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Nicaragua

# After Bogus Nicaraguan Election, Daniel Ortega Remains Dictator

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**Having arrested and jailed his most significant rivals weeks before the election, President Daniel Ortega was reelected on November 7 to a fourth consecutive term, his fifth altogether, with 75 percent of the vote, according to Nicaraguan election authorities.**

Nicaragua exiles in coordinated protests last weekend held in cities in the United States, Latin America and Europe condemned the elections as “a fraud,” demanded “freedom for political prisoners,” and called for an end to “the Ortega-Murillo dictatorship,” referring to Ortega’s wife and vice-president Rosario Murillo. The European Union unanimously condemned Ortega’s “systematic incarceration, harassment and intimidation” of opponents, journalists and activists. The authoritarian rulers of Cuba, Venezuela and Russia sent their congratulations.

Ortega claims Nicaragua held fair elections despite domestic traitors and foreign interference. “They didn’t want us to be able to hold these elections,” he said, referring to his opposition candidates and their alleged foreign puppet-masters. “They are demons who don’t want peace for our people and instead opt for slander and disqualifications. Why? So that Nicaragua is embroiled in violence.”

But former leaders of Ortega’s own party called the election a charade. Luis Carrión, a former comandante in the 1979 Revolution, a former cabinet minister, and a leader of the opposition party Unamos, stated shortly before the election: “There will be voting, but no elections, because the people don’t have the freedom to choose a candidate or a party different than Ortega and the FSLN. This is practically a one-party election with foregone results....There will be no surprises because everything has been arranged so that there can be none.”

## Rigging the Election

Beginning in June, Ortega’s government eliminated 10 presidential candidates: seven were arrested, two went into exile to avoid arrest, and one had his legal status as a candidate suspended. Those events led another to resign his candidacy in protest. Only Ortega, the candidate of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), and a few small, satellite parties that represent no threat to him and are willing to cooperate with the electoral farse appeared on the ballot.

The candidates who were arrested span the political spectrum from right to left. Among the candidates arrested is the conservative Cristisana Chamorro, vice-president of La Prensa, the country’s largest newspaper, and daughter of Violeta Chamorro who defeated Daniel Ortega in the 1990 presidential election. One of the party leaders who was jailed is Dora María Tellez, a former FSLN leader, hero of the revolution of 1979, and former minister of health. She was a founder of the left opposition party Unamos. Then on October 21, Ortega arrested two leaders of COSEP, the Nicaraguan business council, president Michael Healey and vice-president Álvaro Vargas. All together 35 opposition political figures had been imprisoned before the election and dozens more were arrested on election day.

Given these circumstances, many Nicaraguans abstained. The country has 4,478,334 eligible voters, of whom, the Nicaraguan government reports, only 1,791,344 voted, while the non-government group Urnas Unidas claims that there were only 828,492 voters; that is, the government says that 60 percent of voters abstained, while Urnas Unidas claims 82% abstained.

Many foreign governments and international organizations denounced the elections before they took place. U.S.

President Joe Biden stated before results were announced that Ortega and Murillo were “no different from the Somoza family,” the former dictators who ruled Nicaragua for decades. Biden said that Ortega had orchestrated a “pantomime election that was neither free nor fair, and most certainly not democratic.”

Following the election Biden signed a new law providing for more sanctions on Nicaragua. Already existing U.S. sanctions imposed by former President Donald Trump’s administration affect Ortega, Murillo, and other high-ranking officials, while U.S. Treasury officials have blocked loans to Nicaragua from the World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), International Monetary Fund (IMF), and other international financial institutions, measures that contribute to impoverishing the Nicaraguan people. Nevertheless, despairing of the possibility of changing the dictatorship, some in the opposition have called for an expansion of U.S. sanctions, though the left opposition, knowing the history of U.S. imperialism in their country, generally does not.

In December, the Nicaraguan National Assembly passed the Law in Defense of the Rights of the People to Independence, Sovereignty and Self-Determination for Peace to exclude from the election people who financed attempts to oust Ortega or who supported sanctions against Nicaraguan government officials. That law and others were used to bring charges against the presidential candidates and parties. Some of those who were arrested have been put under house arrest, others have been put in prison, where their supporters allege that they are being tortured.

“Our opposition was completely beheaded,” says Leonor Zúniga Gutiérrez, a Nicaraguan sociologist and filmmaker. “Our political leaders, all of them, are in prison right now. And we are concerned that our entire leadership might die in jail.”

While Ortega’s government has been authoritarian since he returned to power in 2007, it has now assumed all of the characteristics of a dictatorship. “We are living under a new regime,” says Zuñiga. “New because we no longer have the right to free elections. The right to vote for our leaders has been completely suppressed. Freedom of expression and the freedom of the press don’t exist as a right anymore. And they don’t hide this. They declare this is a new regime, only Sandinista—and nothing else.”

## The 2018 National Civic Uprising

How did conditions in Nicaragua deteriorate so rapidly and completely? Under pressure from the International Monetary Fund, in mid-April, 2018, Ortega decreed a reform of the social security pension system, raising taxes and cutting benefits by 5 percent. Some pensioners began to protest at social security offices where they were beaten by police. Students joined the protests in solidarity, but the police then shot several students and some died. Shocked and enraged at the murder of the students, protests quickly grew to hundreds of thousands. Then, on Mother’s Day, May 30, 2018, as many as half a million Nicaraguans marched in Managua, led by the mothers whose sons and daughters had been killed by the police—but the march itself was attacked by paramilitary fighters, killing 15 and wounding hundreds. The Mother’s Day Massacre, transformed the protests into a sustained national civic uprising with barricades in the cities and roadblocks paralyzing the country.

In response, Ortega mobilized the police and FSLN paramilitary fighters to violently crush the uprising. In all, at least 320 were killed, hundreds were wounded, 800 people arrested initially, and 150 continue to be held in prison where they are allegedly tortured. Over 100,000 Nicaraguans went into exile in Costa Rica, the United States, Panama, Spain and other countries.

In response to the uprising, Ortega’s government outlawed all protests, expelled foreign nongovernmental

organizations and closed domestic NGOs. Ortega and his family own many radio and TV stations but to gain complete control of the media the government arrested some journalists, shut down critical TV shows, and in general intimidated the media. The free press ceased to exist. Within a couple of months, Ortega had crushed the uprising.

Ortega and his wife and vice-president Rosario Murillo, who actually runs the government day-to-day, claimed that the U.S. government organized and financed the 2018 uprising, aided by the Catholic Bishops and priests who they describe as “satanic criminals.” While the United States did intervene in Nicaraguan politics in the past, it had little reason to want to oust Ortega. His government worked throughout the 2000s with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration and with the U.S. Military Southern Command, as well as with the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the Central American Bank of Economic Integration and encouraged U.S. business to invest.

## Ortega-Murillo’s Conservative Government

Ortega, a leader of the Sandinista Revolution of 1979, claims that he is a socialist and an anti-imperialist. But the truth is otherwise. “Ortega’s government is capitalist, free market, and extremely conservative on social issues,” says Luis Carrión of Unamos. “Ortega has pursued neoliberal economic policies since he came back to power and created the most favorable conditions for foreign capital to come to Nicaragua, particularly for the production of energy and mining. Transnational and other foreign companies have opened businesses, including the highly exploitative maquilas, lured by tax exemptions, low wages, and controlled labor unions. His government was such a good practitioner of the Washington Consensus that it has received praise from the IMF and the World Bank for his free market and capitalist policies.”

In terms of social policies, Ortega-Murillo’s government had adopted the most restrictive abortion law in the world: All abortions are illegal. Murillo attacks Nicaraguan feminist organizations as representing imperialist powers, while her government has repealed progressive laws that protected women’s political and economic equality. Feminist NGOs have been shut down and the government is also planning on closing the Fundación Xochiquetzal, an LGBT center that works on HIV/AIDs. Indigenous groups claim that the Ortega government ignores them.

Daniel Ortega has won the sham November 7 election and remains president, but his may only tighten the lid on the Nicaraguan political pressure cooker that is bound to explode in the future. Nicaraguans dissatisfied with the government are legion: women, students, peasants, workers, parish priests, intellectuals, some business groups, and the indigenous and black people on the Caribbean Coast. Another arbitrary act by the dictator may detonate another rebellion in the future, just as it did in 2018.

The Nicaraguan Revolution of 1979, led by the Sandinista Front for National Liberation, that overthrew the decades long dictatorship of the Somoza family, was at the time a beacon for the left. Thousands of people from the United States, Europe, and Latin America, motivated by religious sentiment or radical politics went to Nicaragua to offer their support in the 1980s, I among them. The struggle of Nicaraguans today against the Ortega family dictatorship should inspire us to create a new solidarity movement, particularly with the working people of the country. Under Ortega, the FSLN which once fought for socialism, degenerated, becoming authoritarian and corrupt, and giving socialism a bad name. Yet among the opposition there are some democratic socialists and we should attempt to work in solidarity with them. Nicaraguans should be able to look for help not to the U.S. government, but to the international solidarity movement.

As one of the protestors speaking at the demonstration in New York City on Sunday said, “No dictatorship lasts forever. The Ortega-Murillo dictatorship must go. Nicaragua wants freedom and democracy.”

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*Note: Quotations from Luis Carrión and Leonor Zúniga Gutiérrez come from a panel discussion titled “The Nicaraguan Crisis: A Left Perspective” presented by NACLA on October. 7, 2021 and can be found [here](#).*

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