

# Nicaragua's Popular Rebellion Stopped—For Now

August 1, 2018



*What is the state of the popular rebellion in Nicaragua? What brought about the rebellion? Who is involved in the rebellion? Who are the most important national and international actors? And what is the nature of the Left's debate over Nicaragua?*

President Daniel Ortega's government has succeeded—for now—in stopping the Nicaragua's popular rebellion after four months of the most severe repression, including killings, kidnappings, and torture of the regime's opponents by both the police and paramilitary forces.

During the months of June and July the Ortega government dispatched police and paramilitary forces to take the university campuses, towns and cities such as Masaya, and Managua neighborhoods held by the opposition, killing dozens of people, kidnapping others, wounding scores, and arresting and torturing many. The best estimate is that more than 300 have been killed and thousands wounded, but no hard numbers are available.[1] Ortega's renewed offensive against what were at first largely peaceful protestors has succeeded for the moment in paralyzing the opposition, though the country continues to seethe.

During the last few months, in addition to violence, Ortega used a variety of other tactics to defeat the movement. To combat the business class with which he has collaborated since the 1990s, Ortega—who through three recent presidential terms had no interest in land redistribution—sent his followers to seize and occupy some lands held by his wealthy opponents, most of whom make their money in agriculture. Ortega also lashed out at the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, with which he had an alliance for many years, but which is now on his enemies list because of its support for the opposition. He has called Nicaraguan Catholic leaders co-conspirators in a “coup” aimed at overthrowing him.

Ordinary citizens and working people who joined the democratic protests and then what became a popular and peaceful rebellion are being fired from government jobs, and a number have been arrested, accused of “terrorism,” and jailed. For example, doctors and professors of medicine in the public universities and hospitals are being fired for participating in anti-government protests. The students who were among the first to protest have born the brunt of the violence throughout, dozens being killed, wounded, or tortured. As former Sandinista Oscar René Vargas put it, “The government

is trying to decapitate the social movements by arresting local leaders and anyone who has criticized the [government's] violence against the people." We are in the "Pinochet phase of the regime,"[2] he said referring to the military dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet of Chile from 1973-90, who imprisoned and murdered hundreds of leftists associated with the former government of Salvador Allende, which was overthrown by the 1973 coup that Pinochet led. There could hardly be a stronger condemnation of a government by a Latin American leftist.

Following up on the months of violence and the suppression of the opposition, as the government's mopping up operation against its opponents went on, Ortega used the July 19 anniversary celebration of the 1979 revolution against the Somoza dynastic dictatorship to mobilize his supporters, though many attended out of fear of being fired from government jobs or attacked by his paramilitary forces. In reality, Ortega's masked paramilitary thugs—whom he refers to as "voluntary police"—have become for the moment his principal source of power. As in so many other parts of the world, we now have government by a dictator and his gangsters. Still, most Nicaraguans appear to remain opposed to Ortega and the government's repression of the rebellion. The recent events have created a whole series of economic, social, and political problems—interruption of agricultural production, the collapse of tourism, and international condemnation of the regime—that will not easily be resolved. The popular rebellion may only have been a rehearsal for a revolution, but only time will answer that.

### **The Ortega Regime: Neoliberal Dictatorship**

How did things get to this point? The Daniel Ortega government, as I have explained in my book *What Went Wrong? The Nicaraguan Revolution: A Marxist Analysis*, has its roots in the revolution of 1979 that overthrew the Somoza dynasty. Modeling themselves on Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, and the Cuban Revolution, Ortega and the other leaders of the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN) who overthrew the Somoza dictatorship wanted to create a new one-party state that controlled absolutely both politics and the national economy, but both the U.S.-backed *Contra* (counter-revolutionary) war against the FSLN government and divisions within Nicaraguan society made that impossible.

The threat from the United States of continued war drove Nicaraguans in 1990 to vote for the opposition coalition of Violeta Chamorro, who became president. Daniel Ortega first formed an alliance with Chamorro's son-in-law Antonio Lacayo, and then gradually made peace and then formed a de facto partnership with Nicaragua's corrupt Liberal and Conservative parties, with the country's capitalist class, and with the rightwing head of the Catholic hierarchy, Miguel Obando y Bravo. From the 1990 election until 2006, Daniel Ortega and his conservative allies were the powers behind the throne, wielding enormous power during the presidencies of rightwingers Arnoldo Alemán and Enrique Bolaños.

Finally in 2006 Ortega succeeded in winning election to the presidency once again (he had served as president during the war in the 1980s). He consolidated his hold on the government, taking control not only of the presidency, but also of the legislature, and the Supreme Court, as well as controlling social organizations and NGOs, and buying up television stations. Ortega imposed neoliberal economic policies aimed at attracting and maintaining domestic, U.S. and other foreign investment by suppressing maquiladora labor unions and keeping wages low. Nicaragua became integrated into the U.S.-dominated North American economy, selling half its products to the United States. At the same time, Ortega established a partnership with the U.S. government, collaborating with the U.S. military, U.S. Navy, and the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency. Nicaraguan continued to be dependent upon U.S., Venezuelan, and other international aid, but still remained one of the poorest countries in Latin America. Changes were made in the Constitution to permit Ortega to run for a third consecutive term, and with the traditional political tools of fear and favors, he won election again in

2011 and then 2016 with his wife Rosario Murillo as his vice-presidential running mate.

## **The Resistance**

Ortega had for years harassed his political opponents, sending his FSLN thugs to beat them when they campaigned against his party. He also worked to discredit and to destroy independent social movements, especially the feminist movement. Large-scale opposition to Ortega began in 2014 with his plan to build an interoceanic canal financed by a Chinese capitalist. Farmers and environmentalists began to protest against the canal; on several occasions police confronted and beat some of them. When in April of this year Ortega announced a reform of social security, both business groups and pensioners objected, and the latter took to the streets to protest. When the elderly protestors were pushed around by police, students came out to join them. Ortega's forces then shot some of the students, and a few weeks later when mourning mothers led the Mother's Day demonstration, Ortega's police and paramilitary fired on them too. The Catholic Church attempted to organize a national dialogue, but Ortega stonewalled the discussions, while the opposition had become intransigent in its demand that he and his wife-vice-president step down.

The Nicaraguan popular rebellion of this spring and early summer developed as a broad multi-class movement—students, retirees, farmers, working people and businesspeople, religious and lay people—a broad democratic movement that lacked a common political program. The strongest organization with the clearest political ideas—fundamentally conservative, pro-capitalist ideas—is COSEP (Consejo Superior de la Empresa Privada en Nicaragua), the leading business organization. The Catholic Church is also powerful, though it is historically divided into the conservative hierarchy, a theology of liberation current led by some university professors and parish priests, and the mass of pious believers. Students created several organizations, but they have had a tenuous existence because of the government persecution of student activists. Now it seems that some students have begun to sort themselves out politically and a student “left” could be emerging,[3] though exactly what they think is still not clear. The farmers' movement has been largely limited to those fighting to defend lands directly affected by the proposed transoceanic canal.

There do exist social movements—environmentalists and feminists—among the educated middle class, but because of government persecution over the last decade or more, they remain small and marginal to the society as a whole. Because Ortega's FSLN controlled the industrial and agricultural unions, there is virtually no independent labor movement. While there is no independent working class movement, working people have been very active in the opposition movement. Two left opposition groups with social democratic politics do exist, the Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS) and the Movement to Rescue Sandinismo (MPRS), both of which broke with Ortega and the FSLN years ago, but they never succeeded in finding a following among the increasingly alienated and politically apathetic public. And because Ortega's FSLN has discredited the idea of socialism and repressed rival democratic socialist currents, it is not surprising that aside from the MRS and the MPRS there is no left to speak of in the movement. The result is that the popular rebellion has been a democratic movement fighting against dictatorship, but its constituent members have failed to create clear political programs. There is, however, the possibility that the democratic struggle could open up a social struggle that would create a new left, while in any case many believe that even a more democratic bourgeois regime would be superior to Ortega's dictatorship.

The popular rebellion's activists occupied university campuses, barricaded themselves in Managua neighborhoods, and fortified their villages and towns. Opponents set up something like 150 roadblocks throughout the country, bringing the economy to a virtual halt. They also organized at least two general strikes that paralyzed the country for a day or more. Whenever possible they took to the streets again and again in massive protest demonstrations against the government, marching even as sharpshooters fired on them, killing dozens. Attacked by the police and paramilitaries, some

opponents fabricated weapons or took them from the police and fought back. So the violence continued until Ortega's police and paramilitaries eventually succeeded in stopping if not entirely eradicating the largely peaceful rebellion.[4]

## **International Actors**

The popular rebellion and its violent suppression, which had interrupted the economies of all of Central America and raised the specter of revolution or reaction, led international actors to become involved. The United States government, which has dominated the Caribbean and Central America since 1900 or earlier had been happy enough with Ortega until quite recently. U.S. organizations such as USAID and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), and no doubt the CIA had for decades, of course, worked in Nicaragua as they do everywhere in the world. It would take a few months, however, before President Donald J. Trump's State Department began to see the rebellion against Ortega as an opportunity perhaps to establish an even more pliant government, though it did so gradually and cautiously.

In May, messaging on Twitter, Vice-President Mike Pence condemned the Nicaraguan government's violence, but only demanded that the Ortega government protect its citizens and their rights.[5] Speaking at the Organization of American States on June 4, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said:

In Nicaragua police and government-controlled armed groups have killed dozens, merely for peacefully protesting. I echo what Vice President Pence said in this very building on May 7th: "We join with nations around the world in demanding that Ortega Government [respond] to the Nicaraguan people's demands for the democratic reform and hold accountable those responsible for violence." The United States supports the work of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and what it is doing in Nicaragua, and strongly urges the Nicaraguan Government to implement the recommendations issued by the commission this past May 21st.[6]

Still there was no general condemnation of the Ortega government, only a call for reform. The United States appeared to support the call made by Nicaraguan business and the Church for early elections.

Ironically the Trump administration behaves as if it were a defender of democracy and freedom. Trump's government issued a general condemnation of the regime did not come until late July, and even then simply called for an end to violence, for dialogue, and for fair elections:

The United States strongly condemns the ongoing violence in Nicaragua and human rights abuses committed by the Ortega regime in response to protests. After years of fraudulent elections and the regime's manipulation of Nicaraguan law - as well as the suppression of civil society, opposition parties, and independent media - the Nicaraguan people have taken to the streets to call for democratic reforms. These demands have been met with indiscriminate violence, with more than 350 dead, thousands injured, and hundreds of citizens falsely labeled "coup-mongers" and "terrorists" who have been jailed, tortured, or who have gone missing. President Ortega and Vice President Murillo are ultimately responsible for the pro-government parapolice that have brutalized their own people.

The United States stands with the people of Nicaragua, including members of the Sandinista party, who are calling for democratic reforms and an end to the violence. Free, fair, and transparent elections are the only avenue toward restoring democracy in Nicaragua. We support the Catholic Church-led National Dialogue process for good faith negotiations.[7]

The Trump administration limited sanctions to personal sanctions against Ortega, Murillo, and Francisco Díaz, head of the national police,[8] and to a revocation of the visas of Nicaraguan government officials and their families.[9]

While the Trump administration's public statements remained mild, there is no doubt that the U.S. State Department, Republican Senators and Representatives, and rightwing organizations were deepening their contacts with conservative elements in Nicaragua and exploring political alternatives to the continued rule of Ortega. The Republicans put forward and the U.S. House of Representatives passed a resolution criticizing the Ortega government.[10] Republican members of Congress invited Nicaraguan students to meet with them in Washington while the students were there to speak before international organizations and human rights groups. All of this is, of course, standard practice of the U.S. government, which works everywhere in the Americas (and for that matter throughout the world) to shape international developments, even if it did not initiate them and cannot control them.

In response to the U.S. government's pressure, Daniel Ortega gave an interview to Fox News, the one TV channel that Donald Trump always watches, no doubt with the goal of speaking directly to the U.S. president.[11] Ortega denied that the government had been violently repressing its citizens and claimed that on the contrary it was the popular rebellion that had unleashed the violence and attacked "Sandinista families." Historian Alejandro Bendaña suggested that Ortega's goal was to convince Trump that if his government fell there would be chaos in Nicaragua and possibly more migrants to the United States. Trump, however, did not tweet any response to Ortega.[12]

The Organization of American States (OAS) debated Nicaragua and passed a resolution, sponsored by the United States and several Latin American nations, that similarly called on the government to protect its citizens, to enter into dialogue, and to hold early elections.[13] The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights issued on July 17 a very strong condemnation of the Nicaraguan government together with specific details of human rights violations and demanded that the government follow international law and protect its citizens. (I urge readers to consult the statement via the link in the footnotes).[14] Members of the European Parliament passed a non-legislative resolution on May 31 denouncing "the decline in democracy and the rule of law in Nicaragua over the last decade, as well as increased corruption, often involving relatives of President Daniel Ortega." The resolution passed by 536 votes to 39, with 53 abstentions.[15]

The United States worked to coordinate the international responses to the Nicaraguan crisis, but it appeared to aim principally at a gradual transition through early elections.[16] Early elections would give the United States time to work with conservative parties and business groups in Nicaragua to construct a political coalition and find a conservative candidate for president who would serve U.S. interests. The aims of the Nicaraguan business class, the Church hierarchy, and the United States government happen to coincide, but they do not represent the interests of the students, pensioners, farmers, environmentalists and feminists, and working people fighting for democracy.

### **The Popular Rebellion and the Left**

The Nicaraguan popular rebellion has been the subject of a debate between the democratic left, which has supported it, and the neo-Stalinist left, which has backed the dictator Ortega. Kevin Zeese and Max Blumenthal wrote many articles, sent many tweets, and gave many interviews in which they alleged that the United States had orchestrated an attempted coup in Nicaragua. They and other authors like them offered as evidence the historical record of U.S. imperialism in Latin America (which is indisputable) and the long-term and well-known role of U.S. agencies such as USAID and NED in attempting to strengthen conservative forces, and they quoted the words or rightwing Republican representatives and suggested with no actual proof the existence of a CIA plot. What

they did not do was discuss the actual nature of the Ortega government and its authoritarian and conservative policies; in fact they seemed to know little about recent Nicaraguan developments.[17]

Many of my generation, the generation of 1968, who supported the Nicaraguan revolution of 1979 (as I did), may have found these arguments appealing, reflecting as they did the situation forty years ago, but not only do they have little factual or logical merit, but they are based on a specious reasoning that denigrates ordinary people and idolizes strongmen. Such arguments are based upon three fundamental suppositions:

1) Nicaraguans and other Latin Americans cannot have legitimate grievances against the “Leftists” governments and would in any case be incapable of creating their own movement, so they must be manipulated by some other force;

2) the United States masterminds and controls all political developments in Latin America from Argentina and Brazil to Venezuela and Nicaragua, and it is the real force behind any apparent popular opposition;

3) existing “anti-imperialist” governments (Russia, Syria, Nicaragua), whatever their character, must be supported against the world’s only imperialist nation, the United States.

These arguments can only appeal to those who have no understanding of the complexity of international political developments, of a world where, for example, people can organize themselves, a left can develop critical of a so-called leftist government, and the United States, powerful as it is, cannot always call the shots. That these authors provide shameful support for an authoritarian, capitalist government murdering hundreds and wounding thousands of its citizens is not surprising, given their support for Vladimir Putin’s regime in Russia, Iran’s theocratic dictatorship, and Assad’s dictatorship in Syria. Zeese and Blumenthal represent what writer Rohini Hensman has called a neo-Stalinist current that came out of the left but now has little that is even vaguely leftist about it.[18]

Fortunately, the international democratic left has rallied in defense of the Nicaraguan people’s rebellion. Noam Chomsky spoke out against Ortega’s “authoritarian” government on Democracy Now.[19] Dozens of leftist intellectuals and political activists principally from Europe and Latin America signed a statement strongly condemning the Ortega governments and containing these demands:

The unconditional release of all political prisoners; the transfer of information from the authorities to human rights organizations about the real situation of the persons declared missing; disarmament of the paramilitary army organized by Ortega and his government; an independent international investigation into the various forms and facets of repression, with appropriate sanctions; the constitution of a transitional government — with a limited mandate, — leading to free elections; and the end of the Ortega-Murillo government.[20]

The international democratic and revolutionary left by and large shares the view presented in this article, that Nicaragua has experienced a popular rebellion against a dictator, and that the Ortega government should be condemned and the popular movement supported.

## **Conclusion**

While the popular rebellion developed in their homeland, many Nicaraguans rallied to support it, but now some fear that that solidarity with their compatriots may put them in danger. There are 5,300 Nicaraguans living in the United States who have Temporary Protective Status (TPS), which provides them with temporary residence and work authorization. The Trump administration plans to

end TPS for Nicaraguans in January 2019. If Nicaraguans return to their country in January 2019, all of them will face a potentially dangerous situation. Some who have been supporting the rebellion from here may also face reprisals when they return, which, based on recent experience, might include imprisonment, torture, or worse. We as socialists should support the Nicaraguan community in the United States should it call for an extension of Nicaraguan TPS.

The first stage of the Nicaraguan popular rebellion of 2018 has ended, and whether or not there will be a second stage depends upon many factors: Ortega's ability to keep the movement down, the ability of the movement to regroup and reorganize, the role of the U.S. government in attempting to shape a new government to its liking, and our ability to show solidarity with the Nicaraguan popular movement. Our positions should be clear:

Ortega must go. The U.S. must keep out. The popular movement must be supported.

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[1] Reports of the repression can be found at the Nicaraguan Human Rights Center at: <https://www.cenidh.org/>; at the Amnesty International site searching Nicaragua: <https://www.amnestyusa.org/search/Nicaragua/>; at the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) at: <http://www.oas.org/en/iachr/reports/pdfs/Nicaragua2018-en.pdf>

[2] Lucia Navas, "Oscar René Vargas: regimen pasa "a fase pinochetista" contra protesta," *La Prensa*,  
<https://www.laprensa.com.ni/2018/07/27/politica/2453383-oscar-rene-vargas-regimen-pasa-fase-pinochetista-contra-protesta>

[3] Lori Hanson and Miguel Gomez, "Deciphering the Nicaraguan Student Uprising/ Descifrando el levantamiento estudiantil nicaragüense," *NACLA* (website), at:  
<https://nacla.org/news/2018/07/03/deciphering-nicaraguan-student-uprising-descifrando-el-levantamiento-estudiantil>

[4] I have discussed this in other articles-<http://newpol.orgsupport-popular-rebellion-nicaragua-%E2%80%93-oppose-us-intervention> and <http://newpol.orgnicaragua-where-rebellion-going> and <http://newpol.orgare-we-eve-another-nicaraguan-revolution-and> most important in this article which is a kind of summary of my book:  
<http://newpol.orgdaniel-ortega-nicaraguas-nov-6-election-and-betrayal-revolution>

[5] Pence on Twitter at: <https://twitter.com/vp/status/1002312027598217216?lang=en>

[6] U.S. State Department, "Remarks at the General Assembly of the OAS," at:  
<https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2018/06/282938.htm>

[7] “Statement of the Press Secretary on Nicaragua, at:  
<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-press-secretary-nicaragua-2/>

[8] Catie Edmondson, “U.S. Imposes Sanctions on 3 Top Nicaraguan Officials After Violent Crackdown,” *New York Times*, at:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/05/us/politics/us-nicaragua-sanctions.html>

[9]  
<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nicaragua-protests-usa/us-revokes-visas-of-nicaragua-officials-over-violence-against-protesters-idUSKBN1KK1OW>

[10] House Foreign Affairs Committee, “House Condemns Ortega Regime’s Violence in Nicaragua,” at:  
<https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/press-release/house-condemns-ortega-regimes-violence-in-nicaragua/>

[11] “Daniel Ortega on Fox News” at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y7Oxprcai-g>

[12] Alejandro Bendaña on Esta Noche, at:  
<https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/#search/fred+murphy+watch/164d2a13cd9c3a5b?projector=1>

[13] OAS statement on Nicaragua at:  
[http://www.oas.org/en/media\\_center/press\\_release.asp?sCodigo=E-048/18](http://www.oas.org/en/media_center/press_release.asp?sCodigo=E-048/18) This was the vote: The resolution was approved with 21 votes in favor (Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, United States, Guatemala, Guyana, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Dominican Republic, Saint Lucia, Uruguay, Antigua and Barbuda, Argentina, The Bahamas, Brazil, Canada, Chile), 3 against (Nicaragua, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Venezuela), 7 abstentions (El Salvador, Grenada, Haiti, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, Belize) and three absences (Dominica, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Bolivia).

[14] UN High Commissioner for Human Rights statement on Nicaragua at:  
<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=23383&LangID=E>

[15] EU Parliament News, “Nicaragua: MEPs condemn brutal repression and demand elections,” at:  
<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20180524IPR04239/nicaragua-meps-condemn-brutal-repression-and-demand-elections>

[16] “U.S. Calls for Early elections in Nicaragua,” at:  
<https://www.univision.com/univision-news/latin-america/us-calls-for-early-elections-in-nicaragua-as-national-dialogue-awaits-ortegas-response>

[17] Zeese and Blumenthal’s articles, interviews, and tweets can be found by searching their last names together with Nicaragua in Google. While they wrote much



[18] Rohini Hensman, *Indefensible: Democracy, Counterrevolution, and the Rhetoric of Anti-Imperialism* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2018).

[19] Chomsky, Democracy Now, at:  
[https://www.democracynow.org/2018/7/27/chomsky\\_criticizes\\_autocratic\\_nicaraguan\\_government\\_urls](https://www.democracynow.org/2018/7/27/chomsky_criticizes_autocratic_nicaraguan_government_urls)

[20] "Standing Against State Violence in Nicaragua," *Socialist Worker*, July 30, at:  
<https://socialistworker.org/2018/07/30/standing-against-state-violence-in-nicaragua>