

37/2023

17/05/2023

Rocío de los Reyes Ramírez

**Nicaragua: Ortega's "final?"
oppressive tablature***Nicaragua: Ortega's "final?" oppressive tablature**Abstract:*

The socio-political crisis that began in Nicaragua five years ago has led to the strengthening of the authoritarian regime of Daniel Ortega and his wife/vice-president, Rosario Murillo. Over this period, they have woven a strategy to stay in power by silencing any hint of criticism: mass anti-government demonstrations have been violently repressed, critical institutions have been silenced, civil society and Catholic Church organisations have been shut down, and political opponents have been persecuted, imprisoned and exiled.

Ortega, a former Sandinista guerrilla who overthrew the Anastasio Somoza regime in 1979, has essentially installed himself as a president for life.

The human rights situation in the country has worsened in recent years, with reports of human rights violations perpetrated by the Nicaraguan authorities. However, the president has described these accusations as "inventions" – part of an international smear campaign.

Keywords:

Sandinista regime, political crisis, Daniel Ortega, Nicaragua, Iberoamerica, Latinamerica

***NOTE:** The ideas contained in the *Analysis Papers* are the responsibility of their authors. They do not necessarily reflect the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defence.

Nicaragua: Ortega's "final?" oppressive tablature

Resumen:

La crisis sociopolítica que comenzó en Nicaragua hace cinco años, ha llevado al fortalecimiento del control autoritario del régimen de Daniel Ortega y de su esposa Rosario Murillo como vicepresidenta. Desde entonces, han tejido una estrategia para mantenerse en el poder, silenciando cualquier atisbo de crítica: se han reprimido violentamente las masivas manifestaciones en contra del gobierno, se han acallado a las instituciones críticas, se han cerrado organizaciones de la sociedad civil y de la Iglesia Católica y se ha perseguido, encarcelado y exiliado a los opositores políticos.

Ortega, un exguerrillero sandinista que derrocó al régimen de Anastasio Somoza en 1979, se ha convertido en un presidente que se autoperpetua en el poder.

La situación de los derechos humanos en el país ha empeorado en los últimos años, con informes de violaciones de derechos humanos por parte de las autoridades nicaragüenses. Sin embargo, el mandatario ha calificado estas acusaciones como "inventos" dentro de una campaña de desprestigio internacional.

Palabras clave:

régimen sandinista, crisis política, Daniel Ortega, Nicaragua, Iberoamérica, Latinoamérica

Cómo citar este documento:

REYES RAMÍREZ, Rocío de los. *Nicaragua: Ortega's "final?" oppressive tablature*. Documento de Análisis IEEE 37/2023.

https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2023/DIEEEA37_2023_ROCREY_Nicaragua_ENG.pdf y/o [enlace bie](#)³ (consultado día/mes/año)

"The more Nicaragua they take from me, the more Nicaragua I have".

Sergio Ramírez

Introduction

Five years have passed since the beginning of the socio-political crisis that provoked massive demonstrations against Daniel Ortega's regime in Nicaragua, demonstrations that were violently repressed. Since then, the regime has tightened its authoritarian grip, silenced critical media, closed down numerous civil society and religious organisations, banned demonstrations, and persecuted, imprisoned and exiled its political opponents.

Daniel Ortega, 76, was president of Nicaragua from 1985 to 1990. In 2006 he regained power and since 2017 he has been joined by his wife Rosario Murillo as vice-president, following a constitutional reform that removed limits on successive terms. They form what is known as the Ortega-Murillo tandem.

President Ortega went from being a Sandinista guerrilla who overthrew Anastasio Somoza's regime in 1979, to a president clinging onto power through elections described as lacking transparency and pluralism with the aim of consolidating his autocratic regime.

For example, the last elections in November 2021, in which he won 75% of the vote, saw seven opposition candidates jailed and allegations of fraud by international organisations. To this must be added the fact that several of his family members hold key positions in the government.

In recent years there has been a deterioration of the human rights situation in the country, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) has documented torture and other human rights violations by the Nicaraguan authorities, as well as the imprisonment of more than 235 political prisoners, some of them in harsh conditions.¹

For the president, these are "inventions" used as part of an international smear campaign. He also accused the country's bishops of taking sides, of engaging with "the coup plotters", as he calls them, and of promoting the creation of satanic sects. According to polls by the Gallup agency, 85% of Nicaraguans disapprove of Ortega and Murillo's

¹ IACHR. Statistics. December 2022. [Online] Available at: <https://www.oas.org/es/cidh/multimedia/estadisticas/estadisticas.html> . NOTE: All web links in this paper were active as of 11 May 2023.

administration,² although the president has also commissioned his own studies in which he claims 77% approve of his mandate.

Ortega has been accused by several national and international actors of having links to organised crime, as well as of having protected criminal groups such as the Clan del Golfo or the Sinaloa Cartel, which use Nicaragua as a route for drug trafficking. In addition, he has also been denounced for having used Venezuelan cooperation to finance his political activities and to enrich himself illegally.

Likewise, the business network of the president and his family in Nicaragua covers sectors such as energy, telecommunications, banking, media and tourism. According to a report by the Violeta Barrios de Chamorro Foundation, Ortega and his family control more than 70 companies that also receive tax benefits, state subsidies and public contracts. These companies generate an estimated annual revenue of \$500 million, representing 5% of the country's GDP. Examples of these companies are Albanisa, TSK-Melfosur, Difuso Comunicaciones, Canal 8 and Bancorp.³

At the same time, according to the World Bank, the average annual inflation in Nicaragua rose to 10.5 per cent in 2022, the highest among Central American countries and more than double the average inflation rate over the past decade. Inflation rose due to the effects of two powerful hurricanes in 2020, strong domestic consumption, and higher import prices caused by pandemic-related supply chain disruptions and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.⁴ This crisis hit the Nicaraguan economy hard, prompting hundreds of thousands of people to migrate either regularly or irregularly. According to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), 800,000 Nicaraguans were living abroad in 2021, which is more than 10% of the total population.⁵

² MIRANDA, W. *Survey attests to disapproval in Daniel Ortega and the "resignation" of Nicaraguans*, El País, 25 JAN 2023. [Online] Available at: <https://elpais.com/internacional/2023-01-25/una-encuesta-certifica-la-desaprobacion-de-daniel-ortega-y-la-resignacion-de-los-nicaraguenses.html>

³ PRIMER INFORME. *The business network of the dictator Ortega and his family in Nicaragua*. 17 March 2022. [Online] Available at: <https://primerinforme.com/corrupcion/informe-la-red-de-negocios-del-dictador-ortega-y-su-familia-en-nicaragua/>

⁴ The World Bank. *The World Bank in Nicaragua*. 4 April 2023. [Online] Available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/nicaragua/overview>

⁵ IOM. Global Communiqué. [Online] Available at: <https://www.iom.int/es/news/la-oim-publica-el-perfil-migratorio-de-nicaragua>

From Sandinismo to authoritarianism

After three failed attempts, Daniel Ortega regained the Nicaraguan presidency in 2006. However, he reinvented his politics and was characterised by practices such as asset distributions, political cronyism and corruption. Over time, these behaviours intensified and had a negative impact on Sandinista ideals.

In order to secure his project, Ortega had to first secure a Supreme Court ruling in 2009 declaring that the article in Nicaragua's own constitution prohibiting presidential re-election or the elimination of the second round of elections was unconstitutional. Similarly, in 2016, the Supreme Electoral Council (CSE) dismissed 28 deputies belonging to the Independent Liberal Party (PLI), who were opponents of the government.

In this way, he bought allegiances and gained loyalty. Although he continued to promote left-inspired ideals and anti-imperialist slogans, he was to maintain an almost symbiotic relationship with the business sector, because he understood that he needed this sector to govern. He went on to establish what was called an *economic consensus model*, i.e. an agreement between business elites and government to make economic decisions together.

It is therefore not surprising that for 10 years the business community, which had guarantees and good business opportunities, did not lift a finger against the various constitutional reforms that today keep Daniel Ortega and his wife in power, in what could be considered a dynastic government. Business decided to put the maximisation of their profits ahead of denouncing all the abuses that were happening and have continued in recent years.

Ortega also sought the backing of the International Monetary Fund by combining macroeconomic prudence and palliative programmes, i.e. targeted poverty alleviation policies that alleviate poverty but do not prevent its reproduction, which have been maintained to this day⁶.

He even pursued rapprochement with the Catholic Church, taking an anti-therapeutic abortion position. This was part of his political opportunism, which involved the repenting of the FSLN⁷ and its leaders – Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo – who toured, almost

⁶ El Economista. *IMF: Nicaragua's GDP will grow by 3 % in 2023 and 3.5 % in the medium term*. 27 January 2023 [online] Available at: <https://www.eleconomista.net/economia/FMI-EI-PIB-de-Nicaragua-crecera-un-3-en-2023-y-un-3.5-a-mediano-plazo-20230127-0019.html>

⁷ Sandinista National Liberation Front.

as a pilgrimage, all the Catholic churches, and many Evangelical ones, where they supposedly lamented all the crimes or rights violations committed in the decade of the revolution.⁸

But many of his former comrades in the struggle distanced themselves from him, accusing him of having betrayed revolutionary principles in order to become more and more like the Somoza family and their form of family patrimonialism.

The whole process involved the dismantling of institutions, the control of the organs of power, including the army, and the conversion of Nicaragua into a one-party state. But even if his government relied on these alliances with different sectors, in 2018, it was unable to contain the discontent of the population. And society erupted.

The popular uprising, initiated by students demanding democracy and freedom, took place against the reform of the Nicaraguan Social Security Institute (INSS), and was later seconded by the peasantry and broad sectors of the urban population. Although this reform was initially intended to curb an increase in workers' contributions and reduce pensions, the brutal repression caused widespread discontent to explode and spread to almost all sectors of the population after 11 years of Sandinista rule by decree forcefully imposed by the army and police.

Even the main business leaders were no longer on the side of the government, as they were not interested in their quota increase, and started to back the protesters.

These protests, in which more than 300 people died on the streets, revealed the true character of the Ortega regime, which was not willing to lose its status for want of unleashing intense government repression, with systematic and widespread attacks against the civilian population. The costs were staggering. In addition to the dead, more than 100,000 people were forced to flee and seek asylum as a result of persecution and human rights violations,⁹ and 700 people were imprisoned as political prisoners.

⁸ Nicaragua Investiga. *FSLN, the party that promoted criminalising therapeutic abortion in all cases*. 26 October 2020. [Online] Available at: <https://nicaraguainvestiga.com/nacion/38014-penalizacion-aborto-terapeutico-nicaragua-ley-fsln/>

⁹ UNHCR. *More than 100,000 people forced to flee Nicaragua after two years of political and social crisis*. 10 March 2020. [Online] Available at: <https://www.acnur.org/noticias/briefing-notes/mas-de-100000-personas-forzadas-huir-de-nicaragua-tras-dos-anos-de-crisis>



Source: Arnulfo Franco (AP)/El País

And so it was that in 2021 Daniel Ortega won the election for a fourth consecutive presidential term. Abstention hit more than 80%.¹⁰ And the elections were classified as a sham by the United States, the European Union and some countries in the region.

A year earlier, Ortega had imprisoned the politicians who were his main challengers, including Cristiana Chamorro Barrios, whom polls showed as the favourite to win by a wide margin.

Similarly, approximately 50 opponents were detained, among whom were former FSLN comrades of Daniel Ortega such as former guerrillas and prominent leaders of the Sandinista revolution Dora María Téllez, known as "Comandante Dos", and retired General Hugo Torres, nicknamed "Comandante Uno". It is important to note that General Torres died in prison without having received a fair trial.

According to an investigation by the Washington-based human rights organisation Freedom House, what has taken hold in Nicaragua is "modern authoritarianism".¹¹ This involves the tactic of circumventing, cheating or directly removing established presidential term limits that are designed to avoid the concentration of power in a single person. The removal of limits aims precisely at perpetuating a single person in the top office of a nation.

The OAS Permanent Council, as of November 2021, concluded that "Nicaragua is not

¹⁰ DW. *Daniel Ortega proclaimed winner of disputed elections*. 27 November 2017. [Online] Available at: <https://www.dw.com/es/daniel-ortega-proclamado-ganador-de-cuestionados-comicios/a-59954197>

¹¹ CNN. *'Modern authoritarianism' is at work in Nicaragua, according to human rights NGOs*. 8 June 2017. [Online] Available at: <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2017/06/08/en-nicaragua-funciona-un-autoritarismo-moderno-segun-ong-de-derechos-humanos/>

complying with the commitments set out in the Inter-American Democratic Charter¹² due to serious violations of the political rights of Nicaraguan citizens. It is necessary, and perhaps significant, to note that the Mexican government chose to abstain from this vote.

The international sanctions against Daniel Ortega's government adopted by the United States, Canada, Switzerland and the European Union have targeted high-ranking public officials, with the main objective of affecting the closest entourage surrounding the president and his main collaborators. While these may have an impact on the government and the individuals sanctioned, they do not necessarily directly affect Ortega's ability to stay in power.

In this sense, a crucial issue that deserves attention is how Nicaragua, despite its anti-imperialist discourse, benefits from its exports to the United States. These exports, mainly of raw materials, play a fundamental role in the Nicaraguan economy, as do the remittances sent from the US. In recent years, these exports have experienced a remarkable increase, almost 80% between 2017 and 2022.¹³

Although sanctions have been imposed on a large proportion of Nicaraguan products, there are still many that have not been affected by these measures. Biden was expected to increase sanctions. While he threatened higher tariffs on gold exports, reduced sugar purchases and withdrew visas from 500 people associated with the Nicaraguan regime, he did not go further. It is clear that if the United States had wanted to exert more pressure, it could have done so, as was done with Cuba or Venezuela.

In fact, around 60% of Nicaragua's exports are destined for the northern giant. Trade between the two countries reached USD 8.304 billion in 2022.

It is contradictory that the country that firmly questions Nicaragua's dictatorial regime and the possible consequences for Central America is precisely the same country that consumes a significant amount of its products. Approximately half of Nicaragua's exports are destined for the United States and this trend continues to grow. This dynamic generates debates at the international level on political and economic consistency with regard to Nicaragua.

Nevertheless, it is not in the interests of the American leader to see Nicaragua's economy

¹² DW. *OAS concludes that Nicaragua is in breach of the Democratic Charter*. 9 December 2021. [Online] Available at: <https://www.dw.com/es/oea-concluye-que-nicaragua-incumple-carta-democr%C3%A1tica/a-60063319>

¹³ OEC. *Nicaragua/United States*. [Online] Available at: <https://oec.world/es/profile/bilateral-country/nic/partner/usa?redirect=true>

weakened; it would be fatal if a major loss of jobs were to raise the spectre of migration, which has already wreaked havoc on US politics that always has an eye on the movement of Central American populations.

Another factor to take into account is the issue of drug trafficking, as Nicaragua is a strategic corridor for drugs produced in the south of the continent. It would not be prudent to abandon control from those latitudes either.

Aggressive hostility towards the Catholic Church

The political crisis in Nicaragua also involves the Catholic Church, as the government of Daniel Ortega accuses part of the ecclesiastical leadership of destabilising the state. The latest chapter in the confrontation was the arrest of Bishop Rolando Álvarez, a voice critical of the Sandinista government within the upper hierarchy of the Nicaraguan Church, along with four priests, two seminarians and a layman, something that has not happened for decades and which has sparked criticism inside and outside the country. But why do church and government clash in Nicaragua?

This confrontation is not new, but it has intensified in recent years. According to a report by the NGO Pro-Transparency and Anti-Corruption Observatory, the Nicaraguan Church suffered almost 200 attacks between April 2018 and May 2022.¹⁴ But the arrest of Bishop Rolando Álvarez, known for denouncing human rights violations by the Ortega government, marks a new milestone in this confrontation.

Bishop Álvarez, who was originally under house arrest, is considered to be the last voice openly critical of the government. He is accused of organising violent groups, inciting them to carry out acts of hatred against the population with the aim of destabilising the state and attacking the constitutional authorities, charges which the bishop denies. But his is not the only case.

In 2019, another bishop critical of the Nicaraguan political regime, Silvio Báez, went into exile after receiving death threats. In addition, the Apostolic Nuncio in Managua, Monsignor Waldemar Stanislaw Sommertag, who had held the position since 2018 and had played the role of mediator in various instances of dialogue between the various

¹⁴ Pro-Transparency and Anti-Corruption Observatory. *Public Record. 190 attacks on religious freedom have been suffered by the Catholic Church in Nicaragua under Ortega*. 26 May 2022. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.expedientepublico.org/190-ataques-a-la-libertad-religiosa-ha-sufrido-la-iglesia-catolica-en-nicaragua-bajo-ortega/>

actors involved in the national conflict, was also expelled and ordered to leave the country immediately.¹⁵

A similar case occurred with 18 nuns of the Missionary Order of Charity, founded by Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Escorted by police and immigration officials, they were taken to the Nicaraguan border by van to cross on foot into neighbouring Costa Rica after being forced to disband the group and close its charities.

Similarly, seven priests have been imprisoned and several Catholic radio stations, many of them run by Bishop Álvarez, have been closed down. The international community has denounced this authoritarian turn by the Nicaraguan president.

It is important to consider that in Nicaragua, a country with more than 7.5 million inhabitants where more than 90% of the population are believers, the Catholic Church remains the most influential institution. Although Ortega maintained a close relationship with the Church at the beginning of his mandate, as previously mentioned, once he consolidated his power and stopped relying on the votes of the faithful to win elections, his priorities changed.

However, the critical point in this "Church-State relationship" was the 2018 protests, when heavy repression left more than 300 people dead in the streets and the Church supported the protesters, even sheltering some people fleeing brutal persecution in Managua's cathedral. At the time, Cardinal Leopoldo Brenes, Metropolitan Archbishop of the Archdiocese of Managua, tried to mediate a failed dialogue and openly denounced the president's persecution of the Catholic Church.

It should be borne in mind that Catholic churches, although they have lost their monopoly of faith to Evangelical churches, have assumed an increasingly important social role. In addition to providing spiritual solace, they became the only places where citizens could freely express their opinions and listen to non-state appointed speakers.

The pope, after the arrest of Bishop Álvarez, called for dialogue in Nicaragua: "I would like to express my conviction and my hope that, through an open and sincere dialogue, the basis for a respectful and peaceful co-existence might still be found," he stated after a public prayer in the Vatican.¹⁶

¹⁵ L' Osservatore Romano. *Comunicado de la Santa Sede sobre la expulsión del nuncio en Nicaragua*. 18 March 2022. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.osservatoreromano.va/es/news/2022-03/spa-011/comunicado-de-la-santa-sede-sobre-la-expulsion-del-nuncio-en-nic.html>

¹⁶ Pope Francis. *Angelus*. The Holy See, 21 August 2022. [Online]. Available at:

These statements were disappointing for all those denouncing the repression, as many considered the Vatican's intervention insufficient for not calling for the bishop's release.

According to human rights activists, former officials and priests, Nicaragua has reached a milestone with the last influential cleric silenced: its status as a totalitarian state is complete.¹⁷

Because the Ortega regime was aware of the high political cost that the arrest of the bishop would entail, they tried beforehand to persuade him by different means to leave the country. These pressures were reportedly brought to bear on his family, who were also placed under house arrest.

He was ultimately sentenced to 26 years and four months in prison after refusing to be deported to the US, a decision that provoked the wrath of the president, who called him "arrogant, unhinged and a madman". The bishop is now being held in a maximum-security prison for alleged "treason".

And finally, as was foreseeable, Nicaragua suspended diplomatic relations with the Vatican following statements made by the pontiff to the Argentinean newspaper Infobae. Asked about the crisis in Nicaragua and the attacks on the Catholic Church, Pope Francis was blunt: "With great respect, I have no choice but to think that the person who leads [Daniel Ortega] is unbalanced. Here we have a bishop in prison, a very serious, very capable man. He wanted to give his testimony and did not accept exile. It is something that is outside of our own times, it is like bringing the communist dictatorship of 1917 or the Hitler dictatorship of 1935, bringing the same ones here... They are a kind of gross dictatorships. Or, to use a nice Argentine distinction, guarangas. Guarangas".¹⁸

Just as he stated about Nicaragua the previous December in another interview with ABC, the Vatican always tries to safeguard diplomatic relations, "the Holy See never leaves, they throw us out".¹⁹

<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/es/angelus/2022/documents/20220821-angelus.htm>

¹⁷ FLORES BERMUDEZ, KURMANAEV and MENDOZA. *Nicaragua silences its last critics: Catholic priests*. 23 August 2022, in: The New York Times. [Online]. Available at:

<https://www.nytimes.com/es/2022/08/23/espanol/nicaragua-ortega-iglesia-catolica.html>

¹⁸ HADAD, Daniel. *Pope Francis: "I want to go to Argentina"*. 10 March , 2023, in: INFOBAE. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.infobae.com/sociedad/2023/03/10/el-papa-francisco-yo-quiero-ir-a-la-argentina/>

¹⁹ QUIRÓS AND MARTÍNEZ BERROCAL. *Pope Francis: "I have already signed my resignation in case of medical impediment"*. 17 December 2022, in ABC. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.abc.es/sociedad/papa-francisco-veces-posturas-inmaduras-aferran-hizo-20221218124801-nt.html>

But the harassment continued with the expulsion of two nuns of the Dominican Sisters of the Annunciation who were running a home for the elderly in poverty, as well as the confiscation of the Trappist Sisters' monastery in San Pedro de Lóvago, Chontales department.

A sad toll of one bishop in prison, another in exile and 66 priests and nuns who have left or been expelled from Nicaragua in the context of the socio-political crisis, in flagrant violation of religious freedom.

Other silenced voices

According to a report by the Regional Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights for Central America and the Caribbean,²⁰ human rights violations perpetrated by the Ortega-Murillo dictatorship in Nicaragua have reached alarming levels. These violations include the use of historical practices such as statelessness, deprivation of civil rights and confiscation of property as political punishment. In addition, a combination of violations of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights has been observed. As a result of this repression and abuse of power, tens of thousands of Nicaraguans have been forced to flee their country in search of safety and protection.



Source: Alfredo Zúñiga/ PhotoPicture Alliance/DW

²⁰ United Nations. Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the human rights situation in Nicaragua. [Online]. Available at: https://www.oacnudh.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Informe_Nicaragua_HRC_51_Septiembre2022.pdf

In February, 222 opponents of the regime were released from prison, expelled from Nicaragua and deported to the United States "as traitors to the homeland", according to the ruling of the Managua Court of Appeals. They were also disqualified for life from holding public office, being elected officials, and their citizenship rights were suspended for life.²¹ Political revenge was meted out to those who committed the "crime" of "destabilising the regime", such as the seven presidential candidates, including Cristiana Chamorro, imprisoned in the months leading up to the 2021 elections in which Daniel Ortega was re-elected.

However, there were not only political opponents, there were also representatives of business associations, from those big families that were abandoned by Ortega when the economic model pact was broken in 2018; students who went out to protest and ordinary people, citizens who supported the protests or participated in them. And a small group of intellectuals who had not lived in Nicaragua for some time.

According to the president, his government decided to release the prisoners in order to "send a message for peace, for stability, so that the people are convinced that we are doing everything to ensure peace"²², as was declared on national television.

In this regard, the Biden Administration has assured that it has not negotiated anything in return with Ortega, but values the gesture as a constructive step that opens the door to further bilateral dialogue.²³ Although it is somewhat strange that the Nicaraguan leader, knowing his past, would give something away for free without expecting anything in return, or maybe it is simply an attempt to improve the dialogue between the two countries and start the way out of diplomatic isolation.

Reactions to these events were swift and the Organisation of American States (OAS) demanded that the Ortega government restore the rights of the expelled political prisoners, while the Puebla Group²⁴ expressed its serious concern over the measures adopted by the Nicaraguan government, describing them as practices reminiscent of

²¹ INFOBAE. *Nicaragua releases and expels 222 "political prisoners", including priests*. 9 February 2023. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.infobae.com/americas/agencias/2023/02/09/nicaragua-excarcela-y-expulsa-a-222-presos-politicos-incluidos-sacerdotes/>

²²BBC News World. *Ortega assures that they did not ask the US for "anything in return" to receive the 222 opponents they expelled from Nicaragua*, 10 February 2023. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-64591187>

²³ Secretary Anthony Blinken. @SecBlinken. 9 February 2023, 18:27 [tweet] <https://twitter.com/SecBlinken/status/1623735459607183360?s=20> [Accessed: 5 March 2023].

²⁴ The Puebla Group is a political and academic forum, founded in 2019, composed of presidents, former presidents, political and social leaders within the progressive movement, as well as academics from 18 Ibero-American countries, Spain and Portugal.

those of the dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s.

The Nicaraguan authorities, by means of a special law demanded by Ortega and hastily passed in the National Assembly, have stripped more than 300 people of their nationality, including Bishop Rolando Álvarez.

It should be noted that these judgments do not have a legal framework at the international level. According to Article 15 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, "1. Everyone has the right to a nationality; and 2. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor of the right to change his nationality". Elsewhere, Article 19 of the American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man states that "Every person has the right to the nationality to which he is entitled by law and to change it, if he so wishes, for the nationality of any other country that is willing to grant it to him."²⁵

The countries of the Ibero-American continent have not clearly set out their position on the regrettable events in Nicaragua, but have instead reacted in a contradictory, ambivalent and assorted manner to the actions of the Sandinista regime.

The first government to offer citizenship to the victims of the Nicaraguan government's "dispossession" was the Spanish government; its proposal extends "to any citizen of Nicaragua who in the future may be rendered stateless by the decisions of Daniel Ortega's government".

Following Chile's condemnation of Ortega for his behaviour, Chile, through its then Foreign Minister Antonia Urrejola, issued a communiqué offering to grant Chilean nationality to any exiled Nicaraguan who requested it.²⁶ The Chilean president, Gabriel Boric, who since coming to power has harshly criticised authoritarian regimes in the region, had already called weeks ago for the release of "opponents who are still being detained in an undignified manner" in Nicaragua, during his speech at the summit of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) in Buenos Aires.²⁷ At the United Nations General Assembly, he called on countries "to work so that, nowhere in the world, having different ideas from the government in power can end in persecution or

²⁵ UN. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.un.org/es/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights> and OAS. American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man. <https://www.oas.org/es/cidh/mandato/basicos/declaracion.asp>

²⁶ LABORDE, A, MALDONADO C.S. *Chile, the only Latin American power to openly condemn Ortega's latest offensive*. El País, 17 February 2023. [Online]. Available at: <https://elpais.com/internacional/2023-02-17/el-chile-de-boric-la-unica-potencia-de-america-latina-que-condena-abiertamente-la-ultima-ofensiva-de-ortega.html>

²⁷ INFOBAE. *Boric calls for free elections in Venezuela and the release of political prisoners in Nicaragua at CELAC*. 24 January 2023. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.infobae.com/america/america-latina/2023/01/24/boric-pidio-en-la-celac-elecciones-libres-en-venezuela-y-liberacion-de-los-presos-politicos-en-nicaragua/>

violation of human rights", which earned him the description of "lapdog" by his Nicaraguan counterpart.²⁸

Colombia granted nationality to Sergio Ramírez, writer and former vice-president of Nicaragua, but initially, with restrained language. It expressed concern about the stripping of nationality and considered the release and expulsion of the prisoners as an important step towards dialogue. A few days later, the Colombian government spoke out more strongly, stating that these were "dictatorial procedures" and expressing its "revulsion". In the case of Bogotá, additional complications arise in the bilateral relationship with Managua due to the fact that both countries are involved in a territorial dispute over the sovereignty of the waters surrounding the archipelago of San Andrés and Providencia.

However, Mexico, Brazil and Argentina have maintained much more reserved, neutral, even circumspect positions. Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador suggested that those expelled from Nicaragua could apply for Mexican nationality, hinting that they would be granted it, but refused to condemn Ortega's behaviour and called for dialogue, implying that Mexico could play an intermediary role in Nicaragua. It should be recalled that López Obrador's government tends to use the principle of non-intervention in foreign policy matters, established in the Constitution, as a means to avoid making statements that might be uncomfortable.

And although the positions of the Lula (Brazil) or Fernández (Argentina) administrations are usually clearer, in this case Buenos Aires, although a little more critical than Mexico, has followed a similar line to that of Mexico, offering nationality to those who request it, but avoiding a clear condemnation of the dictatorship.

Brazil remained silent for several weeks until its ambassador to the UN Human Rights Council, Tovar da Silva Nunes, spoke out in Geneva. It initially proposed a dialogue with the Nicaraguan government and a "positive" approach towards Ortega, but then expressed concern about "reports of serious human rights violations and restrictions on the democratic space, including summary executions, arbitrary detentions and torture".

²⁸ Emol.com. *Daniel Ortega responds to Boric's criticism at the UN: "He forgets about the political prisoners in his country"*, 29 September 2022. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.emol.com/noticias/Internacional/2022/09/29/1074141/daniel-ortega-responde-criticas-boric.html>

The ambassador also mentioned that his country would offer citizenship to opponents expelled by Nicaragua²⁹.

But there seem to be no limits to Ortega's thirst for total control. In early May this year, under his orders, a massive police operation was carried out in the departments of Managua, Rivas, Matagalpa, Chinandega, Madriz, Estelí, Granada, Jinotega and Chontales, which resulted in the arrest of 40 people: opponents, peasant activists and journalists. This was the largest number of arrests in a single day on record since the paramilitary operation known as "Operation Clean Sweep" in 2018.³⁰ The detainees were summarily tried in an early morning trial for the alleged crimes of "conspiracy to undermine national integrity and the propagation of fake news"—a new form of justice.

Conclusion

Five years after the outbreak of social unrest in Nicaragua in April 2018, Daniel Ortega's regime has only increased its repression, reinvented itself and incorporated new patterns of human rights violations, leaving thousands of victims in its wake.

These oppressive tactics include the excessive use of force, the subordination of the judicial system to the interests of the Ortega regime on what should be criminalised, attacks on civil society, forced exile and arbitrary deprivation of nationality.

Social organisations with legal personality have also been dissolved and property seized. Silencing protests and weakening, or outright eliminating, any criticism of established power in Nicaragua has been a favourite activity of the former "comandante" and his wife, the vice-president.

The harassment of the Catholic Church is based on the Church's ability to attract people today, in a country where 90% of the population is still Catholic. It is a luxury Daniel Ortega cannot afford to let under the radar.

²⁹ CASTAÑEDA, J.C. *The sad reality of a Latin America still divided over the human rights situation in Nicaragua*. CNN. 22 March 2023 [Online]. Available at: <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2023/03/22/opinion-america-latina-dividida-derechos-humanos-nicaragua/>

³⁰ MIRANDA W. *Daniel Ortega orders massive police raid detaining 40 in Nicaragua*, in: El País, 4 May 2023. [Online]. Available at: <https://elpais.com/internacional/2023-05-04/daniel-ortega-ordena-una-masiva-redada-policial-que-deja-40-detenidos-en-nicaragua.html>

Despite the resolutions of the Organisation of American States and the sanctions imposed by the European Union and the United States, these have so far been ineffective in stopping the abuses of power by the Ortega-Murillo tandem.

Perhaps, a genuine diplomatic isolation by all neighbouring countries would be a way to avoid the deterioration of democracy that is present in much of Ibero-America.

Finally, it is almost ironic to think that this "liberator" of 1979 has become "the great dictator" in the country that represented literary modernism in the Spanish language through Rubén Darío.

*Rocío de los Reyes Ramírez **
IEEE Analyst