

Nicaragua: Ortega Arrests Opposition Candidates Ahead of November 2021 Election

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Leaders of UNAMOS, the Left Opposition to President Daniel Ortega, who have been arrested by his government.

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Daniel Ortega, who is running for his fourth consecutive term as president of Nicaragua—his fifth altogether—is taking no chances on losing. Though he has held the presidency since 2007, for almost 14 years, and though he not only controls the executive but also dominates the National Assembly and the Supreme Court, and though he and his family and friends own most of the country's news media, Ortega still felt it necessary to arrest five of the most prominent opposition presidential candidates and a number of other opposition leaders. Those arrested this month span the entire political spectrum from right to left, several being former comrades of Ortega's party, the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN). One has to be struck by the dictator's fear of the Nicaraguan people.

While for decades there has been nothing progressive or democratic about Daniel Ortega and the FSLN, the current wave of arrests of his political opponents represents a new, even more authoritarian development. Since the 1990s Daniel Ortega had been moving to the right, engaging in corrupt deals with capitalist parties, forming alliances with both domestic capitalists and with the right wing of the Catholic Church, while protecting the interests of domestic and foreign capitalists. He changed the country's constitution to make possible his continuance in power and to permit his wife Rosario Murillo to become his vice-president. There has been harassment of his opponents in the past, but never the complete repression of all opposition parties such as we now see.

The government argues that its opponents are trying to undermine the country's sovereignty and are "inciting foreign interference in internal affairs, requesting military interventions and organizing with foreign financing." Those arrested have been charged with various specious crimes. While there is no doubt that some of his opponents would like to see the United States bring enough pressure to drive out Ortega, the opposition parties are not working to bring about a military intervention. They wanted to oust Ortega through a fair election.

It is also true that the U.S. government's National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and USAID provide money to various Nicaraguan NGOs some of which may oppose Ortega's policies, but it is not U.S. money that determines the opposition or even influences it very much. It is Ortega who has created his own opponents over the last 14 years and turned many, perhaps a majority, of the Nicaraguan people against him. Without the U.S. State Department and the CIA, the Nicaraguan bourgeoisie is quite capable of coming up with its own political program for change—though much of it is tied to Ortega—and similarly the Nicaraguan people proved in 2018 that they can create a mass movement of tremendous power without relying on anyone else.

Ortega and the Nicaraguan Crisis

Ortega's crackdown on the opposition comes as Nicaragua experiences a series of economic, political and public health crises. In 2018 a national political rebellion took place involving hundreds of thousands of Nicaraguans of all walks of life throughout the country who protested Ortega's violent suppression earlier that year of demonstrations of the elderly and students opposed to a new retirement plan. To suppress the resulting rebellion, police and Ortega's FSLN thugs murdered 300 people, wounded 2,000, arrested and tortured hundreds of others, and effectively prevented any opposition protests in the country. Opposition media was shut down and NGOs were harassed. All of this led some 100,000 Nicaraguans to flee the country.

Then in 2020 came the COVID pandemic crisis, with the Ortega government flagrantly flouting international health recommendations by ignoring social distancing and holding mass public events both out of doors and indoors. Some 700 Nicaraguan doctors signed a letter "urging the government to acknowledge that the virus was spreading in Nicaragua and to put in place preventive measures recommended by the World Health Organization to limit its further spread." Based on a study of excess deaths, some media accused the Nicaraguan government of underestimating fatalities by more than 90 percent. Nicaragua has also failed to vaccinate its population. "Nicaragua has administered at least 167,500 doses of COVID vaccines so far. Assuming every person needs 2 doses, that's enough to have vaccinated only about 1.3% of the country's population. The country is now scheduled to receive enough vaccine through COVAX to cover 20 percent of its population.

As in other countries, the COVID pandemic also brought an economic crisis. In 2020 Nicaragua, already the second poorest country in the hemisphere (second only to Haiti) with a per capital GDP of under \$2,000, saw its economy shrink by 4 percent. On top of the COVID pandemic, in November of 2020, hurricanes Eta and Iona with record winds devastated parts of the country. Nicaragua's economic crisis also resulted in part, however, from the severe economic depression in Venezuela, which under presidents Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro had been providing billions of dollars to the Nicaragua government. Facing its own desperate economic situation, Venezuela could no longer afford to be so generous.

Nicaragua has depended for decades upon foreign assistance from governments and NGOs in order to attempt to deal with the country's widespread poverty and social problems. But after the 2018 national uprising against the Ortega government and the accompanying repression, several NGOs assisting with economic development or social services were either driven out of the country or because of harassment left of their own volition, adding to the country's economic difficulties.

The Repression

Clearly Ortega fears that these various crises have created deep discontent that could lead to one of his challengers winning the election—so he has eliminated them from the contest. Among those candidates arrested by Ortega are some of the country's most important political figures. Placed under house arrest in early June was Cristiana Chamorro, whose father Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, editor of the country's leading newspaper *La Prensa*, was assassinated in 1978, presumably at the order of then president and dictator Anastasio Somoza. Her mother defeated president Daniel Ortega in the 1990 election, serving until 1997. No doubt Ortega feared that Cristiana Chamorro, wealthy, influential, and bearing the famous family name might defeat him in the presidential election. (See this Sept. 2019 interview with Chamorro.)

The Ortega government also detained other moderate or conservative presidential candidates: Arturo Cruz, Félix Maradiaga and Juan Sebastián Chamorro. Other conservative political figures arrested include: José Adán Aguerri, former president of the Superior Council of Private Enterprise (Cosep), Violeta Granera, and José Pellais.

On the left, the Ortega regime arrested several figures associated with the opposition party UNAMOS, a party created by FSLN dissidents. Two of those arrested are veritable heroes of the Sandinista Revolution of 1979: Dora María Téllez, 65, and Hugo Torres, 73, both of whom were once FSLN *comandantes*. Torres said in a recorded video message that was shared on social media, "These are desperate acts from a regime that can feel itself dying." He continued, "Forty-six years ago I risked my life to get Daniel Ortega and other political prisoner comrades out of jail. And in 1978 I once again risked my life alongside Dora María Téllez to free about 60 other political prisoners. But that's how life goes, those who once welcomed principles today have betrayed them."

Other leftists arrested included another former leading activist of the revolutionary movement of the late 1970s, Victor Hugo Tinco, and two younger women, Suyen Barahona, president of the Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS), and Ana Margarita Vigil, the group's former president.

The U.S. Response

Throughout most of Ortega's presidency in the 2000s, the United States and Nicaragua had amicable relations. The two countries cooperated in a number of areas, including the policing of international drug cartels. Ortega also accepted some U.S. military assistance as well as tolerating various U.S. agencies such as USAID. The reason for the U.S. toleration of the Ortega regime, and vice versa, was that it was good for U.S. business and for the Nicaraguan capitalist class. Sixty percent of Nicaraguan trade is with the United States. Ortega could be relied upon to facilitate such international trade and to prevent the organization of independent labor unions in the country's maquiladoras.

Now, however, Nicaragua has become a problem. The United States prefers countries with at least a veneer of democratic institutions and procedures and wants social peace. But since 2018, Ortega has been incapable of delivering either. So, it is not surprising that the United States government has taken strong measures against leading figures in the Ortega government. Following the violent repression of the national uprising in July of 2018, the U.S. government imposed sanctions on Daniel Ortega, his wife and vice-president Rosario Murillo, and on the country's top police officials.

This month U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken called upon Ortega to release the presidential candidates and other opposition leaders as he announced new sanctions against members of the Ortega government and family, including on the president's daughter Camila Ortega Murillo. These U.S. Treasury Department sanctions affect only the thirty or so individuals who have been named and

do not affect the Nicaraguan population as a whole.

“As these sanctions demonstrate, there are costs for those who support or carry out the Ortega regime’s repression,” said Blinken. “The United States will continue to use all diplomatic and economic tools at our disposal to support Nicaraguans’ calls for greater freedom and accountability as well as free and fair elections.”

We know the U.S. government is less interested in elections and democracy than it is in maintaining its role as the dominant power in the Western Hemisphere and that its real concern is that the Ortega government has created instability in a small but strategic corner of the empire. Such instability could lead either to popular rebellion and a left-of-center government or to great-power foreign involvement from Russia or China, neither of which does the United States want.

Since his election in 2007, Ortega has sought a counterweight to U.S. power by strengthening ties to Russia, supporting Russia’s seizure of Crimea from Ukraine in March of 2014 and hosting a visit by Russian President Vladimir Putin in July of that year. Russia has also been rearming Nicaragua and training the Nicaraguan military both in Russian military schools and in Nicaragua.

Then there is China, whose influence has waned. In 2013, Ortega pushed through the National Assembly a plan for a transoceanic canal to be built by the HK Nicaragua Canal Development Investment Group (HKND) headed by Chinese businessman Wang Jing. The canal, which was to begin operations last year, has been a total fiasco and some have called it a scam intended to boost the image of Ortega and to enrich him and his friends. It was farmers’ and environmentalists’ protests against the canal that led to some of the first large public protests against Ortega. The canal seems to have been abandoned in 2017.

In any case, it is clear that, as the editors of *Against the Current* recently wrote, with President Joseph Biden “Empire is Back,” and his administration may take advantage of the current Nicaraguan situation to assert greater influence. This would likely happen in alliance with the Nicaraguan capitalist class as represented by the Superior Council of Private Enterprise (Cosep) though it would also require brokering by the Catholic Church. No doubt the U.S. State Department and the CIA are already looking for Nicaraguan leaders that they can entice or suborn in order to create a safe capitalist opposition that might help to facilitate the fall of Ortega and his flight with his family to some friendly state.

What Should the Left Do?

We in the U.S. and the international left, while avoiding any ties to the U.S. government and demanding that it keep its hands off, should place ourselves on the side of the movements for democracy in Nicaragua. Unidad Nacional Azul y Blanco that was created in October 2018 has formed the broad umbrella organization of the opposition, but it has been dominated by conservative business elements. The somewhat more left-leaning and activist Articulación de Movimientos Sociales, which brought together students, peasants, social movements, feminists, the indigenous and business groups, proved unsuccessful in providing an alternative. Azul y Blanco has understandably been focused on the elections with the goal of ousting Ortega.

Nicaraguan working people—mostly agricultural workers and government employees, but also some miners and industrial workers, as well as the urban and rural poor—have not succeeded in creating their own political movement or party. The FSLN, which attempted from above to turn itself into such a party in the 1980s, became in the 1990s and 2000s simply an electoral machine. Without independent labor unions and facing severe repression since 2018, it has been virtually impossible to create a political presence for working people.

The left in Nicaragua is extremely weak. The FSLN's leftwing members resigned one after another during the 1990s and 2000s, forming opposition groups such as the MRS, the Sandinista Renovation Movement and the MPRS, Movement for the Rescue of Sandinismo. These groups, having rejected Ortega and the FSLN's authoritarianism, tended to adopt social democratic policies, though there were some radicals within them. They failed, however, to establish a base among Nicaragua's working people and the poor. Nevertheless, their leaders such as Dora María Téllez and Hugo Torres—now both arrested—kept alive both the struggle for democracy and for a more progressive society.

During the upheaval of 2018, some university students involved in the protests in support of the elderly concerned about a social security reform, and then after the initial police killings of students in the national protests, became interested in socialism in one form or another. So far, however, with some forced into exile and others facing the regime's repression, they have been unable to create an independent party. No doubt the current struggles will create new opposition groups and some of them may become socialist.

We should reject the argument made by some on the left that we have to support the dictator Ortega and his government because the United States is now opposed to it. We on the left should be opposed to both the United States and to the Ortega dictatorship. We in the U.S. left, while supporting the general movement for political democracy and civil rights, should seek to identify and to work with emerging socialist groups in Nicaragua and with workers, feminists, LGBT activists, environmentalists and others. As international socialists, we stand with all movements for democracy, civil rights, and for socialism.

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