

Nicaragua - Statement on the Situation of the Universities and the Central American University

September 5, 2023



Students protest the government takeover of the University of Central America by the Nicaraguan government.

August 21, 2023 -The cry of alarm of academics, teachers and university workers (including CETRI - Tricontinental Center*) in the face of the new escalation of the offensive of the Ortega-Murillo regime against Nicaraguan universities. *First signatories below.*

As academics, teachers and university workers, we would like to make public our deep concern at the alarming news reaching us from Nicaragua that shows a new escalation of the offensive that the Ortega-Murillo regime has launched against Nicaraguan universities.

Since the end of 2020, taking advantage of reforms to the General Law on Education and the Law on the Autonomy of Higher Education Institutions, more than 26 universities have been closed and their property confiscated. Together with the assets of some of these universities, new public universities were created without following the procedures established for this purpose, which aggravated the situation of confusion and anxiety for students that already existed in the country's higher education subsystem. This time, a new threshold has been crossed in the actions carried out for years to threaten, weaken, isolate and finally close one of the most important universities in the country, the *Universidad Centroamericana (UCA)*.

As reported by the Central American Province of the Society of Jesus in a statement dated August 16, 2023, “the *serious accusations brought against the UCA in the official notice issued by the Tenth Criminal Court of the District of Managua on August 15, 2023, in which it is described as a ‘center of terrorism’ and accused of having ‘betrayed the trust of the Nicaraguan people’ and of having ‘transgressed the constitutional order, the legal order and the order governing the country’s institutions of higher education’ are absurd and deceptive.* We share this view all the more because no fair and independent judicial body has presented evidence to support these accusations.

On the basis of these accusations, the order was given to freeze bank accounts, expropriate property and the *de facto* takeover by the National Council of Universities (CNU), which has become the state organ of repression and submission of universities to absolute political control. Not content with disrespectfully and irresponsibly endorsing *the extinction* of the UCA, the CNU rushed to appoint new authorities to run the university without the support or agreement of the UCA academic community.

In its 63 years of existence, UCA has become one of Nicaragua’s leading and even the leading university and is considered a model of the kind of university that should be established in poor countries with poor education systems, weak democracies and development models based on extractivism and the supply of cheap labour. UCA has demonstrated that it is possible to provide quality higher education to all sectors of the population and to contribute to the creation of a truly humane and sustainable development model.

Since its foundation in 1960, UCA has contributed to the development of science and research at national and international level, offering young people and professionals a comprehensive academic training with criteria of excellence and based on humanistic values. This vision led this institution to become a space for open debate and promotion of social and political rights during the years of the Somoza dictatorship.

During the 1980s, the UCA preserved its founding principles and maintained a relationship of respect with the new authorities, while some of the decisions taken by the higher education governing bodies of the time had undermined the structure and functioning of the UCA. Since its inception, the UCA has been the headquarters and actively supported the work of the Nicaraguan Academy of Sciences, which never received state support and was eventually closed along with thousands of other civil non-profit organizations.

Through its research and social intervention centres and institutes, UCA has invested in areas such as education, sustainable development, regional history, science and has provided social services such as legal advice and psychological support, both to the educational community and to society at large.

It also played an important role in the processes of dialogue, promotion of peace and recognition of multiculturalism after the armed conflict of the 1980s. Its rector had been invited, with the agreement of Daniel Ortega’s government, to participate in the search for a peaceful solution to the serious socio-political crisis that erupted in April 2018.

In 2010, the *World University Ranking*, published annually by the Spanish National Research Council, ranked the Central American University of Nicaragua first among the 52 institutions and centers of higher education operating in Nicaragua. It is also among the top ten on the long list of universities in Central America.

In 2012, UCA achieved another important academic recognition when it was included by the *Quacquarelli Symonds* (QS) ranking in the list of 250 institutions considered the most prestigious

centers of higher education in the Latin American region, where more than 7,000 higher education institutions operate, of which nearly 2,000 are universities. UCA is the only Nicaraguan university to be included in this list. Throughout its history, UCA has been an internationally recognized space for knowledge production, connected to different international networks that connect academic centers in Latin America, North America, Europe and Asia.

All of the above highlights the intentions of the Ortega-Murillo regime to close all spaces that encourage critical thinking, the free exchange of ideas and informed debate on issues of concern to the country. Ortega's plan to establish a dynastic dictatorship in Nicaragua, equal to or worse than those that plunged Latin American countries into pain and doldrums for many decades, is no longer in doubt. Free and autonomous universities have no place in this project and that is why they want to destroy the UCA.

As academics, Nicaraguans or from other countries, we, who have had the privilege of knowing and working with colleagues of the UCA or who know its trajectory, because it has been an example for those who want to build free educational institutions committed to the future of our countries, we want to make our protest heard against what is currently happening in Nicaragua and we call on university organizations, rectors' conferences, professors and students from all over the world, men and women who love justice, peace and freedom, to condemn the Ortega-Murillo regime for its senseless attacks on Nicaraguan universities.

We support and take up the requests of the Central American Province of the Society of Jesus addressed to the Ortega-Murillo regime:

that the severe, abrupt and unjust measure adopted by "justice" be immediately annulled and corrected;2. an end to the growing government aggression against the University and its members;3. that a rational solution be sought in which truth, justice, dialogue and the defence of academic freedom prevail.

Given the arrogant and disrespectful manner in which the CNU-appointed authorities presented themselves on the UCA campus, we demand respect for the physical integrity and freedom of all UCA staff. We demand respect for the job stability of all academic and administrative staff and the prompt delivery of academic records to all students who request them.

We call on the international academic community to be attentive to the events in Nicaragua, to raise their voices in protest and to express their solidarity with the UCA through concrete actions.

Today, more than ever, the motto with which Dr. Mariano Fiallos Gil, "father of university autonomy" in Nicaragua, undertook the struggle for the autonomy of universities and for their transformation into institutions committed to the nation that welcomes and supports them must be heard:

"FOR THE FREEDOM OF THE UNIVERSITY".

University centres, groups and collectives

Institute of Regional Studies of the University of Antioquia (Colombia)

Institute of Social and Human Sciences of the Rafael Landívar University (Guatemala)

Institute for Development Policy, University of Antwerp, Belgium

Institut de Hautes Études de l'Amérique latine (IHEAL), Université Sorbonne Nouvelle

Working Group of the Latin American Social Science Council (CLACSO) "Gender, (in)equality and rights in tension"

CLACSO Working Group "Borders, Regionalisation and Globalisation"

CLACSO Working Group "Political Ecology(s) from the South / Abya-Yala

University of the Land of Puebla (Mexico)

Utopía Collective, Puebla (Mexico)

Geobrujas - Community of Geographers, Mexico City (Mexico)

Latin American Institute for the Study of Peace and Citizen Coexistence (ILEPAZ), Mexico City, Mexico

Initiatives of Bridges for Students of Nicaragua (IPEN), Costa Rica

Flora Tristan Centre for the Study and Promotion of Gender Equality, National University of Misiones (Argentina)

Alba Sud, Barcelona

Aula abierta, NGO for the defense of universities in Latin America

Association of World Citizens (AWC)

Tricontinental Centre - CETRI (Belgium)

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