

Nicaragua

Ethnicity in Nicaragua

Group selection

Nicaragua is characterized by a broad regional split between the Atlantic and Pacific coasts and their 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 (³¹⁹⁶). 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 (³¹⁹⁷, 3-7). The **Mestizo/White** population accounts for 86% of Nicaragua's total population (³¹⁹⁸, 281).

³¹⁹⁶ [Vilas, 1989]

³¹⁹⁷ [Vilas, 1989]

³¹⁹⁸ [Foster, 2000]

The **Afronicaraguan** group consists primarily of the Creoles and makes up about 9% of Nicaragua's population (³¹⁹⁹, 281). Creole ethnic mobilization was distinctively based on self-identification as blacks, influenced by a black nationalist ideology stemming from the USA (³²⁰⁰, 88-93). Within the Atlantic region's ethnic hierarchy, the group occupied a relatively high position (³²⁰¹, 7).

³¹⁹⁹ [Foster, 2000]

³²⁰⁰ [Vilas, 1989]

³²⁰¹ [Vilas, 1989]

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 (³²⁰², 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 (³²⁰³, 40; ³²⁰⁴).

³²⁰² [Vilas, 1989]

³²⁰³ [Van Cott, 2001]

³²⁰⁴ [Vilas, 1989]

This division has also been mirrored in the creation of different political organizations representing the groups at the national level (³²⁰⁵, 89-92, 168-70). Population sizes for these two groups stem from the Joshua Project (³²⁰⁶).

³²⁰⁵ [Vilas, 1989]

³²⁰⁶ [Joshua Project, 2014]

*Power relations**1946-1981*

During this period, mestizos/whites held power in government (monopoly) whereas all other ethnic groups are coded as powerless. 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 (³²⁰⁷, 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. ³²⁰⁸, 483; ³²⁰⁹, 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 (Organizacion Nacional de las Comunidades Indigenas Mayangna de Nicaragua - National Organization of the Mayangna Indigenous Peoples communities, founded in 1974) an organization for the Sumus 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 (³²¹⁰, 497; ³²¹¹, 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.

³²⁰⁷ [Vilas, 1989]³²⁰⁸ [Sollis, 1989]³²⁰⁹ [Vilas, 1989]³²¹⁰ [Sollis, 1989]³²¹¹ [Vilas, 1989]

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 (³²¹², 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 (³²¹³, 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 (³²¹⁴, 497; ³²¹⁵, 90). Thus, despite widespread racism in the Nicaraguan society of that time, the Atlantic minorities (Miskitos, Afronicaraguans, and Sumus) 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.

³²¹² [Sollis, 1989]³²¹³ [Sollis, 1989]³²¹⁴ [Sollis, 1989]³²¹⁵ [Vilas, 1989]

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

(³²¹⁶, 6; ³²¹⁷, 499; ³²¹⁸, 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 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 (³²¹⁹, 9; ³²²⁰, 499, 504; ³²²¹, 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, based on a decidedly mestizo perspective.

During the Contra War, relations between the Sandinistas and the Miskitos, Sumos, and Creoles became additionally strained (³²²², 6, 8; ³²²³, 500-1; ³²²⁴, 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 (³²²⁵, 505-6; ³²²⁶, 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.

In 1982, de-iure regional autonomy was granted to Miskitos and Sumos. Yet, overall, these groups still suffer from political marginalization (³²²⁷). Since the EPR-ETH dataset focuses on de-facto regional power, rather than mere de-iure provisions, the Miskitos, Afronicaraguans, and Sumos are coded as “powerless” here throughout the whole period. The coding for the mestizos changes from “monopoly” to “dominant” in 1988, after the enactment of the new constitution.

1988-2017

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

³²¹⁶ [Bourgois, 1986]

³²¹⁷ [Sollis, 1989]

³²¹⁸ [Vilas, 1989]

³²¹⁹ [Jordan, 2004]

³²²⁰ [Sollis, 1989]

³²²² [Bourgois, 1986]

³²²³ [Sollis, 1989]

³²²⁴ [Vilas, 1989]

³²²⁵ [Sollis, 1989]

³²²⁶ [Vilas, 1989]

³²²⁷ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2008–2010]

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 (³²²⁸, 511-4; ³²²⁹, 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 (³²³⁰, 16; ³²³¹, 170-6).

Implementation of these autonomy provisions, however, was slow and some parts - for example, the regulation of communal property - were not ratified until 2003 (³²³²). 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 (³²³³; ³²³⁴, 16-7; ³²³⁵). (After Ortega's return to power, the FSLN, the former Sandinista revolutionaries, at least created an alliance with the previously banned Miskitu party YATAMA - 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 (³²³⁶; ³²³⁷). In another recent comparative study, mentioning more or less the same causal factors, Gonzalez (³²³⁸, 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.

In the 2011 national elections, president Ortega got reelected and the FSLN even expanded its supermajority in the assembly (³²³⁹: 1). This in turn enabled a constitutional amendment in 2014 that erased the term limit of the presidency and made way to another overwhelming win for Ortega and his party in the 2016 elections, which have not been free and fair according to various sources (³²⁴⁰: 1-2, 18; ³²⁴¹: 1). Hence, authoritarian executive power has steadily been increased and concentrated in a single party. On the national level of politics the ethnic minority groups are only represented in the legislature, on which their influence is minimal, given the FSLN dominance (³²⁴²: 16). Despite the remarkable constitutional framework concerning protection of ethnic minorities and the two

³²²⁸ [Sollis, 1989]³²²⁹ [Vilas, 1989]³²³⁰ [Jordan, 2004]³²³¹ [Vilas, 1989]³²³² [Minority Rights Group International, 2005]³²³³ [Dye, 2010]³²³⁴ [Jordan, 2004]³²³⁵ [Minority Rights Group International, 2005]³²³⁶ [Dye, 2010]³²³⁹ [USDS, 2014]³²⁴⁰ [Freedom House, 2015]³²⁴¹ [USDS, 2016]³²⁴² [USDS, 2014]

autonomous regions on the Atlantic coast, in practice those groups have still very little influence on the decisions affecting core interests like land rights or environmental issues (³²⁴³: 5; ³²⁴⁴, ³²⁴⁵: 1; ³²⁴⁶: 3; ³²⁴⁷: 26). Gonzalez (2015: 26; 2016: 319) argues that 20 years after the creation of the autonomous regime the self-determination of its ethnic minorities has been significantly undermined by the central government's approach of forced subordination. In March 2014, YATAMA announced the dismissal of its alliance with the FSLN (³²⁴⁸: 313). Tensions between the indigenous and Afro-descendant communities on the one hand and the FSLN on the other have further been intensified by conflicts over land rights in the context of invading mestizo settlers or the canal project. The government has reportedly either failed to ensure the ethnic minority groups' rights or even forced decisions detrimental to their will (³²⁴⁹: 1; ³²⁵⁰: 26). Recent development in the relationship between central government and the ethnic groups confirm the de-facto lack of power of the latter, despite Nicaragua's favorable constitutional framework to ensure minority rights.

³²⁴³ [Freedom House, 2015]

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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 2017

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

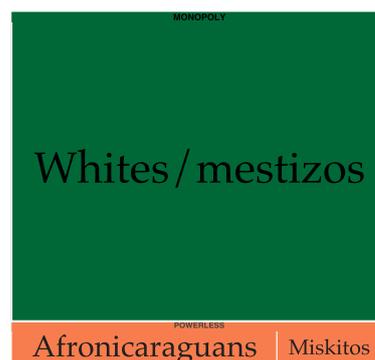


Figure 647: Political status of ethnic groups in Nicaragua during 1946-1987.



Figure 648: Political status of ethnic groups in Nicaragua during 1988-2017.

Geographical coverage of ethnic groups in Nicaragua

From 1946 until 2017

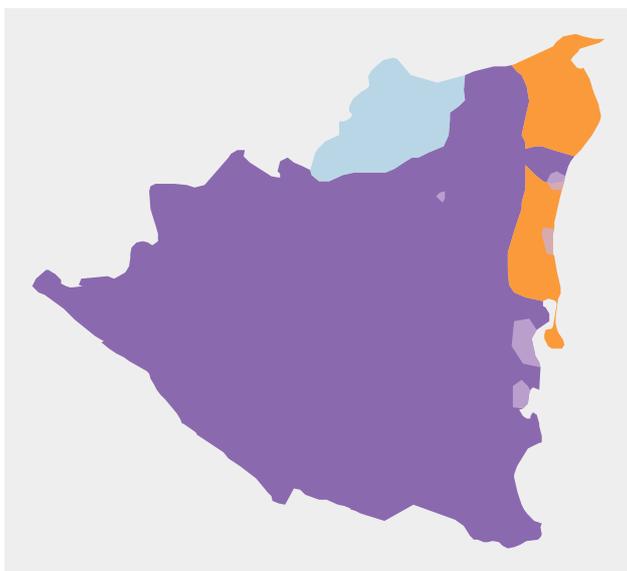


Figure 649: Map of ethnic groups in Nicaragua during 1946-2017.

Group name	Area in km ²	Type
Whites/mestizos	109 355	Regional & urban
Miskitos	9 849	Regional & urban
Sumus	8 355	Regionally based
Afronicaraguans	1 475	Regional & urban

Table 229: List of ethnic groups in Nicaragua during 1946-2017.

Conflicts in Nicaragua

Starting on 1957-04-30

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Honduras	Government of Nicaragua		1957-04-30			

Starting on 1974-12-26

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Nicaragua	FSLN	Whites/mestizos	1974-12-26	No	Yes, from EGIP	Split
Government of Nicaragua	Contras/FDN	Miskitos	1982-03-17	Explicit	Yes	Yes
Government of Nicaragua	Contras/FDN	Whites/mestizos	1982-03-17	No	Yes, from EGIP	Split
Government of Nicaragua	Contras/FDN	Africanicaguans	1982-03-17	No	No	No
Government of Nicaragua	Contras/FDN	Sumus	1982-03-17	Explicit	Yes	Yes