

Splitting the Country: the case of the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua

Luis Sánchez

*Department of Geography
Florida State University*

Abstract

Nicaragua is not only the largest country in Central America but also the least developed. As a nation, the Nicaraguans are a heterogeneous people. The ethnic mosaic that forms Nicaraguan society is visible in terms of the spatial organization of the country. The Pacific coast is occupied primarily by the dominant groups of mestizos and Whites, while the Atlantic coast is populated principally by Blacks and indigenous groups. The presence of significant levels of dissatisfaction within the population of the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua represents a regional problem involving matters of territorial integration and national security. The current patterns of pervasive core-periphery relations in Nicaragua are driving conditions conducive to the rise and resurgence of separatist feelings among the population in the two Autonomous Regions of the Atlantic coast.

Key words: *Nicaragua, Atlantic Coast, core-periphery relations, separatism, ethnic minorities.*

Resumen

Nicaragua no solo es el país más grande de América Central, pero también el menos desarrollado. Como nación, los nicaragüenses son un pueblo heterogéneo. El mosaico étnico que forma la sociedad nicaragüense es visible en términos de la organización espacial del país. La costa pacífica esta ocupada primordialmente por mestizos y blancos, mientras que la costa atlántica esta habitada principalmente por negros y grupos indígenas. Sin embargo, la existencia de niveles significativos de insatisfacción entre la población de la costa atlántica de Nicaragua representa un problema regional con implicaciones en temas de integración territorial y seguridad nacional. Actualmente, los patrones de las relaciones centro-periferia en Nicaragua están creando condiciones propicias para el surgimiento y resurgimiento de sentimientos separatistas entre los pobladores de las dos Regiones Autónomas de la costa atlántica nicaragüense.

Palabras clave: *Costa Atlántica de Nicaragua, relaciones centro-periferia, separatismo, minorías étnicas.*

Introduction

The development of a state is determined in significant measure by its spatial organization. How the economic, political, social, and cultural factors are structured in a given state can affect its development and impact its territorial integrity even more so. Population and its interaction with these factors are the determining elements shaping a country's development. Here is where the territorial integrity of a country can be seriously affected. Territorial integrity is crucial for proper development, especially in developing countries.

In any examination of the territorial integration of a country, the dimension of possible sentiments for separatism is a central factor. Those kinds of popular grassroots

views and feelings can seriously jeopardize the proper development of a country; and even threaten its very existence. I argue that the current patterns of pervasive core-periphery relations in Nicaragua are driving conditions conducive to the rise and resurgence of separatist feelings among the population in the two Autonomous Regions of the Atlantic Coast. Also, that the economic and political dimensions of those core-periphery relations are the most significant elements in shaping such sentiment and polarizing consciousness and identity in the country.

This study describes the case of Nicaragua and the economic, political, social and cultural relations between the 15 departments on the Pacific Coast, and the two Autonomous Regions in the Atlantic Coast (Figure 1). The study takes into careful consideration the existence of different ethnic minorities in Nicaragua's peripheral areas.

Nicaragua is not only the largest country in Central America but also the least developed. Neighboring nations, with similar geographic conditions, can point to far higher levels of modern development than Nicaragua. A history of dictatorships, severe natural disasters, foreign interventions, wars, and internal conflicts has accompanied its development as a nation.

The government of Nicaragua is highly centralized with strong control over the economic, political, and social system of the country. The government seat is in Managua, the capital. Its political structure is dominated by a strong executive power (President) followed by the legislative power (National Assembly), which exercises the political and economic authority. The only exceptions are the two autonomous regions and their regional governments. Even so, those regional governments remain under the authority of the executive and legislative powers, and are like other political subdivisions of Nicaragua existentially dependent on the national budget. These two regions are the main focus of the present study.

As a nation, the Nicaraguans are a heterogeneous people. The dominant population group is *mestizos*, some 77%. Whites represent around 10%, Blacks approximately 9%, and the indigenous and other "ethnic" minority groups some 4% of the total population. The indigenous and other "ethnic" minority population is composed of five different groups: Miskitos, Sumus, Ramas, Creoles, and Garifunas. Miskitos are the dominant group within the indigenous groups. That ethnic mosaic forms Nicaraguan society, and is visible in terms of the spatial organization of the country. The Pacific Coast is occupied primarily by the dominant groups of mestizos and Whites, while the Atlantic Coast is populated principally by Blacks, largely immigrants from the Caribbean islands, and the indigenous groups. While Spanish is the principal language of the mestizos, English is widely spoken on the Pacific coast by Garifunas, Ramas, and Creoles groups, together with Miskito, the principal language of the Miskito people. Sumu, the native language of Sumus is spoken by only a few and appears to be a dying language.

Methodology

The study's methodology is based on data from: 1) Original empirical field work, involving interviews carried out in the two Autonomous Regions of Nicaragua (RAAN, RAAS) during December 2003 and January 2004 and 2) Published data in the research literature and government documents, as well as other literature related to the topic.

The empirical data gathered through interviewing 181 persons form the primary database of the study. These provide the necessary information on current realities in the two Autonomous Regions of Nicaragua. They also furnish data on separatist feelings and the causes. A total of 169 ordinary Nicaraguans were interviewed in the four locations of the study. In addition a second set of interviews were carried out with 12 respondents,



Figure 1: Location of the Autonomous Regions and the interview sites in the study. Source: Instituto Nicaragüense de Estudios Territoriales.

principally decision-makers such as political, religious, and community leaders who are influential in the two regions.¹ Thus, these interviews form two parallel sources of data.

The interviews were conducted in four different locations, two in each Autonomous Region. In the North Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAN) the localities were Puerto Cabezas (seat of the regional administration) and Waspam. In the South Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAS), the locations were Bluefields (seat of the regional administration) and El Rama (Figure 1). The towns in which the interviews were conducted were selected choosing the capital cities and one rural town in each Autonomous Region. The interviews also documented age, sex, race, first language, location, duration of residence and occupation.

In the case of ordinary people, interviews were carried out following a systematic sampling procedure. Interviews were conducted in the main street and market places of each location. The random selection method employed was that every third person that passed between 8:00 am and 5:00 pm. was interviewed. Of those 169 ordinary respondents, 56.8% were mestizos, 34.9% Miskitos, and 8.3% Creole. This sample is representative to the total population of the two Autonomous Regions. Mestizos are the largest group in the Atlantic Coast, followed by Miskitos and Creoles respectively.

In the case of the decision-makers, key persons such as political, civil, and re-

ligious leaders as well governmental officials were identified and interviewed in each Autonomous Region. Those decision-makers were the leaders of the principal political parties, officials of the Foundation for the Autonomy and the Development of the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua, leaders of civic organizations, and officials of the regional government and the means of mass communication in both Autonomous Regions.²

The secondary data set were employed for analysis, explanation, and cartographic representation of the current situation of Nicaragua, specifically the Autonomous Regions of the Atlantic Coast. A central objective here was to determine the evolution and current patterns of core-periphery relations in the country and their impact on any separatist feelings that may be present.

Evolution of the Autonomous Regions

The Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua represents approximately 56% of Nicaragua's territory and some 10% of its total population (FADCANIC 2002: 2). Indigenous groups together with other ethnic groups, mainly immigrants, have populated the region for many years. As a result, a mosaic of different histories, heritages, and ethnic realities has marked a different course of development here from the rest of the country.

The Atlantic Coast was originally inhabited principally by Bawihka indigenous groups, which later intermarried with runaway slaves from Britain's Caribbean possessions, creating an Afro-indigenous mixed group called Miskitos (González 1997: 59). The British introduced guns and ammunition to the Miskitos, who began to expand their territory, pushing out other indigenous groups, whose descendants are called Sumus. They successfully put a halt to Spanish attempts to takeover the area (Doizer 1985: 4), thus opening the door to British domination of the coastal region. By 1631 they had developed significant commercial exchange with the indigenous groups of the area (González 1997: 66), offering them protection against the Spanish invaders. Those trading relations benefited both British and the indigenous groups, rendering the British strong allies of the people of the Atlantic Coast. As a result of these patterns, the Spanish colonization of Nicaragua was concentrated in the western side of the territory, becoming the core for the formation of the later Nicaraguan state.

In 1849 Britain forced Nicaragua to sign a treaty recognizing British rights over the Atlantic Coast (González 1997: 79). British domination over the Atlantic Coast forced Nicaragua to encourage a United States presence to offset the British. As result of the conflict of interests between the US and Britain over the Atlantic coast, in 1850 they agreed to settle the dispute and to sign the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty. In this treaty both recognized the Mosquito Coast as integral part of the sovereign territory of the state of Nicaragua (González 1997). However, the treaty did not give the Nicaraguan government full control over the Atlantic Coast, and Britain continued to exercise influence there. In 1852, under objections from the Nicaraguan government, the United States and Britain signed the Webster-Crampton Treaty. This stipulated that the Miskitos could retain the territory they controlled along the Atlantic Coast (González 1997: 124). The Nicaragua government considered the treaty between United States and Britain an aggression against the sovereignty of the state of Nicaragua and direct interference in its internal affairs.

Although United States and Britain recognized Nicaragua's sovereignty over its Atlantic coast territories, such recognition did not give Nicaragua's government *de facto* control over the region (Merrill 1993: 18). The ethnic and cultural differences of the region and the strong British influence there served as obstacles for the Nicaraguan government to integrate the region within the state. The Atlantic coast thus remained culturally separated and geographically inaccessible from the western part of the country.

In 1893, the newly elected president of Nicaragua José Santos Zelaya launched a modernization scheme for the country (González 1997: 122). For Zelaya, the incorporation of the Atlantic coast to the new state was important, since its natural resources represented a principal component for the development of Nicaragua's economy (Doizer 1985: 147). A year after Zelaya assumed power, and with the military support of the United States, Zelaya incorporated the Atlantic coast de facto into the rest of the country (Hale 1994: 41). With the incorporation of the Atlantic coast into the state of Nicaragua, the entire territory became another department of Nicaragua under the authority of the central government, named the Department of Zelaya in honor of President Zelaya.

In the early 1930s, Nicaragua experienced another change that affected its political evolution: the beginnings of the Somoza dictatorship (Doizer 1985: 215). Somoza created a dynasty after his election as President in 1936. It ruled Nicaragua for almost half a century (*Ibid.*: 215). During the Somoza dictatorship, an enclave economy was created along the Atlantic coast, giving concessions to foreign countries for the exploitation of the natural resources of the region (González 1997: 159).

The repression and the violations of human rights that the Somoza dictatorship practiced in Nicaragua created the conditions for the emergence of the FSLN, the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (Sandinista Front of National Liberation), a revolutionary-guerrilla organization of students and peasants opposed to Somoza's regime (Vilas 1990: 204). After years of military and political clashes that left some 50,000 dead and 150,000 Nicaraguan in exile, on July 19, 1979 the Sandinista Revolution defeated Somoza and took power (Nietschmann 1989: 26).

During Sandinista rule in the 1980s, the Atlantic Coast became a major problem for Nicaragua. The people of the Atlantic Coast resisted the policies of the new government (Schechterman 1993: 35). They were opposed to the vision of population homogeneity of the new government, which ignored the ethnic diversity of the Atlantic Coast and imposed an extreme centralized government on the entire country.

In the mid-1980s, the revolutionary government came into conflict with the United States when President Reagan ordered an economic embargo on Nicaragua. President Reagan authorized \$100 million in military and non-military support for groups trying to overthrow the Sandinista government, arguing that they were threatening US security in the region (Merrill 1993: 47). The ethnic minorities of the Atlantic Coast joined the counterrevolutionary war against the Sandinista government (Schechterman 1993: 35). As a way to find a peaceful solution the revolutionary government agreed to a negotiated cease-fire with the leaders of the Atlantic Coast (Vilas 1990: 278). Those negotiations resulted in government recognition of the ethnic diversity of the Atlantic Coast and the right of the indigenous people to self-government.

In 1987, the Sandinista government promulgated a new constitution. It included the creation of autonomous regions on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua (González 1997: 295). The same year the National Assembly approved Law No. 28, *Ley de Autonomía*, which created the North Atlantic Autonomous Region, RAAN, and the South Atlantic Autonomous Region, RAAS (Pino 1996: 66).

The autonomy law recognized the need for some home rule for the different ethnic communities inhabiting the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua and granted the northern and southern Atlantic regions autonomy in principle by setting up a form of regional self-administration (*Ibid.*: 91). It recognized and guaranteed particular rights to people differentiated from an ethnic point of view. The autonomy gave several political, economic, and cultural rights to the people of the Atlantic Coast. The economic rights that the autonomy gives to the regions include the rights to the territory and the natural resources on it. It also includes the right to collect taxes and to constitute a special fund for

development with the contributions of the central government of Nicaragua. The social rights recognize the freedom of speech, religion, and the right to preserve their cultural identity and native languages. It also recognizes the right to have an education in their native languages. Article 11 of the *Estatuto de la Autonomía*, 1987, states that Spanish is the official language of the state but the native languages of the Atlantic communities can be used officially in these regions. The political rights include the free election of their regional authorities, the proportional and equitable representation of the different ethnic groups in the regional government. It also recognizes the right to administrate their territories according to their traditions.

Even though the autonomy statutes give to the Atlantic Region many rights, to a large degree the regional governments remain under the authority of the executive and legislative powers of Nicaragua. Article 89 states that the communities of the Atlantic Coast are indissoluble parts of the Nicaraguan society. The citizens of the two Autonomous Regions have the same privileges and obligations as all Nicaraguans. The regional budgets depend largely on allocations from the central government of Nicaragua. Often the regional councils have not been able to meet for long periods because of the lack of funds (Ortega 2003: 42).

After the fall of the Sandinista revolutionary government, autonomy of the Atlantic Coast was not a priority for the new government. Although the Law for Autonomy was approved with the 1987 Constitution, it was not ratified until 1994 by the post-Sandinista government (Pino 1996: 67).

Separatism

Separatism is a main factor when considering the territorial integrity of a country. Such sentiment among the people can seriously handicap and endanger the proper development of a country and even its existence. Separatist groups constitute a threat to the integrity of the state with their potential for violent mobilization (Mousseau 2001: 555). Proper development cannot be reached without complete territorial integrity of the country.

The concepts of separatism and nationalism are often mixed up and misconstrued, creating wrong perceptions about their meanings. There is no doubt that both concepts are emotionally laden. Nationalism means a profound attachment to the community of which we are part (Jacobs 1980: 3). Separatism is a kind of nationalism that has as one of its main goals the attainment of maximum autonomy and/or freedom for the chosen entity (Smith 1982: 17). Even though nationalism implies some of that, the emotions that it involves play a key role in separatism; but nationalism cannot always be described as separation or secession.

In the majority of the cases, separatism seems to be a dangerous feeling that clashes with national security, potentially threatening both the national integrity and development of a country. Many countries have been grappling with the effects of separatism instead of trying to find out the root causes underlying these feelings.

Minority dissatisfaction is a central problem associated with matters of separatism. Ethnic kin seem to play a powerful role in influencing the desires of ethnic groups (Saideman and Ayres 2001: 1135). Linguistic and cultural differences in particular regions have persisted over several generations and have survived despite strong pressures toward the assimilation of the minorities. These are characteristics that explain nationalist resurgence (Williams 1982: 1). The presence of those linguistic and cultural factors within the limits of a country could be determinants for a regional problem involving separatist feelings. The existence of "minority" groups with a different ethnic background together with the dissatisfaction factor can determine the rise or resurgence

of some kind of separatist feeling within a country. When two or more communities in a population see themselves as permanently divided and as having different interests, then relations between them cannot be readily resolved through regular democratic means, since even in democratic governments one of the groups may be permanently out-voted (Spencer 1998: 3). This reality makes more prone the rise of, and to a certain point is used to legitimize, separatist feelings among the people of a region that presents different characteristics from the dominant group in the country. When dissatisfaction starts to spread among the people, that is when separatist feelings begin to appear; but that is not enough to determine a true claim for separation. Once that discontent has been harnessed by organizations and political movements, a number of options such as communalism, autonomism, and separatism present themselves, and the conditions that favor one option over another are intimately bound up with the political and economic cycle (Smith 1982: 32). In fact, it is more than just dissatisfaction that can create the conditions for the people to consider any of those options. Ethnic diversity and ethnic mobilization have different meanings and they should not be treated equally (Mousseau 2001: 549). There must be some core territory in which the group is concentrated and is a sufficiently high proportion of the total population for it to be credible to claim the region as a national homeland. Moreover, there must be one or more characteristics that provide the basis for separateness and community in the potential nationality (Orridge 1982: 46).

Autonomy is also a manifestation of minority dissatisfaction, and even though it does not mean separatism, it is often misunderstood. The main argument in autonomism is the recognition of being the center of a nationality, not a separate political entity. The difference is that autonomy claims some institutional recognition within the larger state, while separatism demands complete independence (Orridge 1982: 44). Although autonomy movements are not necessarily separatist, a number of factors can transform regional autonomy movements into outright separatist movements. The most important of these are the historical circumstances. Those circumstances determined the minority's incorporation, the skill and industriousness of the nationalist elite in mobilizing the target population, and the prevailing international climate within which nationalist appeals are made (Williams 1982: 4).

A separatist movement normally bases its claims on the remoteness and territorial distinctiveness of the region where a population is located. Distance, relative isolation and a perception of an unfulfilled resource can be powerful mobilizing influences on the development of a separatist movement. Those factors get stronger when they are linked with a regional distinctiveness that may encompass other variables such as language, religion or a common, shared history of exploitation (Williams 1982: 2). The claims of the right to national self-determination as a full and equal partner are one of the main factors in developing and spreading separatist feelings. Closely related to that is the presence of a long-standing economic inequality, in which, individually and collectively, members of a minority have received a less than proportionate share of wealth and power (Williams 1982; Saideman and Ayres 2000; Mousseau 2001; Sorens 2004). When group identities coincide with economic differences, groups will feel more insecure; therefore to gain control over their economic destinies, they will seek to become more autonomous, increasing the likelihood of secession or irredentism (Saideman and Ayres 2000: 1131). That is where separatism may become a serious problem for the territorial integrity of the country and its proper development, also emerging as a matter of national security.

Not all separatist movements or separatists feelings seek the same goals, nor are they moved by the same factors and causes. Those differences allow a classification of separatism into territorial and ethnic. What motivate territorial separatism are factors

directly related with the land. The separatist group conceives itself to be in an unsatisfactory dependent status, and this essentially economic factor may be coupled with racial, cultural and social factors as well (Williams 1982: 2). On the other hand, ethnic separatism is based on the cultural distinctiveness of the community.

Development plays an important role in matters of separatism. It is one of the determining factors deciding the evolution of such feelings. Development and its uneven diffusion have influenced the course of nationalism, and in some cases have provided the catalyst for its eruption (Smith 1982: 27). The economic factor clearly assumes great importance when the people contemplate the best path forward to satisfy their needs. In most cases, a sense of economic injustice combined with a strong tradition of regional self-assertion has produced fierce resistance among ethnic minorities (Huxley 2002: 34). On the other hand, as Gurr (1993) suggested, people will be more satisfied with higher economic development and prosperity and will therefore be less willing to resort to rebellious and violent actions.

Economic perceptions of injustice have been among the most important factors driving secessionist movements (Bookman 1998: 70). This suggests that the economic issue is a key variable in the emergence of separatist feelings, and a main argument for separatist movements in attaining their goals and even gaining the support of the people. Even though other factors that can influence the emergence of separatism could be present, the economic one is often dominant.

Findings

Separatist feelings are central factors determining popular perceptual satisfaction levels regarding the current situation in the region. As Williams (1982) suggested, minority dissatisfaction is a central problem associated with the dynamics of separatism. The presence of significant levels of dissatisfaction within the population of the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua represents a regional problem involving matters of territorial integration and national security. The multi-ethnic reality of the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua together with the perceptual dissatisfaction factor play a role in the emergence and resurgence of separatist sentiments in the region.

When the respondents were asked about how they think the government responds to their cultural and social needs/aspirations, over 95% indicated dissatisfaction, less than 3% indicated satisfaction and about 2% did not respond (Table 1). The absence of government institutions in the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua creates a perception among the population that the central government is neglecting the region. That feeling of alienation and isolation affects the population irrespective of ethnic group or social condition. As seen in the survey results, the majority of the respondents expressed a level of dissatisfaction (96%), even though their ethnic diversity (57% mestizos, 35% Miskitos, and 8% Creole) was evident. The high level of dissatisfaction confirms the importance and the main role that cultural and social matters play in shaping people's perceptual satisfaction levels. Here all groups sense their peripheral status in aggregate (Table 1). More significant is the fact that the Atlantic Coast is a composite of ethnic groups differing from the dominant ethnic majority in the Pacific Coast core.

On the other hand, when the respondents were asked about how they think the government responds to their economic and political needs and aspirations, 98% expressed dissatisfaction, less than 3% satisfaction, and less than 1% did not respond (Table 1). The nearly absolute dissatisfaction among the population of the Atlantic Coast underscores the sense of isolation and lack of central government experienced by the population in the two Autonomous Regions of the Atlantic Coast.

People have not seen significant changes in their political situation since the ap-

proval of autonomy. Nor has there been any economic growth in the Autonomous Regions. When basic needs are not fulfilled and people feel they are excluded from any effective decision-making, dissatisfaction mounts. The regional governments remain under the authority of the executive and legislative powers of the state, and like other sections of Nicaragua, are dependent on the national budget. There is a pervasive sense of tutelage, a typical dimension of core-periphery power dynamics. The leaders in the Atlantic Coast feel in effect powerless, and express that sense of disempowerment.

Interview Questions		Totals	Mestizos	Creoles	Miskitos
How do you think the government responds to the cultural and social needs/aspirations of the people?	Satisfied	2.4	4.16	0	0
	Dissatisfied	95.9	93.75	92.85	100
	No Answer	1.8	2.09	7.15	0
How do you think the government responds to the economic and political needs/aspirations of the people?	Satisfied	2.4	4.16	0	0
	Dissatisfied	97	94.79	100	100
	No Answer	0.6	1.05	0	0
Are you aware if there is any separatist feeling among some sectors in the Region?	Yes	82.8	78.12	64.28	94.91
	No	17.2	21.87	35.71	5.08
If yes, do you think the people see the separation as a way to progress?	Agree	95.7	73.95	50	94.91
	Disagree	2.9	2.08	14.28	0
	No Answer	1.4	2.01	0	0
Do you think that the separation of the Atlantic Coast is possible?	Yes	45.6	25	35.71	83.05
	No	53.3	75	64.28	15.25
If yes, when do you think that this is likely to happen?	In 5 years	2.6	1.04	7.14	0
	In 15 years	48.1	10.41	0	45.75
	In 25 years	49.4	12.5	28.57	37.28
	In 50 years	0	0	0	0

Table 1. Summary of interviews in total and by groups by percent.
Source: author's fieldwork.

The following three examples are based on data from interviews with decision-makers in three different locations in the two Autonomous Regions. The first respondent is the Regional General Secretary of one of the main national political parties, a mestizo aged 48. He is the chief figure in the political hierarchy of that political organization in the RAAS. The second interviewee, a mestizo aged 53, is an official of a civic organization focus on the autonomy and the development of the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua that operates in both Autonomous Regions. The third example, a mestiza aged 57, is a

civic leader and business-owner in the RAAN.

Autonomy creates the conditions for the economic development of the two Autonomous Regions; the regional governments could negotiate commercial treaties with other nations, and the government will have to consult the regional authorities before making any economic concession that compromises our natural resources; but the reality is that we still are under the authority of the central government, and we have never enjoyed true autonomy.

(Rafael Díaz – RAAS)

The government barely helps us with economic support, they only come during elections. We are isolated from the rest of the country; the only way to get out of here is by a poor road in very bad condition or by water.

(Pedro López – RAAS/RAAN)

The reality is that the government has abandoned us; there is almost no governmental presence here. The natural resources of the RAAN are being exploited, and the wealth that is being generated remains in the Pacific, leaving us with nothing. There is almost no terrestrial communication between us; the closest hospital is eight hours overland in Puerto Cabezas. We learned that the government only responds when faced with a crisis, so the people here have organized protests. They have had significant demonstrations voicing their discontent; as they did in November of 2003 when they took over the municipal airport and hijacked a plane until the government responded.

(María Rodríguez – RAAN)

The opinions of decision-makers provide clear evidence of perception of the current autonomous arrangement of the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua. There is no recognition of the current on-paper autonomy. They have not seen major and important changes in the current economic and political situation of the Regions. Real empowerment is absent.

Data from these three interviews indicate that people are aware that unequal economic growth and power relations between the two coasts function to block fulfillment of the necessities and aspirations of the people of the Atlantic Coast and their leadership. The situation in Nicaragua is a classic case of core-periphery imbalance and power dynamics, marked by evident economic and political differences that drive a powerful sense of regional dissatisfaction and discontent.

With respect to governmental respond to cultural and social needs and aspirations in the regions, the towns of Puerto Cabezas and Waspam expressed the highest levels of dissatisfaction, 100% each, while El Rama and Bluefields voiced lower levels, 92.2 and 91.3% respectively (Table 2). These two locations (El Rama and Bluefields) are dominated by Mestizos. In the case of El Rama, its inhabitants do not see themselves as part of the RAAS. They still use the term Zelaya Central, former Department of Zelaya, which existed prior to the creation of the RAAS as a vernacular geographical label.

Culturally they are part of the Pacific Coast of Nicaragua, but geographically they are part of the Atlantic Coast region. Nevertheless, the town suffers the same isolation common to the rest of the Atlantic Coast. However the people of El Rama and Bluefields perceive their current situation to be the result of government policies of neglect toward the region. On the other hand the highest levels of dissatisfaction among the majority indigenous population of the RAAN (Puerto Cabezas and Waspam) is a clear evidence of the region's ethnic differences on the perceptual levels of satisfaction.

Likewise, regarding the governmental respond to economic and political needs and aspirations in the regions, the towns of Puerto Cabezas and Waspam expressed the highest levels of dissatisfaction, 100% each, while El Rama and Bluefields voiced lower levels, 97.5 and 91.3% respectively (Table 2).

Interview Questions		Bluefields	El Rama	Puerto Cabezas	Waspam
How do you think the government responds to the cultural and social needs/aspirations of the people?	Satisfied	8.6	0	0	0
	Dissatisfied	91.3	92.2	100	100
	No Answer	0	7.5	0	0
How do you think the government responds to the economic and political needs/aspirations of the people?	Satisfied	8.6	0	0	0
	Dissatisfied	91.3	97.5	100	100
	No Answer	0	2.5	0	0
Are you aware if there is any separatist feeling among some sectors in the Region?	Yes	89.1	60	82.2	100
	No	10.9	40	17.8	0
If yes, do you think the people see the separation as a way to progress?	Agree	87.9	95.8	100	100
	Disagree	9.7	0	0	0
	No Answer	2.4	4.2	0	0
Do you think that the separation of the Atlantic Coast is possible?	Yes	34.8	12.5	51.1	86.8
	No	63	87.5	46.7	13.2
If yes, when do you think that this is likely to happen?	In 5 years	12.5	0	0	0
	In 15 years	37.5	40	43.5	57.6
	In 25 years	50	60	56.5	42.4
	In 50 years	0	0	0	0

Table 2. Summary of interviews by location as percentages.
Source: author's field work.

The RAAN (Puerto Cabezas and Waspam) is the most isolated and less developed of the two Autonomous Regions. This region, specially the northernmost areas where Waspam is located has gone through a period of serious economic decline. Also, it was the most impacted area during the armed conflict during the 1980s. The extremely high levels of dissatisfaction (100%) in Waspam and Puerto Cabezas are the effect of governmental absence and neglect of the region. In effect this is disempowerment. On the other hand, the town of Bluefields (with the lowest levels of dissatisfaction) is the most developed town, in terms of infrastructure and economic resources, of the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua. Even though still isolated from the rest of the country, as is

the whole Atlantic Coast, an underground economy based on drugs traffic from South America has played a significant economic role in the town. The current economic and political situation in Bluefields is better than the rest of the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua; and indeed the RAAN. As a result, in Bluefields the sense of relative empowerment is higher. Yet the comparatively better level of development in Bluefields is due not to any government programs. Rather it is due to an internationally and nationally criminalized form of commerce in illicit drugs, serving as a conduit from South to North. Perhaps the very absence of a strong government presence has contributed to the crystallization of a drug trafficking infrastructure in Bluefields. These disparities affect the perceptual levels of dissatisfaction regarding the governmental management on the region.

When the respondents were asked if they were aware of the existence of any separatist feeling among some sectors in the region, 83% responded yes, and 17% no (Table 1). Elements of nationalism and separatism have been present in the popular discourse in the Atlantic Region of Nicaragua for some time. The foreign interventions, Zelaya's incorporation of the Atlantic Coast to Nicaragua in 1894, and most recently the armed conflict between the indigenous minorities and the government during the 1980s have created the conditions for the formation of a nationalistic discourse in the region. That discourse is expressed in the high awareness levels, 83%, of separatist feelings among the population of the Atlantic Region.

Popular discourses are symbolic formations geared to persuasive ideals (Peet 2002: 55). Those symbolic formations result from collective interpretations of historical experiences and interpretations. As Antonio Gramsci (1971) suggested, prevailing common sense, diffused by civic institutions, forms values, customs, and spiritual ideals and induces spontaneous consent to the status quo. This serves to construct a hegemonic discourse. The ideas behind a discourse are also generated more directly by productive practices interpreted by groups of agents, such as organizations and elites, depending on their degree of ideological sophistication (Peet 2002: 58).

How is the awareness of separatist feelings in the region (83%) distributed among the ethnic groups? Of the respondents, 95% of the Miskitos, 78% of the mestizos, and 64% of the Creoles said they are aware of the existence of separatist feelings in the region (Table 1). The higher levels of awareness expressed by Miskitos suggest that their collective experiences, as the descendants of the original inhabitants of the region and the leading group active in the armed conflict of the 1980s, have had a stronger impact on the formation of a political discourse among them. However, of the 83% that were aware of the existence of separatist feeling, 96% agree that people see partition and separation positively, as a pathway to progress, while less than 3% disagree (Table 1). These results are indicators of people's perceptions of the current critical situation of the region. There appears to be a relationship between the perceptual dissatisfaction levels of the population (regarding the current cultural, social, political, and economic situation) and the existence of separatist feelings in the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua.

Respondents were almost evenly divided in the question of the possibility of separation of the Atlantic Coast. Just over half (53%) answered no, and 46% answered in the affirmative. Even though 96% of the respondents think people regard separation as a way forward, the split in the responses to this question discloses serious concerns among the population about the possibility of a separation. Less than half believe it is a feasible option.

Discontent is important for social change but collective action will not occur unless people are able to do more than individually appreciate that something is wrong (Swanson 1971: 77). Such actions can only be carried out by organizations that embody change. The development of a collective belief of injustice, neglect and a nationalistic

discourse are not sufficient to produce a social or political movement. Those movements or organizations must develop a stable structure of leadership to guarantee its rise and growth among the population (Swanson 1971: 102). That resentment against central rule and the salience attached to a separate and distinct cultural identity needs to be organized and energized in a political context for effective concrete results (Mitra 1995). The existence and coherence of a movement seeking change is determined by the formulation and political articulation of an agenda. This process is vital for generating the necessary political power to give concrete territorial expression to demands for a separate homeland.

More important is the need for popular support in the population. As Subrata Mitra (1995) stated, the transformation of sentiments of cultural nationalism into political movements for a separate homeland requires a social network that can be transformed into a political organization capable of facilitating co-ordination among leaders, generating symbolic and material support for the cause and acting as a vigilante organization to punish defectors. In order to generate collective action, leaders must persuade citizens to voice their dissent (Bhavnani and Ross 2003: 341). Elements of fear and governmental repression can shape people's behavior and seriously affect the popular support to the movement. The likelihood of success of a movement depends in part on the public's perception of the likelihood of their success. Ravi Bhavnani and Michael Ross (2003) suggest that if citizens believe that the government will prevail, they will be reluctant to oppose it, no matter how odious they find it. But if they believe the opposition will be successful, they will be more likely to voice their dissent.

In the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua, fear is a major factor affecting people's perceptions regarding the possibility of a separation. In his interview, Juan González, a decision-maker from Bluefields, said: "The separatist feelings among the people are real, there is just fear to express it". There has been a fear of governmental repression since armed clashes between the government and the population of the Atlantic Region erupted in the 1980s. People do not feel comfortable expressing their feelings regarding the separation because they fear a repeat of those experiences. Moreover, there is currently a lack of a strong political or social organization and leaders, which can organize the people and develop a separatist agenda. The main political parties in the two Autonomous Regions are branches of the principal political parties of Nicaragua. Those political parties in the regions are committed to a national project in Nicaragua, not to the regional project of the Atlantic Coast. On the other hand, the local political parties in the two Autonomous Regions identified with the ethnic minorities have not been able to formulate and politically articulate a regional agenda that can persuade citizens to voice their dissent.

What is the ethnic distribution of those who believe separation is impossible? According to the responses, 75% of the mestizos, 64% of the Creoles, and 15% of the Miskitos do not think separation is a feasible option (Table 1). For mestizos, the Atlantic Coast is an integral part of Nicaragua; for the Miskitos the Atlantic Coast is the homeland that has been invaded and occupied several times by foreign countries. Mestizos see the separation as a matter for ethnic minorities that could eventually lead to their domination over them. Nevertheless, many mestizos agree that separation is not a disastrous step forward for the region. The isolation and precarious economic situation that the region is currently experiencing is pushing them to look for alternatives.

The existing separatist feelings in the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua reflect spatial variations in the four target cities of the study (Table 2). The town of Waspam exhibits the highest levels of awareness of the existence of separatist feelings (100%). The serious economic decline at the moment in Waspam is impacting the satisfaction levels there. Waspam is dominated by Miskitos, about three-fourths of the total population,

which historically claim the region as their country, and do not identify with Nicaragua. These economic and ethnic differences are major factors when the population of Waspam defines their loyalties. On the other hand, the town of El Rama expressed the lowest levels of awareness of the existence of separatist feelings (60%). It seems that a less ethnically diverse panorama, 95% of respondents are mestizos, and 5% Creole, has a different effect on people's satisfaction levels.

When asked if the respondents think separation is possible, the town of Waspam expressed the highest values, nearly 90%, while the town of El Rama expressed the lowest values, 12%. The Miskito town of Waspam showed the strongest separatist feelings on the region, while the mestizo town of El Rama the weakest. According to these results, the different ethnic groups do not perceive the separation in the same way. Miskitos still see the Atlantic Coast as their homeland. In their eyes, partition and separation constitute an agenda to gain back control of their country, a nationalist dream.

There are some spatial differences as to when the separation is likely to happen to those who think the separation is possible (Table 2). The town of Bluefields was the only location where respondents, less than 12%, think the separation is likely to happen within the next 5 years. Of those who think the separation is likely to happen in 15 years, Waspam expressed the highest values (58%), while Bluefields expressed the lowest (38%). Of the respondents who think the separation is likely to happen within 25 years, El Rama expressed the highest values (60%), while Waspam expressed the lowest (42%). There were no locations where the respondents think the separation is likely to happen in 50 years. Even though Bluefields was the only location where respondents perceive that separation may occur in 5 years, the low figure of 12% suggests that this is not a significant value suggesting a pattern in perception. Again, these results are a clear indication of the differences between the population of the RAAN and the RAAS regarding their perception about possible separation. The majority of the respondents of Waspam seem to perceive separation as an event on the horizon. In El Rama, by contrast, of those who think the separation is possible, a majority, 60%, think is likely to happen in 25 years. In other words, they see the possibility of a separation as a distant process, far in the future though perhaps in their own lifetimes.

Conclusions

The historical development and evolution of the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua have been a determinant factor in the current economic, political, social, and cultural structures of the country. That current situation of the two Autonomous Regions is a manifestation of the legacy of the past. The different historical realities of the two coasts of Nicaragua have led to the division and polarization of the country. National identities are a form of collective memory. Collective memory selects the elements of the past that make up the formative sense of cultural knowledge, tradition, and singularity that is shared by the members of the nation (Confino 1997). In the present, Nicaraguan collective memory is characterized by a division between the Pacific Coast and the Atlantic Coast. The division that Nicaragua is experiencing is marked mainly by social and cultural differences, but is exacerbated by deeply rooted political and cultural inequalities.

Cultural identity plays a main role determining the spatial division of Nicaragua. To a substantial degree, popular perception of the current situation in the Atlantic Coast has been formulated moored on ethnic differences deeply attached to the territory. Territory is central to a nation's self-definition (Knight 1982; Williams and Smith 1983; Kaplan 1994). The institutionalization of regions illustrates the creation of bounded communities that create national identities (Paasi 1996). Miskitos and the indigenous and other "ethnic" minority groups of the Atlantic Region have created a national identity based

on the belief of a Miskito Nation or Mosquitia, which historically is demarcated within the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua. On the other hand, mestizos are attached to Nicaragua's national cultural identity. These differences act as determinant factors in shaping the perceptual satisfaction feelings of the population regarding the current autonomous arrangement of the Atlantic Coast.

Currently there are separatist sentiments among various segments in the population of the Atlantic Coast. The weak presence of the state and the precarious economic situation of two Autonomous Regions are creating the basis for an upsurge in such sentiment. Even though there are nationalistic elements in the popular discourse of the Atlantic Region, a real possibility of partition and separation is not concrete in the popular mind. Individually, people do not see how the power and control of the central government can be challenged in order to achieve separation of the Atlantic Coast. The fears of being labeled as a separatist and being the object of possible government reprisal significantly shapes the way people express their views about separation. Decision-makers and social and political organizations that believe in separation have not been able to develop a separatist agenda and persuade the population to organize and express their dissent. Even though the regional nationalism that exists among the indigenous and other "ethnic" minority groups, the current ethnic diversity of the region itself makes it harder for these indigenous and other "ethnic" minority groups, even Miskitos, to build such a breakaway movement.

However, a separation of the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua entails factors more complex than people's perception and decision-makers ideals. The precarious economic situation of the region, the lack of adequate infrastructure, and the incapability of the leading class to unify the population regardless of ethnic differences militate against partition and separation as a realistic goal. Nicaragua is not Czechoslovakia. The Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua does not have the necessary resources, in terms of human and economic capital, to sustain and build a separate state. The separation of the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua will lead to greater impoverishment of the region. Also, the government of Nicaragua will not respond positively to partition and the challenge to its territorial sovereignty. The Atlantic Coast represents approximately 56% of Nicaragua's territory, containing the vast majority of the national reserves of natural resources. The development of the national economy of Nicaragua is in great part dependent on the agricultural, forest, fishing, and mining potentials of those territories.

Nevertheless, the current patterns of pervasive core-periphery relations in Nicaragua are driving conditions conducive to the rise and resurgence of separatist feelings among the population in the two Autonomous Regions of the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua. The economic and political dimensions of those core-periphery relations are the most significant elements in shaping such sentiment and polarizing consciousness and identity in the country.

Notes

¹ In some of the interviews, confidential information was given to the author. To avoid reprisals toward the persons interviewed all have here been given pseudonyms.

² Interviews with decision-makers were conducted during the months of November and December of 2003. Because of that time period (during the Christmas holidays) the number of interviews with those key persons was not evenly distributed between each study site.

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