

# Macho Marxism lives on in Nicaragua

At first glance today's election in Nicaragua, a run-down chunk of Central America with only 3.5 million unhappy citizens, hardly seems an important international event.

Unfortunately, war-battered Nicaragua has become a symbol of the struggle for Central America between western democratic values and the still robust forces of Latino-Marxism. After a decade of civil war, the Soviet and Cuban-backed Sandinista regime has just about knocked the U.S.-supported Contras out of action. But the cost of this victory has totally bankrupted Nicaragua's economy.

The Sandinistas have been forced to allow a more or less free election as the price for future economic aid from western nations — particularly now that the Soviets are cutting back their massive military and economic support of Nicaragua and Cuba.

Last year I was in Managua, the wretched capital of Nicaragua, which has never recovered from the massive earthquake that almost levelled it in 1972. Shattered buildings, weed-covered piles of rubble and the rusted skeletons of old cars made the city look like it had been carpet-bombed. A gloomy air of Third World despair and misery seemed to hang over everything.

Even going out for a meal of rice and beans required carrying stacks of musty-smelling, near-worthless Nicaraguan currency that sported pictures of goose-stepping soldiers.

In spite of all this, the Sandinistas have managed to keep things going by maintaining a charged-up atmosphere of revolutionary theatre. I joined a mass demonstration of Sandinistas and rubbed shoulders with militants waving large banners that screamed, "Death to



## Eric MARGOLIS

Yankee imperialism!" Just in front of me, the Sandinista strongman, Danny Ortega, waved his skinny arms and lambasted the wicked gringos.

Today's election will decide whether Nicaraguans prefer such revolutionary Marxist revivalism to a democratic free market system advocated by the squabbling 17-party opposition alliance, Uno, led by Violeta Chamorro, a nice, if lacklustre, lady who runs the opposition newspaper.

What's left of the middle class and many small farmers will vote for Uno. But the bulk of the electorate is made up of youngsters under 25 who have been forced since infancy on Sandinista propaganda and indulged by endless revolutionary jamborees. Polls suggest the Sandinistas will likely win the election.

Even if Uno does manage to win, the Sandinistas now say they will keep their control of the large army and internal security forces — which means effective control of the country. Nicaragua's macho Marxists are not about to collapse like East European paper-tiger communists.

What happens in Nicaragua will have a strong influence over the decade-old civil war that is raging in neighboring El Salvador. That country's democratic

government is locked in a bloody stalemate with Marxist FMLN rebels. A Sandinista victory in today's elections means Nicaragua will keep discreetly supporting the FMLN until it wears down the Salvadoran government — which survives only because of U.S. economic and military aid that is now under sharp attack by liberal Democrats in Congress.

Continued Sandinista rule in Managua will embolden Marxist rebels in Guatemala and Honduras. The militant Sandinistas also have their eye on shaky Panama, a newly fertile ground for anti-Yankee mischief-making.

Behind the Marxists in Managua stands big brother Cuba. This column has been hearing for months that Moscow, in spite of recent arms deliveries, is going to slash its \$7 billion annual aid to Cuba that has made the island into a Marxist Gibraltar.

Maximum Leader Fidel Castro is now clearly isolated and feeling lonely. He has been grumbling openly about how his former allies in Moscow have gone soft in the head. For young Latin Marxists, Castro is still the grand old man of revolution. Castro's last chance to keep up his militant image and machismo is by continuing his vital support of Central America's Marxists.

Communism may be falling apart in Europe, but it still has a home in exile in Latin America.

But even Cuba is feeling the winds of change. Last year, Castro purged many senior Cuban officers and party officials after uncovering a planned coup against his rule. Deep cuts in Soviet aid will certainly undermine the Castro dictatorship and produce growing unrest among long-suffering Cubans. A worried Castro will be watching events in Nicaragua through a haze of cigar smoke.

Revolutions — even Marxist ones — cost money and the cash is running out. The fiesta may soon be over.