

# Nicaragua

## *Ethnicity in Nicaragua*

### *Group selection*

Nicaragua is characterized by a broad regional split between the Atlantic and Pacific coasts and the respective ethnic groups. This cleavage is the result of different colonial histories – the Atlantic region was colonized by the English rather than the Spanish –, but also mirrors an underlying ethnic antagonism between the mestizos, who dominate the Pacific and central regions, and the minorities from the Atlantic coastal zone, which have always perceived the mestizos as an antagonistic bloc (<sup>2419</sup>). These Atlantic coast minorities can be divided into various distinct ethnic groups. Besides mestizos, these are the Miskito, Sumu/Mayangnas, and Rama groups (all indigenous groups), the Creoles and the Garifunas (<sup>2420</sup>, 3-7). In line with the general EPR terminology, mestizos are called "Nicaraguans" here. The combined mestizo and "white" population accounts for 86% of Nicaragua's total population (<sup>2421</sup>, 281).

<sup>2419</sup> [Vilas, 1989]

<sup>2420</sup> [Vilas, 1989]

<sup>2421</sup> [Foster, 2000]

The Afronicaraguan group consists primarily of the Creoles and makes up about 9% of Nicaragua's population (<sup>2422</sup>, 281). Creole ethnic mobilization was distinctively based on self-identification as blacks, influenced by a black nationalist ideology stemming from the USA (<sup>2423</sup>, 88-93). Within the Atlantic region's ethnic hierarchy, the group occupied a relatively high position (<sup>2424</sup>, 7). Two indigenous groups – the Miskitos and the Sumus – are included in the list since they explicitly raised their voice in national politics, forming political organizations to promote their specific demands (<sup>2425</sup>, 89-93). They are listed separately because the division between them has always been openly or latently important for politics – certainly at the local level, but also when the Atlantic coast was drawn more profoundly into national politics (<sup>2426</sup>, 40; <sup>2427</sup>). This division has also been mirrored in the creation of different political organizations representing the groups at the national level (<sup>2428</sup>, 89-92, 168-70). Population sizes for these two groups stem from the Joshua Project (<sup>2429</sup>).

<sup>2422</sup> [Foster, 2000]

<sup>2423</sup> [Vilas, 1989]

<sup>2424</sup> [Vilas, 1989]

<sup>2425</sup> [Vilas, 1989]

<sup>2426</sup> [Van Cott, 2001]

*Power relations*

The early Nicaraguan state, dominated by mestizos, was characterized by ethnocentrism and a general disdain for the Atlantic minorities, which resulted in a state policy of "nationalization", i.e. forced acculturation, by means of language and school (<sup>2430</sup>, 81-2). While this overarching cleavage between the mestizos and the Atlantic minorities had always been of great relevance to Nicaraguan society and politics (see e.g. <sup>2431</sup>, 483; <sup>2432</sup>, 6, 80-2, 100), ethnic interest groups on the Atlantic coast appeared in the late 1960s/early 1970s. ALPROMISU (Alianza para el Progreso de Miskitos y Sumos – Alliance for the Progress of the Miskito and Sumo, founded in 1972) was a Miskito organization (although its name also included the Sumos) of national renown; SUKAWALA (Organización Nacional de las Comunidades Indígenas Mayangna de Nicaragua – National Organization of the Mayangna Indigenous Peoples' communities, founded in 1974) an organization for the Sumos with little influence at the national level; and SICC (Southern Indigenous Creole Council, approx. created in 1976) a Creole/black cultural revivalist movement opposing the mestizo dominance in local politics (<sup>2433</sup>, 497; <sup>2434</sup>, 89-93). Many more such ethnic interest groups emerged during the Contra war, most of them of and for the Miskitos, and many engaged in violent resistance against the Sandinista regime.

During the reign of the Somoza family (with few interruptions from 1937 to 1979), the Atlantic coast, long under the separate control of U.S. enterprises, was administered in a colonial style which focused on resource exploitation (<sup>2435</sup>, 490). Continuing immigration of mestizos from the south led to fierce competition over land and social tensions between the mestizos and the Atlantic coast's minorities already in the 1960s (<sup>2436</sup>, 492). Somoza's relationship with the ethnic interest groups on the Atlantic coast was pragmatic. Instead of repression, he tolerated their formation and simply co-opted their leaders. He became the patron of ALPROMISU allowing the organization to air its demands in a way that did not threaten the existing political and economic system. ALPROMISU was offered a greater role in local government and even a seat in the national congress (<sup>2437</sup>, 497; <sup>2438</sup>, 90). Thus, despite widespread racism in the Nicaraguan society of that time, the Atlantic minorities (Miskitos, Afronicaraguans, and Sumos) cannot be coded as "discriminated" during this time – in contrast to, for instance, the Maya groups in Guatemala until 1995. Their position is best labeled here as "powerless". The "Nicaraguans" (i.e. mestizos) enjoyed a clear "monopoly" of political power.

This situation did not change significantly after the Sandinistas came to power in 1979 and installed their revolutionary government. Power – partly also local power – remained in the hands of mestizos (<sup>2439</sup>, 6; <sup>2440</sup>, 499; <sup>2441</sup>, 117, 135-7). However, the Sandinistas were very much concerned about the economic and political marginalization of the Atlantic minorities and initiated various projects designed to improve their situation: creation of the Nicaraguan Institute for

<sup>2430</sup> [Vilas, 1989]<sup>2431</sup> [Sollis, 1989]<sup>2432</sup> [Vilas, 1989]<sup>2433</sup> [Sollis, 1989]<sup>2434</sup> [Vilas, 1989]<sup>2435</sup> [Sollis, 1989]<sup>2436</sup> [Sollis, 1989]<sup>2437</sup> [Sollis, 1989]<sup>2438</sup> [Vilas, 1989]<sup>2439</sup> [Bourgeois, 1986]<sup>2440</sup> [Sollis, 1989]<sup>2441</sup> [Vilas, 1989]

the Atlantic Coast (INNICA); representation of a new indigenous interest group MISURASATA (Miskitos, Sumos, Ramas, Sandinistas Unidos – Miskitos, Sumos, Ramas, Sandinistas United) – including Miskitos, Sumos, and Ramas (the latter only nominally) – within the legislative Council of State and the government; economic and infrastructure development; health and education programs; a land reform; and the promotion of bilingual education (<sup>2442</sup>, 9; <sup>2443</sup>, 499, 504; <sup>2444</sup>, 108-113, 121, 123, 126). Nevertheless, their notions of how to deal with the Atlantic coast proved to be misguided, unaware of the local reality, paternalistic and overly interventionist – overall, based on a decidedly mestizo perspective.

<sup>2442</sup> [Jordan, 2004]

<sup>2443</sup> [Sollis, 1989]

During the Contra war, relations between the Sandinistas and the Miskitos, Sumos, and Creoles became additionally strained (<sup>2445</sup>, 6, 8; <sup>2446</sup>, 500-1; <sup>2447</sup>, 96, 105, 113-8, 149-55). The Sandinistas' failures coincided with MISURASATA's increasingly aggressive ethnic campaign making ever more extremist claims for an autonomous, even purely indigenous (above all, Miskito) region, even though the Sandinista government made more and more concessions. This strategy was partly chosen in order to legitimate itself within the Miskito community but also incited and supported by the U.S. government, which used the Atlantic ethnic minorities in its fight against the Sandinista leftist revolution (<sup>2448</sup>, 505-6; <sup>2449</sup>, 121-33, 162-3). The result was a violent ethnic conflict on the Atlantic coast between indigenous, mostly Miskito, rebels (to a much lesser degree Sumos and Afronicaraguans), cooperating with the U.S.-sponsored Somoza loyalists, and the Sandinista government.

<sup>2445</sup> [Bourgeois, 1986]

<sup>2446</sup> [Sollis, 1989]

<sup>2447</sup> [Vilas, 1989]

<sup>2448</sup> [Sollis, 1989]

<sup>2449</sup> [Vilas, 1989]

In spite of everything, as the evidence above shows, the Sandinistas' approach toward the Atlantic people was clearly more inclusive than that of any other Nicaraguan government before. This inclusionary approach, stimulated by some military advancement and the realization of the necessity of a new policy to end the war, led to the initiation of the formal autonomy process in December 1984 and the establishment of the National Autonomy Commission and two Regional Autonomy Commissions (covering the north and south of the Atlantic coast). After popular consulting and a multi-ethnic Assembly in April 1987, the Autonomy Statute was drafted and became law in September 1987 – sealing the peace between the Pacific-dominated central state and the Atlantic minorities (<sup>2450</sup>, 511-4; <sup>2451</sup>, 155). The articles of the Statute were included in the new 1987 constitution which created two autonomous regions on Nicaraguan territory: Atlántico Norte and Atlántico Sur, each with a regional council, a regional coordinator with executive powers, and municipal and community authorities, in which all ethnic groups should be represented. Furthermore, the constitution affirms Nicaragua's multi-ethnic nature, recognizes minority languages as official languages, equal to Spanish, within the autonomous regions, guarantees the right to education in one's own language, the legality of communal property and the preservation of the Atlantic peoples' cultures (<sup>2452</sup>, 16; <sup>2453</sup>, 170-6).

<sup>2450</sup> [Sollis, 1989]

<sup>2451</sup> [Vilas, 1989]

<sup>2452</sup> [Jordan, 2004]

<sup>2453</sup> [Vilas, 1989]

Implementation of these autonomy provisions, however, was slow and some parts – for example, the regulation of communal property – were not ratified until 2003 (<sup>2454</sup>). Nicaragua's central governments deliberately delayed the process of implementation and have continually interfered in regional affairs, particularly with regard to the exploitation of resources, violating the autonomy laws. Moreover, regional politics have continued to be dominated by the big Managua-based national parties, compromising the original idea of empowering the Atlantic coast's ethnic minorities (<sup>2455</sup>; <sup>2456</sup>, 16-7; <sup>2457</sup>). (After Ortega's return to power, the FSLN – the former Sandinista revolutionaries – at least created an alliance with the previously banned Miskitu party YATAMA – ironically its former wartime enemy –, which led to some electoral gains for the latter.) Also, the ongoing migration of mestizos to the Atlantic coast region is changing the ethnic balance ever more to the detriment of the minorities. Thus, the institutional rules regulating regional politics cannot provide for a strong political representation of the minorities. Rather, tokenism prevails (<sup>2458</sup>; <sup>2459</sup>). In another recent comparative study, mentioning more or less the same causal factors, González (<sup>2460</sup>, 52) comes to a similar conclusion about the limited effect these constitutional provisions have had on de-facto regional power of the Atlantic coast ethnic minorities. Overall, these groups still suffer from political marginalization (<sup>2461</sup>). Since the EPR-ETH dataset focuses on de-facto regional power, rather than mere de-iure provisions, the Miskitos, Afronicaraguans, and Sumus are coded as "powerless" here throughout the whole period from 1946 to 2009. The coding for the mestizos changes from "monopoly" to "dominant" in 1988, after the enactment of the new constitution.

<sup>2454</sup> [Minority Rights Group International, 2005]

<sup>2455</sup> [Dye, 2010]

<sup>2456</sup> [Jordan, 2004]

<sup>2457</sup> [Minority Rights Group International, 2005]

<sup>2458</sup> [Dye, 2010]

## *Bibliography*

- [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2008–2010] Bertelsmann Stiftung. (2008; 2010). Country Report Nicaragua. Retrieved on 6.5.2014 from: <http://www.bti-project.org/reports/country-reports/esa/eth/2008/index.nc>
- [Bourgois, 1986] Bourgois, Philippe. (1986). The Miskitu of Nicaragua: Politicized Ethnicity. *Anthropology Today*, 2(2), 4-9.
- [Dye, 2010] Dye, David R. (2010). Nicaragua. In: Freedom House. (2010). *Countries at the Crossroads*. Retrieved on 20.2.2014 from: <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/countries-crossroads/2010/nicaragua>
- [Foster, 2000] Foster, Lynn V. (2000). *A Brief History of Central America*. New York: Facts on File.
- [Gonzalez, 2010] González, Miguel. (2010). Autonomías territoriales indígenas y regímenes autonómicos (desde el Estado) en América Latina. In: González, M., Burguete Cal y Mayor, M. Ortiz, P. (Eds.). (2010). *La autonomía a debate. Autogobierno indígena y Estado plurinacional en América Latina (35-62)*. Quito: FLACSO.
- [Jordan, 2004] Jordan, Osvaldo. (2004). When the Ethnic Collides with the National: The Politicization of Ethnicity in the Territorial Struggles of the Kunas and the Miskitus of Panama and Nicaragua. Paper prepared for the XXV International Congress of the Latin American Studies Association, Las Vegas, NV, October 6-8.
- [Joshua Project, 2014] Joshua Project. (2014). Country: Nicaragua. Retrieved on 8.12.2014 from: <http://www.joshuaproject.net/countries.php?rog3=NU> (accessed May 6, 2014)
- [Minority Rights Group International, 2005] Minority Rights Group International. (2005). *World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples: Nicaragua Overview*. London: Minority Rights Group International. Retrieved on 6.5.2014 from: <http://www.minorityrights.org/2583/nicaragua/nicaragua-overview.html>

- [Sollis, 1989] Sollis, Peter. (1989). The Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua: Development and Autonomy. *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 21(3), 481-520.
- [Van Cott, 2001] Van Cott, Donna Lee. (2001). Explaining Ethnic Autonomy Regimes in Latin America. *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 35(4), 30-58.
- [Vilas, 1989] Vilas, Carlos María. (1989). *State, Class, and Ethnicity in Nicaragua: Capitalist Modernization and Revolutionary Change on the Atlantic Coast*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.

## *Political status of ethnic groups in Nicaragua*

*From 1946 until 1987*

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Whites/mestizos	0.86	MONOPOLY
Afronicaraguans	0.09	POWERLESS
Miskitos	0.035	POWERLESS
Sumus	0.002	POWERLESS

*From 1988 until 2013*

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Whites/mestizos	0.86	DOMINANT
Afronicaraguans	0.09	POWERLESS
Miskitos	0.035	POWERLESS
Sumus	0.002	POWERLESS



Figure 544: Political status of ethnic groups in Nicaragua during 1946-1987.



Figure 545: Political status of ethnic groups in Nicaragua during 1988-2013.



## *Geographical coverage of ethnic groups in Nicaragua*

*From 1946 until 2013*

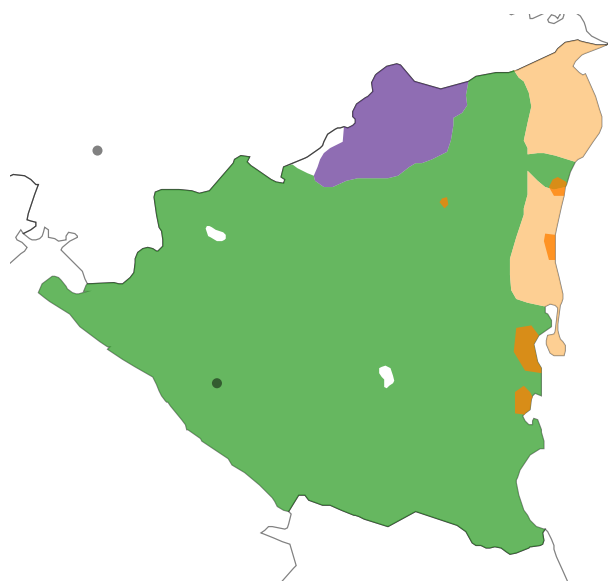


Figure 546: Map of ethnic groups in Nicaragua during 1988-2013.

Group name	Area in km <sup>2</sup>	Type
Whites/mestizos	109 471	Regional & urban
Miskitos	9890	Regionally based
Sumus	8385	Regionally based
Afronicaraguans	1481	Regional & urban

Table 165: List of ethnic groups in Nicaragua during 1946-2013.

## *Conflicts in Nicaragua*

*Starting on 1957-05-01*

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Honduras	Government of Nicaragua		1957-05-01			

*Starting on 1974-12-27*

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Nicaragua	FSLN	Whites/mestizos	1974-12-27	No	Yes, from EGIP	Split
Government of Nicaragua	Contras/FDN	Miskitos	1982-03-18	Explicit	Yes	Yes
Government of Nicaragua	Contras/FDN	Sumus	1982-03-18	Explicit	Yes	Yes
Government of Nicaragua	Contras/FDN	Africanicaguans	1982-03-18	No	No	No
Government of Nicaragua	Contras/FDN	Whites/mestizos	1982-03-18	No	Yes, from EGIP	Split