

Nicaragua: Ortega and Biden Make a Deal

February 15, 2023



About a week ago, on February 9, Nicaraguan dictator Daniel Ortega released and deported 220 of his regime's political prisoners. Taken from their prison cells, they were put on a plane, ignorant of the plane's destination. One person speculated that they might be being sent to China. They were reportedly given a form to sign, saying that they were leaving Nicaraguan voluntarily. Two appear to have refused to sign the paper and go into exile, so they were returned to prison.[1] One of them was Catholic Monsignor Rolando Álvarez who was then immediately tried for undermining national integrity and spreading false news and sentenced to 26 years in prison. Five or so hours after takeoff, the rest of the deportees arrived at Dulles Airport in Washington, D.C.

The freed prisoners included men and women from their twenties to their sixties, from all walks of life — students, journalists, priests, and ordinary working people — but also among them three former presidential candidates who ran for office in 2021 until they were arrested and imprisoned: Cristina Chamorro, Juan Sebastián Chamorro, and Felix Maradiaga. The exiles span the political spectrum from right to left, from the head of the country's business council, Michael Healy, to the former Sandinista *comandante* Dora María Tellez. One of the students is Lester Alemán, who became famous when, in 2018 at the age of twenty, he told Daniel Ortega in a televised public meeting that the dictator should resign. Tried on fabricated charges such as being foreign agents and traitors in sham trials before judges subservient to Ortega, the various exiles had been sentenced to years in prison. In those prisons, some for five years and some for less, they were tortured psychologically and physically.[2] One of their number, the former Sandinista revolutionary Hugo Torres, age of 73, died behind bars a year ago.[3]

Upon arriving in Washington, the exiles expressed to the media their happiness at being free and their anger at having been exiled and stripped of their Nicaraguan citizenship. Their exile means separation from family and friends, the loss of jobs and interruption of careers, anxieties about making a living and residing in a foreign country. One man said, "I am glad to be free, but being exiled from Nicaragua is like being ripped from my mother's womb."

The United States government offered the Nicaraguan exiles a two-year humanitarian visa and the Spanish government has offered them citizenship. The exiles are now pondering their futures.

U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken said, the prisoners' release represented "a constructive step toward addressing human rights abuses in the country and opens the door to further dialogue." Obviously, this is not true. Their release—it frees them from prison and ends their torture—does nothing to improve human rights, democracy, and civil liberties in Nicaragua. The exiles and their supporters believe quite rightly that they should have been released back into Nicaraguan society with all of their civil liberties and political rights—though that is impossible because nobody in the country enjoys those now. If Anthony Blinken looks forward to negotiations, it is surely not because of the preposterous claim that the release of the prisoners somehow furthers the restoration of human rights or civil liberties and political rights to the people of Nicaragua. He has other things on his mind.

Why Were the Prisoners Freed and Exiled?

Both Daniel Ortega and the U.S. government have reasons to want to renew their contentious relationship. Ortega has several objectives in releasing the prisoners and sending them off to Washington, D.C. First, of course, exiling them eliminates virtually all of the leaders of the political opposition from every quarter even more completely and less problematically than having them imprisoned in Nicaragua. Second, Ortega's imprisonment and torture of his political opponents and dissident Nicaraguans has damaged the country's international reputation. Now, with only 35 political prisoners still remaining, things don't look quite so bad. Third, the United States and other countries have imposed sanctions on Ortega, his wife and vice-president Rosario Murillo, other family members, and their governmental inner circle, and they would like to have those penalties removed so they can travel to engage in finance and business and make money.

Tellez has suggested that a fourth reason that Ortega wants a deal with the United States is because of the weakness of his regime that has been riddled with conflict. Ortega's former head of investigation and intelligence for the Nicaraguan police, Adolfo Marengo, was arrested and taken to Managua's *El Chipote* prison in January, apparently because he attempted to flee the country and no longer wanted to work with the regime's inner circle. And a year ago, Arturo McFields, Nicaraguan ambassador to the Organization of American States, denounced the Ortega government during an OAS session for its suppression of democracy. He was, of course immediately dismissed from his post.

The United States has its own reasons for a rapprochement. Washington, as we know, controlled all of Central America since the beginning of the twentieth century, and dominated all of Latin America since World War II. Cuba escaped that domination in 1959—though it soon moved into the Soviet sphere. After the Revolution of 1979 Nicaragua also broke free of U.S. domination for a decade, until the election of 1990, when Nicaraguans elected the conservative President Violetta Chamorro and after her a couple of other even more rightwing presidents. When Ortega became president in 2007, while he excoriated U.S. imperialism rhetorically, he did not leave the U.S. sphere of influence; rather, he entered into all sorts of agreements both with the conservative parties of Nicaragua and with the government of the United States, including with the U.S. military and the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency. The United States learned to live with him and he learned how to make the best of the situation for his ruling group and Nicaraguan businesspeople.

By the 2000s, however, Ortega changed directions was making various deals with the Chinese—most famously for the construction of an interoceanic canal—and with the Russians for military assistance. Recently Ortega's son Laureano Ortega Murillo, now the country's top diplomat and likely heir to the throne, has received emissaries from Iran and met with leading Communist officials in China. One imagines that the United States would like to bring Nicaraguan back into the fold, so to speak.

While the prisoners on the plane wondered where they were going, Ortega and U.S. President Joseph Biden knew. The chartered airplane had to file an FAA flight plan. The FBI had vetted all of the 220 people on the plane before they left Managua. Everything had been planned well ahead of time. It was part of a plan and part of a deal. The release of the prisoners now makes it possible for President Biden and Blinken to make a deal with Ortega that would improve his situation—removing the sanctions—while increasing U.S. influence in Nicaragua. Ortega accused the opponents he imprisoned of being traitors working for the United States, but it is he who wants a closer relationship with Washington.

What About the Nicaraguan People?

The Nicaraguan people rose up for democracy 2018 in a national demonstration of 500,000 people and then engaged in a prolonged struggle that involved blocking highways throughout the country. The government smashed both the protest demonstration and the national resistance, taking hundreds of lives and jailing hundreds more. At the time of the elections in 2021 Ortega's government arrested all of the genuine opposition candidates, seven of them, and imprisoned them too. Since then, the government has shut down 3,000 nongovernmental organizations and hundreds of thousands; one estimate made a year and a half ago was 838,000 people or over 10 percent of the population have fled the country, most to the United States and others to Costa Rica or Spain.[4]

Ortega appeared to have won. But Dora María Tellez, just out of prison and back into the struggle argues that the prisoners, divided in their political positions but united in their struggle for the restoration of democracy have won and that Ortega has lost. She believes that Nicaraguans within and outside of the country can continue to communicate through social media and to organize in the fight for democracy. "You know," she says, "When you look at a river, you see a current on the surface, but there may be an undercurrent that you cannot see." She believes there is an undercurrent, a counter-current in Nicaragua and that gives her hope and should inspire our solidarity with the Nicaraguan people's fight for democracy and perhaps in the future for democratic socialism.

Notes:

[1] This information from a Nicaraguan who spoke to the passengers.

[2] Juan Pappier, "Government Critics Languish in Nicaraguan prisons," *El Pais*, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/10/government-critics-languish-nicaraguan-prisons> . See also former Sandinista revolutionary, Monica López Baltodano, "It is called psychological torture," <https://www.confidencial.digital/english/it-is-called-psychological-torture/>

[3] On the Nicaraguan justice system see the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (**IACHR**) statement:

https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/jsForm/?File=/en/iachr/media_center/preleases/2022/027.asp . And also Human Rights Watch Report:

<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/nicaragua> , See too this NPR report

<https://www.npr.org/2022/02/11/1080204905/nicaragua-has-convicted-more-than-a-dozen-opponents-of-president-daniel-ortega>

[4] See Confidential article based on figures from International Organization for Migration:

<https://www.confidencial.digital/english/nicaraguan-migration-in-numbers/>