government was proved to be accountable to people's demands and even to those who lived at the bottom of socioeconomic hierarchy, preventing them from resorting to more radical means out of democratic institutions to express their demands, like civil unrest and rebellions [3].

Another important factor that benefited Costa Rica's political development is that its democracy removed the arm threat. After a brief civil war in 1948, a new constitution was promulgated in the next year that abolished the military of Costa Rica [2]. It is a significant factor of Costa Rican's democratic consolidation. Many Central American countries fell into civil war in the 1950s and 60s. In most scenario, the military either played a pivotal role in supporting the coup against democratically elected incumbent or was directly involved in the civil war and took charge of the regime [1]. Democracy in these countries could then collapse easily without the military's commitment to defend it. Even if a coup has yet to occur, the government could be reluctant to respond to the public demand and carry out reforms for fear of irritating the military [1]. Costa Rica realized the threat and eliminated it at the very beginning. On the other hand, the abolishment of military also reduced the external threat to the democracy as superpowers (like the US and Soviet Union) were less likely to find out agents in the armed forces and waged a proxy war [1]. Thus, the abolishment of military made Costa Rica's democracy much safer.

Finally, with the concurrent effect of all these factors mentioned, Costa Rica's democracy could survive under a relatively stable environment. Compared with its neighbors, the longevity of Costa Rica's democracy enabled sufficient time for the emergence and consolidation of a pro-democratic political culture. Living under the relatively free and open political environment, people gradually considered democracy as essential and internalized democratic principles [6]. As scholars pointed out, many Costa Ricans have developed a "quasi-religious" belief in democracy [2]. Instead of passively accepting the outcome of democracy, they were passionate and actively participated in each election. Besides the high turnout, study showed That Costa Ricans' faith to democracy was beyond the short-term effect of elections and government performances, but more centered on the internal values of democracy [6]. Democracy even became a source of national pride and identity for some Costa Ricans. With the establishment of a mature pro-democratic political culture, Costa Rica's democracy became more consolidated compared with its neighbors, as its people generally only considered democracy as the legitimate form of government.

4. In Comparison with Nicaragua's Case: Democracy Without Bless

In contrast to Costa Rica's success in maintaining its democracy, Nicaragua's political development has long been stagnated. Since the early 20th century, this country has been suffering under several authoritarian rulers from both left-wing socialists to right-wing pro-American military leaders [7]. Their rules were interrupted by several bloody civil war, but democracy always failed to grow up in the country even after the war ended. From my perspective, Nicaragua's failure to democratize can also be explained by the similar factors that lead to Costa Rica's success.

Compared with Costa Rica's stable and effective democratic government generated from regular election, Nicaragua's democratic institutions are much weaker. Anderson found that Nicaragua, along with many new democracies, were likely to become delegative democracies in which the executive branch enjoyed extensive power with little check and balance [8]. He divided the accountability into horizontal and vertical accountability, the horizontal accountability included the ability of legislature, judiciary, and other independent state institutions to hold the executive power accountable, while vertical accountability referred to the citizens' power to restrict the government's power abuse, like

participating in elections and civil society mobilizations [8].

Linz found that compared with parliamentarism, countries that adopted presidentialism (the president is directly elected and serves as both head of state and head of government) is more likely to slide into delegative democracy [9]. It is because under the presidentialism system, president's legitimacy is independent from the legislature and therefore it is more difficult for the legislature to prevent the president from arbitrarily use of power [9]. An independent executive branch could mean the president only needs to resort to public support instead of the legislature's endorsement for his/her presidency, which could undermine horizontal accountability and increase the likelihood of democratic backlash [9].

Nicaragua has a long tradition of being under a delegative democracy or even a strongman dictatorship. The president's power was criticized as too broad and extensive while the legislature frequently acted as a subordinated institution to the president's will [8]. The judiciary was also appointed by the president so usually only those judges who are loyal to the president can be appointed [8]. Therefore, horizontal accountability was an inherent weakness of Nicaragua's institution.

Although Anderson defended Nicaragua's system by arguing that the politicized public, being mobilized in the revolution, could effectively balance the president's power as a source of vertical accountability, the subsequent development may disprove his argument. His observation was based on Nicaragua's political situation before Ortega was elected as the president in 2006 [8]. At that time, the ruling liberal party was more right leaning in opposition to the populist policy that Ortega and his revolutionary party, The Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), used to mobilize the public. He also pointed out that the number of strikes that occurred in Nicaragua in the 1990s was much higher than in democratic Costa Rica, but the difference could actually indicate that less change can be made within Nicaragua's system than Costa Rica's, so more Nicaraguans had to take their issue to the street [2]. It was also likely that Ortega's FSLN, purported as a grassroots working-class party, organized many of these strikes. Thus, the public could exercise vertical accountability when Ortega was the opposition leader, but after he came to power by using populist sentiment and grassroots mobilization, the public's vertical accountability to the populist government may be much weaker than they were to the previous elitist right-wing government, as what Cupples and Glynn's study has proved [7].

The fundamental weakness of Nicaragua's democratic institution then compounded by its failure to provide adequate social services, public goods, and economic development compared with Costa Rica's. While Costa Ricans have enjoyed universal health care managed by state agencies, Nicaraguans were still demanding that in the 2006's election [10]. While Costa Rica's income level is much higher than most of its neighboring countries, thanks to the long-term peace and stability and effective government to improve public welfare since the 1940s, Nicaraguans were struggling economically with only one-third of Latin America's gross domestic product per capita due to the long-term civil war, domestic violence, and predatory dictatorship [7][10]. Under the dismal background, authoritarian leader Ortega could then made use of the populist sentiment and resentment of the ruling elites to come to power. He portrayed himself as a strongman who could provide Nicaraguans with necessary social service and healthcare that his electorates could value more than abstract democratic ideas [10].

Besides, unlike Costa Rica which has abolished its military, military, security forces, political violence has long been a threat to Nicaragua's democracy. The neutrality of Nicaragua's military has long been in question [1]. For example, the National Guard from 1925-1979 was viewed as a military apparatus of right-wing pro-American governments while the Sandinista Popular Army was affiliated with Ortega's FSLN [1]. Meanwhile, the US also supported Contras in the 1980s to fight against Ortega's regime [1]. With support from their armed forces, political actors could feel they have less

incentive to obey democratic rules and to resolve their disputes peacefully. With the temptation of resorting to violence, domestic conflict could easily escalate into a civil war while superpowers, from the outside could find more opportunities to intervene Nicaragua's democracy and peace processes.

Finally, suffered under all the unfavorable conditions, democratic rules in Nicaragua failed to become the only acceptable rules to resolve political disputes and distribute resources [4]. A pro-democratic political culture then also failed to proliferate in Nicaragua despite the country have held multiple elections. Strongman leadership, like Ortega, still maintained popularity in this country [6][10]. Even though Ortega was widely accused of being authoritarian, discriminating against indigenous people, systematically repressing civil liberties, and undermining democratic institutions, many Nicaraguans still tolerate Ortega's autocratic leadership as democracy has never entrenched their belief and identity like Costa Ricans.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the essay has found that Nicaragua and Costa Rica's different political outcomes resulted from the combined impacts of institutional, economic, military, and cultural factors. Costa Rica's vibrant democracy today benefited from its longstanding institutions that were generally robust, effective, and widely recognized and respected. Its leading economic performance and universal healthcare and social service systems also increased democratic institutions' legitimacy. Costa Rica also minimized the risk of falling into civil wars or proxy wars by abolishing the military. All these factors finally enabled the emergence and establishment of democratic political culture that further consolidated democracy. In contrast, Nicaragua's institutions were much weaker with critical flaws of unchecked executive power that could easily lead to strong-men's leadership. Its economy was devastated in the civil wars. Without adequate state capacity, it also failed to establish a well-functioning social welfare system, therefore giving populist politicians, like Ortega, the chance to increase their popularity. Finally, its military was constantly a threat to democracy that usually affiliated with political parties and powers instead of being loyal to the nation and democracy. Therefore, Nicaragua failed to cultivate a democratic political culture that was helpful in sustaining democracy and preventing the rise of authoritarianism.

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