

The Sparks that Started the Fire

Environmental Protests against the Wildfire in the Biosphere Indio-
Maíz, Nicaragua in April 2018

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Structure

Structure.....	i
Abbreviations.....	ii
Introduction.....	1
Literature Review	3
Outline	5
Methodology	7
Sources	8
Theoretical Framework	8
1 Antagonisms and Contradictions in Nicaragua’s History	10
Nicaragua and the Global Economy	12
Relationship between the Government and Civil Society.....	17
<i>Ideological Mechanisms</i>	18
<i>Structural Mechanisms</i>	19
<i>Juridical/Legal Mechanisms</i>	20
2 Resistance on Environmental Grounds: Fundación del Río	23
Techniques of Resistance	25
<i>Technical means</i>	26
<i>Knowledge generation</i>	27
<i>Structural Means</i>	28
<i>Communication means</i>	29
Scale of escalation of the environmental crisis	33
Protests in Managua.....	35
<i>Protests as “Discursive Articulation”</i>	36
<i>Protest Dynamics</i>	37
<i>Protest Claims and Themes</i>	39
Conclusion	43
Literature	45
Appendix.....	55

Abbreviations

ANACC	Alianza Nicaragüense ante del Cambio Climático (Nicaraguan Alliance to confront the Climate Change)
CENIDH	Centro Nicaragüense de los Derechos Humanos (Nicaraguan Human Rights Centre)
FdR	Fundación del Río
FSLN	Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional
JS	Juventud Sandinista
MARENA	Ministerio del Ambiente y los Recursos Naturales (Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources)
SLRIM	Salvemos la Reserva Indio-Maíz
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Introduction

“SOS Indio-Maíz”

(protest placard, Managua, April 12, 2018; appendix-1)

On April 3, 2018 a wildfire broke out on the outskirts of the biosphere Indio-Maíz in the south-east of Nicaragua. It soon engulfed the centre of the biosphere and devastated 5,551 hectares of rainforest (Centro Humboldt, 2019, 23; Alemán, 2018). Despite numerous early alerts from local communities and civil society actors such as the local grassroots non-governmental organisation (NGO) *Fundación del Río* (FdR), the Nicaraguan government only reacted after three days. The government’s tardy and irresolute response appears symptomatic of its absence in the region: despite the biosphere’s retaining the status of a governmentally protected area since 1990, it has been constantly affected by environmental conflicts caused by invasion, deforestation, and international mega projects for (at least) the last three decades (SLRIM, 2019).

The above-mentioned wildfire triggered country-wide social protests (Hoy, 2018; Salazar, 2018a, n.p.). Students took to the streets in major cities from April 10-14, 2018 to express their indignation in the face of the *ecocide*¹ (González, 2018; Chamorro, 2018). They were soon joined by the wider population. The government reacted to this civic resistance with various repressive measures: it threatened the FdR (which continuously disseminated information about the development of the ecocide to the public); and violently confronted student demonstrations in the capital city of Managua with massive contingents of state authorities and supporters of the governing party Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) (Confidencial, 2018a). Evidence of these aggressive confrontations was soon spread via non-state dominated media channels (particularly Facebook and Twitter). This fuelled indignation from much of the population and inspired further protests throughout the country that concerned more than the wildfire (Confidencial, 2018a). Within this, the protesters’ calls for swift action against the wildfire, requests for information on the situation in the biosphere, and demands for justice regarding the ecocide were accompanied

¹ Mark Gray (1996, 216f) defines ecocide as “deliberate or negligent violation of key state and human rights” entailing “(1) serious, and extensive or lasting, ecological damage, (2) international consequences, and (3) waste.”

by calls for free expression and democracy (Paz, 2018; Mojica, 2018; Osorio, Cortez & Sánchez, 2018, 212).

This uprising came as a surprise to many, situated as it was in a context of de-democratisation and high levels of oppression, particularly since Daniel Ortega's election in 2006. Despite their fight for environmental protection since their founding mostly in the 1990s, the institutionalised civil society, i.e. NGOs, has not succeeded in mobilising the masses against the environmental destruction in Nicaragua. Also the government, which relied on its tight hegemonic² structures, had not deemed such a spontaneous grassroots protest movement possible (Alemán, 2018; Salazar, 2018a, n.p.). To better understand why this was the case, in this thesis I aim at solving the question: *What provoked the protests around the wildfire in Indio-Maíz?* I will attempt to answer this larger question through three key sub-questions:

1. *To what extent did the de-democratisation in Nicaragua since 2007 facilitate the outbreak of nation-wide protests?*
2. *What role did the resistance of NGOs play before the outbreak of the 'environmental protests' in April 2018?*
3. *What were the causes for the widespread participation in the environmental protests in Nicaragua?*

After the wildfire was extinguished on April 13, 2018 the street protests abated temporarily (AFP, 2018). However, new protests against the reform of the national social security system³ broke out five days later. These are widely deemed the trigger for the ongoing socio-political and economic crisis⁴ in Nicaragua; much of the literature has tended to focus solely on this and thus, the ramifications and the importance of the 'environmental protests' have been largely neglected.

In this thesis, I will reveal the important impact of the 'environmental protests' on Nicaragua's social and political structures and its socio-political stability. Within this, I will demonstrate the critical role that the environment plays in uniting the people in their

² Gramsci's concept of hegemony denotes "the exercise of 'direction' or 'hegemony'" as opposed to "power based on 'domination'" (Gramsci & Hoare, 1971, xiv).

³ The reforms entailed the cutting of pension payments and the increasing of workers' and employers' contributions to the social security system (INSS reform) (OHCHR, 2018a).

⁴ An Amnesty International (2018) report confirms that at least 322 protestors were killed, more than 2,000 were injured, and around 300 were prosecuted and imprisoned until October 18, 2018.

struggle for their rights. I will argue that environmental issues can, and do, trigger major social conflict. I will do so by considering the protests within their historical, economic, political and social contexts on both the national and international/global levels. Within this, I will focus on their respective environmental dimensions. The contextualisation will offer insights into the underlying reasons for the protests. Furthermore, I will investigate the protest activities in Managua in order to understand the development and dynamics on the local level, which might offer insights into the immediate causes of the 'environmental protests' and their relation to the outbreak of the national socio-political and economic crisis, which occurred a mere five days after they ended.

Literature Review

Michael Petriello and Audrey Joslin (2018, n.p.) acknowledge the "symbolic and cultural significance" of the biosphere Indio-Maíz which, "contextualized with historical and current events," might have had a major impact on the latest social developments in Nicaragua "in ways we have yet to fully comprehend." However, the event remains understudied. Even though the ecological disaster is mentioned by many analyses of the national socio-political and economic crisis and its reasons and causes (such as i Puig, 2018; Aguilar Antunes, 2018; Sánchez, 2018; Petriello & Joslin, 2018; Paz, 2018; Osorio et al., 2018), they typically do not specify the dynamics of the 'environmental protests' that occurred one week earlier. They neglect their impact on the people and the political situation in the country and thus, on the actual outbreak of the large-scale national crisis.

Salvador Martí i Puig (2018, 2) states that the mobilisation of the students in April 2018 quickly transformed from protests against the negligence of the government facing the wildfire in the biosphere Indio-Maíz and the social security reform that was enacted one week later, to a more fundamental rejection of the increasingly "authoritarian, patriarchal and plutocratic form of governance" (ibid., 3). He acknowledges the multidimensionality of the protests when he highlights the social, economic, political and ecological factors that were at play in the protests. Yet, his study lacks consideration of grassroots civil society movements and earlier mobilisations of the people and thus, it does not consider the role of resistance against the process of "democratic involution" (i Puig, 2018, 2).

Hloreley Osorio, Arnin Cortez and Mario Sánchez (2018) provide an in-depth analysis of the current socio-political and economic crisis. They offer a comprehensive overview of domestic protest movements, their claims, their results, and the consequential political violence that has occurred during Ortega's presidency between 2006 and 2018. Thereby, the authors stress the essential work of civil society at the grassroots level. However, they conclude that overall, civil society's claims were not satisfied and the movements mostly failed to achieve their goals. Crucially, the authors do not consider the social changes and small-scale successes of these movements at the grassroots level i.e. the effects they had on the people's political positions and attitudes.

Despite the broad scholarly consensus on the significance of environmental politics – and within this an economy based on extractivism⁵ – for social, economic and political inequality in Nicaragua, there is a notable absence of studies that focus on the environmental protests caused by the aforementioned wildfire. Most studies agree that they represented one of the reasons for the outbreak of the current national crisis on April 18 (Osorio et al., 2018, 219; Aguilar Antunes, 2018; Ruíz, 2019b). However, they do not offer much insight into the driving forces, dynamics and consequences of the 'environmental protests'.

These studies mainly analyse the events from a global perspective and emphasise the global-national interdependencies (Osorio et al., 2018, 214) in the framework of the global capitalist economy. Within this, they focus on Nicaragua's underlying economic, political and social problems. Thereby, they neglect the significance of the protesters' commitment to – and identification with – environmental matters on the national level (i.e. their insistence on the defence of protected areas) and the local grassroots level (i.e. their symbolic transfer of the crisis in Indio-Maíz to their local environmental problems).

⁵ Extractivism denotes the extraction of natural resources, which is a major economic factor for resource-rich countries, particularly in the Global South (Gonzales-Vicente, 2017).

Outline

“I want a green and free Nicaragua”
(Matagalpa, April 12, 2018; appendix-2)

The sentiment expressed by this protest claim represents many demonstrators’ motivations to protest: their quest for a healthy environment and frustration considering the continuous process of de-democratisation in Nicaragua throughout Ortega’s presidency since 2007. In this thesis, I will address the protesters’ reasons and causes to take to the streets in three chapters.

In Chapter 1, I will elaborate on how this de-democratisation led to social unrest and dissatisfaction among the people and thus, facilitated the outbreak of nation-wide protests. The government’s proximity to the economic sector on the one hand, and a repressive attitude towards civil society on the other hand implied an imbalance of the democratic political system and hinted at Ortega’s establishment of a de-facto authoritarian regime. While the environment is a significant factor in Nicaragua’s national economy, its significance for the population’s well-being at the local level was widely ignored. Accordingly, the process of de-democratisation was also reflected in environmental issues and conflicts; it increased the likelihood of disagreement and thus, resistance.

The investigation of the Fundación del Río (FdR) in Chapter 2 will reveal the far-reaching resistance of grassroots civil society in the environmental realm in the last three decades. While this NGO focuses on the need for environmental conservation, it moreover embraces the social, political and economic implications of environmental destruction. It continuously published the government’s (arguably deliberate) failures to avert the rapid environmental degradation, and made public the devastation of the protected areas, which was condoned on behalf of various economic interests all over the country (FdR, 2013; Rocha, 2015). Furthermore, it highlighted the increasing level of repression, particularly in relation to violations of the freedoms of expression and assembly. Yet, apart from protests that were led by directly affected communities and environmentally engaged parts of society, i.e. NGOs, there was a widespread silence regarding these conflicts among the population.

The environment's importance for social justice⁶ and environmental justice⁷ in Nicaragua seemingly facilitated the outbreak of social protests in the context of the wildfire. Critically, the protesters' claims and voices expressed during, and immediately after, the wildfire-protests in April 2018, indicated their indignation due to the perpetual conflation of the environment with economic and political issues. This seemingly results from the detachment of global and national level economic and political decisions from their local implications for the ordinary people's lives. They called for respect towards 'mother earth', declared their solidarity with Indio-Maíz and repeatedly stressed their concerns for a healthy environment.⁸

The open expression of disagreement and dissent with the government's practices (in the realm of the environment and beyond) – as analysed in Chapter 3 – is an intrinsic part of any healthy, functioning democracy. The exclamations outside of the established hegemonic structures that assure the government's control over critics, constituted a major threat to the establishment and forced it to demonstrate its power via state authorities. At the same time, as Maynor Salazar (2018a, n.p.) reports, the protesters experienced that it was possible to express their anger and disagreement and gained momentum for future resistance (i.e. the protests against the social reform and thus, the outbreak of the national crisis) due to a dynamic of mutual empowerment among each other. On that basis, an in-depth analysis of the protests' dynamics and the protesters' motivations promises a nuanced picture of the political culture and participation in Nicaragua, particularly regarding the younger generation.⁹

⁶ Kelly Buettner-Schmidt and Marie Lobo (2011, 954) define social justice as "full participation in society and the balancing of benefits and burdens by all citizens, resulting in equitable living and a just ordering of society."

⁷ Environmental justice "implies a model of sustainable development that integrates economic development, poverty alleviation, and environmental protection and which recognizes the agency of marginalized communities in changing their conditions of vulnerability" (London, Cairncross & Joshi, 2019).

⁸ Their claims correspond to the UN's emphasis on "a healthy environment [being] vital to fulfilling [the] aspiration to ensure people everywhere live a life of dignity" (OHCHR, 2019).

⁹ As according to the classification of Eurostat (2018), I take the 'young generation' to mean people aged 16-29 years.

Methodology

Based on the constructivist paradigm, this study assumes that truth is primarily relative and subjective – that reality is socially constructed (Fierke, 2010, 188). This means that “social phenomena (...) take specific historical, cultural, and political forms that are a product of human interaction in a social world” (ibid., 189). For an in-depth analysis of the social phenomenon of the protests and their “specific historical, cultural, and political forms” I chose a within-case analysis (ibid., 189). In accordance with Giovanni Capoccia and Daniel Kelemen (2007, 343), I will employ a qualitative, narrative process-tracing design for the analysis of the critical juncture of the case of the protests against the wildfire in Indio-Maíz. I set the timeframe for the investigation from Ortega’s presidency since 2007 to the environmental protests in April 2018. That said, the provision of historical context requires consideration of the colonial past, and imperial past and the Sandinista Revolution.

The FdR serves as a unit of analysis within this investigation because, as Sigrid Roßteutscher (2005, 16) argues, there is “a direct link between the weakness of civil society, on the one hand, and the rise of totalitarian rule, on the other.” The value of this local movement-led approach is further supported by Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink (1998; in Temper et al., 2015, 261), who state that local movements organise “into transnational coalitions across space and places.” Hence, insights into the complicated situation of the Nicaraguan grassroots civil society and the changing spaces for resistance in the environmental sector might shed light onto the reasons for the nation-wide outbreak of the ‘environmental protests’. I chose FdR as it is located in Indio-Maíz and played a significant role prior and during the ‘environmental protests’. I will conduct a document analysis (focusing on reports of FdR’s work) and semi-structured interviews with the director of FdR Amaru Ruíz (April 30, 2019; July 10, 2019), and the director of the Alianza Nicaragüense ante del Cambio Climático (ANACC) Alejandro Alemán (November 15, 2018).

Through a discourse analysis of photos, videos, press coverage, and TV-interviews with protesters on the issue of the wildfire and the corresponding protests, I will reveal the intentions and motivations of the protesters and thus, the potential impact of environmental awareness on the protests. Throughout this thesis, I will use protest claims to introduce underlying reasons as well as pressing causes for the ‘environmental protests’.

Sources

I will draw on a broad range of data sources to analyse the protests. I will focus primarily on theoretical literature to analyse the notions of hegemony, political culture, civil society, social movements and resistance. Regarding primary sources, I will draw on official reports of national NGOs (FdR, ANACC, Centro Nicaragüense de los Derechos Humanos (CENIDH)) and international NGOs (such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International) and the UN; Nicaraguan newspaper articles (critical towards the government: *Confidencial*, *La Prensa*, *El Nuevo Diario*; sympathising with the government: *El 19*, *La Voz del Sandinismo*); social media; blogs; and Skype interviews with the director of FdR and ANACC. Within this, I will focus specifically on photos and video footage of the various protests in April 2018.

Triangulating these sources will help me “examine the same phenomenon from multiple perspectives” and thereby compensate for the (actual and potential) weaknesses in one method and/or data set with the strengths of another method (Jick, 1979, 630). For that purpose, I will set the evidence gained from the above-mentioned sources in relation with data on the condition of Nicaragua’s environment, such as data on the size of forest areas (Global Forest Watch, 2019) as well as information on the general attitude of the Nicaraguan population towards democracy; the government; the environmental, and the social situation in the country, which is provided by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), a project conducted by Vanderbilt University and the *Latinobarómetro* (2018).

Theoretical Framework

The concept of conjuncture (Hall et al., 2013, xv) proves helpful when considering the myriad aspects and dimensions that are interlinked and warrant in-depth analysis when examining the protests against the wildfire in Indio-Maíz in Nicaragua. This concept was developed by Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser to investigate “the antagonisms and contradictions, which are always at work in society” and which might “‘fuse’ into a ruptural unity.” These “antagonisms and contradictions” (ibid.) seem to be reflected, in one way or another, in the continuous process of de-democratisation during the last twelve years of Daniel Ortega’s presidency since 2007. The outbreak of the protests might be understood as their “fusion into a ruptural unity”, or as Capoccia and Kelemen (2007, 343) term it, their “critical juncture.”

Within this, Ernesto Laclau's work on populism (2005) offers a detailed explanation of how such a ruptural unity – how protest – can emerge. Laclau claims that – similar to Gramsci's and Althusser's "antagonisms and contradictions" (which fuse during protests) – different groups of people who share a feeling of frustration due to an unmet social demand within their groups, link up in solidarity with other groups who made the same experience of an unsatisfied demand (ibid., 232). Importantly, these demand-groups do not need to share any positive content; their common denominator is the "common negative outside", i.e. the higher instance that had caused the feeling of frustration (ibid). On that basis, Laclau (2005, 37) suggests that in a moment of "discursive articulation,"

"all the demands, in spite of their differential character, tend to re-aggregate themselves, forming what we will call an equivalential chain. This means that each individual demand is constitutively split: on the one hand it is its own particularised self; on the other it points, through equivalential links, to the totality of other demands."

Importantly, there is a need for a "common element" that keeps the protest movement together (Marchart, 2012). On that basis, leaders can "incarnate a process of popular identification that constructs 'the people' as a collective actor to confront the existing regime" (Arditi, 2010, 489).

The protest claims in early April 2018 indicate manifold unmet social demands, which were based on an all-encompassing process of de-democratisation. Therefore, the call for swift action to extinguish the wildfire in Indio-Maíz in April 2018 might have served as an "empty signifier" and unified the different demand groups (Laclau, 2005, 37). Analysing the protest dynamics, I will delve, in Chapter 3, into the moment of discursive articulation of the different demands i.e. the "critical juncture [...] during which more dramatic change is possible" after relatively long phases of "institutional stability" (ibid.). In Chapter 1 and 2 I will shed light onto this phase of stability (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007, 343) during which social demands were rejected by higher authorities and frustration emerged. The role of civil society as platforms and/or agents for certain demand groups and their struggles will be the object of Chapter 2.

1 Antagonisms and Contradictions in Nicaragua's History

"To protest is a right"

(León, April 11, 2018; appendix-3)

This claim was stated on numerous placards throughout various protests in Nicaragua. It indicates that in Nicaragua, the right to protest is not guaranteed and hence, it symbolises the issue of de-democratisation since disagreement and dissent constitute the underlying logics of politics and democracy (Guénoun et al., 2004, 11; Rancière, 2004, 6). This process of de-democratisation in the course of Ortega's presidency since 2007 involved manifold unmet demands which created an atmosphere of frustration, and distrust in the government. Accordingly, I will answer the following question:

To what extent did the de-democratisation in Nicaragua since 2007 facilitate the outbreak of nation-wide protests?

To do so, I will briefly outline the democratisation process in Nicaragua. Subsequently, I will develop a conceptual and theoretical framework. This will allow me to delineate the central role of the economic sector within Nicaragua's political structures and, in the subsequent section, discuss a set of mechanisms that the government has been using to weaken civil society and thus, expand its own power. Throughout this chapter I will argue that environmental questions and conflicts have had a significant impact on Nicaragua's condition of social justice; with this in mind, I will determine whether the ecocide was only accidentally the trigger for the uprising – an empty signifier – or whether environmental awareness was an 'intrinsic reason' for the protests.

The relatively short history of democracy in Nicaragua (Whisnant, 1995) adds to the fragility of its political culture and structures. The country suffered under colonial rule for three centuries (until 1821) and was subsequently subject to US imperial control under the US-backed dictatorship of the Somoza family (Harris, 1985; Whisnant, 1995; Boracco, 2011, 4). Nicaragua has only experienced democracy since the socialist Sandinista Popular Revolution party (FSLN) took power in 1979; the early years of this democracy, however, were overshadowed by the devastating US-initiated contra war against the communist government i.e. since 1982 (Whisnant, 1995). UN mediation and the election of the UN

coalition's liberal representative Violeta Chamorro in 1990 simultaneously ended the war and "Comandante" Ortega's first presidency.¹⁰ Since Ortega returned to government in 2007 alongside his wife and vice president since 2017, Rosario Murillo, they have continuously expanded and secured their power; establishing a de-facto dictatorship (Osorio et al., 2018).

Nicaragua's political reality stands in contrast to what Jacques Rancière describes as 'the political' and democracy; Rancière (2004, 5) invokes Aristotle's claim that only thanks to the comprehension of language, man can "discuss the just and unjust." He considers language a necessary, but not sufficient, precondition for the existence of a "common political world" and thus an "egalitarian community," as there is a need for a constant quarrel about what is 'the common' (ibid.). This act of questioning the common constitutes politics, which implies that the underlying logic of politics is disagreement and dissent (Guénoun et al., 2004, 11). On that basis, Rancière argues that in order to define humans who are capable to comprehend language as citizens, there is a need for disagreement (Rancière, 2004, 6), understood as "the democratic logic of dissensus" (Guénoun et al., 2004, 16) over "the perceptible givens of common life" (Rancière, 2004, 6). A citizen is "he who partakes in the fact of ruling and the fact of being ruled" (Aristotle in Rancière, 2015, 35) which leads to Rancière's description of "democracy [as] the institution of politics itself as the aberrant form of government" (Rancière, 2004, 6). This means that democracy – "the power of the demos [(people)]" (Rancière, 2015, 40) – is contradictory to logics of domination based on entitlements to dominate and it stands for the "speech of those who should not be speaking" and the power of "people 'beyond count' who do not have the entitlement to exercise power" (such as birth or wealth) (Rancière, 2004, 5). Within democracy, "equality is axiomatic" as a point of departure rather than a goal to be attained by politics (Guénoun et al., 2004, 3); it overrides the logic of domination (Rancière, 2004, 6).

On the basis of Rancière's understanding of the demos, Laclau (2005) argues that 'the people' is not a pre-existing social category, but it is politically produced. Furthermore, he states that 'the people' is not a homogeneous group, but it is "internally split – between *populus* and *plebs*, whole and part" (Laclau, 2005, 81, 93ff). Importantly, in populist struggles such as protests, the *plebs* claims to be the *populus* – the part that claims to represent 'the whole people' (Arditi, 2010, 490).

¹⁰ Ortega was the coordinator of the transitional government from 1979-1985 and then Nicaraguan president until 1990 (Kruijt, 2011, 60). In 2006 he was re-elected and took office in 2007.

In Nicaragua, the “democratic logic of dissensus” (Guénoun et al., 2004, 16) seems to have been steadily suspended since 2007. Barry Cannon and Mo Hume’s *transition theory* (2012, 199) helps to unpack this process of de-democratisation. Similar to Rancière, the authors argue that democracy is “a constant, even daily, struggle between democratizing and de-democratizing tendencies” between the state and civil society¹¹ (2012, 199). They frame the dialectical relationship between these two actors within “the wider socioeconomic and structural contexts of neoliberal globalization” (ibid.). On this basis, the authors argue that democracy and civil society “cannot be seen as fixed entit[ies],” but as entities that are constantly shaped by external forces, i.e. global economy (Cannon & Hume, 2012, 200). The transition theory therefore serves to investigate the constituents and the functioning of democracy in Nicaragua.

Nicaragua and the Global Economy

“Indio-Maíz is a biological- not an economic reserve”

(Managua, April 11, 2018; appendix-4)

This quote represents the protesters’ repeated denouncing of corruption, unpunished pollutive economic practices and particularly the unchecked economic exploitation of natural resources and protected areas, specifically. They alluded to the government’s failure to restrain such activities and at once expressed much concern over the proximity of the government and the economic sector. In the light of the interrelation between the elements of social justice as “full participation in society and the balancing of benefits and burdens by all citizens, resulting in equitable living and a just ordering of society” (Buettner-Schmidt & Lobo, 2011, 954) and democracy, the implied disparity of benefits and burdens among the population hints at a deficiency within Nicaragua’s democracy. According to the transition theory (Cannon & Hume, 2012, 199) this means that there is an imbalance in the democratic system which implies far-reaching consequences for Nicaragua’s population. With that in mind, it seems necessary to examine the role that the relationship between the government and the economic sector played in the outbreak of the ‘environmental protests’.

¹¹ Ronnie Lipschutz’ and Judith Mayer’s (1996, 2) define civil society as “those forms of associations among individuals that are explicitly not part of the public, state apparatus, and the private, household realm of the atomistic market”.

The roots of the imbalance within Nicaragua's democracy can be found in the global economy and its significant impact on the social, political and economic situation in the Global South. Considering the consistencies of colonial and imperial dependencies in Nicaragua throughout the last century until today, any assessment of the interrelation between state, economy and civil society requires their contextualisation in its economic history. Hence, the following section provides insights into the Sandinista Revolution (1979-1990) and the role of environmental issues in these interrelations.

As Bagú posited in 1949, in the colonial period

"production (in Latin America) was not directed by the needs of national consumers (...). The lines of production were structured and transformed to conform to an order determined by the imperial metropolis."

This seemingly laid the basis for the current "structural underdevelopment"¹² and the region's dependency¹³ on the Global North (Bagú, 1949; in Harris & Nef, 2008, 253). Furthermore, besides the industrial economies' historical reliance on import – and moreover on the over-exploitation – of natural resources from 'the periphery'¹⁴, this inherently implies the 'outsourcing' of negative environmental impacts and the entailed social impacts of their extraction (Escobar, 1995; Temper et al., 2015, 260). On that basis, Richard Harris (1985, 8) posits that "Nicaragua's traditional overspecialization in agro-exports" – which manifested itself through the growing exportation of cotton and other "primary exports" such as beef, sugar and shellfish since the 1950s (Ocampo, 1991, 333) – has inhibited a focused industrialisation of its economy and consequently generated the country's vulnerability within the international market (Harris, 1985, 8), which persists to this day. On the domestic level, the population has not profited proportionally from the export-generated economic growth; wealth remained concentrated in the hands of a few members of the political and/or economic elite, who were mainly members of the US-supported Somoza-Dynasty

¹² The concept of development is highly contested, and criticised for being "based largely on the ideology of progress and a mechanistic view of society that necessarily equates progress with growth" (Harris & Nef, 2008, 254). Development seen as a means to overcome structural inequalities and injustices is widely rejected as "dominant, universalizing, and arrogant discourses of the North" (McEwan, 2009, 27).

¹³ Dependency theory posits that the "impoverished state of the Third World is the result of deliberate policies on the part of First World nations, dating back to colonial times" (Buchanan, 2010, n.p.).

¹⁴ Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein (1991, 175) argued that nations are organised in a 'world economy' which is constituted of a 'core' and a 'periphery'. This 'world-system' relies on the domination of non-market economies by market-economies, i.e. the periphery by the core (ibid., 89).

(Ocampo, 1991, 334). This rampant inequality seems evidenced by the fact that 41% of Nicaraguan land was owned by a handful of private producers (Harris, 1985, 10f). Accordingly, domestic consumption capacity was low – which further fostered the country’s vulnerability to the international market (Faber, 1999, 54). Moreover, the economy’s over-dependence on the extraction of raw materials for export and the lack of environmental, community health and safety regulations during the Somoza dictatorship have had devastating effects on Nicaragua’s environment (Gibson, 1996; Faber, 1999, 55). Anne Larson (1989) reports that there has been massive contamination and overexploitation of water and land, which comprised mass-scale deforestation.¹⁵

As Faber (1999, 45) argues, the interlinked issues of “poverty, repression, economic exploitation, and environmental degradation” resulting from the US model of dependent capitalism¹⁶ (as according to the dependency theory) under Somoza’s dictatorship, generated the population’s strife for democracy and thus, paved the way for the Sandinista Revolution in 1979. In accordance with an awareness that environmental issues create “the conditions for social justice” (Schlosberg, 2013, 38), the revolutionary project comprised a revolutionary ecology which contained the notion of ‘environmental justice’. Revolutionary ecology was considered to be a precondition for overcoming the economic and social crisis, and for the resolution of the “internal and external pressures to be encountered in the future” (Faber, 1999, 47);¹⁷ besides social and environmental justice, it was based on national sovereignty and self-determination; sustainable development; and ecological democracy. Among others, this entailed the founding of the ‘Nicaraguan Institute of Natural Resources and the Environment’ (IRENA; today MARENA) which was responsible for environmental programmes e.g. those concerning reforestation, pollution control, and environmental education, and cooperated with other governmental agencies and NGOs (Faber, 1999, 52); and an agrarian reform which entailed the (re)distribution of property to

¹⁵ A significant example is the case of the US-based chemical industry Pennwalt S.A., which had dumped around 40 tons of elemental mercury in Lake Managua – Nicaragua’s second largest fresh water body – between 1968-1981. This constituted significant health hazards to employees and Managua’s citizens who were dependent on lake-water for cooking, irrigation, and fishing (Hassan et al., 1981). Only in 2009 a treatment plant was launched (Vammen et al., 2019).

¹⁶ This means a system of production in the ‘periphery’ which resulted from “extensive foreign penetration” in line with international capital and international markets (Duval & Freeman, 1981, 101f).

¹⁷ Frequently, the FSLN’s co-founder and minister of the interior in the Sandinista government, Tomas Borge, used environmental metaphors and symbols in speeches, and thereby tied the revolutionary process to the environmental problematic; he considered “their environmental dreams as tools for creating a new society” (Borge in Steward 2001, 3).

poor peasants, arguably to prevent social and ecological hazards from being produced (ibid., 55).¹⁸ Yet, the realisation of the revolutionary project was deficient due to “ministerial ‘feudalism,’ corruption, and inter-governmental rivalry” (Steward, 2001; Faber, 1999, 76f), which caused resistance among much of the population during the revolution and thereby facilitated the leverage of the United States’ contra war. Furthermore, due to its far reaching approach and the suggestion of an alternative to globally enforced capitalist i.e. exploitative development, the ‘revolutionary ecology’ inspired numerous environmental movements worldwide – and concurrently caused international repugnance, particularly by the US (Harris, 1985, 15; Faber, 1999, 45). The subsequent electoral defeat of the FSLN against the centre-right opposition in 1990 brought the Sandinista revolution and therefore, the ecological experiment and hopes of an improved state of environmental justice to an early end (Faber, 1999).

The 1990 neoliberal government caused the country’s “return to the status of a small Central American state whose role is to produce coffee, bananas and other export commodities for the new metropolitan powers” (Prevost, 1999, 4). Yet, during the 17 years of opposition, Ortega had used his position as Secretary General of the FSLN to adapt to the prevailing neoliberal circumstances. While maintaining a socialist narrative by using revolutionary rhetoric to demonstrate proximity to the population, he drew on neoliberal strategies to “neutralise his traditional enemies” – both within and beyond his party’s limits – and to position himself and the party for a future presidency (i Puig, 2015, 307). This first materialised in a pact between the hard-line neoliberal president Arnoldo Alemán and Ortega in 2000 (i Puig, 2015, 307). After his re-election in 2006, Ortega exploited his proximity to the economic sector and constructed a system characterised by corruption and clientelism, and further augmented the country’s neoliberal extractive pattern, which increased social, economic and environmental inequality and injustice (Osorio et al., 2018, 218). Until today, Nicaragua’s export-oriented economy has depended mainly on resource-intensive textile and agriculture, but also beef, coffee and gold; a third of the country’s GDP relies on “basic natural resources” (AI, 2015; USAID, 2017). Despite a GDP growth of 4.5% in 2017, Nicaragua remains the poorest country in Central America and the second poorest country in the Western Hemisphere (CIA, 2018). Symbolic for the social, political and economic imbalance in the global economic, and arguably geopolitical, context is the mega

¹⁸ This list is not exhaustive. For more information, see Faber (1999, 55ff).

project of the inter-oceanic canal through the South of the country.¹⁹ This proclaimed 'development project' would entail the dispossession of 120,000 peasants and indigenous peoples and therefore gave rise to many social protests organised by peasants and environmentalists since 2014 (Vázquez, 2015). Analysts agree that the 'Anti-Canal Movement' constitutes a major antecedent dynamic of the current crisis (Aguilar Antunes, 2018; Vázquez, 2015; Osorio et al., 2018).

Accordingly, hopes for a return to revolutionary ecological principles and the corresponding alternative economic model, which focuses on environmental and social injustice, were frustrated very early on after Ortega's return to power. The failure of Nicaragua's revolution, the following democratisation and the aspiration for environmental justice was compounded by the internal struggles of the FSLN and international interference (particularly that of the US) during the Sandinista Revolution. Ortega's veiled proximity to the economic sector under a mask of a socialist narrative before and during his presidency has had far-reaching consequences on the social, economic and environmental sectors. This has led to the people's indignation as expressed by protest claims such as "a purchased people is fried and grilled" (protest claim, Matagalpa, April 12, 2018; appendix-5). A protestor's cry of: "mother earth, don't pardon, because they know what they do" (Managua, April 11, 2018; appendix-6) suggests that the abandoned revolutionary ecology might bolster their frustration as it evidences the government's awareness and former sensitivity to the issue of environmental justice. Given the strong ties between Nicaragua's government and the economic sector, the transition theory (Cannon & Hume, 2012, 199) suggests that this struggle has to be fought mainly by civil society.

¹⁹ The realisation of the project was commissioned to the Chinese investor HKND in 2014. The investor holds the right to construct an inter-oceanic canal and economically exploit the region for 50 years, with the right to prolong the contract for another 50 years (Vázquez, 2015).

Relationship between the Government and Civil Society

“Only the people saves the people”

(León, April 11, 2018; appendix-7)

This claim emphasises the perceived precariousness of the people’s situation in Nicaragua from which they need ‘salvation’. In the light of Rancière’s understanding of democracy as “speech of those who should not be speaking” and the power of “people ‘beyond count’ who do not have the entitlement to exercise power” (such as birth or wealth) (Rancière, 2004, 5), this protest claim indicates the malfunctioning of democracy: along with the protest claim “it is incredible that the nature cries for help and even more incredible that the government doesn’t listen” (Matagalpa, April 12, 2018; appendix-8), it shows the protester’s distrust in democracy, i.e. the government’s commitment to meet the people’s demands and thus, the commitment to improve the social, economic and environmental situation – which comprises its engagement for environmental justice.

Cannon and Hume’s (2012) transition theory posits that there is a dialectic relationship between the government and civil society which suggests that any part’s action causes the counterpart’s reaction. Therefore, I will elaborate on the role that the government’s attitude towards oppositional forces since 2007 played in the outbreak of the ‘environmental protests’ in the following section. Within this, I will offer a brief insight into the government’s mechanisms of repression.

The government’s quest for control of civil society traces back to the Sandinista Revolution. While the victory in 1979 was facilitated mainly by the grassroots movements’ strong, dynamic support of the Sandinistas (Vanden, 1999), the hierarchical relationship between the FSLN and civil society was the critical factor for success. This relationship was pre-determined by the FSLN’s guidelines during the revolutionary struggle (i Puig, 2015) and did not leave room for criticism or dissent; participation implied compliance and acceptance of being ruled by the FSLN (Belli, 1994). After the insurrection, using the US’ intervention since 1982 as a pretext, the government became increasingly repressive and constantly narrowed the space for the development of an independent civil society (Prevost, 1999, 7). This caused early disagreements within the FSLN and the resignation of various revolutionary

leaders.²⁰ The pacification of the contra war in 1990 brought about a strengthening of the civil society; in this period, many NGOs – such as FdR – were founded by former participants of the Sandinista revolution who declared it their goals to promote ideals of the revolution and further engage in democratisation (Ruíz, 2019b).

After Ortega's election, Prado's early warning in 2007 that Ortega's "Decreto 03-2007"²¹ would lead to a strict political centralisation and consequently to the death of the autonomy of civil participation and organisations of civil society had seemingly not been taken seriously by the civil society sector (Prado, 2007, n.p.); the more so as it proved correct only slowly until 2011. For instance, spaces for civil participation that had been created in the forms of local, municipal, departmental and also national networks and associations were gradually closed by the government.²² To that end, the government created nation-wide ideological, structural, and juridical/legal mechanisms that serve to control and threaten civil society. The functioning of these mechanisms is evident within the environmental realm.

Ideological Mechanisms

“What if the “Trees of Life” burned?”

(León, April 11, 2018; appendix-9)

Protesters repeatedly referred to the more than 140 ‘trees of life’, which are several meters tall symbols made out of aluminium and which illuminate the avenues of Managua and characterise public spaces throughout the country. These ‘trees of life’ symbolise the government's power, and seemingly represent the fundamental relationship between the government and the environment (Maldonado, 2013). Besides other symbols in the country – such as the silhouette of Nicaragua's resistance hero, Augusto C. Sandino and the government's symbolic pink, light green and yellow colours – the ‘trees of life’ are one

²⁰ Such as Dora Maria Telléz or Sergio Ramírez – who have become dedicated political enemies of Ortega (Whisnant, 1995; Telléz, 2013).

²¹ This decree reformed the executive power and created four new national councils (the council for national politics; for security and food sovereignty; for the Caribbean Coast; for communication and citizenship) for which Ortega appointed close allies as coordinators; among others, his wife Murillo became the coordinator of the latter council (Prado, 2007, n.p.).

²² Ironically, these were established during the country's neoliberal period and by NGOs which most often rooted in the Sandinista revolution.

means of demonstrating the government's omnipresence in the country. This seems conducive towards the hegemonic system, which allows them to govern through 'consent and control' and which is enforced by the political elite, which enjoys "'historically caused' consent" (Gramsci & Hoare, 1971, xiv). Ortega's power heavily depends on an "authorized heritage discourse" (Graham & Howard, 2008, 162). This facilitates the creation of a collective identity that is based on the country's colonial heritage and particularly on the history of the Sandinista revolution. In order to impose their view of the country's heritage – and of what 'their common objectives' are – the government "domesticat[es] the past[s]" and thereby "infuse[s] [the people] with present purposes" (ibid.). This attempt to establish their own view as 'common sense' "is one key route to securing popular legitimacy and compliance" (Hall et al., 2013, xiii). It also accords with Mouffe's (2014) understanding of hegemonic practices as attempts to create a contingent order that serves to fix social relations.²³ Critically, these hegemonic historical narratives narrow the space for criticism, as criticising the president and his politics could be interpreted as disrespecting Nicaragua's history, its national liberation and the sacrifices that have been made for it. Structural mechanisms serve to maintain and expand the above-mentioned hegemonic narrative.

Structural Mechanisms

"We are not the opposition, we are the people"

(León, April 11, 2018; appendix-10)

This protest claim indicates a (populist) struggle for who is 'the people' and, on that basis, hints at the dispelling as opposition – which entails repression and criminalisation – of any civil movement in the country that emerges outside of the governmentally controlled structures. An important example of this form of controlling and containing civil participation is the "Citizen Power Councils" (CPCs) which are meant to replace independent organisations on the grassroots level. Critics describe these councils as "indoctrination mechanisms," which "reduce citizen autonomy of thought and action [and] occupy increasing numbers of social spaces" (Cannon & Hume, 2012, 105).

²³ Ortega's electoral campaign "El Pueblo Presidente" ("The People President") in 2011 is a vigorous example for this mechanism.

Moreover, the government has shut down all forms of coordination and communication with civil society (Ruíz, 2019b). As Alemán (2018) stated, government and civil society only meet at international forums, such as the United Nations Climate Change Convention. Furthermore, the centralised, hierarchical structure of the government and consequently, the delegation of environmental responsibilities to specific state institutions and ministries, has made it possible for the central government to ride out and ignore local complaints. This was lamented in various declarations by FdR (2014).

Another structural mechanism is the government's control of the majority of media channels, particularly the broadcasting system (Cupples & Glynn, 2018), which impedes the dissemination of critical information and thus, awareness. 90% of Nicaragua's TV channels are controlled either by the Ortega-Murillo family or a Mexican media entrepreneur. This is further problematised by the "multiple forms of harassment" that independent journalists have faced and; the seizure or destruction of independent media operations' equipment (Cupples & Glynn, 2018, 26).

Furthermore, the government has frequently occupied public spaces, thereby blocking the necessary infrastructure for oppositional groups' political assemblies e.g. during protests. This constitutes one part of the repressive repertoire of the government; thereby "the very platform for politics becomes the object around which political mobilization rallies" (Butler, 2014, 102). This reflects the narrowing of spaces to voice and (physically) express dissent and to call into question 'the common', as propagated via the ideological mechanisms – and thus, precludes an integral part of democracy.²⁴

Juridical/Legal Mechanisms

"Art. 30: Nicaraguans have the right to free expression of their thoughts – publicly, privately, individually and collectively #IndioMaíz#BOSAWAS#IndioMaíz"
(*protest claim, Matagalpa, April 12, 2018; appendix-11*)

This protest claim, which is an excerpt of Nicaragua's constitution, refers to the government's use of unconstitutional juridical means to repress the work of civil society organisations since 2007; this was repeatedly lamented by the national human rights

²⁴ What's more, the government obliged state officials, students from public universities, etc. to participate in governmental demonstrations (Confidencial, 2018b).

organisation CENIDH (2016, 3). The government repetitively threatens oppositional parties to deprive them of the legal basis for their work (ibid.). This indicates that even if the freedom of expression and assembly i.e. as enshrined in article 30 of the country's constitution, are officially upheld, the government does not guarantee these rights consistently. This creates uncertainty and thus pressure on civil society organisations (Bertelsmann, 2014). Furthermore, Nicaragua officially espouses a progressive environmental and social legislation. This, however, contrasts with "the realities of wealth accumulation, land evictions and environmental destruction" (Ripoll, 2018, 1). The government uses this legislation to rebut (international) demands for greater commitment to environmental conservation.

Moreover, the criminalisation of numerous forms of organised resistance and the violent confrontation of some of the over 90 nation-wide Anti-Inter-Oceanic-Canal demonstrations since 2014 indicates another departure from the constitution (UN, 2015). As Judith Butler (2011, 10) argues, by attacking the bodies of protesters and journalists, pro-government actors "attack[ed] the right itself" to gather together free of intimidation and violence. The law on "Sovereign Security" (No. 919) further codified this tendency: human rights organisations warned that the law's "laxity of definitions and concepts" could facilitate the use of indiscriminate violence against protests and public demonstrations (CIDH, 2015, 31).

According to Ruíz (2019b), the conflict caused by the planned 'mega project' of the inter-oceanic canal constituted a schism in the relationship between the government and civil society. The government deployed comprehensive campaigns of open state force and violence and consequently changed from more indirect, implicit techniques of repression e.g. establishing, and enforcing, a hegemonic narrative to more direct, open techniques.²⁵ Thus, it raised the conflict to a new level as it constituted a next step from earlier criminalising civil society to legalising its (violent) confrontation. Accordingly, economic projects such as the inter-oceanic canal and the government's increasingly repressive strategies, display the government's dismissal of the people's civil rights in general, and the wilful disregard of environmental issues – and thus social and environmental justice – in particular.

²⁵ In December 2016 the government destroyed infrastructure, i.e. blast a bridge, to hinder protesters to reach a large-scale demonstration in Managua; they used violence against protesters and repressed independent media reports (CENIDH, 2018).

The threefold strategy of closing political space on the ideological, structural and juridical/legal levels made it increasingly difficult for civil society organisations to hold their ground and thus, defend democracy. This supports Julie Cupples' and Kevin Glynn's posited fragility of Nicaragua's democracy (2018, 1), as it reveals the weakness of the system which allows the government's ignoring the constitution; the corruption of institutions, and; the manipulation and repression of the population. Instead of serving the people's needs and satisfying their demands, the government's proximity to the economic sector suggests that it aims to satisfy its own needs and increases its power. This malfunctioning of democracy becomes particularly evident upon consideration of the environmental realm as it literally becomes visible to the people and directly affects them on the local level, i.e. it threatens their livelihoods, their health, and their identities.

As Telléz (2013) stated,

“the people are tired of being treated like persons without dignity. [...] We all saved this. It will burst. [...]. [...] The time will come. [...] What we have to do? Continue to empower the people's dignity, their protagonism, their position, their demands and just fights. And continue to organise ourselves and work so that the time comes.”

Accordingly, the government's strategies led to a change in civil society's practices and attitudes; FdR adopted an increasingly offensive, and even confrontational, approach.

2 Resistance on Environmental Grounds: Fundación del Río

“Salvemos la Reserva Indio-Maíz”

(“Let’s Save the Reserve Indio-Maíz”)

(*Managua, April 10, 2018; appendix-12*)

This motto was often presented during the course of ‘environmental protests’ in Nicaragua; it is likewise the name of a campaign to protect the biosphere which was a joint initiative by the local environmental NGO Fundación del Río (FdR) and other civil society actors in 2015 (SLRIM, 2019). The motto represents the many unmet demands in the environmental realm and implies the people’s determination to take responsibility and thus, action themselves. In the light of FdR’s significant role during the wildfire in reporting, and raising awareness of, the wildfire and the ensuing protests, I aim to answer the following question:

What role did the resistance of NGOs play before the outbreak of the ‘environmental protests’ in April 2018?

In accordance with the concept of environmental justice, FdR’s efforts for conservation and protection of the biosphere were inextricably linked with struggles to empower the local and national community to claim their rights. This implies their empowerment to confront the government and thus, to resist the evidenced de-democratisation process since Ortega’s presidency in 2007. Hence, after introducing FdR, I will categorise its dynamic and flexible techniques of resistance on the grassroots level, and thereby investigate their contributions to the outbreak of the ‘environmental protests in April 2018.

FdR was established in 1990 as a by-product of the Sandinista government’s earlier initiative to establish the biosphere Río San Juan in Nicaragua’s Atlantic region. It is dedicated to the conservation and development of the biological reserve Indio-Maíz, which constitutes the core of Río San Juan (FdR, 2013). Due to its rich biodiversity, UNESCO classified the biosphere Río San Juan as a protected area of international importance in 2005; it ought to be the second most protected area in the country. Indio-Maíz expands over 270.000 hectares and qualifies as one of the greatest humid tropical forests in Central America (Centro Humboldt, 2019). Despite their legally guaranteed protection, environmental experts and activists have constantly reported that these fragile ecosystems

are facing myriad existential threats. While deforestation has a long tradition in Central America, there is evidence of its acceleration in the past two decades in Nicaragua. Between the years 2000 and 2017, the country has lost 1.32 mega-hectares, which accounts for 17% of its total tree cover. Within this, Río San Juan has suffered from the highest relative tree cover loss; 30% (Globalforestwatch, 2017).²⁶ Some of the major threats to the biosphere Indio-Maíz are the advancing agricultural front; the failure of the state to assume its responsibilities regarding illegal deforestation, extractivism and dislocation and lethal violence against local indigenous communities (FdR, 2012; Global Witness, 2018). The situation in Indio-Maíz is representative for the nation-wide problem of the exploitation of natural resources, mainly motivated by economic interests.

Due to the far-reaching social and economic consequences of the environmental problems in Indio-Maíz, FdR's social responsibility goes beyond the environmental sector. This is in accordance with Joan Martinez-Alier's, Leah Temper's, Daniela Del Bene's, and Arnim Scheidel's (2016, 748) understanding of environmental justice:

“social mobilizations over resource extraction, environmental degradation or waste disposal are not only about the distribution of environmental benefits and costs (expressed in monetary or non-monetary valuation languages); they are also about participation in decision-making and recognition of group identities.”

This is mirrored in FdR's vision statement where the NGO declares

“to be an organisation that promotes environmental and socio-cultural values with a broad, dynamic and proactive membership committed to the defence of natural resources and to encourage civil participation within the country's legal framework” (own translation; FdR, 2012, 3).

Furthermore, the NGO considers it its mission

“to generate capacities in the population of Río San Juan to underscore the defence of the biodiversity of its natural ecosystems and its civil rights, as well as to promote the development of alternative environmentally friendly economies that improve their quality of life” (ibid.).

²⁶ While different research institutes report on slightly diverging numbers, the overall trends remain the same.

According to Ruíz (2019b) “environment is the people as well”; thus, due to the government’s open disregard of environmental issues which went hand in hand with an increasing violation of the local population’s human rights, the NGO increasingly emphasised its commitment to this sector as well. Accordingly, FdR remains vested in the local level due to its focus on the concrete environmental issues in Indio-Maíz; yet, it has expanded its scope to the national and even global sphere of civil and human rights.

Techniques of Resistance

“#NosQuierenCallar”

[“#TheyWantToSilenceUs”]

(facebook post, FdR, April 11, 2018; appendix-13)

This hash-tag is an allusion to the changing forms of governmental repression and violence which went beyond the government’s refusal to establish a constructive relationship with civil society organisations such as FdR during and more evidently after Ortega’s first presidential term.²⁷ The government progressively revealed its ignorance of environmental – and thus the local people’s – issues. There were multifarious spaces of quarrels between the NGO and the government, which suggest four – arguably interlinked – categories of FdR’s resistance: technical, knowledge-related, structural, and communicative. Each category comprises activities, campaigns and positions of the NGO within and beyond the environmental realm. They document FdR’s long-term fight *for* the realisation of its mission and vision and *against* governmental repression; the protesters’ frequent implicit and explicit references to FdR’s work indicate their impact.

²⁷ Amaru Ruíz reports a basic level of cooperation and communication throughout the first term of Ortega’s presidency until 2010: public functionaries drew on FdR’s expert knowledge and participated in forums and events organised by the NGO (Ruíz, 2019b; FdR, 2009).

Technical means

“A nation that destroys its soil destroys itself”

(protest claim, Matagalpa, April 12, 2018; appendix-14)

In the course of the protests against the wildfire, the demonstrators frequently stressed the importance of a healthy environment as precondition for human existence. The reference to a nation’s soil emphasises that environmental movements are crucially linked to local modes of production, social reproduction and local identities. This corresponds with Lipschutz’ and Mayer’s (1996) argument that environmental movements have a distinct role compared to other social movements, particularly due to the importance of ‘place’ for their engagement. They acknowledge that the forces of the globalised neoliberal market play a crucial role in the dialectic relationship between civil society and government.

On that basis, FdR’s technical form of resistance comprises its work on the ground, which is based on local circumstances and local communities. This includes the NGO’s development and promotion of sustainable and environmentally friendly economic models that are tailored to the specific local circumstances. Their initiatives include the promotion and introduction of mixed crops as a way to increase the resilience of small producers in the face of the expanding monocultures of African palm (Vérant, 2013), the use of environmentally friendly fertilizers instead of agro-chemicals and the establishment of cooperatives²⁸ that constitute an alternative to the neoliberal model of excessive extractivism (FdR, 2013). Therefore, the NGO organises assemblies, workshops and education for youth and adults to empower the local population to protect their environment and thereby sustain their livelihood. Even though these initiatives are small scale and locally bound in nature, they suggest an alternative to the government’s economic model. Furthermore, they create a basis of trust between the local population and the NGO, which enhances its power and influence on the local level and (potentially) the regional and national levels.

²⁸ Such as in the realm of ecotourism.

Knowledge generation

“3,602 more hot spots compared to the first 12 days in April 2017”

(Centro Humboldt, April 11, 2018; appendix-15)

The above citation exemplifies another major aspect of the civil society’s work: its commitment to knowledge generation. As Temper, Martinez-Alier and Del Bene (2015, 259) argue,

“activists and scientists co-produce new and alternative knowledge that gives local organizations visibility and legitimacy, and empowers them to challenge the manufactured uncertainty produced by the state or companies.”

This links to the Nicaraguan government’s strategy regarding production and the continuance of ignorance among the population, which helps them sustain their hegemony (Cupples & Glynn, 2018, 8).²⁹ This strategy finds a theoretical basis in Michel Foucault’s (1977) discussion of the interrelation between power and knowledge: Foucault stated that “there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations” (175). FdR created a broad base of expert knowledge on the region through the ground work mentioned above; the monitoring of the biosphere and investigations of the ecosystem’s development; and through exceptional patrols in the biosphere (FdR, 2012a). This expert knowledge guarantees the NGO’s independence from data provided by the government and limits the government’s scope for manipulation of the public via the withholding of information and/or distribution of misinformation.

By revealing evidence of environmental devastation e.g. by illegal land squatters, FdR could evidence the government’s wilful ignorance and lack of compliance with its constitutional responsibility to protect the area. This proof of the government’s negligence constitutes another form of knowledge in the fight for environmental protection and democracy, which FdR continuously spreads via its channels of communication (see below). Additionally, by taking the initiative, FdR and its co-operators liberate themselves from the passive roles assigned to them. Instead of remaining an object of study and treatment within

²⁹ According to Robert Proctor and Londa Schiebinger (2008, vii), “deliberate or inadvertent neglect, secrecy and suppression, document destruction, unquestioned tradition and myriad forms of inherent (or unavoidable) culturological selectivity” are potential ways of producing ignorance.

the state's power structures, the FdR – and consequently, the local communities – act as aware, knowing and resistant subjects.

Structural Means

“We Are Indio-Maíz”

(Managua, April 10, 2018; appendix-16)

The protesters repetitively expressed their solidarity and identification with Indio-Maíz. This links to the civil society organisations' and activists' strategy to mutually support each other and strengthen their positions against governmental offensives. FdR established and maintains networks and alliances with various NGOs within and beyond the environmental sector; universities and academics; technicians and indigenous peoples, on the local, national,³⁰ and international levels.³¹ This helps them to obviate their incorporation in the government's organisations and hierarchies. Furthermore, by defending the spaces for autonomous participation in the public sphere, they defend the possibility to express their opinion, which Chantal Mouffe (2014, 757) defines an integral part of any healthy functional democracy.

Another avenue to challenge the government is the cooperation with local and indigenous governments (Ruíz, 2019b; FdR, n.d.). This is significant as there exists a constant, mostly latent, conflict between the government and indigenous peoples in the Atlantic region.³² Many scholars agree that this clash is rooted in different colonial regimes: while the Pacific Coast was consistently ruled by Spain, the Atlantic Coast initially formed part of the British colonial empire and was only ceded to Spain in the Treaty of Versailles in 1783 (Boracco, 2011, 4). This historical divide prevails and many scholars agree on the existence of

³⁰ Such as “Red Local”, “Alianza Nicaragüense ante del Cambio Climático (ANACC)”; “Grupo Cocibolca” (specifically in the Anti-Canal-Movement); CODENI (Nicaraguan Federation for Children and Youth) (FdR, n.d.).

³¹ Such as “Unión Internacional para la Conservación de la Naturaleza”; “Red de Reservas Silvestres Privadas” (FdR, n.d.).

³² Already during the Sandinista revolution, there were conflicts between indigenous peoples, who claimed for autonomy and land rights, and the Sandinista government, which interfered through the agrarian reform and the intention to declare some indigenous territories as protected areas (Faber, 1999; Cupples & Glynn, 2018).

continuous colonial relationships within the country³³ (Cupples & Glynn, 2018; Osorio et al., 2018; Aguilar Antunes, 2018). These relationships are characterised by “institutionalized and everyday racisms, social, economic and infrastructural neglect, environmental destruction, cultural imperialism, paternalism, and folkloricization” (Cupples & Glynn, 2018, 18). Hence, cooperating with indigenous peoples and thus, giving them a voice might also challenge the government’s attempts to structurally isolate and marginalise them.

Communication means

“We want truthful information”

(Managua April 11, 2018; appendix-17)

In order to provide ‘truthful information’ that is independent from state-controlled media channels, FdR has established a broad range of channels and platforms for the publication of the precarious situation in the biosphere; of the tense situation of civil society organisations; and thus the perpetrations of the government both in the realm of environmental politics and considering the process of de-democratisation. The communication techniques link in one way or another to the previously discussed techniques.

Local meetings and departmental assemblies serve as spaces for the exchange and participation of communities on the local level; moreover, FdR can gather and disseminate information through these events. FdR’s radio station project ‘Radio Vos Juvenil’ is a critical part of their communication strategy. It has been operated by local youth since 2006. Besides this project’s objective to involve the youth in local social, political and economic development, it has become a major source of information for the community and a factor that contributes to the creation of a common identity (FdR, 2012b). Beyond the local and departmental limits, Ruíz has increasingly been involved in teaching activities in the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA) in Managua, and he has been invited to hold speeches and lectures on various occasions on the topic of environmental degradation in Nicaragua (Ruíz, 2019b). Another platform is FdR’s nation-wide campaign “Savemos La Reserva Indio-Maíz,” which was established in 2015. This campaign is a joint initiative of various

³³ The colonial powers’ “different methods of exploitation” which are given due to the regions’ different geological characteristics, i.e. fertile soil conducive to agriculture in the Pacific Coast; and volcanic acid and sensitive soil covered with dense rainforest in the Atlantic Coast, seemingly persists until today (Rooper & Smith, 1986, 3; Vérant, 2013, 6).

environmental NGOs and the territorial indigenous governments that aims to raise awareness for the precarious situation in the region on the national level (SLRIM, 2019). It uses a website (<http://www.salvemoslareservaindiomaiz.org/>) and social media channels to directly convey its concerns to the Nicaraguan population (ibid).

Besides these middle- and long-term communication techniques, FdR has also contributed to the anti-canal movement through participation in demonstrations and the provision of expert knowledge for the assessment of environmental impact assessment reports on the canal projects. Moreover, FdR could use the Anti-Canal Movement as a platform to communicate its cause: participation in these protests implied the NGO's exposition in public spaces and thus, guaranteed publicity and a nation-wide audience. Thus, FdR benefitted from this opportunity to position itself openly and promote the cause of the conservation of Indio-Maíz.

FdR functions as a platform for different unmet demands in the realm of environment and environmental justice and commits to the fights for their fulfilment. Furthermore, in accordance with Roßteutscher (2005, n.p.), FdR has served as a mediator between “the micro world of individuals” and the “macro worlds of state agency and economy”: it facilitated and performed everyday resistance (micro-level) and simultaneously represented communities' requests and brought individuals' issues to a higher level, i.e. the government (macro-level).

In accordance with Hall's concept of conjuncture, FdR's resistance represents “the antagonisms and contradictions, which are always at work in society” (Hall et al., 2013, xv) during the phase of “institutional stability” in Nicaragua (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007, 343). Yet, FdR persistently challenged the government's attempts to centralise power and inhibit criticism and opposition by openly expressing dissent and dynamically creating alternative, new spaces for civil participation. Through its disclosing of the government's failures to comply with its environmental obligations; raising awareness for the urgency of political commitment to improve the environmental situation in the country; and mobilising the people to demand for these changes and for environmental justice, FdR facilitated the people's realisation of – and fight for – their civil rights and thus, for environmental justice. In the face of the many interlinked social, political and economic dynamics that resulted from the government's increasing repression within its seemingly stable hegemonic

structure until its recent change to open violence, a “fus[ion] into a ruptural unity” (Hall et al., 2013, xv) became increasingly likely.

3 The Protests

“One voice for saving Indio-Maíz

#SOSIndioMaíz

Stop the Fire!!”

(protest claim, Managua, April 11, 2018; appendix-18)

The wildfire in the biosphere Indio-Maíz in the southeast of Nicaragua between April 3-13, 2018 prompted more and more people throughout the country to join the protests and to unite their “voices for saving Indio-Maíz” (ibid.). The environment was the central theme throughout these protests. For instance, a protester in Matagalpa on April 12 stated her plain motivation: “I join this force as I want to extinguish the fire” (appendix-19). Others expressed symbolic, emotional motives, such as “they are burning us” (Managua, April 10, 2018; appendix-20). This latter claim showed a strong personal identification with the biosphere; the protester went beyond showing solidarity and claimed that all the people were victims of the wildfire. Furthermore, the use of “they” stressed the wildfire’s characteristic as ecocide which was based on a deliberate, criminal act of which the protesters seemingly accused the government. This accusation was rooted in the government’s negligence and slow response to the wildfire, which seemingly triggered the people to take to the streets. To investigate the causes for the protests, in the following section, I will answer this question:

What caused the widespread participation in environmental protests in Nicaragua?

On the basis of the “antagonisms and and contradictions” (Hall et al., 2013, xv) in Nicaragua’s society throughout Ortega’s presidency since 2007, and within this the significant role of environmental issues, this chapter focuses on the “ruptural unity” of these earlier mid- and long-term conflicts. This requires an in-depth investigation of the actual development of the crisis. I will outline a scale of escalation which facilitated the development of the nation-wide demonstrations; within this, I will focus on the actions taken by FdR and the government. Then, I will conduct a discourse analysis of protests in Managua, which served as inspiration for the whole movement. This will comprise the discussion of the protest claims which helps to understand the frustrations, quests,

aspirations and motivations that ‘pulled the people on the streets’; and within this, the role of environmental destruction regarding the people’s indignation.

Scale of escalation of the environmental crisis

“Not to declare national emergency is governmental ecocide”

(León, April 11, 2018; appendix-21)

The situation in early April 2018 escalated gradually which was fuelled by the government’s tardy and irresolute action, as alluded to in the claim above. FdR was informed about a major wildfire in the natural reserve Indio Maíz by the communal governments of Indian River and Graytown in the reserve Río San Juan on April 3, and issued a national alert the next day (FdR, 4 April 2019). Based on its earlier work, FdR has played a pivotal role in the change of the perception of the wildfire from a local environmental crisis towards a national crisis with political, social, economic and environmental characteristics³⁴; throughout the environmental crisis, FdR, further national environmental experts³⁵ and local governments continuously informed about the desperate fight against the expanding wildfire and urged the central government to take action (SLRIM, 5 April 2018). The public soon followed their news.

In view of the significance of a “rapid initial attack” of fires to prevent major damages (Plucinski, 2012), the tardy – and thus unsuccessful – response only after 72 hours constituted a major factor that contributed to the people’s indignation (Salazar, 2018b, n.p.). The indignation reached a next level after the government rejected specially trained Costa Rican fire fighters who had geared up to help on April 9, 2018. Ruíz (2019b) claims that he personally had called upon the neighbouring country for support, which then became subject of coordination between the Nicaraguan Ministry of Governance and Costa Rica’s Fire Department (Astorga, 2018). Yet, the Nicaraguan government refused them admittance

³⁴ In this case of emergency, the NGO could draw on its long-term structural techniques of establishing networks and alliances with various civil society organisations and particularly their cooperation with local governments. Its earlier communicative techniques in cooperation with independent, critical media like “La Prensa”, “Confidencial” or “El Nuevo Diario” were intensified; the Facebook pages of ‘Fundación del Río’, of the campaign ‘Salvemos La Reserva Indio-Maíz’ (SLRIM), and of the FdR’s director Amaru Ruíz became major platforms of communication in the course of the wildfire (as Ruíz signs responsible for communication for the three Facebook pages, they represent the same position and work).

³⁵ Such as Victor Campos, director of the Humboldt Centre.

and argued that there was no more need for international help (Astorga, 2018). The continuous extension of the fire, however, evidenced the government's incapacity to handle the crisis. The next day, material and human resources sent from Mexico, Honduras and El Salvador supported the Nicaraguan military in their work (López, 2018); according to Nicaragua's head of the air force Spiro Bassi Aguilar, the international support was "essential" in the fight against the flames (ibid). This incidence revealed the negligence of the government and the unreliability of official information on the situation in the biosphere. Attempts of independent journalists and environmental activists, among others Amaru Ruíz, to access the affected zone were inhibited by military officials (Torrez García, 2018). According to Ruíz, this was another attempt to hide the "real impact of the wildfire"; while the government reported 3,585 hectares of affected land, environmental experts claimed that 5,000 hectares were destroyed (ibid). This attempt to repress independent information was intensified when the Ministry of Governance accused the FdR of illegal financial activities on April 11, which was accompanied by the threat to withdraw the NGO's legal status as a civil society organisation (FdR, 2018). Yet, instead of complying with the ministry's order to refrain from any further involvement in the crisis, FdR published the notification and thus once again exposed the government's repression to the people and thereby further encouraged their hostility.

As they were not heard on the national level, several civil society organisations addressed a letter of complaint about the situation to the UN special rapporteurs on human rights and the environment; indigenous rights; and UNESCO (UN, 2018). Thereby, the signees hoped to increase pressure on the government to finally attain swift action against the wildfire and publication of truthful information (Salazar, 2018a, n.p.).³⁶ Finally, rainfalls extinguished the wildfire on April 14, and brought environmental demonstrations to a temporary halt; yet, activists continued their protests e.g. through clean-up activities in their local environment.

The development of the environmental crisis and the corresponding attitude of the government reflected the overall environmental, political and social development in the past decade: inactivity in the face of environmental destruction; repression and threatening of

³⁶ Among others, this letter stressed the interrelation between the wildfire and environmental justice, as the slow reaction to the wildfire resulted in the destruction of indigenous territories and thus, their livelihoods – which constitutes a violation of indigenous rights and the rights to a healthy environment as according to the OHCHR (2019).

opposition, dissidents and independent journalism; and spreading of misleading and false information to the public. Thus, environmental and social injustice coined reality both throughout the past two decades as well as in the crisis specifically. In the course of the crisis, various different demand groups saw their individual reasons for frustration, i.e. their unmet demands, represented. For the sake of preventing the actual ecocide, these demands became urgent calls and thus cumulated and caused a “ruptural unity” (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007, 343). Accordingly, the ecocide constituted a moment of “discursive articulation” (Laclau, 2005, 37) during which various demands “re-aggregate[d] themselves, forming [...] an equivalential chain” by maintaining their individual essence on the one hand, and aligning with “the totality of other demands” on the other hand. This resulted in country-wide protests.

Within this logic, the specific demand to extinguish the wildfire constituted an empty signifier through which all demand groups identified with the ‘environmental protests’. Yet, considering the importance of environmental issues for social justice in Nicaragua, this “empty signifier” was significantly ‘filled’ with environmental demands and claims. In the following section, I will investigate the dynamics of protest activities in Managua to discuss the protesters’ immediate motivations and aspirations.

Protests in Managua

“Nicaragua awake”

(Managua, April 11, 2018; appendix-22)

The environmental crisis could be considered as wake-up call for the population to confront the severe social, political, economic and environmental problems in Nicaragua which result from the process of de-democratisation. The capital city of Managua was the stage for the first, most, and most extensive demonstrations against the ecocide on April 10 and 12. They inspired protests in other major cities, such as the university town of León on April 11 and Matagalpa the following day; there were also smaller-scale protests in Granada, Chinandega and Nueva Segovia on April 13 (Radio Corporación, 2018). In this section I will conduct a discourse analysis of the dynamics of the protests in Managua by taking into consideration the declared intentions; the actual (spontaneous) development and the reaction of governmental agents; and the claims made.

Protests as “Discursive Articulation”

“People, unite”

(protest chant, April 2018; appendix-23)

Several students initiated the first “emergency demonstration” on April 10, in reaction to the government’s rejection of Costa Rica’s help (Salazar, 2018a, n.p.). They announced their intentions to publicly protest via the hash-tag “#SOSIndioMaíz”. This hash-tag soon became the keyword for the country-wide protest movement and it served as platform to spread information on the situation in the biosphere. In the announcement, they indicated the absence of a script which indicates the movement’s spontaneity and which made it difficult to confront (and criminalise) by the government. Furthermore, there was no leadership for the event (Laura, 2018) which was further emphasised in a TV-interview of three protesters who stated “we are no leaders, we are only an example for those who are outside there” (Confidencial, 2018b). This implies the protesters’ self-conception as representing ‘the people’. Importantly, the protesters stressed that they were independent from any political party and that the only reason why they gathered was their indignation and their will to assume responsibility as citizens (Mojica & Villavicencio, 2018). In an open confrontation with a party member of the oppositional Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC) on April 12 in Managua, the students emphasised their rejection of any politician’s participation – which was a denial of Nicaragua’s current political culture in general. Their initiative proved the young generation’s will to “partake[s] in the fact of ruling and the fact of being ruled” (Aristotle in Rancière, 2015, 35) as citizens, and their repudiation of politicians in office who did not represent their ideas (Confidencial, 2018b). This furthermore entailed an implicit challenge to the hegemonic system as they questioned the ‘common sense’ propagated by the government. The intention was to create a space to “express different discontents considering the situation, to create alliances and search for alternative actions (during and after the wildfire)” (Laura, 2018). The students opened the event to any demand group which would have the opportunity to position itself in the newly emerging movement – to influence it and to be influenced by it. This suggests that they expected a process of “discursive articulation” (Marchart, 2012, 230) to eventually engender the cultural-political unity of the movement through the mutual influence of the individuals’ and the groups’ identities; accordingly, they considered the protests as discourse. The students seemingly realised the potential of bringing together different demand groups to attain the common

aim of ending the environmental devastation in the context of the actual crisis and beyond it; and furthermore, to initiate more far reaching political and social change.

The scope of this process of discursive articulation broadened due to the country-wide expansion of the protests. The group identity of the protest movement is therefore based on the mutual discursive influence of identities within single events; and furthermore, on the discursive influence between protests in different cities that gave feedback to each other (via social media and/or independent media reports). These different protests differed in minor respects to those in Managua: they were smaller in scope and had less events affiliated with them. Participation of different civil society organisations coined the individual events, which was particularly evident in León, where an association of the Catholic Church joined the demonstration and contributed claims such as “Let’s care for God’s creations – Laudato Si – Pope Francis” (León, April 11, 2018; appendix-24). Another difference was the response of governmental actors to these events. While protesters were attacked by pro-government Sandinista Youth (JS) and/or police in Managua (April 12), León (April 11) and Granada (April 13), there were no violent confrontations in Matagalpa (April 12). Apart from these variations, the protests displayed similar patterns and were inspired by, and modelled on, the protest in Managua. Therefore, I will focus on the protests in Managua in the section below.

Protest Dynamics

“Our voices will not extinguish the flames, but they will awake conscience”

(placard of protester in Managua, April 10, 2018; appendix-25)

Lacking opportunities to directly fight the wildfire, students decided to take to the streets and thereby contributed indirectly to the solution of the environmental crisis. This is in accordance with Butler’s (2014, 102) claim that “a bodily performativity brings together acting and speaking in a particular way, bespeaking what is acted, and acting what is spoken”; the protesters symbolically took the initiative themselves and thereby put pressure on the government to take determined action against the wildfire and comply with its responsibilities.

Already before the first protests, which had around 500 participants, the JS organised a “Festival for Peace and Indio-Maíz” (Mojica & Villavicencio, 2018) in the same place and at same time as the autonomously organised protest. This was an attempt to prevent the ‘resurgence of politics’, since, according to Butler (2011, 5), taking to the streets allows to overcome police power as the acting together of bodies “opens up time and space outside and against the temporality and established architecture of the regime.” Butler posits that politics depends on the appearance of bodies and voices. As no single body can create the necessary space of appearance (i.e. act politically), political action emerges from *between* bodies (Butler, 2011, 6). Therefore, the students’ autonomous organisation and street protests were threats to the government’s hegemony and challenged the ostensibly fixed social order – and thus, the prevailing power relations.

In reference to the omnipresent threat of governmental violence and the corresponding feeling of vulnerability, the demonstrators chanted the chorus “we are not afraid, we want answers about Indio-Maíz” (Mojica & Villavicencio, 2018). Butler (2014, 101) argues that besides verbal claims, deliberately exposing the body to possible harm is part of the very meaning of political resistance and that this vulnerability is a mode of relationality to other humans. Therefore, it could be argued that the enduring of the feeling of vulnerability is a constituent part of the protests, which requires mutual support of co-protesters.

This vulnerability became evident in the second protest event in Managua on April 12, when JS and the police violently confronted the demonstration. As the JS had occupied the protest place, the protesters spontaneously decided to head towards the ‘Plaza de las Victorias’ which is traditionally meaningful for the FSLN. While the occupation of space in general is a form of “posing a challenge in corporeal terms to the legitimacy of the state” (Butler, 2011, 10), the impulsive taking of such an iconic place symbolised the protesters’ dynamism and vigour and their disposition to confront the injustices that are committed in the country (Salazar, 2018b, n.p.); the protesters had not deemed this possible before (Altamirano in Salazar, 2018b, n.p.). Shortly after this occupation, they were attacked by massive contingents of JS-members, police and anti-riot police (ibid). Videos and photos of the violent incidents rapidly spread and fuelled the indignation among large parts of the population, which triggered further protests. As Butler (2011, 18) argues, “media does not merely report the scene, but is part of the scene and the action; indeed, the media is the

scene.” This corresponds to the initiators’ idea of the protests as discourse, in which reports of the events contribute to the development of the event on a broader (i.e. national) scale. Importantly, however, the risk that the bodies took was local (ibid).

The experience of mutual support in the face of the repressive state unleashed a certain pride regarding these first achievements; and the hope that this event constituted the beginning of “a more organised and political young citizenship” (Mojica & Villavicencio, 2018). A protester stated “we will keep on doing this, I am not gonna stop, I will go on to demonstrate whatever might happen because it is my duty as citizen” to do so considering the many “environmental, educational, social problems” (Moraga & Altamirano in Salazar, 2018b, n.p.). Accordingly, the protest claims revealed the intent to press for swift action against the environmental crisis – and for more far-reaching change in the long run.

The protesters considered the nervous reaction of the government in the face of the peaceful protests as indicator for their success. Even though the ‘environmental demonstrations’ in Managua ceased temporarily after the wildfire was extinguished by rainfalls (and in the face of threats of mass violence by JS), the more far-reaching social protests against the social reform starting from April 18, 2018 can therefore be understood as a continuation of these first ‘environmental protests’.

Protest Claims and Themes

“They will not silence us – we are responsible for our flora and fauna and our patria”

(León, April 11, 2018; appendix-26)

Laclau’s “theory of articulation” (Laclau in Marchart, 2012, 230) suggests that any agent’s cultural and/or political identity is the result of a discursive process of articulation. This implies, that there are no fixed group identities and that any identity has to be open and adaptive to fellow-campaigners’ ideas – “it is through the discursive articulation of protest that the identity of the protesters is articulated in the first place” (ibid.). The protest claim above reflects the complex interrelation between different frustrations and quests, aspirations and motivations – and between different identities – already on the individual level. It alludes to the governmental repression; to a feeling of community among the protesters; to a feeling of responsibility as a citizen for the vulnerable environment and

implicitly to the failure of the government to guarantee its protection; and finally it reveals a strong national identity. Accordingly, the claims of the country-wide protests reflected a broad range of social, economic, political, cultural and environmental issues and a multitude of unmet social demands. The themes relating to the process of de-democratisation (i.e. economic abuses; repression of civil society) which constitute the underlying reasons for the people's frustration have been introduced and discussed in the first chapters. Likewise, the environment's significance for social justice in Nicaragua – as identified in the protest claims – has already been covered.

Beyond these, references to cultural works constituted another major theme: the unofficial hymn “Nicaragua, Nicaragüita” by Carlos Mejía Godoy – which, among others, praises Nicaragua's rich flora and fauna – became an integral part of the protest movement.³⁷ Many claims in the course of the nation-wide protests referred to artistic works/cultural heritage, such as citations of the country's most popular poet Rubén Darío (1867-1916), the singer/songwriter Katja Cardenal (1963) or the contemporary hip hop group Calle 13, which were adapted to the environmental context (appendix-27;28;29). Thereby, the protesters implicitly challenged Ortega/Murillo's “authorized heritage discourse” (Graham & Howard, 2008, 162) which is based on the country's history and culture, and thus their hegemonic system. By referring to cultural works outside of the government's hegemonic discourse, they revealed the arbitrariness and instability of the government's propagated monopoly on the country's (cultural) heritage.

A further significant thematic block evolved around the protesters' feeling of unity, responsibility and solidarity, which is represented by the claim “indifference is complicit to the ecocide” (Managua, April 10, 2018; appendix-30). Furthermore, protesters urged the people to join the protests (appendix-23). By stating their wish to assume responsibility for flora and fauna, for the protection of biospheres, etc., the protesters implicitly stressed the failures of the government to accomplish its tasks and thereby called its legitimacy into question. Thus, negative experiences and frustrations were transformed into stimuli for activism and formulated as solicitations for the people to join the movement and assume responsibility (such as for a healthy, clean environment) as well. Still, other claims contained calls for the government to take action (appendix-31), which implies “that the decisory

³⁷ The author's songs already played an important role for the creation of a collective identity during the Sandinista Revolution in which the author participated actively (Ramírez, 1983). He left the FSLN in 1990 and became a fervent opponent of Ortega and Murillo.

power of the higher instance [was] not put into question” (Marchart, 2012, 231). This discrepancy reveals diverging attitudes towards the government’s legitimacy among the protesters, which is in accordance with Laclau’s concept of the “equivalential chain”, i.e. each protester’s position is linked to “the totality of other demands”, yet it maintains its own “particularised self” (Laclau, 2005, 37).

The overarching theme is environment: the biosphere Indio-Maíz, environmental destruction, ecocide. While the protests were essentially linked to the environmental crisis, the importance of environmental issues for social justice in Nicaragua explains the amalgamation of various demand groups with environmental demands. Moreover, as indicated by Lipschutz and Mayer (1996), a major factor for the environment’s social relevance is its local ties. Diverse claims confirmed the transfer from the crisis in Indio-Maíz to the protesters’ local environmental conditions; protesters called for information on – and improvement of – local environmental conflicts (such as a cleaning project of the Rio Chiquito in León) (appendix-32;33;34); some conducted local cleaning activities in the context of the crisis (such as in Matagalpa on April 15, 2018), after the wildfire was extinguished. This seemingly indicates a sincere ambition regarding a clean, healthy environment.

Furthermore, within the claims on Indio-Maíz there were various disparate references to among others, generational justice; to the importance of Indio-Maíz as “the lung of Central-America” (Managua, April 10, 2018; appendix-35); and to general respect towards nature (appendix-36). This suggests that Indio-Maíz constitutes the empty signifier in the present discursive articulation. Thus, the environment seemingly fulfils the role of the common element of the movement – the platform where different demand groups come together. Moreover, the environmental theme also represents a distinct demand group which embodies manifold individual, unmet environmental demands. This suggests a ‘twofold relevance’ of the environment: it constitutes a genuine issue, i.e. a *cause* of the outbreak of the protests as well as being inherently linked with other (e.g. political, economic, social) demands, i.e. underlying *reasons* for the outbreak. This implies that the environment retains vast potential regarding the mobilisation of people, as individuals might identify with the environmental crisis due to their experience of ‘various different frustrations’ that were directly or indirectly linked with environmental issues. Consequently,

Indio-Maíz was a powerful empty signifier which *caused* the outbreak and the spread of the protest movement.

Conclusion

“The Earth is gonna charge us”

(León, April 11, 2018; appendix-36)

This thesis sought to find out what provoked the ‘environmental protests’ in the context of the wildfire in Indio-Maíz in April 2018. On the basis of the theory of conjuncture, and within this, drawing on Laclau’s theory of discursive articulation, I have shown that the environment constituted a strong “empty signifier”, which allowed for the massive participation in the ‘environmental protests’. My analysis of Nicaragua’s de-democratisation in Chapter 1 revealed the important role that the environment played within “the antagonisms and contradictions, which are always at work in society” (Hall et al., 2013, xv) – particularly due to Nicaragua’s extractive economy. Within this, environmental issues represent a nexus of interests of various actors and thus, they openly display conditions of social and environmental injustice throughout Nicaragua’s recent history. Accordingly, the environment is a contested asset which is inextricably linked with various unmet social demands and thus, frustrations among the population. In Chapter 2 I showed that many NGOs were committed to the fight for its conservation; their constant resistance against severe, increasing governmental repression facilitated the people’s realisation of – and fight for – their civil rights and thus, for environmental justice in the face of the ecocide in Indio-Maíz in April 2018. The wildfire constituted the cause for the “‘fus[ion]’ into a ruptural unity” of the antagonisms (ibid). The analysis of the protest dynamics and the protest claims in Chapter 3 suggests that the environmental crisis was seen as symbolic for the political, economic, social and environmental situation in Nicaragua. Due to the environment’s ‘twofold relevance’ – i.e. as a protest cause that was directly related with underlying reasons for the protests – it allowed for the unification of many parts of society. It thus allowed for unexpectedly extensive participation throughout the country. This present case suggests a General ability for environmental issues to serve as “empty signifiers” and thus, cause major social conflicts.

Moreover, this thesis offered insights into the students’ political culture, their rejection of the current political system and their will to take responsibility and “partake in the fact of ruling and the fact of being ruled” (Aristotle in Rancière, 2015, 35). It revealed that the students’ initiative to take to the streets had far-reaching implications for Nicaragua’s social

and political structures and stability. On the basis of civil society's efforts to defend democracy (and the environment) throughout the past decades, the students took to the streets to demand swift action to save the biosphere Indio-Maíz. The students soon realised their potential to challenge the repressive and manipulative government i.e. when various demand groups joined forces. The explicated openness of the movement to all those who wished to express their accumulated frustration was therefore a central factor for the rapid spread of the protests i.e. their 'success'. These protests represented a decisive change in prevailing power relations as they openly challenged hegemonic structures; the people's realisation of their own potential has seemingly played a decisive role in the outbreak of the nation-wide protests in the context of the national social security reform, which happened only five days after the environmental protests came to a (temporary) halt.

As stated in the introduction, this study assumes that truth is primarily relative and subjective; this indicates a limitation of this thesis as it examined the protests mainly from the perspective of civil society and the protesters. Therefore, future analyses focusing on the government's perspective would be desirable. Another interesting aspect for future research is the generational conflict which was implied by the students' indignation with the current political structures.

The 'environmental protests' against the wildfire in Indio-Maíz fit into the framework of protests against large-scale environmental devastation which is becoming increasingly relevant to international politics. The growing awareness for the need to protect the environment, i.e. biodiversity and rainforests (as absorbers of CO²) in the context of the climate change-debate has given local environmental struggles global political significance. A recent example is the case of the extensive wildfires in the Amazon, which caused global political tensions in August 2019. This suggests that environmental issues have much potential to serve as both reasons and causes for conflicts on the local, national and global levels.

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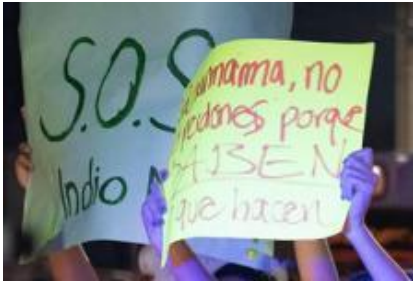



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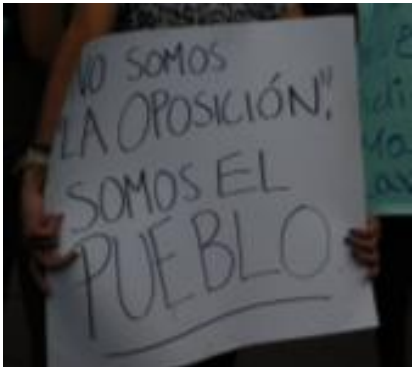
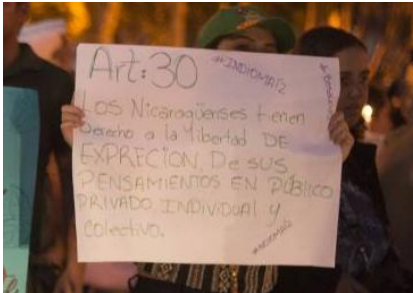



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Appendix

Introduction			
1	“S.O.S. Indio-Maíz”	Managua, April 12, 2018 Niú (2019)	
2	“I want a green and free Nicaragua”	Matagalpa, April 12, 2018 The author’s personal archive	
Chapter 1			
3	“To protest is a right”	León, April 11, 2018 Altamirano (April 11, 2018)	
4	“Indio-Maíz is a biological- not an economic reserve”	Managua, April 11, 2018 Pro Regenwald (n.d.).	


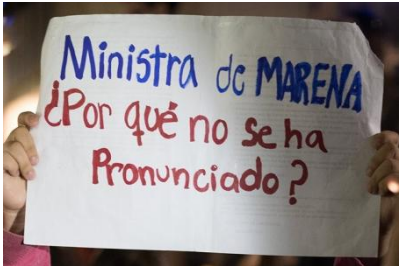
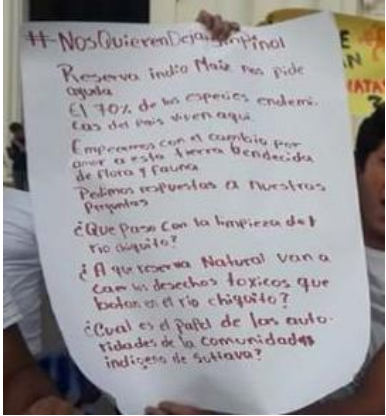


5	“A purchased people is fried and grilled”	Matagalpa, April 12, 2018 The author’s personal archive	
6	“Mother earth, don’t pardon, because they know what they do”	Managua, April 11, 2018 Niú (2019)	
7	“Only the people saves the people”	León, April 11, 2018 Altamirano (April 11, 2018)	
8	“It is incredible that the nature cries for help and even more incredible that the government doesn’t listen #SOSIndioMaíz”	Matagalpa, April 12, 2018 The author’s personal archive	
9	“What if the “Trees of Life” burned?”	León, April 11, 2018 Altamirano (April 11, 2018)	

10	“We are not the opposition, we are the people”	León, April 11, 2018 Managua, April 12, 2018 Treminio (@danitreminio, April 12, 2018)	
11	“Art. 30: Nicaraguans have the right to free expression of their thoughts – publicly, privately, individually and collectively #IndioMaíz #BOSAWAS #IndioMaíz”	Matagalpa, April 12, 2018 The author’s personal archive	
Chapter 2			
12	“Salvemos la Reserva Indio-Maíz” (“Let’s Safe the Reserve Indio-Maíz”)	Managua, April 10, 2018 Movimiento Autónomo de Mujeres Nicaragua (April 11, 2018)	
13	“#NosQuierenCallar” “#TheWanToSilenceUs”	(Facebook post, FdR, April 11, 2018)	
14	“A nation that destroys its soil destroys itself”	Matagalpa, April 12, 2018 The author’s personal archive	

15	“3,602 more hot spots compared to the first 12 days in April 2017”	Centro Humboldt (April 11, 2018)	
16	“We Are Indio-Maíz”	Managua, April 10, 2018 Movimiento Autónomo de Mujeres Nicaragua (April 11, 2018)	
17	“We want truthful information”	Managua April 10, 2018 Movimiento Autónomo de Mujeres Nicaragua (April 11, 2018)	
Chapter 3			
18	“One voice for saving Indio-Maíz – #SOSIndioMaíz – Stop the Fire!!”	Managua, April 10, 2018 Salazar (2018a)	
19	“I join this force as I want to extinguish the fire,”	Matagalpa, April 12, 2018 The author’s personal archive	

20	“They are burning us”	Managua, April 10, 2018 Regidor (2018)	
21	“Not to declare national emergency is governmental ecocide”	León, April 11, 2018 Altamirano (April 11, 2018)	
22	“Nicaragua awake”	Managua, April 11, 2018 Ramírez (April 11, 2018)	
23	“People Unite”	León, April 11, 2018 Periódico Católico El Camino - León Nicaragua (April 11, 2018)	<i>Chants of protesters; video-footage.</i>
24	“Let’s care for God’s creations – Laudato Si – Pope Francis”	León, April 11, 2018 Periódico Católico El Camino - León Nicaragua (April 11, 2018) Min: 2:45.	
25	“Our voices will not extinct the flames, but they will awake conscience”	Managua, April 10, 2018 Osorio (2018)	

26	“They will not silence us – we are responsible for our flora and fauna and our patria”	León, April 11, 2018 Altamirano (April 12, 2018)	
27	Adapted quote of Rubén Darío	Managua, April 12, 2018 Altamirano (April 12, 2018)	
28	Quote of Katja Cardenal	Managua, April 12, 2018 Altamirano (April 12, 2018)	
29	Quote of ‘Calle 13’	Managua, April 12, 2018 Mojica & Villacivencio (2018)	

30	“Indifference is complicit to the ecocide #IndioMaíz”	Managua, April 12, 2018 Altamirano (April 12, 2018)	
31	“Minister for ‘Natural Resources and the Environment’, why don’t you take a stand?”	Managua, April 12, 2018 Mojica & Villacivencio (2018)	
32	<i>References to local environmental conflicts</i>	León, April 11, 2018 Altamirano (April 12, 2018)	
33	“And what about the Río Grande in Matagalpa?”	Matagalpa, April 12, 2018 The author’s personal archive	
34	“No to the contamination of Lake Nicaragua”	Granada, April 13, 2018 Torres (April 13, 2018)	

35	"The lung of Central-America is burning #SOSIndioMaíz"	Managua, April 10, 2018 Osorio (2018)	
36	"Yes to respect towards our natural reserves"	Matagalpa, April 12, 2018 The author's personal archive	
Conclusion			
37	"The Earth is gonna charge us"	León, April 11, 2018 Altamirano (April 12, 2018)	