

Compete, accompany, or democratize? The Nicaraguan Catholic Church's motivations for involvement in the 2018 wave of protest

by

Sergio Miguel Cabrales Domínguez

B.A., Universidad Centroamericana, 2015

MA, University of Pittsburgh, 2020

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

University of Pittsburgh

2022

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

DIETRICH SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

This thesis was presented

by

Sergio Miguel Cabrales Domínguez

It was defended on

February 28, 2022

and approved by

John Markoff, PhD., Distinguished University Professor, Department of Sociology

Suzanne Staggenborg, PhD., Professor, Department of Sociology

Thesis Advisor: John Markoff, PhD., Distinguished University Professor, Department of
Sociology

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2022

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Sergio Miguel Cabrales Domínguez, MA

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In 2018, a wave of more than 2,000 mass protests in Nicaragua demanded democratization and the resignation of President Ortega. Members of the Catholic Church (Catholic Agents) played a critical role during these protests by certifying the protesters and their causes, making available multiple religious assets, and negotiating with the parties. To what extent and why did the Catholic Church contribute to this mass mobilization? Drawing on extensive qualitative fieldwork, this paper offers an analysis of the motivations of the Church in this political process. This case provides a powerful new setting to evaluate expectations of Religious Economies Model (Finke, R., & Stark, 2005; Gill, 1998; Trejo, 2009) against other emerging motivations. The findings show that Catholic agents were not motivated to compete for membership and political favoritism in the oligopolistic religious market (Yang, 2010). They elaborated transcendent and institutional motives resulting from the historical conflict with the Sandinistas and political perceptions about the viability and duration of the protests. Above all, an explicit will to democratize Nicaragua fueled these Catholic actions. The new case study thus offers an opportunity to understand the Catholic involvement in political upheavals, a similar behavior observed during the “Third Wave” of democratization (Huntington, 1991; Troy, 2009).

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1.0 Introduction

In 2018, a wave of more than 2,000 mass protests in Nicaragua demanded democratization and the resignation of President Ortega, a Sandinista leader who has governed with growing and political control the country continuously since 2007 (Sánchez & Osorio, 2020). The mobilizations, caused by a political controversy related to social security, quickly escalated from the interaction of severe state violence and perceptions of the feasibility of regime change. However, the inconsistent but effective tactics of high state repression managed to demobilize this wave in less than six months, consolidating an authoritarian regime that persists to this day (Klein et al., 2021; Martí i Puig, 2019).

Members of the Catholic hierarchy, from laity to bishops, played a complex role during these protests. They certified the protesters and their causes, putting multiple religious assets that increased social mobilization at their disposal. At the same time, President Ortega called on the bishops to mediate negotiations with the opponents in an unsuccessful negotiation process. Far from being homogeneous, the actions of members of the Church (from now on, Catholic agents) varied at all levels.

Despite the high interest that the Church's role in this remarkable period of protest has aroused, the reasons and motivations for its participation have not yet been identified and explained. The recent Nicaraguan case study thus offers an opportunity to understand Catholic involvement in political events and contributes to sociological discussions about the reasons that lead religious organizations to mobilize their assets, certify mobilizations, and promote social changes, including democratization (Huntington, 1991).

This article provides a comprehensive study of the motivations that led Catholic agents in Nicaragua to act in the way they did in 2018. For this, it mainly evaluates the rational explanation of religious competition (Finke, R., & Stark, 2005), which has been significant in the action of the Church in other political events in Latin America (Chesnut, 2003; Gill, 1998; Trejo, 2009). The case study allows us to observe if this concern, relevant in the 20th century amid historical religious market transitions, is still relevant today. In addition, the study also explores other reasons that could be contributing to the Catholic Church, once again, actively influencing political mobilization processes.

With data compiled from semi-structured interviews with Catholic agents, an examination of Nicaraguan bishops' pastoral letters issued between 2006 and 2021, an original database on Nicaraguan protests, and a review of secondary sources, this article examines the motivations of the Catholic Church in this mobilization, considering the multiple agents of the ecclesial structure.

The findings show that Catholic agents in the 2018 protests in Nicaragua were not motivated to act to compete for membership and political favoritism, as the characteristics of the oligopolistic religious market suggested (Yang, 2010). However, the Catholic agents elaborated transcendental motivations based on theological and doctrinal arguments (Smith, 2014), which allowed them to assume the enormous costs of this involvement. In parallel, institutional motivations resulting from the historical antagonism with the Sandinistas, political perceptions about the viability and duration of the conflict, and an explicit will to democratize Nicaragua were the fuel for these Catholic actions. Positive externalities, such as unexpected and unintended consequences, resulted from these not-so-rational motivations.

The rest of the article first describes the role of the Catholic Church in the 2018 mobilization and some aspects that need to be clarified and to which this study will address.

Subsequently, a literature review is presented, particularly from the perspective of religious economy, which has been widely used to explain –not describe– these religious and sociopolitical processes. Then, it presents the methodology that the researcher has used for approximately three years. The results section discusses the motivations in three parts: economic-religious, transcendental, and institutional. The last section synthesizes the findings of this work and reflects on some implications.

1.1 The Church in the 2018 Wave of Protest

In April 2018, President Ortega, a Sandinista revolutionary leader, approved neoliberal reforms to the Social Security System in Nicaragua. The unilateral decree prompted a rupture of alliances between the government and its economic and political allies and created unrest among multiple sectors in the country. Students called for demonstrations that ultimately faced the government's repression. In a matter of hours, protests spread to other cities rejecting the reform and the State Repression and urging more democracy in the country (Agudelo & Martínez, 2020; Mosinger et al., 2022; Sánchez & Osorio, 2020).

A Wave of more than 2,000 protests between April and September 2018, reaching 97 of the 153 municipalities, followed those initial events and transformed into a revolutionary movement that wanted a regime change. In this sudden and critical juncture, the Catholic Church in Nicaragua was a determinant actor that impacted the mobilization and its sociopolitical changes with its actions and omissions. The protests reached the nine dioceses of Nicaragua. Some of them had more demonstrations, mainly due to political and demographic variances, distance to the capital Campo (Butcher, 2017), access to technology, and media coverage Campo (Wisler and Giugni, 1999), among other factors. Catholic

involvement during the Wave was significant, explicit, and mediatized but had different tonalities depending on the local Catholic agents (the bishops, parish administrators, the religious congregations involved, and the Catholic laity).

Amid the increasing violence and mounting protests, President Ortega proposed a National Dialogue and invited the Nicaraguan Bishops Conference (CEN)¹ to mediate it. Many social actors saw the Dialogue as an opportunity to achieve democracy (Espinoza, 2018). Still, some perceived them as a threat, as it was argued that the negotiations would lower the pressure on the streets (Olivares, 2018). President Ortega's invitation to the bishops highlights his positive perception of the Church during the mobilization, even though some Catholic agents in the nine dioceses explicitly supported the demonstrations.

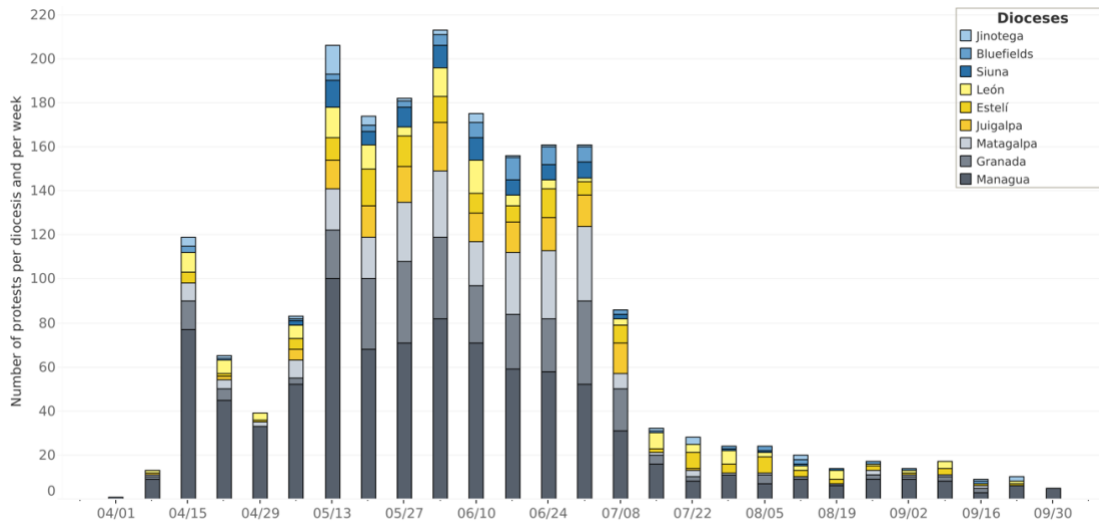
In these weeks of intense mobilizations, it was common to see religious men and women, lay leaders, and priests participating in the demonstrations (Aleteia, 2018); parishes converted into shelters and hospitals for protesters injured by the repression and bishops raising criticism in the face of the increased repression (Velásquez, 2018b). The active role of the Church was recognized by various sectors of society and by international organizations that followed up on the crisis generated by the protests (United States Department of State, 2019).

When the National Dialogue sessions started in May, not without constant stagnation, the protests increased exponentially, and most of these events had high levels of violence and repression. Amid the worsening crisis, some bishops and priests increased their public and active

¹ The ten bishops of the nine dioceses of Nicaragua compounded the CEN in 2018. It is considered the high instance of the Church in the country, the Nicaraguan Catholic province. Despite it being generally perceived as a homogeneous actor, there are significant internal variations among its members, as table 1 suggests.

support to the emerging opposition groups and protesters. With this alignment, the government, which initially relied on the bishop's neutrality, questioned the Catholic Church's role.

Figure a. Frequency of Protests per Dioceses per Week. (April – September 2018)



***Data comes from the author's original database on Nicaraguan protests

Table 1. Nicaragua. Features related to Bishops' Political Positioning. 2018.

Diocese	Territorial jurisdiction by department (Percentage of Catholics* in the Diocese 2014 / 2016)	Bishop (Year joined the CEN) Estimation of political criticism toward government (**) in 2018	Number of protests amid the Wave***
León	León, Chinandega (53.11 / 58.85)	Bosco Vivas (1981) Low	127
Managua (Archdiocese)	Managua, Masaya, Carazo (42.5 / 41.06)	Cardinal Brenes (1988) Moderate	902
Granada	Granada, Rivas, Boaco (60.5 / 50)	Silvio Báez (auxiliar) (2009) High	301
Estelí	Estelí, Madriz, Nueva Segovia (60.42 / 52.08)	Jorge Solórzano (2000) Low	141
Jinotega	Jinotega (38.54 / 31.25)	Abelardo Mata (1988) High	42
Juigalpa	Chontales, Río San Juan (60.27 / 63.01)	Carlos Herrera (2005) Low	144
Matagalpa	Matagalpa (52.41 / 52.74)	René Sándigo (2005) Moderate	249
Siuna	Región Autónoma Caribe Norte (38.89 / 40.28)	Rolando Álvarez (2011) High	76
Bluefields	Región Autónoma Caribe Sur (40.43 / 55.1)	David Zywiec (2002) Low	62
Country level	(48.47 / 47.92)	Nicaraguan Bishop's Conference (CEN) High	2044

* Data comes from the Lapop Datasets, edition 2014 / 2016.
 **Categorical estimates based on the author's documentary review and interviews. The level references the public pronouncements of the bishops on a personal level. There is evidence of activity and discreet political incidence of some prelates.
 ***Data comes from the author's original database on Nicaraguan protests.

Gradually amid this critical juncture, the Catholic Church hierarchy transformed into a cleavage factor between the emerging and growing opposition and the Sandinistas. The former group constantly praised the role of the bishops, priests, nuns, and the papal nuncio and emphasized its decisive institutional role in the country's future. The Sandinistas, remaining in power, developed accusatory speeches towards the Catholic leaders, especially towards the most active and criticizing bishops and priests. These direct attacks, some physical², on the Catholic hierarchy

² For instance, Bishops and priests of the Archdiocese of Managua, along with the papal Nuncio, visited a demonstration in July 2018, where Sandinista mobs attacked them. They shouted at the bishops: "Assassins, coup plotters, pedophiles." The crowds wounded Monsignor Báez. The attack stopped when the Nuncio

surprised protesters across the country. The Catholic Church, which until then was immune to direct repression, was facing retaliations from the Sandinista authorities because of its involvement with protesters. President Daniel Ortega accused the bishops of promoting a “coup d'etat” against him in cooperation with the opposition movements and the United States government (Salazar, 2018b). The CEN affirmed that President Ortega's accusations were false and pointed out that they have been impartial mediators in the conflict but that the Church could not be insensitive to the suffering of the Nicaraguan people.

The Wave ended in late September 2018 (Cabrales, 2020). With the installation of a police state, the repression contributed to the consolidation of an authoritarian regime that persists four years later. Bishops, priests, religious men and women, and lay leaders, for their part, remain to pay unexpected costs for their 2018 involvement but continue with their condemnation of Nicaraguan politics. Due to the authoritarian consolidation, many Catholic agents have moderated their public expressions of criticism. However, they preserve their discreet involvement, support for opponents, and public criticism.

The reasons and motivations for this involvement have yet to be found and analyzed. How to explain the Nicaraguan Catholic Church's participation in the 2018 Wave, considering the diversity of its agents, contributes to the debate among scholars for why, and under what circumstances, religious authorities actively promote social change and democratization (Carozza & Philpott, 2012; Huntington, 1991; Troy, 2009), certify organizations and protests (Almeida, 2019), and mobilize its assets for these causes (Smith, 2014).

called president Daniel Ortega, asking him for respect (Ivett Munguía & Calero, 2018; Tijerino & Cruz, 2019).

Previous research, particularly from the sociology of religion, has pointed to the mechanisms and processes contributing to religious institutions and leaders favoring movements and protests, mainly through the creation of frames (Hoyle, 2016; Reed & Pitcher, 2015; Sanchez, 2014), the mobilization of religious assets (Morris, 1996; Smith, 2014), and identifying structures of opportunities and threats (Borer, 1996; Keogh, 2013). Other studies have tried to explain, not only describe, the reasons behind these involvements, mainly through the model of the religious market (Gill, 1998). According to these studies, as business firms, religious institutions such as the Catholic Church must develop initiatives and strategies to retain or expand their membership, particularly in places where there is increased competition from other religions. Depending on the regimes inserted, this dynamic has had severe political implications, particularly with Latin American Catholic Church. Studies of the religious market focus their attention on the National Bishops Conferences or the role of individual bishops as gravitational centers of ecclesial authority.

Table 1 shows that the Catholic Church in Nicaragua indeed faces a reduction in membership, in some dioceses more than others. At the national level, according to the LAPOP study series, Catholics were 48.47% in 2014 and slightly reduced to 47%. in 2016. The data could suggest a compelling explanation for political involvement in 2018 from the perspective of increased religious competition and variant stability of Catholic membership (Wilde et al. 2010).

However, a closer look at Table 1 also shows that this apparent link between declining membership and Church's political involvement in mobilization has no evident pattern. Dioceses like Jinotega and Siuna, with a minor proportion of Catholics, had bishops with low public political criticism. Also, the number of protests would suggest that bishops with little public political criticism observed fewer protests in their dioceses; however, as indicated above, this is due to

geographic patterns and reduced media coverage in these remote areas of the country. Similarly, the disparity of positions reflects that the Nicaraguan Bishops were unequal at the diocesan level, and we can expect more variations at the local parish and regional levels.

Thus, an initial look at the data suggests that the motivation that could arise from the increased religious competition could have had different nuances at the local level or have surrendered to other reasons, perhaps less rational than the logic of the market. This research deepens the explanatory analysis through mixed methods, predominantly qualitative, allowing to examine the motivations of the Catholic Church considering the multiple agents of the ecclesial structure and acknowledging inter-diocesan variations beyond the apparent homogeneity of Bishops' Conference. With this approach is possible to identify the dynamics of the motivation of religious competence in this recent case study and explore other reasons for Catholic involvement in this mobilization.

2.0 Literature Review

Finke, R., & Stark (2005) suggest a model to analyze religious institutions that, as business firms, compete under market dynamics. The religious leaders (the supply side) develop strategies, policies, products (doctrines, traditions, theological interpretations), and marketing techniques (evangelization strategies, visibility, attraction power) to protect or increase its assets and increase its reach among the church members (the demand side).

A critical factor in the relationship between the supply and demand side in the religious economy is the State's role and, in consequence, as the Political Process Theory suggests (Tarrow, 2011), the political context. State intervention in the religious economy, in the form of subsidies, protections, barriers to entry, and regulations, depending on its level, history, and characteristics, creates four different types of religious markets: monopolies, oligopolies, a total ban on religion by the State, and competitive markets (Yang, 2010).

In societies with religious monopolies, the State supports a religious organization with favorable incentives and subsidies, guaranteeing its cultural hegemony. As a result, the monopolist religious organization cultivates excellent and cooperative relations with State representatives (Chesnut, 2003). A religious firm, under monopoly conditions, tends to be lazy, which means that its human resources (i.e., clergy) do not innovate tactics to increase or retain the religious membership to supply quality religious products and services (Gill, 1998; Larkin, 1972).

More than one religious organization has privileges or government approval in an oligopolistic religious market, but others are banned or subject to repression (Yang, 2010). In an oligopoly scenario, competition does not have the characteristics of a free market since there is significant State intervention in the religious economy. In this sense, the firms must compete

primarily for government favoritism and membership. In this dual competition, oligopoly firms tend to be more creative and innovative to preserve their membership and state favoritism to guarantee access to human and financial resources to drive their services, growth, and agenda. In total ban on religion by the State, the religious organizations become forbidden and behave under black market dynamics. In this scenario, religious firms must preserve their membership and existence by following multiple survival, transcendent and stoic strategies. This type of market, according to Yan, has been rare in recent history.

In societies where the State is not favoring religious firms and where the options on the supply side are many, religious organizations are in a competitive market. Under this dynamic, the religious institutions become very energetic and creative with high levels of lay participation and innovation to compete successfully. Its human resources are constantly looking for innovations in its religious products, marketing, and organizational strategies. (Finke, R., & Stark, 2005). Under this logic, it is also relevant to consider “informal competitors”, particularly secularization trends. Secularizations (differentiation of the secular public spheres, such as state, economy, science; and the decline of religious beliefs and practices in modern societies) have given way to the demolition of religious monopolies (Casanova, 2007), but also stimulating the emergence of more competitive religious markets.

Under these religious market models, researchers have analyzed the role of the Catholic Church in multiple regions and political events of the world. For instance, Chesnut (2003) and Gill (1998) noted that Latin America abandoned a monopoly-like religious market economy, previously in favor of the Catholic Church, and have entered the dynamics of a more competitive environment. The Catholic Church has lost members, while Pentecostalism gained space. The authors assumed that these were features of a competitive market, where Latin-Americans had

more options to choose among religious products and suppliers according to their preferences and tastes. As a result of that market change, and to adapt, the Catholic Church developed innovative products, strategies, and services to make it more attractive to potential followers (Trejo, 2009).

Regardless of whether it has been transformed into an oligopoly or a free market, the transformation in the Latin American religious market has had significant political implications. Gill (1998) found that when religious competition increases under authoritarian settings, Catholic leaders perceive in opposition to those regimes an opportunity to regain membership and influence among believers. That was the case in Chile and Brazil, where protestants groups were increasing, and the Church constantly developed reforms and explicit opposition toward authoritarian policies. In those countries, pastoral innovations, such as Comunidades eclesiales de base and Liberation theology, emerged to revive the ecclesial influence in society and promote awareness of injustice and social change. If the increase of religious competitors occurs under democratic regimes, Gill (1994) points out, the Catholic Church plays a significant role in strengthening the democratic norms. Under situations of competition and democracy, the Latin American Catholic Church tends to innovate techniques and pastoral choices with democratization potential. For example, (Trejo, 2009) showed that Mexican priests and bishops, confronted by the gradual increase in Protestant influence in southern Mexico, became more actively involved with indigenous communities, initiated forms of religious practice in local languages, provided more social services, and mobilized church resources for indigenous causes to retain the Catholic membership.

On the contrary, if there is a religious monopoly, under authoritarian settings, the Catholic Church built friendly and legitimizing relations with the regimes, aiming to preserve resources and strengthen its statal protection. In Argentina, for instance, where the protestant incidence was

lower, the Church hierarchy endorsed the military rule in the 1970s. For its part, a religious monopoly under democracies would be nonexistent.

Although the model has given significant and convincing explanations in how the Catholic Church, a religious firm, reacts under competition and promotes social change, the persistence of the competition effect over time is still unknown. Gill (1994) indicated that “the competitive threshold for pastoral reform should decrease as time progresses” (p.423); however, the temporary proximity of the increase of competitors in the religious market in Latin America made it impossible to observe its persistence in the long run. Today, Latin American countries’ transition from a Catholic monopoly to more competitive religious markets, be they free markets or oligopolies, is well advanced. Also, new and powerful forms of competition have emerged, such as secularization (Casanova, 2007).

In addition, the understanding of how religious competition influences the agencies of the Catholic Church, a diverse structure, remains slightly explored. The Catholic Church is a transnational institution that seeks to maximize its resources and assets (members, money, infrastructure, and political and moral power) at the international, national, and local levels. It has a robust hierarchical structure conformed by multiple Catholic agents, such as the Pope, bishops, priests, religious men and women from different congregations, and laypeople, following that order of power, visibility, and influence. The most basic territorial unit of the Catholic Church is the diocese, where the head is a local Bishop. These prelates oversee those units to which local parishes and works (including schools, hospitals, and social programs) belong; but are ultimately subjected to the Vatican control (Ferrari, 2007). In a region or a country, the bishops organized in National Bishop’s Conferences, often analytically considered as a unitarian and homogeneous actor, because of the “hierarchical nature of the Catholic Church that tends to mute internal

conflict”, and the fact that Catholic leaders “have strong interests in presenting a unified front, especially as pertains to major policy decision” (Gill, 1998, p. 9). This analytical consideration is unquestionable, but it does not thoroughly ponder that the Catholic Church is an entity influenced by multiple agents that perceive a motivation, including religious competition, in different manners. Other researchers, pointing to limitations in the competition model, have emphasized the need to include characteristics of the social environment within which Catholic leaders (particularly bishops) operate. These features, such as stability and structuration (or interaction) with other organizations, are also related to the level of competition with other firms (Wilde et al., 2010). However, these studies also highlight the Catholic leaders’ role, disregarding the multiple agents in the Church.

The Catholic Church admits temporary agencies for its multiple actors in the hierarchy. Under this temporary agency, Bishops and priests, religious men-women, and lay leaders, with different spiritualities, education, ecclesial traditions, personalities, and memories, develop perceptions and actions of all kinds. Despite that in the medium or long term, the Catholic structure, based on the quasi-authoritarian principle of obedience, has provisions and power over these individuals; the Catholic agents could actively influence the institution. In other words, they are not entirely passive. The 2018 Nicaraguan Catholic involvement in the mobilization contributes to this understanding with abundant examples of this dynamic.

The studies using the religious model have explored the behavior of the Catholic Church in interaction with regimes, essentially putting attention at the Bishops National Conferences level and the superior stages in the hierarchy. However, the increasing emphasis of the Catholic Church on the laity participation in political life and the Church’s activities, overcoming clericalism as

Pope Francis has accentuated (Wood, 2016), is potentiating the range of action of those temporary agencies.

In addition, although case studies and quantitative comparisons have shown the incidence of Catholic concern on religious competition in gradual, long-term, sociopolitical processes and transformations, few studies have demonstrated how decisive this interpretation and matter is in rapid changes, crises (Diamond, 2019), and “critical junctures” (Collier & Collier, 2015), such as the 2018 Wave of protests.

In summary, the current nuances of the effect of religious competition in the Latin American Catholic Church, the variations of the relevance of religious competition across the ecclesial structure, and how they perceive this concern in sudden sociopolitical crises are still unexplored. Considering these remaining questions and the recent case study offered by the 2018 Wave of Protests and the Nicaraguan Catholic Church's involvement in those critical events, this study seeks to examine what motivations the Catholic agents had with this participation.

Answering these questions also allows us to test if the religious competition concern is relevant in a country where the Bishop's Conference previously actively opposed an authoritarian regime under this market logic (Gill, 1994). Nicaragua and its Sandinista revolution against Somoza's rule in 1979 received scholarly attention from those who explained the significant and changing Catholic role in that considerable mobilization (Foroohar, 1989; McAdam et al., 2001; Williams, 1989). The studies, primarily historiographic and qualitative, explained the Church's involvement in the revolution as the direct result of significant doctrinal changes resulting from the Second Vatican Council (Foroohar, 1989; Williams, 1989), the increasing repression and corruption (McAdam et al., 2001), and the rupture of alliances between the business sector (aligned with the Church) and the Somoza regime (Sawchuk, 1997). With the revolution's triumph, conflicts

between Sandinistas and the Church quickly emerged as they perceived threats in the revolutionary regime's ideological alignment (Williams, 1989). More than forty years after the Sandinista Revolution, and with significant transformations in the Nicaraguan religious market, the 2018 Wave of Protests offers a new critical scenario to observe the persistence of these explanations across the time, particularly the religious competition model.

3.0 Methods

This study has a non-experimental approach with mixed and triangulated methods. It follows the style of the “analytic ethnography” (Lofland, 1995) attempting to explain the Catholic involvement in the 2018 wave of protests.

3.1 Interviews

I conducted unstructured interviews with Nicaraguan Catholic agents in person or online (due to the Covid-19 Pandemic restrictions). In exploratory visits, the researcher has constantly approached them since 2019 and restarted the interviews in 2021, three years after the Wave of protests and its political consequences still ongoing. A new round of interviews in 2021-2022 allowed us to explore the evolving thinking and feelings for the Catholic involvement when they are more reflected, beyond the climax of the initial crisis. The interviews started with a sampling considering the nine dioceses in Nicaragua and the diverse agents in the ecclesial hierarchy (not only the bishops and priests), and then following the snowball technique with new collaborators, reaching 27 informants in different dioceses, religious orders, and congregations, and lay-centered groups.

The purpose of the interviews was to identify how these Catholic agents got involved, perceived, and rationalized the 2018 general or specific events. In all the unstructured interviews, three main topics were discussed:

- informant's involvement and perception of the 2018 wave of protests, considering specific circumstances, experiences with the hierarchy amid the critical juncture, and general evaluation of Church's action.
- the Church's motivations, emphasizing the agent's inspirations and the institutional incentives for the involvement.
- And finally, the Consequences of the Catholic Church's involvement.

The researcher clarified that anonymity was necessary mainly because of the restrictive sociopolitical context in Nicaragua. All specific identifiers (except for the diocese of the origin or religious order) were removed. The IRB approval from the University of Pittsburgh allowed for the oral consent of the informants without documentation. Eighteen of twenty-eight interviews were recorded and then transcript, and the other ten took place with the authorization of only taking notes. The notes and transcripts were coded and analyzed with MaxQDA®, initially creating three nodes following the abovementioned three aspects. Later, according to the emerging findings, I followed a flexible coding approach Campo (Deterding & Waters, 2021), which resulted in a code structure similar to the Result Section in this document.

3.2 Supplementary Data

The researcher also considered rich data coming from public documents, speeches, and interviews issued by the Nicaraguan Bishops Conference members and particular priests in the 2018 protests or later. Likewise, newspapers, budget reports, and other documents were analyzed.

3.2.1 Bishop's Documents

I reviewed 77 official documents released by the Nicaraguan Bishops Conference (pastoral letters, public declarations, among others) between 2006, one year before the return of President Ortega to the Executive, to 2021, three years after the Wave of protests. These documents are available but dispersed on the CEN's website and social media pages. All these archives are considered the official position of the Catholic Church's bishops in the country, despite internal differences resulting from temporary Catholic agencies, as discussed in the Theoretical Framework. The analysis of these documents allowed for the identification of the Church's postures and thematic agenda across time, and particularly during the six months of the protests, to understand the hierarchical positioning of the Church amid the changing events. In 2018, the bishops issued 15 official documents, more than any year under the time frame in consideration. All those documents were determinant in the development of the Wave, and some informants constantly referred to them in the interviews.

Protests Events Analysis (PEA)

As secondary data for the analysis, I use an original database on Nicaraguan Protests created and maintained by this researcher since January 1, 2016. This data is obtained by systematically monitoring and registering protests covered in Nicaraguan newspapers (Cabrales, 2020). Based on these data, it is possible to analyze multiple aspects of the 2018 wave protests under study, for instance, how the +2,000 protests reached the nine dioceses in the country.

Most importantly, the database allowed the identification, description, and analysis of critical events that modified the pattern of protests. In some of them, the Catholic Church leaders' role was determinant and pointed to active involvement in the mounting mobilization. However, although the database helped indicate a Church's involvement, it was limited in providing a

complete description and analysis of the events and motives. Almeida (2019) advises that newspapers do not usually report key elements for protests analysis, such as frames and motivations.

3.2.2 Secondary Sources

I used secondary sources consisting of a revision of national and international news articles, videos, Facebook and Twitter posts, and international organizations' reports where Church agents played a significant role or gave relevant interviews. In many cases, the interviewees referred to these multimedia materials. Some interviewees also pointed to the need to review budgetary files (of government's subsidies to the Church), letters, or communiqués. I followed the track, found them, and analyzed them correctly.

This study also considered the most recent data from the Latino Barometer and LAPOP. The surveys, with national representation, allowed for the characterization of the religious markets (competition proportions, as shown in Table 1) and respondents' perceptions of the Catholic Church (as a credible or legitimate institution).

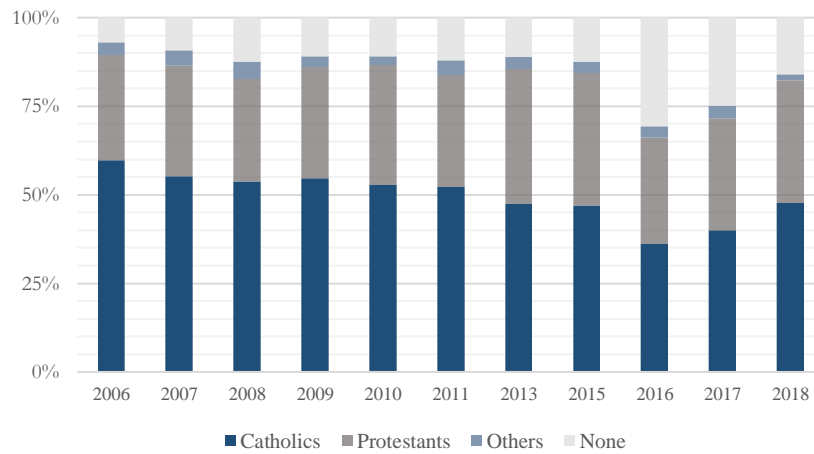
4.0 Results

The Church involvement in Nicaragua in the 2018 Wave of protests suggests that the Catholic concerns with religious competition and political favoritism, although decisive at the beginning of the 20th century's transition of religious markets, has decreased over time. The Catholic Church has stopped explicitly and implicitly considering the religious market's distribution as a priority. It is motivated to act in political matters for theological and pastoral reasons and other institutional factors, whose consequences are often outside the logic proposed by the market laws (Finke, R., & Stark, 2005; Gill, 1998). The results show that these motivations vary depending on the ecclesial agents who, far from behaving homogeneously, have temporary agency, with multiple effects on the ecclesial structure.

4.1 Diminishing Effect of Religious Competition Concerns

The decrease of Catholics in Nicaragua was evidenced in the LAPOP data in Table 1 for the years 2014 and 2016. However, this trend is also present in the Latinobarómetro data, a study that preserves religious affiliation questions in its national surveys. Data between 2006 and 2018 in figure b shows a decrease of Catholics in the Nicaraguan religious market and the growing numbers for the Protestant churches' members in multiple denominations. It is a consistent decrease in nominal Catholics. In 2006, they represented 59.7% of the population, while in 2018, the year of the protests, they were 47.8% of Nicaraguans: a reduction of more than 11 percentage points in twelve years.

Figure b. Change in Religious Market in Nicaragua. 2006-2018



Source: Author's elaboration. Data from the Latinobarometer 2006-2018

As proposed by Finke and Stark, the increased competition in the Nicaraguan religious market would imply an abandonment of the monopolistic model that characterized the Nicaraguan religious market until the 20th century. Still, the case should not necessarily mean the liberation of the religious economy in that country. In practical terms, the reader could consider that this new scenario in Nicaragua, in the 21st century, is that of a religious oligopoly, since a plural number of religions coexist, in which certain creeds have been legally privileged to a greater extent than others (Yang, 2010). Although the exercise of beliefs has not been limited in Nicaragua, the authorities have granted privileges, concessions, and political favors to the Catholic Church, and to a lesser extent to some emerging evangelical denominations in the country, which the Sandinista government has also favored (Rizo, 2021). According to Yang's definition, religions in oligopolies display a dual competition for membership and government favoritism to continue receiving benefits and state protection against new competitors. As with other types of religious markets, the existence of these two competencies could determine the motivations of the Catholic Church to act in politics as a strategy or innovation.

However, the Nicaraguan Catholic agents in the 2018 protests and in the sociopolitical context that preceded it do not indicate that they have motivations to engage in politics actively and critically by considering the increase of religious competitors or the preservation of the favoritism of the Sandinista authorities.

4.1.1 A Shrinking Membership

Concerns about diminished membership did not emerge tacitly or explicitly in the interviews despite asking multiple ways about Church members' motivations to carry out specific actions during the 2018 protests or before. Few references to the subject corresponded to religious men pointing out cases between Sandinista leaders and evangelical pastors, mainly the corruption of social programs and educational policies before 2018. A Claretian brother, for example, indicated that in a community of the diocese of Estelí, it was common to see the evangelical pastors praying in favor of President Ortega and thanking him for his support. However, according to several testimonies, some Catholic priests and seminarians also practiced this type of cooperation.

Few other mentions of the subject show an attitude of acceptance of the new configuration of the religious market, but without alarming tones of concern to motivate action. A Franciscan in the Archdiocese of Managua noted:

Nicaragua has, indeed, changed a lot during the last twenty years. We can no longer say that Nicaragua is a majority Catholic country. Now there is a diversity of thoughts and religious experiences. I remember that my neighborhood was the parish. Now, my neighborhood is bigger than the parish, and the new generations are more distant than before (Franciscan, personal communication, January 2022)

The pastoral letters of the CEN between 2006 and 2021 also did not mention concerns about the evangelicals' increase in Nicaragua. On the contrary, among the few references to other Christian denominations is a promotion of a coalition of Catholics and Evangelicals against therapeutic abortion in 2006. Catholic and Evangelical religious leaders organized joint mobilizations and collected 290,000 signatures to ask the State to make therapeutic abortion illegal. A month before the 2006 general elections, which the Sandinista Ortega won, the Catholic Church organized a massive march to the National Assembly, demanding the criminalization of abortion. With this type of action, together with a strong advertising campaign, Catholics and Evangelicals strongly influence public and official opinion on the subject (Amnistía Internacional, 2009). Ortega's new administration and the Sandinistas in the National Assembly finally penalized abortion the following year.

Another significant event in this regard, five years before the 2018 protests, is when the Catholic agents in Nicaragua commemorated their centenary as an ecclesial Province of Nicaragua. The bishops proudly highlighted the Catholic contributions to Nicaraguan political, economic, and social life with the national jubilee. They stated that the Church had more than 320 parishes, numerous schools and hospitals, religious orders operating in different areas, and lay movements. Along with this inventory of religious and political assets, the CEN said that the Church promotes the rule of law, democracy, justice, and peace (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2013). The bishops' language in this meaningful milestone shows that beyond observing with concern their declining membership, the Church recognizes its strengths and the extent of its religious assets.

Similarly, in 2014, when President Ortega received a document from the bishops in the framework of remarkable conversations with the CEN, the prelates appealed to the religious freedom in Nicaragua: “invoking the religious freedom established in our Constitution and

appealing to the goodwill of the Government, we urgently ask that you facilitate our presence for evangelization in (...) schools, prisons, hospitals and any other place that requires the presence and action of the Church” (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2014b, para. 31). The bishops thus recognized that in a legal framework that guarantees the existence of religious competitors, Catholic agents would also be able to act freely in carrying out their services. In the remaining documents of the period under study, there are no other references regarding the number of evangelicals or religious freedom.

Regarding the 2018 protests, none of the testimonies indicated concerns about the declining number of Catholics as a motivation to act. When asking explicitly about this cause, the reaction of several Catholic agents was stunner or distrust: "the church did not do it thinking about that, that it could recover parishioners," a nun stated categorically (Sister, Carazo, personal communication, January 2022). A lay leader in the diocese of León pointed out that the situation was too extreme to think about competitions and that the market logic is insufficient to explain what happened:

Knowing the priests, I would believe that they were not motivated by that (competition). It was not worth that! Some priests exposed their lives! The church is not doing badly here in Nicaragua because all the priests have at least something to live on and eat. Here they did not ask who was Catholic and who was Evangelical (...) When life is at risk, you have to have something more powerful (...), there was too much fear. (Lay leader, León, personal communication, November 2021)

A Piarist pointed out with irony and humor when explicitly asked about the religious competition motivation to act in the 2018 protests:

It seems paradoxical (...) The Church was being persecuted. I personally do not think the Church had that motivation. In other words: am I going to take the risk so that they hit a stone or shot me a bullet, just so that more faithful come to the Church? That is not so coherent. I feel that (idea) is very forced. If anyone within the Church thought that he was not acting according to the gospel, one would not act simply to show off. (Piarist, personal communication, January 2022)

Interviewees point out that the motivation for the religious competition is not significant if it exists. The Catholic involvement in the protests that year implied very high costs, and the possible benefits in terms of new parishioners did not end in balance, as explained later. The socioeconomic and demographic conditions of the Church in which Catholic agents were comfortable in 2018 did not suggest a need to risk the firm's assets, including the lives of human resources. That is, from this economic perspective, the involvement was irrational.

Nor do the documents of the Episcopal Conference issued during the critical juncture of 2018 refer to the diminished Catholic membership. The few mentions invite the creation of coalitions between Christians of different denominations to act and pray amid the unexpected crisis generated by the protests: "(...) let's avoid everything that can trigger situations of violence (...). We exhort Christians and in particular Catholics and our communities to persevere in prayer" (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2018g). Similarly, some documents addressed Catholics, "brothers of other Churches," and "men and women of goodwill committed to serving the common good." (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2018f). Thus, the willingness of Catholic agents to collaborate even with competitors amid a critical juncture is again observed. This new ecumenical nature of the Catholic Church, promoted since the Second Vatican Council, seems to be more

entrenched today than in the 20th century and suggests that the Church works along with other religious communities to set up social institutions to serve humans well-being (Himes, 2007).

4.1.2 Disregarding Political Favoritism

Ortega's new administration in 2007 and the political victory over abortion created an optimistic perception that the Catholic agents could influence the country's politics from a pastoral perspective, even in conjunction with other Christian denominations. It was also significant that Ortega appointed the emeritus cardinal Obando, a former opponent of the Sandinista government in the 1980s, as head of the Reconciliation and Peace Commission. The appointment of Cardinal Obando meant the possibility of overcoming historical conflicts between Sandinistas and Catholics and actively influencing the new national policy. The role of the cardinal, initially praised by some Catholic agents, was quickly questioned, in a clear example of a temporary Catholic agency capable of actively influencing and criticizing the hierarchy:

I remember that (...) (a priest) who does not mince words approached the Cardinal in front of a group of high school students and said: ‘Monsignor, we do not understand your behavior, why are you now being close to these people (the Sandinistas)?’. The cardinal told him: ‘I am a pastor, and if I am a pastor, I have to observe everything, and the conversation ended there. (Franciscan, Masaya, personal communication, January 2022).

With the new Ortega administration, the Catholic Church in Nicaragua continued to receive government subsidies and tax exemptions, confirming the oligopolistic competition for state resources. These subsidies would be maintained until 2018, the year of the massive protests, as indicated later in figure c. Along with these benefits, the new government gave the Church

significant concessions in subsidized Catholic education, social programs, and penitentiary ministry (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2007). Despite these concessions and benefits, an indication of the conditions of political favoritism they enjoyed, the Catholic agents began a spiral of involvement in criticizing the authorities, irrational from the perspective of the religious economy in oligopolies.

In a gradual reverse that started in 2008 and achieved its peak in the 2018 protests, the Catholic agents considerably escalated its accusatory language in reaction to Ortega's government actions and policies. The bishops denounced a "regression of authoritarianism" in Nicaragua, consisting of the subordination of the Judiciary, Legislative, and Electoral Power that allowed Ortega's continuous reelections and created the conditions for alleged vote frauds (Martí i Puig, 2016; Perez-Baltodano, 2010; Sánchez & Osorio, 2020). The CEN also denounced the installation of autocratic and abusive power, cases of corruption, the use of Catholic symbols and language for political purposes, the government's intolerance for criticism, the rising political violence across the country, and the persisting poverty resulting from increasing inequality (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2008a, 2008b, 2012, 2014b).

Several informants reported this increased tension and perception of injustice at the local level. A religious man who frequented rural areas affirmed: "We looked at what was happening with the communities, how they were politically polarized, we looked at the situation of poverty, the political manipulation, all this chain that comes from the presidential couple to the bases of the communities" (Claretian, Estelí, personal communication, November 2021). Another Friar in the diocese of Granada points out categorically that:

It was a flawed, unsustainable system (...) that had been eating up the country's political, functional, and social structures. The (Ortega) regime

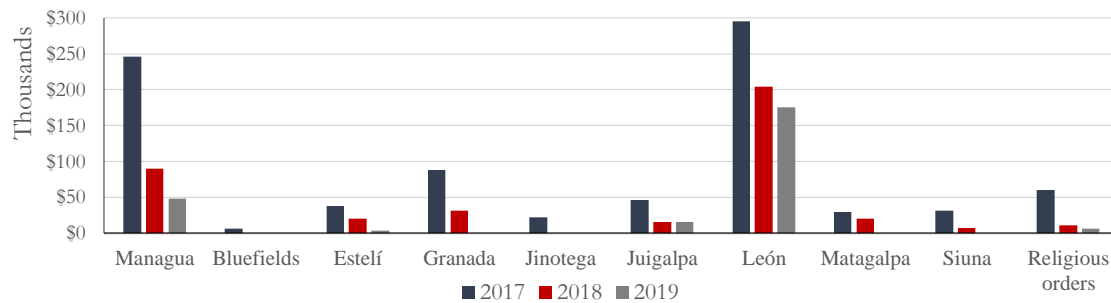
brought out the worst of our culture, our mentality, taking advantage of that to the credit of a family and political leadership. It seemed unfair to me.

(Franciscan, personal communication, October 2021)

Despite the increased language and accusatory perception of Catholic agents against Ortega, state subsidies to the Church continued, prioritizing some parishes³. Figure c shows that the country's nine dioceses and religious congregations received approximately \$864,000 in 2017, the year before the protests. The diocese of León and the Archdiocese of Managua were the ones that received the most resources. These allocations are described as maintenance funds for parishes and social programs of these dioceses and are given to the parish priest administrators. The analysis also found that other Christian denominations received funds from the State, thus evidencing the oligopolistic characteristics of the Nicaraguan religious market.

³ A significant example is the parish of Nuestra Señora de la Merced in the Archdiocese of Managua. His parish administrator has been close to the Sandinistas and has been named a "missionary of peace" (Rodríguez, 2019). The parish received subsidies close to 20 thousand dollars in 2017, more than 12.6 thousand dollars in 2018, and was one of the few that received resources in 2019, with approximately 6 thousand dollars allocated from the General Budget of the Republic. This outlier case is also an example of the temporary Catholic agency in action.

Figure c. Subsidies to Churches, Temples, and Religious Congregations. 2017-2019. Amounts by dioceses



Source: Author's elaboration. Data from Nicaragua Government budget 2017, 2018, and 2019. Informes de Liquidación (Dirección General de Presupuesto, 2018, 2019, 2020).

In addition to these funds from the budget, it was typical for some parishes and Catholic works to receive funds from the municipal mayor's offices, within the context of patron saint festivities, the purchase of religious supplies (books and images), special infrastructure projects in the temples, payment of utilities, and salaries to staff, such as parish administrators and local seminarians. In the Caribbean of Nicaragua, a diocesan priest exemplifies:

Party members wanted to be on good terms with the Church. They tried to do us favors. The Sandinista mayors used to say: 'Father, just let me know if you need something; we are here for anything.' I kept my distance, but other priests took advantage of that. My concept is that it should not be like that; it is the people who must maintain their parishes" (Priest, personal communication, November 2021).

The rationale of various ecclesial agents that received these resources has been utilitarian. In a public statement, Monsignor Solórzano of the Diocese of Granada said that "budget aid to cathedrals and parishes is received for maintenance and specific projects such as painting or roofs." (Solórzano in Navas & Chamorro, 2016). Similarly, Cardinal Brenes, of the Archdiocese of

Managua, pointed out that he ordered to his subordinated clergy that, in case of receiving state resources for parish projects, they must prepare expense reports to the Asamblea Nacional (National Assembly), which authorized the funds.

In similar logic, Monsignor Abelardo Mata, one of the most critical bishops of Ortega's administration, oriented to his clergy to receive the resources and subsidies because "the money is not from their (Sandinista's) pocket, it is from the public treasury. Take the resources because it is our right, but do not follow what they ask. Follow your parish programs!" (Mata in Munguía, 2020). Several informants also echoed this rationale, justifying the reception of resources from the Nicaraguan Budget and taxes while preserving the autonomy of the Church. In an eloquent example of this logic, which also illustrates the disregard for political favoritism, the bishops rejected the practice of offering gifts to Catholic agents (especially priests in parishes) that "were intended to silence voices and consciences." (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2014b). This cooperation was an expression that, despite the criticism of some ecclesial agents at that moment, "there was a relationship between the Church and the government (...) giving stability to authorities and the country." (Seminarian, León, personal communication, November 2021). At least in this aspect, it was a mutually beneficial relationship in which the government achieved certain legitimacy from the collaboration with the Church, and the Catholic agents enjoyed the flow of resources from the State without both fully compromising their actions.

The relationship suggests that the Sandinista authorities had a *tolerance zone* for the criticism of the Catholic agents since they understood the Catholic heterogeneity and the criticism that naturally arose from some, and the certainty that they could influence that criticism with openness and collaboration. Under this tolerance zone for criticism, subsidies and significant concessions emanated in the Church-State relationship before 2018. This zone, of course, had a

limit, which was reached as much as criticality increased significantly. The Church reached that point in the 2018 protests.

Numerous ecclesial changes also characterized the years prior to the 2018 protests and contributed to this increasing climate of criticism to the authorities. New influential bishops, such as Rolando Álvarez, diocesan, and Monsignor Silvio Báez, a discalced Carmelite, joined the Nicaraguan Bishops Conference. Báez's Carmelite spirituality, based on prayer and contemplation, and his exemplary doctoral education in biblical theology created no political expectation when Pope Benedict XVI appointed him in 2009. However, years later, with his position as auxiliary bishop of the archdiocese of Managua, he became one of the most critical voices denouncing the government's increasing authoritarianism (see table 1). The same high-level criticisms arose from Monsignor Álvarez in Matagalpa, appointed in 2011.

The resignation of Pope Benedict XVI in 2013 and the subsequent election of Pope Francis meant a gradual change in the transnational Church's paradigm of action. The new pope, a Jesuit, made numerous appeals to the Church's commitment to democratic institutions (Pope Francis, 2015; Wood, 2016). References to the magisterium of Pope Francis were going to be constant in the bishops' pronouncements during the 2018 wave of protests. For instance, in July 2018, Cardinal Leopoldo Brenes confirmed that he told the priests to: "open the temples, (...) that the Churches can be turned into hospitals and shelters, as Pope Francis says." (Brenes in Villavicencio, 2018) Since 2014, Pope Francis constantly used the analogy to describe the Church "like a field hospital where wounded people arrive seeking the goodness and closeness of God." (ACI, 2014). This comparison had a literal interpretation in the Nicaraguan bishops and priests amid the Wave of protest. Similar references to pope Francis came from bishops like Monsignor Báez when he

asked the demonstrators to avoid political ideologies because the protests' cause was "social justice." (Álvarez, 2018).

In 2014, Pope Francis named Monsignor Leopoldo Brenes, archbishop of Managua, as cardinal. The nomination had implications for the country's political life because it reconfigured the ecclesiastical hierarchy of Nicaragua by depositing in the figure of Brenes significant political capital and opened opportunities for talks between Ortega's government and the Church that year. In that dialogue, the bishops clarified their role and motivations for actions in Nicaraguan politics: "We do not seek anything for ourselves. We are interested in the good of the country. With the Pope, we are convinced that we must choose the dialogue, but without separating it from concerns for social justice" (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2014a). The excerpt confirms the influence of Francis's new papacy on the CEN to understand Nicaraguan politics, the pastoral motivation of the Church for this advocacy, and the breadth of issues and concerns.

In 2018, when the protests arose, Catholic agents became highly involved with the protesters. However, under the logic of the tolerance zone, President Ortega and many Sandinistas perceived connections in some bishops and Catholic leaders that could work in his favor. With this perception, the authorities invited the CEN to be a mediator in the negotiation process while the protests and the involvement of ecclesial agents in them escalated. Monsignor Abelardo Mata, from Estelí, said that: "the people and the government looked for us as a lifeline in the face of an unprecedented and unexpected event for them. We organized (the dialogue) hoping that the people would be heard" (Mata in Munguía, 2020)

With the progress of the national dialogue, the Sandinistas eventually questioned the apparent bias of the Church in favor of the opposition. A Seminarian, present at the negotiations, evaluates: "The government authorities underestimated the Church because they thought it would

be a little more in their favor for the negotiation." (Personal communication, November 2021). According to other Brother, "the search of the system (authorities) for the Church was utilitarian; that is, they wanted to lower the intensity of the crisis by using the Church, presenting themselves as subjects of goodwill. The Church did not lend itself to it" (Claretian brother, Managua, personal communication, October 2021). The inclination of various ecclesial agents arose proportionally in response to the increase in state repression against protesters, activating powerful motivations, as will be discussed in the following sections. Eventually, the Church's position did not contribute to the negotiation process: "If you analyze what the role of a mediator is in a dialogue, the Church did not do it. It was indirectly polarized (...) Even the government delegates criticized this". (Seminararian, personal communication, November 2021). A priest, also present at the National Dialogue, pointed out that the dialogue was, indeed, full of critical gestures:

A gesture is better than a thousand words. When Daniel Ortega arrived (on the first day of the negotiations), the bishops were supposed to greet him, but they did not. When Daniel came, the bishops were just sitting there in the seminary. A rude gesture! (Father, Archdiocese of Managua, personal communication, May 2019)

The Church's level of criticality in the dialogue and protests was beyond the limit point in the tolerance zone for the Sandinista authorities and their supporters. The involvement immediately generated elevated costs for the institution, which had not been observed despite the criticism of the Bishop's Conference years ago. The existence and acceptance of these costs have been expressed in many ways in interviews and documents and represent a counterargument to the rational choice explanation of the pressing need to maintain political favoritism. As retaliation for

this generalized involvement and criticism, the Catholic agents, instead of achieving government favoritism, suffered *harassment, deprivation of resources, and direct violence*.

Harassment as a retaliation had expressions in multiple physical assaults and verbal affronts, threats, and intimidation by pro-government groups against Catholic leaders and members. Catholic agents reported vandalism, desecration of temples and religious items in at least five dioceses, and legal or normative actions against the Church involvement. For instance, government officials forced public employees to sign a letter headed to the Vatican, denouncing Monsignor Baez for “instigating violence and discord” during the protests (Vargas & López, 2018). Later, in April 2019, Pope Francis transferred Monsignor Silvio Baez abroad, and according to him, “What the Pope has tried (...) is to safeguard my life and my integrity.” (Báez in Cruz, 2020) Similarly, some Catholic agents, especially foreigners in mission in the country, had to be transferred abroad by their superiors because of threats and harassment.

Priests and religious men and women also reported barriers and bans to their pastoral work in prisons, schools, distribution of religious goods (such as bible and books), and restrictions for missionaries’ visas and residence permits. Father Avilés pointed out that: “(The coercion) is becoming finer (...). For example, recently, the parochial schools that closed in a strike have received a financial punishment and threatened to remove the government subsidy.” (Avilés in Confidencial, 2019). Some Catholic agents reported death and jail threats to lay leaders, priests, and local bishops. Monsignor Mata admitted that: "There is a persecution against the Church and our position." (Mata in Munguía, 2020)

Catholic agents in different dioceses confirmed that police and Sandinista sympathizers have frequently harassed religious groups' meetings: "If you hold a meeting in your house, you will have a policeman watching" (Lay Leader, Managua, personal communication, November

2021). In addition, surveillance has increased, with police agents infiltrating religious services to spy on priests' homilies and activities. A Brother summarizes the current perception towards Catholic agents: "We are now seen as the demons of Nicaragua" (Archdiocese of Managua, personal communication, October 2021).

Deprivation of resources, as retaliation, consisted in the government's drastic reduction of subsidies, tax exemptions, and budget allocations for the Catholic Church starting the second half of 2018. Only 19 parishes and temples received grants in 2019 (most of them with pro-Sandinistas parish administrators), compared to the 157 allocations in 2017. The total amount allocated to the nine dioceses decreased by approximately 70% in two years. In the 2020 budget, there are no explicit references to donations to parishes or cathedrals. This reduction in financial collaboration also happened at the municipal level: "I remember for the patron saint festivities of my parish; the mayor's office gave everything. However, as of 2018, this was not the case. So, if that happened with a parish, I could not imagine the magnitude in a diocese!" (Franciscan Friar, Masaya, personal communication, January 2022). A diocesan seminarian illustrates a common situation with some of these municipal collaborations in the context of the 2018 protests:

There was a seminarian whom the mayor of his municipality gave a monthly allowance. This seminarian had bought his ornaments, sacred vessels at the mayor's expense of his city. As the Sandinista mayor of his municipality wanted him to speak in favor of the Party and against the Church, he decided to leave the seminary in 2018. (Seminarian, Archdiocese of Managua, personal communication, January 2022).

The Catholic agent voluntarily gave up his ecclesial career when he compromised his autonomy and action. He "knew that he was not going to be able to do it and that this was going

to end in a fatal scenario." (Seminarian, Archdiocese of Managua, personal communication, January 2022).

The lack of support from the authorities towards Catholic works had a significant impact among the ecclesial agents, but this retaliation endows more autonomy and freedom to the Catholic Church. Monsignor Mata, reacting to the media, stated: "I celebrate this (reduction) because in this way we totally separate ourselves from them; it is very healthy because of the type of government there is" (Mata in López & Chamorro, 2019). In the face of the setback in the flow of resources, the ecclesial agents' attitude confirmed the utilitarian disposition that prioritized the autonomy of the Catholic works. Even though it is retaliation, the reduction of state resources for the Catholic Church could be interpreted cautiously as the beginning of overcoming the model of religious oligopolies that characterized Nicaragua, since "differentiation between church and state, as Philpott notes, 'may well foster the health of religion, giving it the very autonomy by which it flourishes'" (Troy, 2009, p. 1099).

The third form of retaliation, *direct violence*, has been the most aggravated cost for the Catholic involvement, consisting of lethal and non-lethal force by state and parastate groups against the Church's infrastructure and members. With accusations of church bias, violence against Catholic agents and temples increased exponentially. For example, a Franciscan who was going to his home during protests reported that Sandinista sympathizers got him out of a vehicle and began to shout:

'A priest, a priest!', [later he adds] "about 50 paramilitaries surrounded me with weapons and all with balaclavas, and they said to me: 'Cura, where are you going?' or 'this son of a bitch, what is he doing here?'. At that moment, one of them recognized me and went to talk to let me pass, I never

recognized him, but they let me pass. (Friar, diocese of Jinotega, personal communication, November 2021)

An armed attack on a parish in the Archdiocese of Managua that served as a refuge for students who fled the repression after protesting by occupying a nearby university for weeks stands out. Para-military forces, allegedly integrated by un-uniformed police officers and Sandinista supporters, surrounded the demonstrators, priests, and journalists who took refuge in the parish. The para-militaries shot at the Church, leaving two casualties and another sixteen injured (Partlow, 2018; Salazar, 2018a).

Along with the multiple violent events of the Wave of protests, direct violence against church members continued after the demonstrations culminated in September 2018. For instance, in December that year, a woman threw sulfuric acid at a priest at the Managua Metropolitan Cathedral during confession (Tórrez, 2018). In November 2019, Sandinistas entered the Cathedral in Managua to displace a group of political prisoners' mothers who were starting a hunger strike in the temple (at the protection of the Church). The Sandinistas, while holding signs protesting Church involvement, physically assaulted religious men and women in the temple. "This is bad (...) they were going to lynch us," said Sister Guzmán, administrator of the Cathedral (Arcia, 2019).

In 2020, different parishes denounced acts of desecration. In particular, the attack that suffered a centuries-old image of great devotion among Nicaraguan Catholics, La Sangre de Cristo, which unknown persons incinerated, stands out. Monsignor Brenes, a bishop characterized by his moderation in public statements, visibly astounded, declared to the media minutes after the attack: "It is a truly reprehensible act, and I want to say clearly that it was a planned act, very calmly planned by the person who did it. (...) I would like you (journalists) to express it: This was an act

of terrorism, a blaze caused by a large-scale bomb”. (Brenes in Trinchera de la Noticia, 2020; Ynestroza, 2020)

Despite all these costs, unseen before the Wave of protests, the Catholic agents did not give up their criticism in a “spiral of involvement.” (Borer, 1996). A Franciscan friar sums up the enormous costs incurred by the ecclesial involvement in this mobilization: “What the church won was persecution, destruction of its sacred spaces, persecution of the humblest members of our pastoral groups, catechists, altar boys, religious and even parents.” (Franciscan, personal communication, October 2021). The costs, which persist four years after the protests, show that the involvement was irrational if explained solely from religious economics. The friar reiterates this point:

If the Church had thought about its self-preservation, I think it would have taken a colder stance and closed its doors, and it would have taken a position of apology, a speech of peace. (...) It seems to me that the church did not gain anything. (Franciscan, personal communication, October 2021).

As a significant example of the temporary ecclesiastical agency, the critical position during the protests was not generalized. Some Catholic agents were moderate in their actions, while others persevered in their sympathy for the Sandinista Front party during the mobilization, omitting criticism of the repression or publicly supporting the party's authorities:

a small group assumed a different attitude from others. That created inevitable tensions in the clergy. It was not obvious at the protests, but it would be clear later. The bishops were reconcilers; they tried to get us to think things through (...) not to divide (Priest, dioceses in the Caribbean, personal communication, November 2021).

These moderate and Sandinista Catholic agents led to them differentially suffering the costs associated with ecclesial involvement and continuing, among other things, to receive resources. In the diocese of León, the moderate attitude of Bishop Vivas, highlighted by various informants, impacted the level of costs suffered by that diocese in the context of the protests.

The budget analysis in figure c indicates that León received more than \$295,000 in state grants in 2017 and more than \$204,000 in 2018. In 2019, the State assigned approximately 175 thousand dollars, 70% of the gifts to the nine dioceses, when the others observed a considerable reduction of these budget items in retaliation for the ecclesial involvement with the protesters. Preserving these diocesan resources was an apparent result of Monsignor Vivas' moderation, especially when compared to the costs suffered by other dioceses with more critical ecclesial agents. In addition, this selective flow of resources corroborates the existence of the tolerance zone, according to the accepted limits of authorities' criticism, in which Monsignor Vivas remained.

Nevertheless, the omission of criticism from some moderate ecclesial agents should not necessarily mean sympathy for the authorities but rather a strategy resulting from other motivations. For example, according to local testimonies, Vivas avoided more frontal actions against the government to continue exercising pastoral services:

Monsignor Bosco used to say: "If I do not know how to act today as a pastor, tomorrow I lose pastoral space. They close my access to the prison, and I cannot take food, clothes, give withdrawals." (...) if I do not know what to say now, tomorrow I will lose access to the hospital. So, if I do not take care today, tomorrow I lose." Monsignor Bosco made that reflection in 2018. (Lay Leader, diocese of León, personal communication, November 2021)

Until this point, the findings confirm that to get involved in the 2018 protests, Catholic agents in Nicaragua, in the religious oligopoly, did not consider competition for members or political favoritism of the Sandinista authorities as an explicit motivation. In the case study, the Church even created coalitions with its competitors and constantly developed open criticism of the State, from which resources were poured into it before the crisis. If this involvement was an explanation, the presence of religious competitors behaves as a highly implicit motivation that does not find any expression in public documents, nor does it emerge in reports of critical situations. If it exists, more substantial reasons inhibited the motivation to compete, as the next section explains. Although it was found in some dioceses, the desire to preserve the favoritism of authorities was not a generalized phenomenon throughout the Church in the country. The Catholic agents who cared about favoritism instrumentalized it with rationalities that emphasized ecclesial autonomy in their actions and services.

Therefore, the case study suggests that, although the religious competition was a structural determinant in the anti-authoritarian behavior of the Church in Nicaragua during the Somocista dictatorship in the late 1970s (Gill, 1994), the evidence shows that this factor has diminished forty years later, if not extinct. Thanks to pastoral and doctrinal transformations, the Catholic Church promotes more ecumenical actions that diminish the importance of this factor and facilitate interreligious work for the common good (Himes, 2007). From the perspective of regimes, the case also shows that the Nicaraguan authorities, in a religious oligopoly, strategically tolerated a certain level of criticism. They do this by acknowledging the temporary agencies of members of religious firms, by recruiting possible partners according to different personalities, backgrounds, and experiences, and above all, by managing the differences between the agents to obtain revenues from government legitimacy. This zone of tolerance explains the constant resource flow to

individuals before 2018 despite the harshness of some Catholic agents, in addition to Ortega's acceptance of calling on the bishops to mediate the dialogue during the Wave of protests.

4.2 Transcendent Motivations

Contrary to the expressions referring to the religious market and political favoritism, theological and pastoral elaborations emerged explicitly and abundantly in all the informants to explain the involvement of the Church in the 2018 protests. These were transcendent motivations (Smith, 2014), which gave Catholic agents sacred incentives to get involved and assume the high costs of their actions, often irrational from the logic of religious economy. With this Catholic imagination (Greeley, 2000), powerful inspirations, icons, rituals, speeches, and songs emerged, like frames, generating the altruism and sacrifice that movements require, which explained the persistence of action and rhetoric criticism despite high retaliation.

These transcendental motivations had as their primary sources the teachings of the Second Vatican Council and the centuries-old social doctrine of the Church. After the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, a new era began in the relationship between Catholicism and politics, which enabled the Church's adoption of a pronounced focus on human rights, religious freedom, democracy, and economic development (Carozza & Philpott, 2012; Himes, 2007; Levine, 2006; Troy, 2009). The Latin American participants of the Second Vatican Council returned to the region and adapted these social teachings that were “incendiary” in Central America (Nepstad, 1996, p. 110; Sanchez, 2014). The doctrinal appropriation of the Council was not uniform, had implications for church-state relations, and motivated significant disruptive activity in a variety of oppressive contexts. Gill (1998) noted that the Council represented an “institutional liberalization” and that

the bishops translated the reforms into a "preferential option for the poor," according to the level of religious competition at the national level. Considering this process of doctrinal appropriation as homogeneous, Gill assured that it was "possible to eliminate this as the main cause" of the variations in the anti-authoritarian positions of bishops in Latin America and pointed to religious competition as an explanatory factor. However, Philpott pointed to the need to see more national variations, since "the more widely these ideas [about justice] were held among a nation's Catholics, the more likely their Church was to take up oppositional democratic politics" (Troy, 2009, p. 1099)

The recent case of Nicaragua in 2018 suggests that the appropriation of the social doctrine of the Church, more than fifty years after the end of the Council, is today more generalized, motivates significantly, but continues to vary according to personal experiences (mainly the education of the Catholic agent) and to the nature of the political event at the background. The events of 2018 in the country also suggest that this process of doctrinal appropriation is constantly evolving.

For Catholic agents in Nicaragua in 2018, being motivated by social doctrine depended, above all, on the pastoral education they received, that is, how much they were exposed to it. A Brother recognizes that: "in the Church, there are several trends (...) some of us have studied liberation theology (...) there are others who follow the theology of the conservative Church". (Brother, personal communication, November 2021). Some ecclesial agents, particularly those in religious orders and congregations, have studied this social doctrine, with theological frameworks such as liberation theology or the principle of subsidiarity (Hehir, 2000; Pena, 1994). In their testimonies, the references to these doctrinal documents were constant and came up immediately in their recounting of experiences and reasons for getting involved in the protests.

Others, particularly seminarians and diocesan priests, did not explicitly mention these doctrinal documents but more parsimoniously appropriated their teachings in practice and rhetoric, using these elaborations as explanations for their involvement. A Franciscan friar, pointing to diocesans, acknowledged that there was "a diocesan clergy at the national level that was very fearful, very conservative, without having set foot in a university or faculty of liberation theology," but that they were surprisingly able to articulate social doctrine practically during the protests. (Franciscan, personal communication, October 2021). In other words, the social doctrine has variations in how the Catholic agents learn and apply it, but today it has a more generalized effect to call for action.

Some church leaders further stimulate social doctrine learning and rhetoric. In particular, the informants point out that the papacy of Francis has promoted the appropriation of this teaching. This promotion has motivated some bishops, such as Monsignor Báez and Álvarez, who were highly critical in the 2018 mobilization. A lay leader in Managua observes: "Pope Francis sees that the Church cannot be disconnected from the world. Moreover, I think that in Nicaragua, particularly, Monsignor Báez introduced that idea, that line of understanding the Church as an institution that must commit itself to social causes. I think that he had much impact locally." (Lay Leader, Managua, personal communication, November 2021)

In the first moments of the 2018 protests, Monsignor Báez, more than twenty priests, and Cardinal Brenes arrived at the Metropolitan Cathedral to address students in a demonstration. Monsignor Báez gave a very impactful and influential speech then: "I would like to thank you on behalf of the Church because you are the moral reserve we have (...) Su protesta es justa (Your protests are fair), and the Church supports you." He asked them to avoid political ideologies because the protests' cause was "social justice." Báez made constant references to Pope Francis'

social teaching (Álvarez, 2018). With this action, the Church printed with transcendent motivations the emerging demonstrations, giving them legitimacy. Although the Church's support was already evident in facilitating multiple assets to protect and validate the early risers across the country, Báez's words ratified it publicly.

The catholic agents' actions were spontaneous and resulted from personal initiatives in many cases. They supported the protests and helped demonstrators without a clear guideline coming from the hierarchy, motivated by their own social and theological reflections, and in interaction with their personal experiences of repression and injustice: “regarding participation, it was something spontaneous, something that came from the priests who also share and feel the pain with the people” (Priest, Dioceses in the Caribbean, personal communication, November 2021). Lay leaders also justified these improvised reactions with religious arguments: “everything in the protests was reactionary (...) it was truly a chain of rapid reactions. It is the Holy Spirit that comes and says: 'do this and that'. It was always like that.” (Lay woman, Archdiocese of Managua, personal communication, January 2022). A Sister confirms that her community decided to become actively involved in demonstrations and promote political reflection groups because of their initiatives: “We were seeing it, the context was telling us, these were decisions at the local level of what we were experiencing.” However, she adds that the validation of the ecclesial authorities, such as the one Baez made in his powerful speech, was vital to continuing their actions: “we also saw the support of the Church, and we felt safe because there was also the hierarchical backing of the church in that sense” (Sister, Carazo, personal communication, January 2022).

Bishop Baez's rhetoric, based on the church's social doctrine and the teaching of Pope Francis, “created a basis to determine from where the church was going to be projected” in the crisis (Claretian Brother, Archdiocese of Managua, personal communication, November 2021).

Báez was very influential among several Catholic agents, to the point of becoming "the leading voice of the spiritual, theological reflection of what Nicaragua was living". (Franciscan, personal communication, October 2021). Monsignor Álvarez, before 2018, also promoted training courses on Catholic social doctrine among the laity and thus influenced the thinking of his diocese: "He has been one of the bishops who has actively preached the social doctrine of the Church." (Franciscan Friar, Masaya, personal communication, January 2022). Álvarez's references to Pope Francis and the church's social teachings are also constant in his speeches and public declarations.

The documents of the Bishops Conference, issued during the protests, frequently quote Pope Francis' social teaching, particularly those present in the encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium* (Francis, 2014). The bishops used Francis's quotes as frameworks for objectives of the National Dialogue, as they point out that it must be "a sincere search for consensus and agreements, but - as Pope Francis recommends - "without separating it from the concern for a just, memorious and non-exclusive society." (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2018d, para. 5)

The spontaneous and violent nature of the protests impacted how the social doctrine was appropriated. In the face of an unforeseen critical juncture, Catholic agents used the social doctrine as a practical frame of reference that was at hand. For example, in a meeting between the clergy of Managua and different religious congregations, the day after the mobilization began, some priests pointed out: "We now have to assume the social doctrine of the Church and defend the people and be with the people." (Brother, Archdiocese of Managua, personal communication, November 2021). In one of the initial demonstrations, a sister stated that her primary motivation to shelter young protesters in the Managua Cathedral and protect them from Police repression was her pro-life duty, following the Catholic Social Doctrine. This motivation came even before receiving any orientation from the Catholic Hierarchy (another exceptional display of the

temporary catholic agency). Later, in recounting the event, she referred explicitly to one document of the Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, noting that the Church must be with the people and the justice: "The Church has to be with the people (...) The encyclical specifically says that. It is not something that we invented, but that the Church has always been at hand with the people." (Sister, Archdiocese of Managua, personal communication, May 2019). Similar declarations were given by a priest when he said that for the Church, the 2018 involvement was not new, and it was a matter of coherence with its social teachings (Father, Archdiocese of Managua, personal communication, May 2019).

The action of the ecclesial agents in the 2018 protests also suggests that the process of appropriation of the social doctrine is evolutionary and elaborates doctrinal rhetoric to motivate. One of the most frequent expressions in the testimonies, which represents an evolution and appropriation of the concepts of Catholic social doctrine, is the practice of *Acompañamiento pastoral* (pastoral accompaniment). Several agents reported that their central motivation, which they attributed to the Church in Nicaragua in general for the 2018 protests, was to *acompañar* (to accompany) the Nicaraguan people at that critical moment.

For example, amid the protest and the National Dialogue summoned by President Ortega, the Bishops emphasized their pastoral mission in the crisis. The bishops stated: "The prophetic ministry (...) requires us to be attentive and active in favor of the just claims of the people that God has entrusted to us. (...) We will not give up accompanying at this decisive hour all the Nicaraguan people who, under the blue and white of our flag, have taken to the streets to claim their deserved rights" (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2018a).

Similar expressions arose among various Catholic agents. A group of religious brothers in the Archdiocese of Managua, while discerning whether to participate in the first protests, met as a

community and decided: "let's accompany (acompañemos) (...) as a church we must be present and accompany, let us carry our flags." (Brother, Archdiocese of Managua, personal communication, November 2021). Other religious pointed out: "It was a moment to say: I am with the people because I accompany them, my flock." (Personal communication, November 2021). A Salesian priest pointed out: "The experience we lived was powerful because we had to be next to our people." (Salesian, personal communication, May 2019). A Diocesan Father in the Caribbean indicated: "parish priests have always been attentive to this situation, that is, we walk with the people, we get involved with the people." (Priest, personal communication, November 2021).

During the Wave of protests, a significant ecclesial intervention displayed the doctrinal appropriation of pastoral accompaniment in practice. Cardinal Brenes, Monsignor Báez, the Papal Nuncio, and members of the Managua clergy went to Masaya, near the Capital city, to "accompany the people" and try to stop the repression (Arquidiócesis de Managua, 2018). Once there, people took the streets to receive the bishops and knelt on the sidewalks with the Vatican and Nicaraguan flags while shouting "Long live the Catholic Church, Viva Nicaragua Libre." The bishops made an unplanned procession amid the barricades and attacks (Editorial El Nuevo Diario, 2018). At one of the city's parks, the bishops prayed and asked for peace. Similar situations occurred in other dioceses when bishops and priests took to the streets in procession to accompany the demonstrators in their mobilizations or to stop the violence against them. In the Diocese of Matagalpa, Monseñor Álvarez organized similar processions and publicly declared that his motivation to do the actions was "to accompany the people in prayer." (Velásquez, 2018a).

Emphasizing again the heterogeneity in which these appropriation and doctrinal adaptation processes occur due to Catholic agencies, a layperson in the diocese of León summarized that the pastoral accompaniment in the 2018 protests:

manifested in different ways. Some are higher in their criticism, others being moderate. The role of everyone was the one they had to have to do something for their people (...) The church's role was to be with the people and support them in whatever way they could. (Lay leader, León, personal communication, November 2021)

In other words, many Catholic agents in Nicaragua were motivated to involve in the mobilization because of theological and pastoral motivations, some of them interacting with their humanitarian sensibility. In an interview, for example, Monsignor Báez said, visibly moved: “I have cried because so many young people have died unnecessarily and unjustly, with limitless cruelty” (SosNicaragua, 2018a). As Báez declared, once they felt these transcendent motivations, Catholic agents mobilized all their available religious assets for the just protest.

4.3 Institutional Motivations

4.3.1 The Historical Conflict between the FSLN and the Church

To explain their motivations for the 2018 involvement, the Catholic agents also referred to the 1979 Sandinista revolution and the role of the Church in it. The memory of those events motivated in two ways: a national precedent of ecclesial involvement in mobilization; and a background of antagonism with the Sandinista authorities.

Some emphasized that the Catholic Church, as it did in 2018, played a critical role in the 1979 Sandinista revolution and in the years that followed. A friar in the diocese of Jinotega noted: “the (Franciscan) order supported the movement of the revolution in Nicaragua, many friars were

in ideological support and fighting for the Nicaraguan revolution.” (personal communication, November 2021). During this revolutionary mobilization, the ecclesial communities and religious leaders protected, legitimized, and strengthened the action of the Sandinistas against the Somocista dictatorship through frames and mobilized resources (religious assets), and subsequently protected young people from the armed conflict between the Sandinistas and the Contras⁴. In 2018, the memory of that support was present in the rationale of several Catholic agents and made it possible to justify their involvement in the new political event. In this way, Monsignor Brenes pointed out:

As priests, we welcomed many young people into our church in the 1979s and 1980s (the Sandinista revolution). I had to do it, and that's why I say it with all the authority. In the year 84, I was returning from Rome, and I was pastor of the parish of La Inmaculada, and I had to support some young people who were fleeing military service (...) In other words, the Church always has a humanitarian action, and we do this without any interest.
(Cardinal Brenes in Canal Católico de Nicaragua, 2018)

Similarly, a Piarist Brother, whose community participated in demonstrations and publicly rejected the repression in León and Managua, pointed out that:

In the 80s, our schools helped a lot to safeguard people so that the Sandinista government would not take the boys to military service. We helped a lot. I make this reference to see that in Nicaraguan history, the Piarist community

⁴ A Catholic Agent's typical action in this conflict was to help young people exile to avoid being recruited into the obligatory military service imposed by the Sandinistas. The situation had a parallel in 2018 when priests and religious men and women helped several young protest leaders to leave Nicaragua and take refuge in Costa Rica, Honduras, or El Salvador to avoid apprehension. (Activist leaders, Costa Rica and El Salvador, personal communications, May 2019, November 2021).

has always supported the people, safeguarding their security (...) Making that historical memory (of conflict) a reality again was not fair. One had to fight against it. (Brother, diocese of León, personal communication, January 2022)

Like the social doctrine of the Church, which worked as a motivator at hand, the ecclesial experience in support of the Sandinista revolution was a clear precedent to be replicated. In the 2018 protests in Nicaragua, revolutionary memory arose among all the mobilized actors. Mosinger et al. (2022) found that demonstrators created historical frames that linked the 2018 protests with the 1979 revolution in some cities of the country characterized by their exceptional revolutionary stunts in those years. A Salesian in one of those historical cities points out that he perceived the protests in this way: “I felt parallelism between what I was experiencing at that time (the 2018 protests) and what I experienced in the 1980s. Because I have had to experience those two things. I was terrified in these last protests, in the 80s, almost not because I was younger. (...) And now, the history repeats itself, is a vicious circle” (Salesian Father, personal communication, May 2019)

On the other hand, Catholic agents turned their attention to conflicts between the Church and the revolutionary authorities in the 1980s that arose from the revolution's Marxists-ideological alignment. This escalated antagonism was also related to the papacy of John Paul II, who had a strong position against this type of regime (Foroohar, 1989), creating a conservative reaction throughout the Catholic agents worldwide. Those interviewed recalled situations in which Catholic agents were threatened or attacked by the Sandinistas, particularly some bishops and priests of the time. For example, Monsignor Bosco, to whom the informants pointed out his moderate position during the 2018 protests and the subsidies he received from the state, “told an anecdote about when the Sandinistas had taken over the San Judas parish, and he went to rescue the holy sacrament. The

Sandinistas began to throw the Holy Sacrament, making fun of it, hitting the monsignor, and insulting him. He arrived at the seminary all beaten but with the Blessed Sacrament recovered. With these experiences, he was clear that the Sandinistas were not good persons.” (Seminararian, Diocese of León, personal communication, November 2021).

Moderation observed in some ecclesial agents, such as Monsignor Bosco Vivas, is also the result of their leadership experiences during the 1980's conflicts between the Church and the Sandinistas. In other words, the lessons learned from the historical disagreements were decisive for some bishops to be more moderate in their declarations, avoiding escalations that would impede ecclesial work and action. Thus, Monsignor Brenes, Vivas, and Schmitz, who joined the CEN in that decade and were the oldest members of the Episcopal Conference in 2018, were characterized by moderate attitudes and public statements during the protests (see table 1). The case of Monsignor Abelardo Mata, ordained as bishop in 1988 in this tense sociopolitical context, who was more vocal against the authorities before and during the protests, contrasts with this trend.

Monsignor Baez acknowledged that: “I did not experience the 1980s personally because I was not in Nicaragua, but through my family and the news I realized what the dictatorship of the 1980s was like and the frontal attack against the Church. It was really hard. (...) I have never trusted Daniel Ortega; I knew that sooner or later this (regime) was going to evolve into a dictatorship.” (Monsignor Báez in Cruz, 2020). Similarly, the Franciscan friar who admitted his order's collaboration with the revolution quickly clarified in his narrative: “But the Church has been against Sandinismo at other times, and especially when there are times of repression. Historically there is enmity with the Church and Sandinistas. Also, here (the city where he does pastoral work), the division between the Church and Sandinismo is clear. For example, in every

presidential election, Sandinista sympathizers attack the house of the friars with stones, even long before 2018.” (Friar, diocese of Jinotega, personal communication, November 2021).

The constant references to the conflict suggest that the Catholic Church was susceptible to the deterioration of political life under the new Sandinista government, even before the 2018 protests. Even with the political victory over abortion in 2007 and the constant flow of resources through subsidies, the informants point out that they always viewed the intentions of the Sandinista authorities with mistrust. An early example illustrates this point. In 2006, when recognizing Ortega's electoral victory, the bishops stated: "The expectation of a new government is perceived in our people and, we hope the authorities will be the first to support and promote this commitment to society, taking into account the participation of all." However, they appealed to the social doctrine of the Church, particularly with the encyclical *Deus Caritas est* (Benedicto XVI, 2006), and went on to point out: "What is needed is not a State that regulates and dominates everything," concerning the problematic precedent of centralization that characterized the Sandinista government in the 1980s (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2006)

This conflict, present in Catholic agents' memory from the return of the Sandinistas to power in 2007 until the 2018 protests, suggests the strength of a determining institutional motivator that has been observed in other contexts where the Church has been very critical and has collaborated in democratization processes. According to Carozza and Philpott (2012), the Church promoted democratization more actively in places with a high level of differentiation from the state and where religious authorities had less close connections with local political elites. In other words, the Church had "moral extraterritoriality," which gave the catholic agents greater freedom to legitimize and participate in movements critical to established regimes. In Nicaragua, as described in the previous section, despite the utilitarian connections with the authorities manifested

in many ways, including subsidies, the preponderance of the conflict of the 1980s made this distinction possible, morally separating the ecclesial authorities from the Sandinistas and giving them greater freedom in critical moments, such as the 2018 protests.

4.3.2 Democratization: the Need to Transform Nicaraguan Politics.

Protesters perceived real political opportunities for regime change in the 2018 wave of protests and the National Dialogue mediated by the Catholic Church. In a matter of weeks, the demands of the mobilization evolved from rejecting social security reforms to demanding the immediate resignation of President Ortega. Some Catholic agents identified this escalation as potentially revolutionary. Monsignor Mata, at the beginning of the National Dialogue, addressed President Ortega and said:

I don't think I'm dramatic (...). (President Ortega), rethink with your cabinet the paths you have crossed. It has begun, with pain, I say, an unarmed revolution. People confirm everything that we bishops have been collecting for many years and that we had the opportunity to present on May 21, 2014. If you want to dismantle the revolution, it is not by force of pressure from rubber and lead bullets. (Mata in Canal Católico de Nicaragua, 2018b)

The potential revolutionary threat caused the authorities to activate more extreme mechanisms of repression, leaving more than 300 casualties and systematic violence across the country (Amnistía Internacional, 2018; GIEI, 2018), generating the perception of greater urgency for a democratic system. In this context, Catholic agents first evaluated the duration and dimension of the protests and their potential consequences for the Church. In many ways, the informants pointed out that the unexpected mobilization initially seemed brief: “We never thought that this

would be so long-lasting.” (Sister, personal communication, May 2019); “I never imagined that this would be so long. I thought it was going to be a temporary crisis” (Friar, personal communication, November 2021); “This difficult situation caught us unexpectedly because no one thought things were going to happen that way” (Father, personal communication, November 2021). The protesters also had these perceptions and thought about a real possibility of rapid democratization. Under this logic, Catholic agents significantly got involved and mobilized multiple religious assets for the protestors, as described in this study.

The incentive to transform political life in Nicaragua via democratization was very active among Catholic agents. It resulted from three previously explained motives and perceptions: transcendental motivations, the antagonism between Catholics and the FSLN, and the perceived opportunity to quickly manage political change. The logic of religious competition, as previously indicated, did not enter the equation of this rationale. This motivation was significant across the entire Catholic hierarchy. For instance, when the bishops accepted the mediation in the National Dialogue, they demanded certain pre-conditions, such as the release of detained protesters, the cessation of repression, respect for freedom of the press, the invitation of international organizations to supervise human rights violations, and an open agenda, including democratization (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2018c, 2018b). Confirming their perception of historical antagonism, the bishops, and the protesters saw with skepticism the possible results: “The National dialogue is a risk. It can be a government strategy to return to normality. Maybe nothing will be achieved. However, we, the bishops want the truth; we will not let ourselves be instrumentalized, and we will only seek the best for Nicaragua. We will take the risk!” Monsignor Silvio Báez said on his Twitter account (04.28.2018).

The bishops explicitly insisted that the negotiations' objectives were: "review the political system of Nicaragua from its roots to achieve an authentic democracy" (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2018c). In June 2018, amid the stalemates in the negotiations between the government and the opposition, the bishops met privately with Ortega. They gave him a document that reflected "the feelings of the vast majority of Nicaraguans" (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2018e), which included the request to hold early and free general elections. Several testimonies mentioned this private meeting and pointed out its relevance: "In the meeting in the presidential house, Monsignor Silvio told Ortega: 'I call on you to be reasonable. Before further bloodshed, it is best that you either resign or move the elections forward.' Ortega did not like that." (Father, personal communication, May 2019).

Upon withdrawing from the negotiations due to severe deadlocks in July, the bishops reiterated that their motivation to influence the crisis generated after the protests was to transform Nicaraguan political life. "(We bishops) have witnessed the government's lack of political will to dialogue sincerely and seek real processes that lead us towards a true democracy, repeatedly refusing to address the central issues of democratization (...)." (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2018h, para. 3). Other ecclesiastical agents, who were involved in the protests, pointed out that the country's democratization was their primary motivation for their actions:

The Church spoke precisely of the need to change the country's direction, the need for a return to democracy, and the need to respect civil rights. That has always been the goal of the Church regarding the life of the country. The mission of the Church has been to seek systems that ensure the well-being of its citizens. (...) A call to make fundamental and specific changes

in different aspects of the country's life. (Lay woman, Archdiocese of Managua, personal communication, January 2022).

Our motivation is the commitment to human rights, commitment to justice, commitment to truth, and commitment to the poor people who suffered at that precise moment. I do not think the church has said: 'Here I am, here I am to have a leading role.' No! We are here at the service of everyone, and we try to help as much as possible. (Diocesan priest, dioceses in the Caribbean, personal communication, November 2021).

The church wanted to accompany and take that leap (...): build new societies. That moment provided us with all the conditions to make that jump in the conscience of the Nicaraguan people and build a society based on principles that are not negotiable. Principles that make us what we are called to be, a society based on justice, equality, the common good. The church wanted to be involved (...) to reach a peaceful solution. (Franciscan Friar, Masaya, personal communication, January 2022)

The Church wanted a change at the level of human rights, an improvement in the conditions of the people. Indeed, we are in a dictatorship! The people were tired of this repression going on for a long time. (It was) that possibility of changing the political and social context. (...) That was what the Church also wanted to achieve: to join the people's demands; the Church was on the side of the majority. (Sister, Carazo, personal communication, January 2022).

Although the urgency of changing authorities was under consideration, the Catholic agents were devoted to a systemic transformation in Nicaragua, pointing to values and ways of understanding politics, overcoming ideologies⁵, and historical cycles of violence and conflict⁶. In this regard, Monsignor Mata, criticizing the advancement of the crisis and questionable opposition leadership, insisted: “We cannot continue managing public affairs like this. Hopefully, the vision of the Republic's politics will change (Mata in Munguía, 2020). The motivation to promote democratic values was also expressed in the influences of ecclesial agents for moderation. Negotiating participants said the bishops repeatedly insisted on tempering the opposition's demands for regime change and opting for more gradual and democratic solutions (National Dialogue participants, personal communications, February 2020).

This case study finding suggests that the Catholic Church is once again playing a role during in democratic recessions. In the last decade, aspirations for democratization in Latin America have been curtailed by authoritarian repression and undemocratic governance (de la Torre, 2013; Levitsky & Way, 2010; Weyland, 2013). Nicaragua offers an example here. Amid this democratic recession, the Catholic Church promotes values of democratization because under these conditions, its institutional work is facilitated, and its transcendental motivations are realized. The phenomenon is not new, as Huntington (1991) suggested that during the "Third Wave" of

⁵ Monsignor Baez was very explicit in this regard. He frequently invited the young demonstrators to avoid ideologies because "ideologies always bias reality, they do not let people think, and they think for the people." He urged the protesters to uphold "genuine ideals" of justice, peace, and democracy. (SosNicaragua, 2018a)

⁶ During the protests, priests intervened with the demonstrators and called on them to keep the peace. In Masaya: “once Father Augusto was celebrating mass, and the demonstrators caught a policeman, they brought him barefoot, almost naked, beaten. The priest left the Mass and went to help. He pushed for sending him to his house. And if it hadn't been for the priests, several of those police officers would have been dead. (Catechist in Masaya, personal communication, May 2019)

democratization, around eighty countries made a transition to democracy. Three-quarters of these had predominantly Catholic populations. Carozza & Philpott (2012) suggest that one of the leading causes of this defiance of Catholic leaders to communist and right-wing leaders, without distinction of ideologies, was the doctrinal, liturgical, and pastoral change that arose at the Second Vatican Council during the 1960s. This is also highlighted in the findings for the recent 2018 Nicaraguan case.

4.3.3 Positive Externalities: Legitimacy and Increased Participation

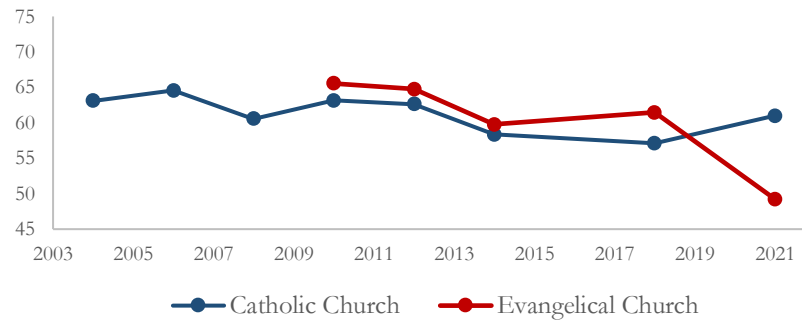
Although influential at the beginning of the waves of democratization, according to Gill's findings, the motivation of a new competitive religious market has not been found as an explicit motivator among Catholic agents in this recent case study. The democratic values that the Catholic agents promote seem to counteract monopolistic aspirations. However, the religious market model does allow explaining some unexpected consequences of the ecclesial action and its motivations to act with the logic of positive externalities.

Catholic agents reported at least two positive externalities of their involvement. The most significant is the preservation of legitimacy at a time of sudden sociopolitical crisis. Numerous authors have noted that critical junctures, like the 2018 protests, have a decisive impact on citizens' attitudes toward the political system and its various components, including institutions such as the Church (Agger et al., 1965; Diamond, 2019). In several dioceses of the country, Catholic agents report that trust in the Catholic Church has increased due to their involvement in the mobilization. A seminarian indicates: "The Church's actions moved the laity and even people who do not confess the Catholic faith. The Church has even left its comfort zone to claim what its people asked for." (Personal communication, November 2021)

A Catechist in Masaya also report this externality: “Now, people greatly appreciate the Church, they always support the priests in their activities.” (Catechists, personal communication, May 2019). Also from León, it is affirmed that, in general, the Church has emerged strengthened in terms of trust among Nicaraguans: “it is still strong and continues to be a reference to the people” (Lay leader, personal communication, November 2021). The analysis of videos related to church agents during the protest shows abundant protesters' gestures of trust towards church agents. For instance, a group of nuns approached one of the occupied Universities and, holding Nicaraguan flags, joined the protest. Visibly emotional, the oldest of the religious women said: “Viva Nicaragua (...) free, sovereign, independent, democratic, fair! We have been in prayer for you (the students); we are taking care of you in prayer. Go ahead, the fight is fair” (SosNicaragua, 2018b). The students surrounded her and gave her abundant hugs.

Figure d echoes this qualitative evidence with data from LAPOP 2004 – 2021. Public opinion data indicate that, at the national level, Nicaraguans slightly increased their trust in the Catholic Church between 2018 and 2021. However, it did not return to the maximum levels recorded in 2006. The Evangelical Churches, for their part, did observe this drastic reduction in confidence, attributable to the criticized involvement of some religious leaders with government authorities (Rizo, 2021).

Figure d. Nicaragua. Trust in the Catholic Church and Evangelical Churches. 2004-2021



Source: Author's elaboration. Data from LAPOP 2004-2021.

Note: All responses have a numeric code between 1, meaning not at all, to 7, meaning a lot. The ordinal variable was rescaled from 0 to 100. The higher values mean more trust in the Catholic Church.

This credibility among Nicaraguans will allow the Church, as a positive institutional externality, to impact the country's political agenda and public policies in times of stability, in an eventual democratic transition, but hardly with the Sandinistas remaining in power. As shown, the authorities continue to impose high costs on the Church for its involvement beyond the tolerance zone. In addition, this externality makes sense with the perceptions of time of the Catholic agents. The Church has a long memory of these situations of institutional adversity and has survived them. In a public interview, Monsignor Mata stated categorically that: "The Church has always seen the coffin of its persecutors pass" (Chamorro, 2018), referring to the attacks that the institution was suffering in this context. In other words, for an old institution like the Church, the perception of the duration of conflicts can impact how costs are assumed and patiently wait for their returns.

The second externality reported refers to the participation of parishioners. Immediately after the protests, amid the escalation of repression and the dialogue process, ecclesial agents observed an increase in local and diocesan religious activities as support for ecclesial positions.

For example, thousands of participants joined a procession in a massive pilgrimage organized by the Church before the negotiations began in May. According to the informants, events like this one demonstrated trust in the Catholic Church in its mediation role (Journalist, Personal Communication, December 2019).

Currently, the participation of Church members points to a balance. Many Sandinistas Catholics have stopped actively participating in their parishes, being very critical of the action of the ecclesial authorities in getting involved with the protesters. However, other Catholics have become closer to ecclesial activities, actively collaborating in some ministries and services before the Covid-19 pandemic⁷, with qualitatively better participation than before:

The community grew and matured. There is cohesion; the following of Jesus is based on clear convictions and concrete options. Those who have remained participating have grown. They are trained laities who continue to be prepared with an evangelical gaze to see, judge, and act. (Brother, personal communication, November 2021)

However, this observed increased participation is not a result of conversions from other religious denominations to Catholicism but rather arises from the increased involvement of nominal Catholics in their communities. There have been significant approaches from Protestants who recognize and applaud the role of the Catholic agents during the critical juncture of 2018. "There are many evangelicals who said: 'what the priest and the bishop did, no pastor did.' The

⁷ The measures of the Catholic Church to prevent the spread of the virus, which include the reduction of face-to-face activities, make it challenging to make these assessments after 2020: "now the pandemic, to a certain extent, has greatly limited parish life (Lay woman, personal communication, January 2022) "Right now we cannot measure if there are more parishioners because the pandemic made us go backward, now everything is virtual" (Lay leader, personal communication, November 2021).

church has remained in the conscience of the people, and they are very grateful” (Lay leader, personal communication, November 2021). However, the informants emphatically added that this had not meant the abandonment of the faith of the members of the other churches:

I would be a liar if I told you that I know someone who changed churches because of this situation and because of the testimony that the Catholic Church was giving at the time. It was just a matter of recognizing the Catholic Church's role. (...) At that time, the church did not see itself as a leader of faith or religion. It saw itself as part of a people who needed a truth. (Brother, Ticuantepe, personal communication, January 2021)

Recent studies of the Evangelical Churches in Nicaragua in these protests also confirmed this outcome: “the evangelical believers who support the Catholic Church do not change their faith, although they feel respect and gratitude for the social commitment they showed” (Rizo, 2021, para. 389).

The finding is in line with the discussion at the beginning of the results. In this case study, religious competition is not a motivator since the Catholic agents do not look to win or regain membership against other religious firms.

5.0 Conclusions

In Latin America, the religious economy has helped explain the involvement of religious organizations, such as the Catholic Church, in complex political processes, particularly in the 20th century. The Church, as a firm, competes with other religious organizations for members and favoritism from the authorities to subsist, carry on its services, and maintain its assets. These competencies, the theory suggests, motivate action and innovation through various tactics, such as supporting mobilizations or complacency to legitimize authorities. However, religious markets in Latin America continue to evolve, and the effect of these competitions in motivating actions needs to be reassessed considering new political developments. Furthermore, it is crucial to recognize variations within the Catholic Church, which far from being a homogeneous structure is highly influenced by the temporal agency of its members, especially considering new pastoral and doctrinal provisions.

The actions of the Catholic Church in the exceptional wave of protests of 2018 in Nicaragua offered a privileged case study to examine these empirical and practical questions. The research concludes that the concern of Catholic agents for the competition from other churches and political favoritism in the religious oligopoly that characterizes the country has decreased and does not have explicit expressions in the account of the motives of the actors in the ecclesial hierarchy in this mobilization. As a reason to motivate the actions of 2018, Catholic agents perceive that the rationality of the market is insufficient. It is a very implicit motivation that does not find expression in public documents if it exists. It does not arise naturally when the firms' human resources (laity, priests, religious, and bishops) and their clients (the lives of Nicaraguans) are at play. The Catholic agents indicated that their motivations for actively influencing this mobilization are theological

and pastoral reasons, based on the evolutionary social doctrine of the Church, built as a handy and straightforward framework. This motive invited them to accompany (*acompañar*) the Nicaraguan people during this critical juncture. In addition, institutional motivations appeared, such as the perennial perception of antagonism between Sandinistas and Catholics. The memory of this historical conflict, along with assessments of the intensity and duration of the protests, and doctrinal frames, gave way to the most powerful motivation of the Catholic agents to act in this mobilization: to systematically transform the political life of Nicaragua via democratization. The results confirmed that the motivations vary among the ecclesial agents who, far from behaving homogeneously, exercise temporal agency, with multiple effects on the ecclesial structure.

Studies that have used the religious model to explain the behavior of the Catholic Church in political processes have focused their attention on the level of national Bishop's conferences and high-ranking members of the Catholic hierarchy. Although this approach is very valid and valuable, the present case study has suggested that it is vital to consider how ecclesiastical agents at all levels elaborate their motivations by influencing and precipitating actions in the Church's structure. In addition, the involvement of Catholics in the Nicaraguan protests of 2018 suggests that the model of religious markets is relevant to describe the characteristics of religious firms and the implications of their actions (in the logic of costs, benefits, and externalities). However, it does not generate straightforward motivations in the same way as it did a few decades ago. Gill (1998) slightly anticipated the diminution of this effect in the long run.

Above all, the motivation for political transformation, amply documented in this research, suggests that the Catholic Church in Nicaragua promotes democratic values as it did in Huntington's "Third Wave". This time, the Church is even doing it in coalitions with its religious competitors and disregarding elements of political favoritism and elites. Although the results of

this case study are specific to Nicaragua, the implications of this crucial motivation could have regional effects, especially in the context of the democratic recession that has characterized the last decade in Latin America. The national and local waves of protest and social movements that have recently emerged in the region provide several examples where ecclesiastical actors have played decisive roles, have mobilized their resources, and made mobilization mechanisms possible. These actions could suggest that this tendency to promote democratic values is generalized and that Nicaragua in 2018 was not just an exception.

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