

# Nicaragua Resists: Daniel Ortega Gained Control but Lost Power

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*"Thus the people leapt into the streets, jubilant, waving flags,  
believing that a single man embodied all their harm,  
dancing in the sun  
while in the dark crevice of one or two hearts  
the new tyranny silently nested."*

Pablo Antonio Cuadra

Forty-six years after the Sandinistas came to power, in what some call "the triumph of the revolution," it is worth pausing to consider what now reads like a clear prophecy by Nicaraguan poet Pablo Antonio Cuadra, in this passage from "In the Heat of August...". A poem that could describe how an armed uprising brought about the fall of a dynasty —the Somozas— while, in the shadows, a new tyranny was taking shape —cloaked in illusion, myth, and promises of prosperity for the long-impooverished and marginalized.

As Latin America faces a growing wave of authoritarian regressions, Nicaragua emerges as one of the most alarming and, at the same time, paradigmatic cases. In its recent history, since 2018, the dictatorship of Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo has cemented the collapse of democracy, establishing a de facto

totalitarian state through killings, deprivations, brutal repression, forced exile, and the criminalization of all dissent, as the daily weapons of power<sup>1</sup>.

In the face of this apparatus of oppression, an alternative emerged of peaceful resistance, diverse and committed to restoring democratic order and the rule of law. Despite the complicit silence of some international actors and the diplomatic normalization of an unpunished dictatorship, Nicaraguan society resists —both inside and outside the country— paying an extraordinarily high human cost to regain its freedom.

This article aims to examine the role of this resistance against the Ortega-Murillo regime and to explore its implications for democracy in Latin America. Nicaragua is not an isolated anomaly, but rather a troubling mirror of the challenges faced by democratic systems across the continent: the hollowing out of institutions —stripped of checks and balances and captured by state powers—, the use of the armed forces as a tool of political control, the annihilation of real oppositions, and the colonization of collective memory.

### **The establishment of totalitarianism in the heart of Central America**

The defeat Daniel Ortega suffered in 1990 left him in a parliamentary minority and drove him to co-opt labor unions —with roots in Sandinismo— in order to “govern from below” and create instability for his successors. One of the most common vices in local politics is not knowing how and when to step down

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1 Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. *Graves violaciones a los derechos humanos en el marco de la crisis sociopolítica en Nicaragua*. OEA/Ser.L/V/II, doc. 86. Washington, D.C.: OEA, 2018.

from office. Ortega capitalized on his time in opposition by strengthening the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) until it became the second political force amid the imminent divisions within Nicaraguan liberalism, which in turn enabled the secret 2000 pact between Ortega and Arnoldo Alemán.

This pact –between the FSLN and the Constitutional Liberal Party (PLC)– allowed both parties to divide up control of state institutions as if it were a banquet: 50/50 for each in the judiciary, the electoral system, and continued presence in Parliament. The threshold to win an election outright in the first round was reduced to 35%, and the runoff election was eliminated. These conditions were custom-designed to smooth Ortega’s path back to power.

The current dictatorship is built on a foundation of impunity, corruption, and a political class without scruples. From its inception, the regime sought to dominate not only state institutions but also private life, the collective conscience, and the nation’s historical narrative.<sup>2</sup> This authoritarian drift relied on weak institutions, built not on democratic or republican principles, but on an ideology transformed into a founding myth: Sandinismo.

In 2007, Daniel Ortega returned to power. No longer wearing a military uniform, he appeared in the public square in a white shirt and called on the police and army to return to Sandinista principles. The “second phase of the revolution” was underway. A strategy of power accumulation and centralization then began, dismantling institutional checks and balances: the Judiciary was captured through loyal magistrates, the Supreme Electoral Council became an office of fraud, and the National Assembly turned

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2 United Nations Human Rights Council. *Informe del Grupo de Expertos sobre Nicaragua: La consolidación de un Estado totalitario*. A/HRC/55/49. Ginebra: ONU, 2024.

into an instrument to legalize arbitrariness. The separation of powers was completely eliminated.<sup>3</sup>

The constitutional rupture occurred in 2009, when magistrate Rafael Solís —president of the Constitutional Chamber of the Judiciary and the wedding godfather of Ortega and Murillo—ruled that Article 147 of the Constitution, which barred presidential reelection, was no longer enforceable. The Organization of American States (OAS) stayed silent, even while monitoring the elections, failing to acknowledge the obvious irregularities.

At the same time, Ortega presented himself as “a new man,” pragmatic, seeking to make a pact with one of the country’s real powers: the capitalist elite. He established a tacit agreement with the business elites, especially COSEP, offering political stability and legal security in exchange for non-confrontation. The pact functioned as the backbone of the model: access to contracts, protection from protests, and the ability to influence economic policies, in exchange for quiet backing of authoritarian rule. Democracy was sacrificed in exchange for the illusion of economic growth.

### **Tropical sultanate: an export model of coercion**

The most radical shift occurred after the civic uprising of April 2018, when repression left more than 350 people dead, more than 2,000 political prisoners, in a ‘revolving door’ cycle of arrests and releases, and nearly 900,000 exiles: the largest exodus in the country’s recent history.<sup>4</sup> Repression became institutionalized:

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3 Organization of American States. *Informe sobre Nicaragua y resolución de condena al régimen Ortega-Murillo*. AG/RES. 2948. Washington, D.C.: OEA, 2021

4 ACNUR. *Situación de desplazamiento de personas nicaragüenses*. América Central, ACNUR, 2023.

journalists, students, priests, business leaders, and opposition figures were persecuted, imprisoned, killed, or banished. More than 5,000 NGOs have been shut down, and political parties not aligned with the regime have been outlawed.

Ortega does not rule alone. Rosario Murillo, his wife, has been central to the construction of this “tropical sultanate.” Under her command, propaganda has imposed a culture of obedience based on the cult of personality, fear, and symbolic manipulation: a kind of political catechism designed to rewrite history. An even more perverse echo of Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu, the Romanian dictators.

In 2024, Ortega formalized the two-headed dictatorship: a constitutional reform allowed Rosario Murillo to be named “co-president,” securing a dynastic line of succession. Although there is no provision for how their children might inherit power, it is clear that the model aspires to perpetuate itself, since the position was crafted as a discretionary role for vice presidents—without granting them access to the bloodstained throne.

The strength of the regime today rests on terror, enforced through the State’s absolute control and the deployment of armed forces and police as instruments of repression. International organizations have confirmed that the state apparatus—including the National Police and the Army—has been instrumentalized to carry out a repressive plan with the knowledge of the political leadership: a combination of vertical power and ideological fanaticism<sup>5</sup>.

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Divergentes, “Los 328 nicaragüenses desnacionalizados: quiénes son y qué representan”, *Divergentes*, February 10, 2023. <https://www.divergentes.com>.

5 “Informe del Grupo de Expertos en Derechos Humanos sobre Nicaragua: Violaciones generalizadas y sistemáticas de los derechos humanos

In foreign policy, the dictatorship has turned Nicaragua into an authoritarian enclave serving powers such as Russia, China, Iran, Cuba, and Venezuela. Ortega is no longer just a national dictator: he is an accomplice to espionage networks, money laundering for his allies, an exporter of irregular migration, and a protector of fugitives from international justice.

#### **April: the birth of new political practices.**

In the year 2018, a civic awakening was made possible that overcame the barrier of apathy and channeled demands for representation that the traditional political class had failed to address. The existing parties, far from capitalizing on this social energy, invested their political capital, human resources, and finances in discouraging citizen participation in public affairs. It was the drive and courage of the youth that allowed sectors historically excluded from decision-making spaces to raise their voices.

The first phase of the process was defined by ‘self-organized’ forms of peaceful protest. This brought with it important advantages: greater participation, diversity, spontaneity, and a reduction of collective fear. However, there were also disadvantages: dispersion, lack of information, vulnerability, and greater strategic demands. Despite this, a new political class emerged with a multisectoral face, managing to bring together —through common ground— sectors historically divided: the private sector and trade unionists, progressive groups and conservative organizations, for example.

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desde abril de 2018”, United Nations Human Rights Council, March 2023. A/HRC/52/63..

This new opposition articulated its interests around the recovery of the rule of law, individual and collective freedoms, democratic institutionalization, and the pursuit of justice for the victims. Organization became the second phase, complex by nature, which fragmented what had once looked like a single, united blue-and-white front. The thirst for democracy generated a proliferation of organizations, movements, and platforms. Resistance in Nicaragua has not been homogeneous or linear, but it has been profoundly courageous, plural, and ethical. Confronting the Ortega-Murillo dictatorship through nonviolence, in the midst of systematic repression, has been –and continues to be– an act of collective heroism.

The civic insurrection of April marked a breaking point in recent political history. What began as a student protest against neoliberal reforms to the social security system quickly transformed into a national uprising against corruption, repression, and the lack of freedoms. Through various forms of protest, the population found a new voice demanding the resignation of the regime.

Part of this leadership bet on a peaceful and orderly way out of the crisis through elections in 2021. Although conditions were unfavorable, they prepared to hold primaries. And, as the saying goes, ‘Ortega killed the cat at the doorstep,’ meaning something was crushed before it could even begin. The discontent was so widespread that the dictatorship’s strategies of control only strengthened the citizens’ drive to go out and vote. The dictatorship knew this. That is why it annihilated the competition by imprisoning the pre-candidates and dissidents who threatened the status quo, later forcing them into exile.

Since then, the resistance has been reconfigured in multiple forms. In exile, there are platforms for raising international

awareness and denunciation and efforts to reorganize opposition movements, with members now scattered across the globe. Social media has played a key role in bridging these two realities. But is there opposition inside the country? The answer is immediate: yes.

Despite absolute control, gestures of everyday rebellion persist: an anonymous piece of graffiti, a whispered slogan, civic disobedience in the face of the obligation to attend regime-sponsored activities, tuning in to independent media from exile, and the organization of clandestine networks —one by one.

Each of these acts represents a denial of absolute power and an unyielding affirmation of the right to live in freedom.

The Catholic Church has played a prophetic and human role that has made it the most trusted institution in the country, despite systematic persecution against the clergy and other church bodies. For its part, the independent press —even from exile— continues to inform the public, despite media confiscations and newsroom closures.<sup>6</sup> The dictatorship has shut down more than 5,000 non-governmental organizations and stripped more than 300 people of their nationality, but it has not succeeded in erasing critical thought or breaking the collective will for change.<sup>7</sup>

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6 Reporteros Sin Fronteras. *Clasificación Mundial de la Libertad de Prensa* 2024. París: RSF, 2024.

7 Human Rights Watch. *World Report 2024: Nicaragua*. Nueva York: HRW, 2024.

La Prensa. “Más de 600,000 nicaragüenses han salido del país desde 2018.” *La Prensa*, 2 de diciembre de 2023.



## **Regional apathy toward dictatorships**

The Nicaraguan case cannot be analyzed in isolation. The consolidation of the Ortega-Murillo regime represents a large-scale authoritarian setback that calls into question not only the validity of human rights in Central America, but also the very viability of the democratic model in Latin America. What is happening in Nicaragua is, at the same time, a warning and a symptom: democracy in the region is not guaranteed. Its erosion can be rapid, profound, and, above all, silent if decisive action is not taken.

Nicaragua has become an enclave of international authoritarianism in the Western Hemisphere. The regime has woven strategic alliances with powers such as Russia, China, and Iran, which see Central America as a geopolitically valuable space to challenge Western influence and project power in the region. Through these ties, the regime obtains political, technological, military, and financial support, thereby reinforcing its mechanisms of internal repression. In addition, its ideological and operational closeness with regimes such as those of Cuba and Venezuela has served as a model for consolidating a system of control based on surveillance, persecution, the criminalization of adversaries, and clientelism.<sup>8</sup>

However, the danger does not lie solely in external alignment. Daniel Ortega has paid no significant international political cost, despite the fact that the 2021 elections were not recognized by most of the democratic world. We are facing an asymptomatic and indifferent region, where Ortega sends a clear message to other authoritarian leaders —those with autocratic temptations or already on the path to consolidating a dictatorship: one can

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<sup>8</sup> BBC Mundo. “Nicaragua: acuerdos con Rusia y China”, January 2023.

destroy a republic, imprison the entire opposition, rewrite the Constitution, eliminate political parties, shut down universities, exile thousands of citizens, and still enjoy diplomatic recognition and economic benefits.<sup>9</sup>

Dictatorships do not speak the language of reason, but of coercion. Acting half-heartedly not only prolongs the crisis of the people, but also becomes a veiled form of complicity. The invocation of the Inter-American Democratic Charter—which obliges States to break relations with governments that alter the constitutional order—has fallen into disuse. Paradoxically, it is authoritarian regimes themselves that end up conditioning its application. Many Latin American governments choose silence to avoid “picking a fight,” while the paralysis of organizations such as the OAS and the United Nations actively contributes to the normalization of dictatorship.

The Sandinista regime has shown that an autocracy can entrench itself without ever rolling tanks into the streets: it is enough to control the judicial system, co-opt the branches of the State, issue repressive laws, and strip institutions of their substance. Ortega represents a “model” that is observed and, in some cases, imitated. Governments that restrict the press, discredit social protest, instrumentalize the courts, and cling to power through “legal” reforms find in Nicaragua both an inspiration and a silent complicity.

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9 Organization of American States. *Informe sobre Nicaragua y resolución de condena al régimen Ortega-Murillo*. AG/RES. 2948. Washington, D.C.: OEA, 2021.

“Informe del Grupo de Expertos en Derechos Humanos sobre Nicaragua: Violaciones generalizadas y sistemáticas de los derechos humanos desde abril de 2018”, United Nations Human Rights Council, March 2023. A/HRC/52/63.

Likewise, the passivity of regional mechanisms for democratic protection has seriously weakened the inter-American framework. Nicaragua's exit from the OAS, the ineffectiveness of its resolutions, and the limited pressure from the United Nations system expose the fragility of the institutional framework meant to safeguard democracy. In the face of this vacuum, regional civil society must rethink its strategies, build transnational solidarity networks, and practice a bolder, firmer citizen diplomacy. We Nicaraguans have stood on the front lines; now greater definition and political clarity are required.

The case of Nicaragua challenges the democracies of the continent to take a stand. Neutrality is not possible in the face of a dictatorship. Every gesture of indifference strengthens authoritarianism. Every timid statement lends it legitimacy. By contrast, every act of active solidarity, every just sanction, every clear denunciation keeps alive the hope that freedom can still be won.

Democracy cannot defend itself. It requires vigilant citizens, solid institutions, and a coherent international community. In Nicaragua, the decomposition of the republican system unfolded in plain sight, as much of the world turned a blind eye, and many actors inside the country underestimated the destructive capacity of the Ortega-Murillo regime.

Holding the opposition responsible for the enthronement of dictatorships is a form of self-flagellation. What is truly our responsibility is to achieve a silent organization within the country that can serve as an alternative for the "day after." The fall of the regime—as if a single man encapsulated all the damage —does not, by itself, guarantee a functional democracy, much less an orderly transition. Strategic political organization can. Moreover,

it is essential to capitalize on this moment of exile to forge a national vision and build real alternatives, free from clientelism, caudillismo, and fear.

I consider it essential, in the balance of forces, that the continent's democratic governments—including the United States and the European Union— increase the political consequences of repression. It is indispensable to maintain and reinforce a sanctions strategy focused on the income streams that sustain the regime, as well as to condition or suspend loans through international cooperation mechanisms. Free trade agreements should be monitored for compliance with democratic and human rights clauses, and suspended if those clauses are not upheld. At the same time, political and material support should be provided to victims, human rights defenders, and journalists. Only then can the regime be compelled to come to the negotiating table, for the good of the country and the entire region.<sup>10</sup>

In this scenario, the “globalized resistance” is today one of the most powerful assets against the regime's impunity. Unity should be seen as a means, not an end: the current condition is not a uniform opposition, although it is possible to carry out joint actions by finding common ground amid differences, building a single message with multiple voices. With a strategic vision for an orderly transition. Fragmentation and distrust have been weapons that the regime has effectively promoted. Overcoming them requires dialogue, will, and coordinated action.

Nicaragua needs an opposition that stands firm and offers solutions; that not only exposes the dictator, but emerges as

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10 U.S. Customs and Border Protection. *Southwest Land Border Encounters*. Abril de 2024. <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-land-border-encounters>

a genuine alternative after his fall. An opposition capable of building a radically different democracy: a democracy that does not forget, that does not repeat past mistakes, and that places the free and dignified individual at the heart of the national project.