

Civil Society in Revolt against the Leftist Authoritarianism of the Ortega/Murillo Regime

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Since the spontaneous citizen protests that erupted on April 19, 2018, were met with violent state repression, Nicaraguans have experienced a horrendous human toll: over 400 dead, thousands injured, over 500 political prisoners (including hundreds charged with manufactured crimes and hundreds more detained without any charges being filed), as well as students expelled from their institutions of higher education and doctors fired for treating protesters.¹ Since April, international and local human rights organizations have documented violence by police and parapolice forces operating as paramilitary bodies using high-caliber weapons against university students, demonstrators, journalists, human rights defenders, Catholic Church clergy (who were initially serving as mediators in the stalled national dialogue between the government and protesters), and the population in general.

The present dossier is a follow-up to the emergency roundtable we organized for the LASA meeting in Barcelona in May 2018, entitled “Ni izquierda ni derecha, Nicaragua está arrech: La juventud autoconvocada en revuelta popular frente al pensamiento único de un Estado autoritario.” The aim of that panel was to provide a corrective to the left/right prism through which the crisis in Nicaragua was and is being read outside the country. While the occupations of university campuses and *tranques* blocking access to roads and cities throughout Nicaragua have been dismantled by the use of force and police and paramilitary assaults, the situation in the country has not returned to normal, as the government claims. Protests continue, many university students refuse to return to classes, and the government

has begun rounding up and apprehending protest leaders and jailing them on trumped-up charges of violating anti-gang and anti-terrorism laws.²

In fact, the situation of one of our proposed contributors illustrates this reality. We had originally planned to include an essay by Enrieth Martínez, a fifth-year student in sociology at the UCA (Universidad Centroamericana) and a co-founder of the Coordinadora Universitaria por la Democracia y la Justicia, one of the student protest groups. Enrieth and other members of the CUDJ were arrested and briefly detained at the El Chipote jail in Managua and were only released thanks to the intervention of the mission from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights sent by the OAS to document the violence in Nicaragua.³ Many student leaders have fled the country or are in hiding, while reports continue of others being detained.

How can we make sense of what is happening in Nicaragua? Is this a “soft” right-wing coup fomented by the United States and are the students and other protesters naïve pawns of US imperialism and neoliberal capital, as many accounts in left-wing publications in the United States and elsewhere allege? One of the main themes of the present dossier is precisely to show that it is impossible to accurately understand the conflict in Nicaragua by viewing it through such outdated ideological lenses.

First, the characterization of the Ortega/Murillo government as “leftist” begs the question what that means given that Ortega was able to regain the presidency in 2007 thanks to a pact with ex-president and leader of the Partido Liberal Constitucionalista, Arnoldo Alemán, which

vacated the former's jail sentence for corruption and lowered the percentage necessary to win a presidential election in the first round from 45 percent to 35 percent (Ortega won with 38 percent of the vote). In 2006 the FSLN (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional) also endorsed a strict law banning all abortions in Nicaragua, and the Ortega/Murillo government has been consistently hostile to feminist organizations and women's groups, and until recently had close ties with the most conservative elements of the Catholic Church and the COSEP (Consejo Superior de la Empresa Privada) and welcomed investment by transnational capital. Moreover, the Ortega/Murillo government until the crisis had excellent relations with the United States, receiving US economic aid and cooperating with the US "war on drugs" and its immigration policies.

Second, the protesters and student groups who initially led the uprising are composed of people of all ideological stripes. From die-hard anti-Sandinistas to young leftists steeped in revolutionary lore but disillusioned with the authoritarian tendencies, corruption, and concentration of power in the hands of the Ortega/Murillo family, to ordinary citizens who had never before been active in politics but who took to the streets to protest violence such as the country had not seen since the bloody end of the Somoza dictatorship in the 1970s, protesters have a wide range of ideological positions.

Finally, Nicaragua's opposition parties have been playing catch-up rather than leading the protests. Like elsewhere in Latin America the traditional political establishment has lost credibility in Nicaragua. Opposition parties are weak and have not been able to mobilize significant support, which explains why (in addition to probable fraud and massive absenteeism) Ortega handily won reelection in 2016. The massive protests that erupted in April 2018 not only were not foreseen by anyone, they could not have been called by the opposition parties.

Instead, as the two articles in this dossier demonstrate, there was discontent from various sectors of civil society that does not fit neatly into standard ideological categories: from peasant

movements galvanized by the government's plan to build an interoceanic canal to black and indigenous activists on the country's Caribbean coast whose demands for communal territory and autonomous rights placed them at odds with the government's vision of development through mega-projects and its demand for tight control by the central state over decision-making at local and regional levels.

As the crisis in Nicaragua lurches on, only one thing is clear: the Ortega/Murillo regime is becoming more and more authoritarian, violent, and repressive against the sizable percentage of the population—perhaps a majority—that opposes it. The question is what comes next. As Creole feminist activist Shakira Simmons cogently observes in her article, the challenge will be to see how current calls for a more democratic Nicaragua can resolve long-standing tensions that defy easy ideological classification but are nevertheless central to the country's future.

Notes

- ¹ The figures increase constantly as the repression intensifies. The figures cited here are based on those compiled by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the Centro Nicaragüense de Derechos Humanos (CENIDH). See <http://www.oas.org/es/cidh/informes/pdfs/Nicaragua2018-es.pdf> and <https://www.cenidh.org/>.
- ² For example, a third national strike was held on September 11, 2018, convened by the Alianza Democrática, which emerged after the protests and is composed of student groups, peasant movements, the private sector, and so on. The day of protest was in demand of the release of political prisoners, and during it most of the private sector was closed, including shops, banks, gas stations, transportation, and private colleges and universities. See <https://www.revistaeclesia.com/nicaragua-realiza-tercer-paro-nacional-en-protesta-contra-ortega/>.
- ³ "Policía libera a 20 líderes universitarios y a tres documentalistas que fueron detenidos en Carazo," *La Prensa*, August 25, 2018, <https://www.laprensa.com.ni/2018/08/25/nacionales/2463981-policia-detiene-21-lideres-universitarios-en-carazo>. //