



## **Three Months of Violent Conflict in Nicaragua with No End in Sight: An On-The-Ground Report**

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### **Introduction**

When I began writing this article, Nicaragua was at a complete standstill. On June 14th, 2018, the Civic Alliance for Justice and Democracy in Nicaragua (La Alianza Cívica por la Justicia y la Democracia de Nicaragua) successfully organized a national strike (“paro nacional”) throughout the whole country. The Alliance serves as an umbrella group of different opposition movements against the current government, ranging from young university students and dissident Sandinistas to members of the private industry and religious groups. The Alliance was responding to what members perceive to be governmental violence against peaceful protests, which became widespread on April 18<sup>th</sup> 2018. With all but a few governmental agencies, local markets and bus routes participating, the strike was an incredible mass movement to experience. For the first time



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in my life, I witnessed a whole country shut down. This sent a strong message to President Daniel Ortega (2007-present) and his powerful wife, Vice-President Rosario Murillo Zambrana (2017-present).

Despite its impressive success, the strike failed to meet its objectives: (1) bring down the current government; (2) initiate early elections; and (3) halt governmental violence. Instead, the opposite occurred. Ortega became more determined to stay in power. Ortega noted on various speaking occasions that he would not give in to the coup leaders (“golpistas”). “Here we stay,” he exclaimed.[i] Violence and death also significantly increased. When the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (CIDH) gave its initial human rights report days after the strike, 212 were found dead and 1337 wounded. A month later, the death toll has risen to over 400.[ii] Sunday July 8<sup>th</sup> was one of the most violent days with twenty-four deaths resulting from the government’s effort to remove road blocks (tranques), a hallmark of the protests, in the Department of Carazo. Two were later killed when the riot squad, police, and paramilitaries finally took over the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua (UNAN), which was seized by students, on July 14<sup>th</sup>. Uncommon previously in the country, there are now rampant kidnappings related to the political crisis. One of the most infamous cases involved the nephew of a member of Carlos Mejía Godoy and Los de Palacagüina, the most famous Nicaraguan revolutionary musical group. So far there has been three months of crisis. The economy is in shambles, schools and universities are closed, and emigration is on the rise. When I visited the Jesuit University of Central America, where I worked as a professor for five years (2000-2005), I felt as if I were transported to a war zone. With failed negotiations, more marches, and an additional national strike on July 13<sup>th</sup>, both sides remain completely entrenched. There is no end in sight. In three months of protests, there have been at least an average of four related murders a day, not to mention thousands injured, political prisoners, and a destroyed economy.[iii] In the words of Carlos Mejía Godoy, “With Somoza it was a war, now it is a massacre!”[iv]

But what went wrong? After years of strong economic growth and favorable approval ratings, how did the government lose support so quickly? Even more perplexing, a significant portion of the protest is coming from Sandinista strongholds affiliated with Ortega’s Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), which he has led since the overthrew Somoza in 1979. The Department of Masaya, one of the most pro-Sandinista areas of the country, has been an epicenter of protests. Although I tried to enter the city, travel was virtually impossible due to the roadblocks. The entrance was plagued not only with tranques, but masked armed men and women (encapuchados), whose side of the conflict was not always clear. The UNAN, the country’s largest public university known for being a bastion of revolutionary thought, has also become embroiled in the conflict. Students seized the institution on May 7<sup>th</sup>, refusing to give it up until Ortega stepped down. How could the popular masses turn on the president so quickly? Ortega was also the master of alliance building, reaching out and solidifying relations with one of its archenemies during the 1980s, the conservative Catholic Church. Now, clergy and churches, as well as journalists, are often attacked by supporters of the president.[v] Drawing upon on-the-ground field work, this article attempts to shed insight into the current crisis. Despite constant U.S. Embassy warnings about traveling to the country (and



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sending home staff and Peace Corps volunteers), it was actually an ideal time (the month of June) to be in Nicaragua. Witnessing the country's worst crisis in forty years first-hand and trying to make sense of it is an important endeavor.[vi] Although Nicaragua attracts little academic and media attention, the country's revolutionary spirit still remains a significant part of Latin American politics.

### **The Government of Ortega-Murillo**

International news media tend to attribute the current crisis to changes in the national pension system. In April of this year, the government, with no public debate, altered the system by increasing monthly payments by 5% and decreasing benefits. In such an impoverished country, this change in law was a watershed event, galvanizing a wave of protests. However, protests began to mushroom previously with the interoceanic canal agreement between the Nicaraguan government and Chinese billionaire Wang Jing of the Hong Kong Nicaragua Canal Development Group (HKND). In addition to the potential environmental destruction and massive movement of people, the agreement gave HKND full rights to the land for fifty years. The estimated \$50 billion project entails a massive track of land beginning in Punta Gorda on the Atlantic side of the country, ending in the Pacific at Brito River. The canal cuts through Lake Nicaragua, upsetting not only pristine flora and fauna, but also the beautiful Ometepe Island, a big tourist destiny spot. [vii] More recently, the perceived governmental failure to address the wild fires in the reserve Indio Maiz fueled protests. Students and activists began demanding more action against the fire that devoured pristine areas of Rio San Juan, which straddles the border with Costa Rica. [viii] However, students were quickly met with repression by police, the riot squad and groups affiliated with the government, often known as turbas Orteguistas.[ix]

When the pension crisis hit months later, popular barrio movements contributed to the protests. The 5% raise and expected decreases in payouts to the retired hurt the government's most important base: the poor. As we see in Latin America, very small changes can push families into more poverty. Although such increases appear to be small on paper (remember the Brazilian bus fares), they can cripple a family's finance, particularly in Nicaragua, the second poorest country in Latin America after Haiti. Although the government later removed the law from the nation's legal gazette, protests rocked the country. [x] Students, another sector sympathetic to the Sandinista government, led the protests with many from different cities such as Masaya and Leon participating. The response by the government was intense and for many repressive. When two were initially killed and many injured on April 20<sup>th</sup> and the Movement 19<sup>th</sup> of April (Movimiento de 19 de abril), which the movement became to be known, was born. The governmental verbal response was also off base. Baynardo Arce, the economic assessor for the president, stated that the increases did not pertain to nor affect students, demonstrating a detachment from the reality of an important base.[xi] A monthly increase in payments obviously harms students. Not only do most students live at home with their parents and grandparents, who are directly affected by the increase, but that means less money for them. And since the Nicaraguan family is so close, young people understood and felt the negative impact.



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Furthermore, the government has been behind most of the attacks against demonstrators. One march I observed (Marcha de las Flores) ended in the death and injury of a number of participants due to paramilitary violence of Orteguistas. Speaking with protesters, a large extent of them were affiliated with the Sandinista party. One interviewee had a visceral hatred for the president, saying we should “kill” him due to the repression. When I asked if he were Sandinista, he replied “100%.” These feelings toward Ortega have permeated through the Sandinista base throughout popular barrios in Managua, the capital city, and Sandinista strongholds such as Masaya. The continued repression has horrified many. The more the protests developed, the more the government seemed cornered into a difficult space. In addition to the UNAN, students took the Polytechnical University (UPOLI). This young base was turning on the government. In the first National Dialogue on May 16<sup>th</sup>, Lester Aleman, an admirer of Carlos Fonseca (1936-1976), became famous for calling both Ortega and Murillo “killers” directly to their faces.[xii] This was the first and only national dialogue in which the president and vice-president would participate. But the repression continued, shocking many. In one case, a family of five were burnt alive in the barrio Carlos Marx. Although the government denied involvement, surviving family members and neighbors attributed the attack to police and paramilitary actions against the neighborhood close to the seized university UPOLI.[xiii] As the second National Dialogue began on May 18<sup>th</sup>, Ortega and Murillo failed to participate, sending government officials in their place.[xiv] This further undermined the credibility of the government.

In addition to the perceived repression, many of the young people from Sandinista backgrounds fail to identify with Ortega. A common description I hear is that the president is “burned out” (“quemado”). Few were familiar with his heroic efforts to over Somoza and stand up to the United States intervention in the 1980s. The younger crowd, in colloquial terms, is demanding new blood and Ortega-Murillo has helped undermine a positive image. First, the president and his wife are rarely seen in public. Despite being the worst national crisis in forty years, they only participated in one national dialogue and never do press interviews. His wife communicates through long radio speeches transmitted by media outlets such as *La Nueva Radio Ya* and *Canal 4: Multinoticias*. The discourse tends to stress general themes of peace and Christianity. Sources close to the president have confirmed to me that he suffers from lupus. Ortega is extremely sick and wears long sleeves (often a blue jacket) despite the extremely high temperatures of the capital city, Managua. The rumor is that he cannot withstand the sun and much of his body is marked by the disease. Whether this is a rumor or truth is not significant; the couple’s secrecy and withdrawal detach them from the people. Ortega-Murillo also seem to have lost the lessons of why Somoza was overthrown in the first place. Many Nicaraguans were disgusted with a family dynasty that treated Nicaragua like their own finca. However, this has become the feeling for many Nicaraguans regarding the current government. Although personally knowing some of Ortega’s family and never doubting their capabilities to carry out high-stress governmental jobs, putting family in high-profile positions may have resulted in a great error. His wife, whom everyone knew was influential, became the vice-president in his second term. This move smacks of a family dynasty. His sons were also placed in notably high positions of power. They have been in charge of governmental agencies such as Pro-Nicaragua (promoting investment), the Nicaraguan Distributor of Petroleum, the liaison for HKND, and countless media outlets. As



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more Sandinistas became marginalized, family members took over key positions, creating an image of corruption and nepotism.[xv]

### The Opposition

This is not to say that the opposition is not committing errors. Speaking with a broad array of protesters, I continually heard about governmental corruption. Ortega and Murillo, in the eyes of the demonstrators, should simply step down. The political context, however, is more complex. The opposition fails to concede the benefits the government has afforded the lower classes. One notable example is removing student fees from public schools (colegios) and organizing free breakfast and lunch initiatives in which parents would participate by bringing staples such as rice and beans. I witnessed this interesting initiative years ago in different barrios and was actually impressed with its implementation. Parents participated by cooking for the children. More recently, I spoke with owners of a daycare center in a poor barrio in Managua. The owner continued to support Ortega. Despite creating the private school in the post-revolutionary neoliberal period, Ortega's government stepped in to help barrio children once he was elected. Additionally, one now sees playgrounds, water parks, and other initiatives that visibly benefit many barrios, particularly in urban centers within and out of Managua. I personally found many of these projects to be impressive. The Port of Salvador Allende, which sits on Lake Managua, is home to a water slide and pool, popular restaurants, parks, and replicas of famous architectural structures from Nicaragua. With years of steady economic growth, such initiatives have solidified the Sandinista base and helped Ortega maintain a certain level of popularity throughout the crisis. The opposition has failed to ensure people that many of these benefits will continue. The call for the exit of Ortega ("salida") is frightening to many who have received benefits not felt during the neoliberal years (1990-2007).[xvi]

It is also important to note that Ortega was democratically elected. The 2011 had observers from the European Union (EU), Organization of American States (OAS), and experts from Nicaragua, among other Latin American countries. Although opposition groups continually denounce how parties were marginalized from participating and corrupt electoral agreements, followers of Ortega-Murillo believe the protesters are rightwing coup supporters who merely want to undermine democracy. [xvii] Why should they have early elections when they won in 2011? For them, this is not constitutional and the opposition is engaging in illegal coup activities. Ortega has astutely stressed this point, demanding that demonstrators should look for the votes of the people. [xviii] For the government and its supporters, they are not going to merely step aside due to protests. This is something the major outlets of communication that have been critical of the government fail to understand. They define the protesters as the "Nicaraguan people." Despite losing credibility due to the government's handling of the protests, Ortega still relies on a significant and passionate base of support. Furthermore, supporters can easily cite their own examples of "terrorism," a word now being thrown around in the country. *La Nueva Radio Ya*, a popular news outlet affiliated with the government was set on fire and burned to the point to which I failed to recognize it when I walked by. Police have been killed and kidnapped, not to mention Nicaraguans suspected of being affiliated with the



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government. Two supporters of the government were killed and then burned in the street while onlookers applauded. *La Nueva Radio Ya* attributed this to the “extreme right.”<sup>[xix]</sup> Therefore, supporters of the government see themselves as defenders of democracy against terrorism.<sup>[xx]</sup> Some with whom I spoke with were not necessarily Ortegestas. But they argued that the government had the right to remove long-term barricades to get the country mobile again. They also highlighted the fact that the conservatives, Catholic Church, and dissident Sandinista movements, particularly the Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS) never liked Ortega to begin with. Did Ortega just become a killer overnight? They claimed opposition movements were merely taking advantage of the situation, but the government was democratically elected.

Possibly more important, this base is extremely passionate and well-trained. Ortega still commands respect from former military guerrillas as well as the police and military. When a police station of Masaya was barricaded by an opposition movement for two weeks, the police, riot squad, and paramilitaries took it by force to liberate Commissioner Ramón Avellán. This was a tactical military success and evidence has emerged, though also denied by the general himself, that the experienced retired General Glauco Robelo, who participated in the 1979 Final Offense in Masaya against Somoza, participated in the rescue. Whether he did or not is not important. The fact that he continues being a fervent supporter of Ortega, which he has conceded himself in various interviews, reminds us that former military personnel are loyal to the government.<sup>[xxi]</sup> It is no wonder why the police, riot squad, and paramilitaries were able to finally take the UNAN once they were determined to carry out the task. As Avellán recently stated, they will take Monimbó, a small Masaya town known for being Sandinista, “at any cost.”<sup>[xxii]</sup> If protesters continue with barricades, there is a large disposal of former guerrilla forces who can assist the government. National strikes and marches, though important, may not be enough to force the government out of power and bring about early elections.

### Conclusion

So where does this bring us? The crisis is unfolding like a Greek tragedy, but there seems to be no denouement. The motto from the protests is, “Que se rinda tu madre” (that your mother gives up). But neither side is ready for submission. Despite international condemnation, Ortega and Murillo are in a strong position to sustain power. With the United States putting sanctions on governmental figures and prominent leftist figures such as former Uruguayan President José Alberto “Pepe” Mujica (2010-2015), who stated in reference to Ortega, “Sometimes the time come to say I am leaving,” the Nicaraguan government appears to count on enough local support to survive.<sup>[xxiii]</sup> Simultaneously, the opposition is united in protests and national strikes. It seems like no one’s mother is ready to give up.

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*Image: Anoche inmigrantes nicaragienses en Costa Rica se protestaron en una vigilia en Plaza de la Democracia en San José.*

*Source: <http://www.estrategiaynegocios.net/lasclavesdeldia/1171591-330/nicaragua-se-prepara-para-una-multitudinaria-marcha>*

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[i] See the following for one of Ortega's speeches see "Daniel Ortega en acto del FSLN: 'Aquí nos quedamos todos.'" El Nuevo Diario. May 30.

<https://www.elnuevodiario.com.ni/nacionales/465922-daniel-ortega-fsln-protestas-nicaragua/>.

[ii] Flores, Judith and Romero, Elizabeth. La Prensa. June 6, 2018. "Informe final de la CIDH: 212 muertos en Nicaragua por la represión de Daniel Ortega."

<https://www.laprensa.com.ni/2018/06/22/politica/2438937-represion-del-gobierno-de-daniel-ortega-deja-al-menos-212-muertos-en-nicaragua-segun-la-cidh>

[iii] For an in-depth article on the killings, see Velásquez, Uriel. "Cuatro muertos por día en tres meses de protestas." El Nuevo Diario. July 18.

<https://www.elnuevodiario.com.ni/nacionales/469871-cuatro-muertos-dia-tres-meses-protestas-nicaragua/>.

[iv] Cruz, Eduardo. Carlos Mejía Godoy: "Con Somoza era una guerra, ahora es una masacre."

La Prensa. July 8, 2018. <https://www.laprensa.com.ni/2018/07/08/suplemento/la-prensa-domingo/2445168-carlos-mejia-godoy-con-somoza-era-una-guerra-ahora-es-una-masacre>.

[v] For such attacks, see "Turbas y paramilitares agreden a Obispos y Periodistas." 100%

Noticias. July 9, 2018. <http://100noticias.com.ni/videos/108-turbas-paramilitares-agreden-obispos-periodistas/>.

See Rocha, José L. for an understanding of how Ortega used the Catholic Church and then turned on them with violent attacks. "Ortega: de la teocracia al anticlericalismo." El Confidencial. July 13, 2018. <https://confidencial.com.ni/ortega-de-la-teocracia-al-anticlericalismo/>.

[vi] It is imperative to note that although I spoke with a wide range of people on both sides of the conflict, I am not inclined to offer names since the tension is so high, many fear reprisals for their respective positions.

[vii] For the governmental response on canal protests, see Salinas, Carlos. "Nicaragua reprime las protestas contra el Canal." El País. December 1, 2016.

[https://elpais.com/internacional/2016/12/01/america/1480549730\\_004865.html](https://elpais.com/internacional/2016/12/01/america/1480549730_004865.html). For the canal agreement, see Ley No. 840, Aprobada el 13 de Junio del 2013.



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<http://legislacion.asamblea.gob.ni/Normaweb.nsf/b92aeea87dac762406257265005d21f7/914d10ad15d09a2f06257b9e004c82e8?OpenDocument>.

[viii] For an in-depth article on the fires, see Garay, Josué. “Lo que se sabe del incendio que devora la Reserva Biológica Indio Maíz.” *La Prensa*. April 10, 2018.

<https://www.laprensa.com.ni/2018/04/10/nacionales/2401924-todo-sobre-el-incendio-en-la-reserva-indio-maiz>.

[ix] Although these aggressive groups are often referred to as “turbas Sandinistas,” many Sandinistas with whom I speak prefer Orteguistas since they argue that they do not represent Sandinismo, but more of a cult following for Ortega. In fact, Sandinistas no longer affiliated with Ortega are often the target of such groups.

[x] The following BBC Mundo article demonstrates how the pension system change caused massive protests, forcing Ortega to withdraw the law. It also shows how the international pressed tended to attribute the protests solely to the social security system. “Nicaragua: Daniel Ortega anuncia la cancelación de la reforma al seguro social que desató protestas violentas.” April 22, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-43860596>.

[xi] For the interview, see: “Bayardo Arce admite que Ortega ‘se equivocó.’” *El Confidencial*. April 26, 2018. <https://confidencial.com.ni/bayardo-arce-admite-que-ortega-se-equivoco/>.

[xii] Carlos Fonseca was the founder of the original Sandinista party. To see Lester verbally attack Ortega and Murillo see “Lesther Alemán: un héroe entre los jóvenes que protestan en Nicaragua.” *El Nuevo Diario*. May 23, 2018.

<https://www.elnuevodiario.com.ni/nacionales/465096-lesther-aleman-protestas-nicaragua/>

[xiii] “Nicaragua consternada tras jornada en que una familia murió calcinada.” *El Nuevo Diario*. June 7, 2018. <https://www.elnuevodiario.com.ni/nacionales/467379-nicaragua-violencia-familia-calcinada/>.

[xiv] For a better understanding of the National Dialogue and demands, see “Así te contamos la segunda jornada del diálogo en Nicaragua.” *La Prensa*. May 18, 2018.

<https://www.laprensa.com.ni/2018/05/18/politica/2421332-en-vivo-segundo-dia-del-dialogo-nacional>.

[xv] The popular daily paper *La Prensa* ran stories on the family’s nepotism. Cruz, Eduardo. “El poder de los Ortega Murillo.” November 11, 2016.

<https://www.laprensa.com.ni/2016/11/13/suplemento/la-prensa-domingo/2133595-poder-los-ortega-murillo>.

[xvi] For problems with Neoliberalism in Nicaragua, see Ripley, Charles. 2010. “The Privatization of Nicaragua’s Energy Sector: Market Imperfections and Popular Discontent.” *Latin American Policy*. 1(1). Pp. 114-132.

[http://www.academia.edu/5620509/The\\_Privatization\\_of\\_Nicaragua\\_s\\_Energy\\_Sector\\_Market\\_Imperfections\\_and\\_Popular\\_Discontent](http://www.academia.edu/5620509/The_Privatization_of_Nicaragua_s_Energy_Sector_Market_Imperfections_and_Popular_Discontent)





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[xvii] For an example of corruption, see the following: Bendana, Alejandro. “Strange Bedfellows: The Aleman-Ortega Pact.” *Nacla*. Sept. 25, 2007. <https://nacla.org/article/strange-bedfellows-aleman-ortega-pact>

[xviii] “Discurso íntegro de Daniel Ortega el Día de las Madres en Nicaragua.” *Nuevo Diario*. May 31, 2018. <https://www.elnuevodiario.com.ni/nacionales/465970-daniel-ortega-masacre-dia-madres-nicaragua/>

[xix] “Sicarios de la derecha asesinan a dos hombres y queman a uno de ellos en entrada a colonia 9 de Junio.” *La Nueva Radio Ya*. June 16, 2018. <https://nuevaya.com.ni/sicarios-de-la-derecha-asesinan-a-dos-hombres-y-queman-a-uno-de-ellos-en-entrada-a-colonia-9-de-junio/>

[xx] There is evidence that mainstream media outlets often fail to cover attacks by right-wing forces, particularly those supported by the United States. For a scientific study, consult Ripley, Charles. “Venezuela, Violence, and the New York Times: Failing When it Comes to Selective Indignation.” *COHA*. Sept 17, 2017. <http://www.coha.org/tag/charles-ripley/>.

[xxi] For information on taking Masaya, see Salazar, Maynor and Wilfredo Miranda. *El Confidencial*. “Paramilitares y policías masacran Masaya: 6 muertos.” June 19, 2018. <https://confidencial.com.ni/paramilitares-y-policias-masacran-masaya-6-muertos/>.

[xxii] “Avellán: ‘Se va a limpiar Monimbó al costo que sea.’” *100 Noticias*. July 17, 2018. <http://100noticias.com.ni/videos/175-avellan-se-va-limpiar-monimbo-costo-que-sea/>.

[xxiii] “Llegó el momento de decir ‘me voy’, dice Pepe Mujica a Ortega.” *100 Noticias*. July 17, 2018. <http://100noticias.com.ni/nacionales/91643-pepe-mujica-daniel-ortega/>.