

Jose Esteban Gonzalez

Remember Nicaragua

The inspiring turnout of voters in El Salvador's election should remind the world of what the Nicaraguan people wanted from their revolution—and how their hopes for human rights and democracy have been denied. But a recent visit to Washington leaves me worried that liberals and conservatives alike may be retreating from an interest in Nicaraguan human rights.

The triumph of the Nicaraguan revolution was certainly a great failure for American foreign policy in Central America. Many American liberals who opposed that policy and who supported the anti-Somoza struggle welcomed our revolution as a punishment of the U.S. government. They see the policies of the Sandinista government as a vindication of their stand.

Liberals here who once listened with indignation when I spoke of the oppression and brutality of the Somoza government now grow suspicious and annoyed when I describe the abuses of the Sandinistas. For Nicaraguans, however, the revolution offered promises, not punishments, and the Sandinistas have betrayed those promises.

American conservatives, on the other hand, are often more interested in geopolitical matters than in human rights. They now are preoccupied with bringing international pressure to bear to persuade the Sandinistas to accept "stability" in Central America. We Nicaraguans fear that, to some in the administration, our human rights movement could become an expendable pawn on the chessboard of superpower politics.

What has happened in Nicaragua is very grim. There have been massacres of political prisoners. I myself with other members of the Human Rights Commission examined several mass graves on two different sites near the city of Granada in October 1979 and March 1980. Other persons in whose truth-



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fulness I have full confidence have witnessed similar evidence at other sites—and even those who are still in Nicaragua will so testify. These killings cannot be dismissed as rash acts of post-revolutionary anger. They have continued for over two years—some occurred within the past few months.

The official number of political prisoners in Nicaragua now stands at 4,200—higher than the highest figure ever registered under Somoza. There have been hundreds of disap-

pearances—although the government never responds to inquiries about such persons.

The official Sandinista press regulations permit less freedom of the press in Nicaragua today than there was under the "black code" of the Somoza dictatorship. There is none of the fraud at the ballot box that there was under Somoza—government goons now prevent political parties from even meeting. Most recently we have witnessed bloody repression of the Miskito Indians.

But the people of Nicaragua still yearn for freedom, and have no wish for a return to government like that of the Somoza era. The Catholic church is strong, and firmly devoted to human rights. Other groups—the private sector, political leaders, trade unionists—are still pressing for the fulfillment of the promises of the revolution. And the Sandinistas have at times proved sensitive to international pressures for human rights.

An international campaign for Nicaraguan human rights could have a very significant impact—in Nicaragua and elsewhere. I hope the Reagan administration will not let a preoccupation with "globalism" blind it to this possibility. I hope American liberals can stop romanticizing a revolutionary leadership that has turned against the democratic promises of the revolution.

The people still provide the best hope of peace and justice in Central America. It's something both your Liberals and conservatives should remember.

The writer organized the Nicaraguan Permanent Commission for Human Rights in 1977 to oppose abuses of the Somoza regime. He now heads the Nicaraguan Committee for Human Rights, based in San José, Costa Rica.