



## Understanding Protests, Repression, and the Need for a Revival of Democracy in Nicaragua

Mateo Jarquin, Chapman University

Starting in late April of 2018, the small Central American country Nicaragua entered the media spotlight as massive street protests rocked the decade-long authoritarian regime of President Daniel Ortega. Brutal government repression has **killed over 200** and led to **intensified calls** for Ortega to step down. Although nobody could have predicted the precise timing of this uprising, unrest was inevitable given the closing-off of all political avenues for change in the country. My research suggests that a transition to democracy is the only viable solution to the present crisis and indicates why and how the international community should help.

### The Beginning of the End for the Ortega Regime?

University students first took to the streets to protest cuts to social security programs. Until recently, the government relied on generous Venezuelan aid to co-opt elite allies and finance social programs. Slightly deteriorating economic conditions forced the government to reduce spending across the board. Media censorship and brutal repression soon turned a localized tax protest into a full-blown, spontaneously organized popular rebellion. Even after the government backtracked on pension cuts, the unrest intensified because Mr. Ortega has been sowing the seeds of the present discord since his return to power in 2007. For the past 11 years, he has co-opted all branches of government, personalized the country's institutions and security forces, and re-elected himself through a sham electoral system after abolishing constitutional term limits. He started to groom his children for future leadership roles, and in 2017 installed his wife, Rosario Murillo, as vice president.

During the 1980s, Ortega was a key figure in the revolutionary government of the Sandinista National Liberation Front. The Sandinista period, which was defined by socialist-leaning policies and civil war with United States-backed "Contra" rebels, ended in 1990 with free elections and a transition to democracy. While he was once a self-proclaimed Marxist revolutionary who cultivated support from workers, progressive social movement leaders, and intellectuals, Ortega has recently adapted to the electoral era by abandoning leftist politics and seeking alliances with the business elite and conservative religious leaders. Until the current turmoil, business and religious leaders supported and legitimized the regime in the name of social peace and economic stability. Nicaragua has been one of the most stable and fastest-growing (in terms of Gross Domestic Product) countries in the region – relatively free of the gang violence and drugs that have plagued other Central American nations. Nevertheless, the price has been too high.

Nicaraguan history shows why the new autocratic model is doomed to fail. During the 20th century, three successive dictators from the Somoza family systematically violated human rights and used their state control to enrich themselves and their cronies. In one of the poorest and most unequal countries in the hemisphere, Nicaragua's traditional elites acquiesced to dictatorships that enforced stability and implemented economic policies favorable to their interests.

This Somoza-era bargain, which Ortega has studiously emulated, turned out to be a recipe for tragedy. The U.S.-backed military dictatorship *did* bring four decades of relative peace, but when Nicaraguans decided that they had enough, they saw no other way out but its violent overthrow.

Confronted with an insurrectionary population, Anastasio Somoza Debayle – the last of his clan – refused to resign, opting instead to hold on via brute force. In the run-up to his overthrow in July 1979, roughly 40,000 Nicaraguans lost their lives.

Today, in order to avoid further bloodshed, Mr. Ortega and Ms. Murillo must face the fact that any sustainable solution to this crisis must end their hopes of establishing another dynastic dictatorship. Just as it was under Somoza, authoritarianism has proved to be the *cause* of instability, rather than a guarantee of social peace and economic growth.

## **Why the International Community Must Propel an Immediate Return to Democracy**

The international community has an interest in a stable Central America. Chaos and further impoverishment would invite the spread of drug-trafficking and gang-related violence into Nicaragua from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. Endemic violence in those countries has not just posed a challenge to governance; it has also been cited as the main driver of emigration to the United States.

International actors should base their decisions on the understanding that durable stability in Nicaragua can only be sustained through democratic governance and respect for civil liberties. They should demand that any talks arising from the crisis be geared toward early elections monitored by international observers. As a pre-condition, they should also demand the immediate end of state violence and accountability for its perpetrators at the highest-level. In the long-run, the international community should encourage Nicaraguan policies aimed at reducing the stark socio-economic inequalities which have historically allowed authoritarian leaders to run the country by simply cutting deals with the country's capitalist class.

International engagement to these ends should be multilateral and, whenever reasonable, involve two-way streets. Suspension of aid and threat of sanctions by the United States has failed to shake the Ortega regime's foundations. Moreover, one-way pressure may backfire by providing fodder for Ortega, who has thrived on anti-imperialist sentiment and rhetoric in the past. Instead of unilateral pressures from the United States, multilateral hemispheric organizations like the Organization of American States and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights should take a leading role in pressing for and facilitating a democratic transition in Nicaragua.

Before his military overthrow in June 1979, the Somoza government was condemned in a resolution from the Organization of American States that also legitimized a transitional government in Nicaragua. A decade later, the Esquipulas Peace Accords ended armed conflict in Central America when its countries agreed to simultaneously hold free elections and revise their constitutions. These past episodes show that multilateral approaches can work. They also reveal that just as the "Third Wave" of democratization was contagious years ago, so too can present-day authoritarianism spread like a virus if dictatorships are allowed to remain in power. If it is concerned with democracy elsewhere in Latin America, the international community should act now to ensure a positive outcome in Nicaragua.

**Read more in Mateo Cayetano Jarquín "Red Christmases: the Sandinistas, Indigenous Rebellion, and the Origins of the Nicaraguan Civil War, 1981–82" *Cold War History* 18, no. 1, (2018): 91-107 and Mateo Jarquín Chamorro, "The Beginning of the End for Ortega?" *The New York Times*, April 26, 2018.**