

Restoring Democracy in Nicaragua ESCALATING EFFORTS AGAINST THE ORTEGA-MURILLO REGIME

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American Enterprise Institute (2020)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep25368>

Accessed: 07-02-2022 19:48 UTC

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# Restoring Democracy in Nicaragua

ESCALATING EFFORTS AGAINST  
THE ORTEGA-MURILLO REGIME



**RYAN C. BERG**

JULY 2020

A M E R I C A N   E N T E R P R I S E   I N S T I T U T E

# Executive Summary

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The Marxist guerrilla Daniel Ortega seized power in Nicaragua in 1979 and sought to consolidate a dictatorship in place of the one he overthrew. His Sandinista Front was forced by a US-backed insurgency to accept an election in 1990, in which unity candidate Violeta Chamorro handed him a stunning defeat. Ortega spent the next 16 years, in his words, “governing from below.” As democratically elected successors grew the economy, Ortega relied on his brother’s control of the military, held his party together, divided the opposition, and plotted his return to power.

Now 74 years old and in his second stint as Nicaragua’s president, the current iteration of Ortega may be the most dangerous yet. Since his return to power in 2007, Ortega has grown steadily autocratic as he corrupts and co-opts Nicaragua’s weak democratic institutions. Since April 2018, Ortega and his wife, First Lady and now Vice President Rosario Murillo, have orchestrated an authoritarian crackdown against protestors, civil society movements, students, and opposition groups, among others, resulting in hundreds of deaths and hundreds of thousands of Nicaraguans forced into exile.

This report explains the urgent need for a more decisive US strategy to help confront the ongoing crisis in Nicaragua, including clear and achievable objectives backed by a coherent plan of action that anticipates the reactions of Ortega’s regime. Today, US policy toward Ortega is improvised and haphazard at best. Unless Ortega is forced from power by unforeseen events, the general elections scheduled for November 7, 2021, offer the best chance to beat him in a free and fair contest with the help of robust and proactive international observer missions.

This report provides background on the current political crisis, outlines Ortega’s consolidation of

political power and the regime’s key pillars of control, and concludes with policy recommendations for the US government and Nicaragua’s democratic opposition.

- Daniel Ortega’s suppression of protestors and civil society continues unabated. Since April 2018, Nicaragua’s security forces have killed hundreds of people, thousands have been injured or held as political prisoners, and more than 100,000 Nicaraguans have fled to neighboring countries or the United States.
- Ortega’s authoritarian consolidation began well before April 2018; the keys to his regime’s ruthless survival strategy are the National Police and Nicaraguan Army, co-optation of the judiciary, domination of the media, and a highly complicit private sector that long ago embraced a *modus vivendi* with his socialist government, among others.
- The US should ramp up its sanctions against the Ortega regime; target individuals and industries, especially those connected to Ortega or the military; sequence its sanctions rollout; and synchronize external pressure with the domestic opposition to develop an effective strategy for achieving key political and electoral reforms ahead of the general elections in 2021.
- Reinvigorated diplomacy, particularly with the European Union and other Latin American governments, should seek to expand the international coalition against Ortega’s repression to maintain steady pressure for a definitive change in the regime’s character.

Cover photo: Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega and Vice President Rosario Murillo sing the national anthem during a march in Managua, Nicaragua, September 29, 2018. Photo by REUTERS/Oswaldo Rivas.

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# Restoring Democracy in Nicaragua

## ESCALATING EFFORTS AGAINST THE ORTEGA-MURILLO REGIME

**Ryan C. Berg**

On April 18, 2018, Nicaraguan civil society mobilized in response to President Daniel Ortega's surprise proposal to increase the payroll tax and cut the country's social security system. Caught flat-footed, Ortega's government responded with a ferocious crackdown on elderly Nicaraguans protesting the cuts. Clips of government brutality against grandmothers spread like wildfire on social media, and Nicaragua's already restive university students descended on Managua to reinforce the nascent protest movement. With the spark lit, the country exploded when Ortega's government responded again with brutal repression, using live ammunition that killed throngs of protestors. The regime also took hundreds of political prisoners.<sup>1</sup>

One week into the protests, Ortega and his wife—first lady, vice president, and ruthless criminal operator, Rosario Murillo—broadened the country's definition of terrorism.<sup>2</sup> Thereafter, the ruling couple began manufacturing a well-worn propaganda narrative: that political unrest was tantamount to *un golpe suave* (“a soft coup”), reducing all political grievances against their government to illegitimate claims stemming from US pressure on Nicaragua.<sup>3</sup> The Ortega regime came to view civil society itself as the seedbed of an opposition movement bent on its overthrow (Figure 1). After the protests began, the regime decided to launch the so-called “third phase” of the Sandinista Revolution—a government in total denial of any crisis and based on the participation of the faithful and corrupt few who remain and the ruthless elimination of enemies and traitors.

Ortega's political consolidation has managed to hollow out meaningful political opposition to his *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (FSLN or Sandinista National Liberation Front) party. In this vacuum, civil society and independent media outlets have served as the only opposition, pushing back against Ortega's hostile takeover of Nicaragua's political institutions, demanding accountability. For quite a few Nicaraguans, the red and black flag of “Sandinismo” has become synonymous with Ortega's unrelenting political repression against Nicaraguans, while the opposition consciously adopted the deep-blue national flag.

Legislation fast-tracked through Nicaragua's National Assembly gave Ortega control over the 20,000-person National Police (run by his son's father-in-law), approximately 3,000 paramilitaries (some of whom are integrated into the FSLN's party structure and armed by the government), and the 12,000-member National Army (Figure 2). In general, the National Police, National Army, and other irregular forces have heeded Murillo's call to “give them everything we've got.”<sup>4</sup> Balaclava-clad paramilitary groups (*turbas* or *parapolicías* in Spanish) bearing FSLN symbols have terrorized protestors and burned persons alive, including infant children.<sup>5</sup> In one particularly grisly episode, roving snipers killed more than a dozen people on Mother's Day in 2018.<sup>6</sup>

To prevent the diffusion of reliable information, Nicaragua's customs officials blocked the import of newsprint—reprising a hallmark of Ortega's rule in the 1980s—ransacked media offices of famed outlets *La Prensa* and *Confidencial*, arrested prominent

**Figure 1. Peaceful Protests Calling for an End to Violence in the Capital City Managua, Nicaragua**

Source: Reuters. Photo by Jorge Cabrera.

journalists, and shuttered several media outlets that dared to cover the protests and grave human rights abuses.<sup>7</sup> The media has been forced to scale back print versions and publish skeletal dailies exclusively online.

Further, the regime cut the signals of at least five cable TV outlets covering the protests.<sup>8</sup> In addition, an improvised explosive device went off outside the Costa Rican broadcasting studio where exiled journalist Carlos Fernando Chamorro was recording his weekly show, *Esta Semana*—a harrowing incident meant to convey that no Nicaraguan who challenges Ortega, no matter how prominent, is safe from the reach of his authoritarian regime.<sup>9</sup>

Ortega's repression shows few signs of abating, although incidents have decreased as the population has been subdued. Police encircle and beat Nicaraguans who dare to challenge the Ortega regime's human rights record, including those who report violations to the Inter-American Commission on Human

Rights. Members of the National Police even laid siege on mothers of political prisoners engaged in a hunger strike in a Catholic church—demonstrating there is truly no sanctuary in Nicaragua.<sup>10</sup>

Protests have dropped off precipitously in rural areas after the Ortega regime clamped down; however, civil society organizations and the media often lack adequate access to document sundry abuses in these areas.<sup>11</sup> While the government has opened a cascade of criminal cases against protestors and regime critics—leveraging the charge of “inciting terrorism” under the newly broadened definition—it has opened only four investigations into human rights abuses committed by the National Police.<sup>12</sup> Public prosecutors, some of whom form part of Ortega's highly complicit judicial branch, have fabricated cases against demonstrators, and Ortega's military even made an incursion into Costa Rica to execute a Nicaraguan “person of interest.”<sup>13</sup>

**Figure 2. Heavily Armed Paramilitary Groups Terrorize Nicaragua's Streets While Bearing the Flag of the FSLN Party**



Source: Getty images. Photo by Marvin Recinos.

The chronology of Ortega's repression is indicative of his methods of control. First, Ortega responded to protests with police and paramilitary groups. Next, the regime vowed to sweep up any remnants of protest and declared an ersatz "return to normalcy." An increase in arbitrary detentions followed thereafter. When these tactics failed to slow the protests, the ruling couple resorted to outright criminalization of dissent.

Accordingly, the weapons associated with each step of Ortega's escalation also increased in their lethality: Canisters of tear gas were followed by rubber bullets, rubber bullets became real bullets, and, eventually, real bullets turned into military-grade firepower turned on innocent civilians (Figure 3).

As he faced domestic resistance, outside powers shored up Ortega's position. Ortega accepted a small contingent of Russian troops from President Vladimir Putin and permits the country to operate a "police training center" in the capital and a secretive satellite compound outside Managua.<sup>14</sup> Russian weapons have been used to commit human rights abuses, including Dragunov sniper rifles in the aforementioned massacre on Mother's Day 2018.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps most concerning for the country's democratic future, Nicaragua's National Tourism Institute reports that 5,000 Cuban "tourists" arrived in the country during the first half of 2019—a marked increase of 900 per-

cent from the 566 who arrived in 2018.<sup>16</sup>

Aided by a Havana-Managua-Caracas commercial flight, several hundred advisers from the Cuban Intelligence Directorate have descended on Managua and now operate openly with Nicaragua's National Army, monitor police units for defections, and train prison officials in interrogation tactics.<sup>17</sup> While Cuba's relationship with Nicaragua never blossomed into the

**Figure 3. Riot Police Patrol the Streets During a Protest in Managua, Nicaragua**

Source: Reuters. Photo by Oswaldo Rivas.

economic dependency characterized by its relationship with Venezuela, Cuba's mission in Nicaragua is to neutralize the opposition and spread its terrifying tactics of systematic repression.<sup>18</sup>

The Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts (GIEI), a working group of the Organization of American States (OAS), noted grave human rights abuses in Nicaragua and declared the Ortega regime's actions rise to the level of "crimes against humanity."<sup>19</sup> In response, the Ortega regime expelled both the GIEI and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights Special Monitoring Mechanism for Nicaragua. Later, the regime denied entry to the OAS Commission on Nicaragua, which attempted to complete its special report last year. (The OAS Commission ultimately completed its work from El Salvador.)

More than 100,000 Nicaraguans have fled since April 2018, although some estimates place the number

closer to 140,000.<sup>20</sup> About 10 percent of all Nicaraguan households have had a family member leave the country.<sup>21</sup> Approximately 4,000 people leave the country per month.<sup>22</sup> And the economy could decline by as much as 6 percent this year, albeit double-digit losses are not out of the question.<sup>23</sup> Costa Rica and neighboring countries are bearing the brunt of this economic decline and mass migration.

Worse yet, because of the Ortega regime's manifest neglect, Nicaragua appears to be stumbling into another potential disaster that could trigger mass migratory movements and further rattle regional stability—namely, its denial of COVID-19.<sup>24</sup> Spillover effects in the health and social sectors are already visible in Costa Rica, El Salvador, and Honduras. Many Nicaraguans are aware that Costa Rica has one of the most robust health care systems in the Americas, and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees

registers approximately 200 Nicaraguan refugees per day in Costa Rica.<sup>25</sup>

The Ortega regime has placed countless lives at stake with its reckless and criminal response to the unfolding coronavirus pandemic, demonstrating just how few independent voices remain in the government and how little accountability exists under the Ortegas.<sup>26</sup> A recent article in the *Lancet* characterized Nicaragua's response as "perhaps the most erratic of any country in the world to date." Despite a leaked government document declaring the potential for up to 30,000 infections, the Ortegas have pointedly refused to issue "stay-at-home" orders to combat the virus' transmission. Further, with tests tightly controlled by the Ministry of Health, the government has capped testing numbers to 50 per day and promoted an unproven Cuban drug as remedial.<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile, doctors are forced to deny care for political reasons and forcibly migrate for criticizing the regime's lack of stay-at-home orders.<sup>28</sup>

While Ortega himself was absent for 33 days—a personal record in a well-documented pattern of behavior during national crises—the country remains an island of inaction. In fact, the government has encouraged mass rallies and school attendance.<sup>29</sup> The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights recently urged Nicaragua "to recognize the extreme gravity of the situation, and immediately adopt steps to address and contain the pandemic."<sup>30</sup> Instead, the regime has kept the country open to ensure a steady stream of funding for its repressive security apparatus.<sup>31</sup> Murillo even called on thousands of supporters to congregate in a street celebration dubbed "love in the time of COVID-19." Meanwhile, rumors abound of secret "express burials" at midnight, mass graves guarded by paramilitary groups to hide the magnitude of the virus, and the spurious listing of "atypical pneumonia" as the cause of death for most COVID-19 fatalities.<sup>32</sup>

The regime's silence is not ignorant but calculated and criminal. When Bishop Rolando José Álvarez Lagos of Matagalpa sought to implement several local call centers to dispense general information and programs intended to stop the transmission of COVID-19, the Nicaraguan Ministry of Health

blocked him.<sup>33</sup> A lack of functioning health clinics has been blamed on protestors' purported "destruction" during confrontations with the Ortega regime, when in fact, the regime sought to discourage protestors by firing hundreds of doctors and nurses for abiding by the Hippocratic oath and offering care to those supporting the opposition.<sup>34</sup> Many medical personnel responded by emigrating.

As a result, public hospitals are brimming with patients. There are reports that the Ortega regime continues to deny care to members of the opposition and doctors are prohibited from wearing personal protective equipment while treating coronavirus patients.<sup>35</sup> Six hundred doctors have signed a petition to declare the Ortega regime's COVID-19 response as criminal.<sup>36</sup> The country must confront COVID-19 with a shortage of key health care workers.<sup>37</sup>

## Pillars of Control

Owing to both repression and the pandemic, effective and organized resistance has largely ground to a halt. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights describes Nicaragua as suffering from a "climate of widespread terror."<sup>38</sup> Lethal force instills terror in the population as the Ortega regime engages in a policy of "shoot to kill."<sup>39</sup>

Yet, Ortega's domination of Nicaraguan politics is constituted by more than his monopoly on violence. His regime's control is more thorough and all-encompassing. Ortega counts the support of a range of institutions in Nicaraguan society and government that he has bent to his will over the years. These are his key "pillars of control."

Ortega is an astute and relentless leader who has survived decades in power by seizing opportunities to broaden political alliances and debilitate his opponents. In Nicaraguan society, where political rule is highly personal and, as the OAS Commission on Nicaragua finds, there is "a pattern of wide reaching executive control of state institutions," few institutions have managed to avoid being compromised.<sup>40</sup> With extensive executive influence across the state, most Nicaraguan institutions have had

to reconcile in some way with Ortega, or they have done so willingly and become central pillars of control for his regime. The legislative and judicial bodies, the police and the army, the Catholic Church, the private sector, the media, and even opposition political parties all are complicit, to varying degrees, in Ortega's continued hold on political power.<sup>41</sup>

In particular, Ortega's hold on power has relied on a combination of factors and institutions—clientelistic politics, strong social spending for his base of support, generous lending from multilateral institutions such as the Inter-American Development Bank and the Central American Bank for Economic Integration (CABEI), an erstwhile alliance with the country's powerful business sector (COSEP), and, much like the earlier support he received from the Soviet Union in the 1980s, lavish financing from like-minded ideological leaders, such as Venezuela's Hugo Chávez and his successor, Nicolás Maduro.<sup>42</sup>

**Control of the National Assembly and Politicization of Election Bodies.** After Ortega's stunning electoral defeat in 1990, he ceded the presidency. Before doing so, however, he moved to consolidate his power. In the final months of Ortega's presidency, the FSLN nationalized state assets and expropriated private property in an event known as "*La Piñata*"—like the popular papier-mâché party decorations burst open for the treats they hide inside.<sup>43</sup> In delicate transition negotiations, Ortega insisted that his brother, Gen. Humberto Ortega, would retain command of the military—then known as the Sandinista Popular Army (EPS). Gen. Ortega led the EPS until 1995, when it was renamed the Nicaraguan Army under a new commander and Sandinista loyalist. (Gen. Ortega became a vocal critic of the re-politicization of the Nicaraguan Army that began in 2007 under his brother.)

By amassing economic and military muscle, Ortega ensured that he would remain highly relevant and well financed as he transitioned to the role of main opposition figure. Before they could appreciate the danger, Ortega seized wealth from potential enemies and kept the brute force of a politicized military. As the opposition leader for 16 years, he played spoiler (and corrupter) to three different

administrations, effectively preventing Nicaragua's institutions from fully adopting a democratic character. Further, Ortega used undue influence over the state security apparatus to infiltrate key areas of government and continue to dictate the terms of doing business in Nicaragua, making good on his promise to "govern from below"—wielding student unrest and Sandinista labor unions to intimidate the government, private sector, and political foes.<sup>44</sup>

Despite his relative power during this time, Ortega never attracted support from beyond his Sandinista base. He ran unsuccessful presidential campaigns in 1996 and 2001. He finally secured victory in 2006, with just 38 percent of the vote—the result of a shady arrangement known euphemistically as the Governance Agreement (known popularly as "*El Pacto*," the Pact) passed by the National Assembly in 2000. The deal was supposed to acquire immunity for the corrupt President Arnoldo Alemán of the Constitutionalist Liberal Party (PLC) in exchange for improving the FSLN's electoral chances.<sup>45</sup> Crucially, the backroom deal lowered the threshold for winning the presidency from 45 percent to as little as 35 percent of the first-round vote, provided the margin of victory was at least 5 percent. Conveniently for Ortega, ever since he lost the 1990 general election, his support topped out at 35 percent.

Ortega's return to power in January 2007 coincided with massive FSLN gains in the National Assembly, making it increasingly pliant. The body rewrote the constitution, ending the prohibition on consecutive presidential terms (effectively codifying an earlier ruling by the Nicaraguan Supreme Court). In January 2014 alone, it passed 97 constitutional amendments with wide-ranging consequences for public finance, Ortega's accountability, and the organization of elections.<sup>46</sup>

Election fraud also ensured an increase in the number of loyal members serving in the National Assembly. The 2011 election, which the European Union's electoral observation mission declared "opaque and arbitrary," saw Ortega win 72.5 percent of the vote and an absolute majority for the FSLN in Congress. Subsequent elections allowed the FSLN to win a supermajority, obviating the need for any compromise with the opposition.

While there is little Ortega cannot do with the National Assembly, he also relies on dominance of Nicaragua's highly politicized *Consejo Supremo Electoral* (Supreme Electoral Council). In the past, the council issued electoral calendars without making any changes suggested by political parties for improving the democratic process. Regulations prohibit both domestic and international election observers. Perhaps most brazenly, opposition party participation has been eliminated or severely restricted.<sup>47</sup>

Nicaragua's 2016 general elections saw the Supreme Electoral Council force 16 opposition lawmakers from their seats in the National Assembly, deny independent election observers, strip the main opposition candidate Eduardo Montealegre of his political party, and permit Murillo to run for vice president, cementing a family dynasty similar to that of the Somoza dictatorship. Under international pressure, Ortega has gestured at making "major electoral reforms" while excluding the opposition from any negotiations.

**Judiciary.** Ortega has packed the judiciary with his acolytes, and his hold over the judiciary is crucial to his perpetuation in office. The final report of the OAS Commission on Nicaragua noted the impartiality and independence of Nicaragua's judicial institutions are widely questioned, making Nicaragua a "co-opted state that is incompatible with the rule of law."<sup>48</sup> Indeed, Rafael Solís, a former justice on Nicaragua's Supreme Court, revealed in his January 2019 resignation letter that Ortega and Murillo often directly influence and dictate the decisions and resolutions of the country's courts.<sup>49</sup>

Control of the judiciary (along with the legislative body) permitted Ortega to lift a ban on consecutive presidential terms in 2010, paving the way for his indefinite reelection and granting him the power to rule by decree.<sup>50</sup> It also allowed Murillo to run for vice president in 2016—making a mockery of the constitutional prohibition against relatives of a sitting president running for any office, much less the vice presidency.<sup>51</sup> In that same election, the Supreme Court bolstered one-party rule by stripping the leading opposition candidate, Montealegre, of his affiliation with the Liberal Independent Party. In his place,

the Supreme Court recognized Pedro Reyes Vallejos, who headed a weaker faction and maintains close ties to Ortega.<sup>52</sup>

In the context of the 2018 protests, Ortega relied on the judiciary to provide him with cover as he brazenly imprisoned protestors and opposition members and prosecuted them on trumped up charges. An investigative report later revealed that prosecutors were intimidated and forced to sign charges for cases they did not have the permission to read or review.<sup>53</sup> Nearly uniformly, these cases were fabricated against demonstrators. Further, when cases go to trial, the Ortega regime occasionally manipulates the process to steer cases to "loyal" judges, particularly those who have pronounced support for the country's widened definition of terrorism.<sup>54</sup>

**National Police and Paramilitary Groups.** The National Police have been central to Ortega's continuation in office. It is one of the regime's main tools to maintain internal control, repress opposition groups, detain citizens illegally, and intimidate opposition politicians.

Ortega scored a massive victory in June 2014, when the legislature approved the Law of Organization, Functions, Career, and Special Regimen of Security of the National Police. The law took responsibility for the National Police from the Governance Ministry and vested control directly with the president as the "supreme commander." One of the most important institutions in Nicaragua society was transferred, in its entirety, to Ortega, who controls its leadership and can fire personnel for "disobedience." The law also established a vetting process for police recruits, handing control of the process to the FSLN.<sup>55</sup> These reforms eviscerated any whiff of accountability for the security forces and permitted the National Police to engage in corruption and cooperate with sundry criminal groups. June 2014 appears a key turning point for Nicaragua's National Police when considering the relatively low levels of violent crime in Nicaragua compared to the rest of Latin America and the community-oriented police model Nicaragua built before this reform. The role of the National Police in Ortega's repression casts the institution in a much different light (Figure 4).

**Figure 4. The National Police Have Employed Brutal Tactics to Disperse Peaceful Demonstrations**

Source: Reuters. Photo by Oswaldo Rivas.

There is solid evidence the National Police aided marauding paramilitary groups that brutally suppressed the Nicaraguan opposition in the April 2018 protests. When the GIEI, a working group of the OAS, noted grave human rights abuses in Nicaragua that rose to the level of “crimes against humanity,” they referred specifically to paramilitaries that operated “in parallel and coordinated fashion with the National Police.”<sup>56</sup> Further, Bellingcat, the investigative journalism site, managed to leverage open-source data to geo-locate paramilitaries on several days of intense protest and identified their weapons as military grade.<sup>57</sup> (The overwhelming evidence helped the United States Treasury Department eventually justify a sanctions designation for the National Police.<sup>58</sup>) Paramilitaries are heavily armed and operate in rural and urban Nicaragua, taking part in kidnappings and extrajudicial executions.<sup>59</sup> In fact, a research report from the Nicaraguan Association for Human Rights discovered

a level of cooperation between paramilitaries and the National Police that rivaled Venezuela’s notorious nexus between police forces and paramilitaries.<sup>60</sup>

Nicaraguan paramilitaries wield greater firepower, have access to military-grade tools such as radios, and operate with the National Police (or are at best tolerated by them) even more transparently than in countries such as Venezuela. Although some comprise a sort of voluntary citizen police force, others are police officers (or even members of the Nicaraguan Army) operating undercover. Former Police Commissioner Francisco Díaz admitted that police officers, at the behest of President Ortega himself, constructed a formal paramilitary unit within the regular forces whose central command was directed by FSLN leadership.<sup>61</sup> These units were charged with not only intimidating protestors but also infiltrating opposition groups and passing personal information from the leadership to the national intelligence

directorate. In turn, the latter formed a group of “commandos” responsible for hunting down and harassing individuals.

In early March 2020, the United States Treasury Department announced sanctions against the Nicaraguan National Police for “using live ammunition against peaceful protesters and participating in death squads, as well as carrying out extrajudicial killings, disappearances, and kidnappings,” and applied individual sanctions to three top police commissioners.<sup>62</sup> The move brought immediate accountability to a force that was subjected to few, if any, investigations for human rights violations.<sup>63</sup> It also had immediate consequences, most notably, the revocation of a nearly \$8 million loan from the CABELI meant to expand and fund Nicaragua’s National Police force.<sup>64</sup> The CABELI, like other multilateral lending institutions, has been a key source of financing for the Ortega regime.

**Nicaraguan Army.** In the 1990s, the Violeta Chamorro administration tried to depoliticize the country’s army. This included placing a five-year term limit on the presidentially appointed head of the armed forces. Since returning to power in 2007, Ortega has unwound many of these reforms and once again politicized Nicaragua’s armed forces. He has revived Sandinista ideology in the army, co-opted senior officers with material rewards, and expanded the military’s role and resources. For instance, the armed forces share management responsibility for Nicaragua’s maritime ports, airports, telecommunications facilities, and ground-based satellite communications and enjoy privileged access to scholarships for their children and highly generous pensions.<sup>65</sup>

In the early 2010s, Nicaragua’s legislature approved a reform that permitted Ortega to single-handedly change parts of the military code. The current head of the army, Gen. Julio César Avilés Castillo, has been in the post for more than a decade.<sup>66</sup> Avilés halted efforts to dismantle paramilitary groups associated with the army and has repeatedly denied the existence of paramilitary forces in Nicaragua, even as the army has increased its role in internal security.<sup>67</sup> (Recently, the US government sanctioned Avilés for refusing to dismantle paramilitary groups.<sup>68</sup>)

Meanwhile, the army has maintained extensive financial interests throughout Nicaragua and abroad. Through an offshoot investment arm, the military controls construction firms, real estate, financial companies, and hospitals and has investments in the New York Stock Exchange.<sup>69</sup> The Institute of Military Social Welfare (*El Instituto de Previsión Social Militar*, IPSM) is one of the most profitable investment funds in the country, yet its finances are rarely scrutinized and kept largely out of the public eye. The comptroller general of the republic has never been permitted to audit these accounts. Instead, IPSM hires outside firms to audit its accounts, which are then accepted as valid by the comptroller general. Astonishingly, the last time IPSM’s audit was released publicly was in 1995.<sup>70</sup>

**Superior Council for Private Enterprise (COSEP).** The control Ortega and Murillo exercise over Nicaraguan society does not rely on force, corruption, political manipulation, and repression alone. COSEP, Nicaragua’s largest and most powerful business group, has a storied history of interaction with Ortega and the FSLN. Initially enemies of the Sandinistas, the group played a crucial role in overthrowing Nicaragua’s Somoza dictatorship before returning to its critical stance toward the Sandinista Revolution, which saw massive expropriation of private property and drove the economy into the ground.<sup>71</sup>

After his return to the presidency in 2007, Ortega made peace with Nicaragua’s business community—as it overlooked electoral fraud, repression, and corruption. He touted a moderate political philosophy and a newfangled “flexibility” in his Marxist positions. Ortega no longer made a show of engaging in anti-US diatribes and professed a support for trade, private enterprise, and bedrock principles of capitalism, such as private property rights. Rather than fulminate against Nicaragua’s business elites, Ortega’s return and consolidation of power relied on actively courting business elites’ support—and in many cases, co-opting them.

To earn their trust, Ortega developed a governing model known as “dialogue and consensus.” In exchange for their cooperation, the business elite received tax exemptions and other perks.

Nicaragua's economy even managed to grow under a more export-oriented model. For more than a decade, this model managed to draw praise, achieve some economic growth, and attain investment (and debt forgiveness) from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.<sup>72</sup> Eventually, Nicaragua's business elite found common cause with Ortega because he allowed them a considerable level of state control.

José Adán Aguerrí Chamorro, the longtime head of COSEP, described an approach that joined COSEP and Ortega in governing Nicaragua. Members of COSEP came to believe that the group's economic success was tantamount to Nicaragua's success. "The nation's good economic performance is the result of an open political dialogue," Aguerrí proclaimed in an interview. "We know we will be heard, we do not fear a sudden change of the rules of the game."<sup>73</sup>

What Aguerrí Chamorro failed to mention, however, was that dozens of laws passed by Nicaragua's Congress were first vetted by COSEP to ensure a favorable business climate for the country's elites. Commenting on this arrangement, the analyst Tim Rogers observes:

While that alliance is hardly an exercise in transparency or representative democracy, it is one that fosters negotiation and compromise, which is better than an unchecked autocracy. . . . But until Nicaragua's political opposition stops shirking its responsibilities to the nation, the plutocratic pacto is all that separates Nicaragua from the arbitrary rule of a conubial monarchy.<sup>74</sup>

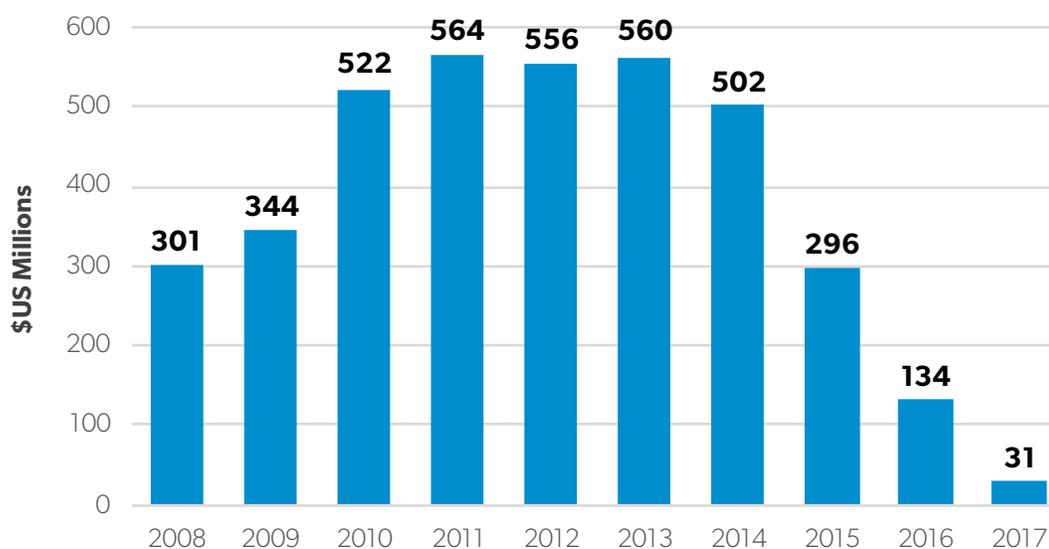
As described here, Ortega's arrangement with COSEP amounts to an extra-parliamentary body, which has effectively replaced the political opposition as the body that engages in dialogue with Ortega. Extensive inclusion in governing the country has kept COSEP from financing Ortega's political opponents in the past, thereby dooming their candidacies and allowing Ortega to consolidate political power without major barriers. In other words, COSEP refrained from biting the hand that feeds.

Among other things, First Lady Murillo's formal entrance into government as vice president and her rapid accumulation of power unnerved many in COSEP and began to strain this marriage of convenience. COSEP's comfort level with its previous governing arrangement began to fray as new rules allowed Murillo to prevent ministers from communicating without her prior consent and restricted their travel outside the country without her approval. Murillo clears all government communications through her office.<sup>75</sup> COSEP's economic model also moved away from Ortega's emphasis on agriculture, instead focusing on the coming knowledge economy. The withering alliance received its final blow when Ortega proposed reforms to social security without first consulting COSEP, which now claims to back Nicaragua's opposition.<sup>76</sup>

#### **Ideological Alliances and Venezuelan Patronage.**

Every year between 2008 and 2016, Ortega's regime received hundreds of millions of dollars from its ideological companion, Venezuela (Figure 5). By remaining one of Venezuela's most reliable associates in Central America, Ortega has been lavished with vast sums of cash from Caracas—in some years, approaching 8 percent of Nicaragua's annual gross domestic product (GDP).<sup>77</sup> Between 2008 and 2014, some of the most cash-flush years, Venezuela transferred between \$4 billion and \$6 billion to Nicaragua, using "deferred payments" on oil from *Petróleos de Venezuela, SA* (PDVSA) to move money to *Albanisa*, a PDVSA-owned subsidiary under the FSLN's control. Venezuela's largesse is a mainstay of Ortega's dictatorial regime and reinforced his familial kleptocracy, although Venezuela's support is drying up because of the chaos caused by its own political and economic unraveling.

Eventually, these "deferred payments" were deferred indefinitely. In reality, they were never intended for repayment. Hardly any of the funds went toward social and development programs, as intended. For instance, a \$3.5 billion oil refinery never came to fruition, the land indicated for its construction still an empty field.<sup>78</sup> Instead, Venezuelan funds sustained Nicaragua's clientelistic politics, funded the FSLN's political campaigns, enriched cronies,

**Figure 5. Venezuelan Aid Given to Nicaragua Through “PetroCaribe” Program, 2008–17**

Source: Central Bank of Venezuela.

and thereby entrenched Ortega’s political rule.<sup>79</sup> The fund has practically no external oversight, which has allowed the custodian to effectively serve as the FSLN’s treasurer.

Nevertheless, Nicaragua’s business leaders benefited from Venezuela’s largesse because it eased the private sector’s tax burden and provided ready markets for commodity exports. Unfortunately, for business leaders and Ortega, as Venezuela began to unravel in 2015, its financial support soon dried up. The recent US indictment of Venezuela’s dictator, Nicolás Maduro, on charges of drug trafficking alleges a nexus among Venezuela, Nicaragua, and the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC), whereby Venezuela colluded with the FARC in illicit narcotics trafficking while Nicaragua served as the vehicle to launder proceeds and fund political campaigns.<sup>80</sup> Clearly, Ortega needs a replacement for the lost revenue, while Maduro requires a money-laundering avenue for his criminal regime’s trafficking proceeds.

**Media Control.** As noted, Ortega’s election to a third term as president in 2011, which brought with him a Sandinista supermajority in Congress,

was marred by irregularities. Judging from Nicaraguan media coverage, however, an outside observer would know little about irregularities or the denial of access for international elections observers. The postelection analysis was better proof than any that Ortega had successfully clamped down on the media since returning to power.

Since returning to the presidency, Ortega used the power of public investment to reward media outlets featuring favorable coverage, showering them with advertising contracts. His party has also started news aggregation websites with vetted and approved material. An increased media presence and fawning coverage—headlines often refer to Ortega’s political opponents as “parasites” and “promoters of death,” among other things—help explain Ortega’s nearly 30-point difference in electoral performance between 2007 and 2011. (The other contributor is sheer fraud.)<sup>81</sup>

Freedom House has noted that the Ortega regime “engages in systematic efforts to obstruct and discredit media critics.”<sup>82</sup> For instance, journalists covering opposition politics have been victims of routine violence and threats on their life. When they

complain, their cases are often dismissed by the National Police. Since returning to power, Ortega has closed and ransacked around 24 media outlets, while others have stopped covering politics to survive the constant pressure.<sup>83</sup>

In the media landscape, Ortega had the most difficulty gaining control of Nicaragua's newspapers. Fortunately for him, the stakes were lower. Nicaragua's high rates of poverty and illiteracy ensure that its newspapers have a smaller audience and influence than television and radio do. Even so, Murillo attempted to buy massive shares in *El Nuevo Diario*, and the Ortega government has launched politically motivated investigations into prominent families that own influential print media outlets.<sup>84</sup>

Since April 2018, the space for critical journalism has all but disappeared. The ruling couple has weaponized the term "fake news" in their attempt to silence print media, completing their long-sought domination over the media.<sup>85</sup> Nicaragua's constitution now limits criticism of political figures to that which is "constructive" only.<sup>86</sup>

Ortega, Murillo, and the Sandinista Party have survived and adapted over four decades of change in Nicaragua. They have successfully held office for more than half that time by centralizing authority around themselves and the Sandinista Party every time the country faces a crisis.<sup>87</sup> The continued drive to personalize Ortega's and Murillo's leadership has resulted in their undisputed political control through the pillars outlined here, as well as the hollowing out of the FSLN itself. The ruling couple has cultivated vertical bonds between the Nicaraguan people and Sandinista leaders and portrays themselves as beneficent parents of a nation, their smiling faces beaming from billboards across the country. All the while, Ortega and Murillo consolidate political control and amass wealth and strategic assets in land, media, and energy.<sup>88</sup>

## US Policy Toward Ortega: 2007–Present

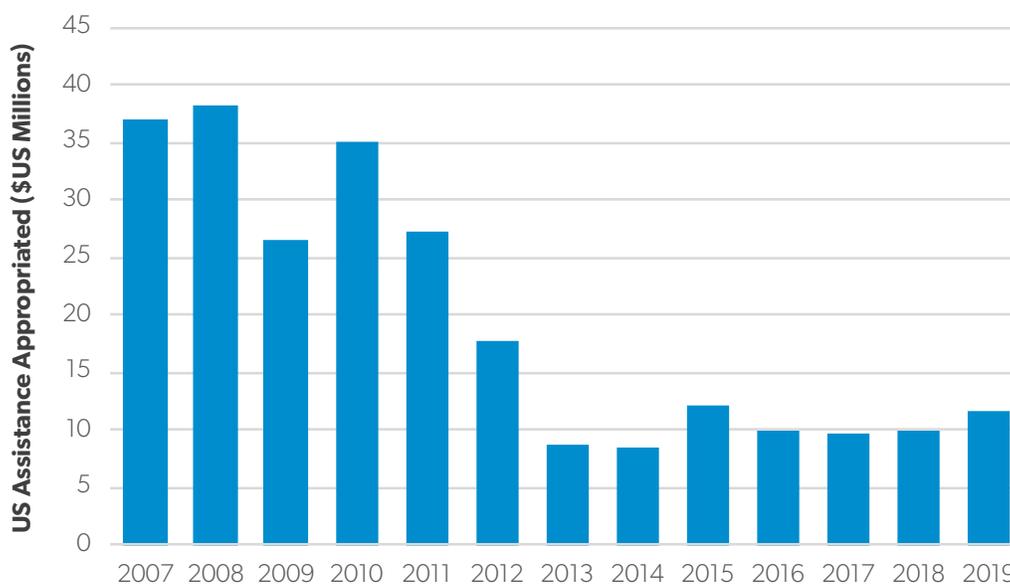
Ortega's return to power in 2007 marked a turning point in the long history of US-Nicaragua relations. In general, Ortega made a show of limiting

his anti-American outbursts, while the US sought an early rapprochement with his government. In particular, the George W. Bush administration offered a helping hand. President Bush expressed a desire to reconcile with Ortega through trade and job creation.<sup>89</sup> Ortega promised to remain in the previously signed Dominican Republic–Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR) and to implement the agreement faithfully, as well as the Millennium Challenge Corporation's Compact with Nicaragua, which brought in hundreds of millions in development assistance.<sup>90</sup> (The US later terminated the compact after allegations of election fraud in 2011.) Two-way trade between the US and Nicaragua increased, and greater numbers of Americans flocked to Nicaragua for tourism.

Despite repeated corruption allegations and concern for the state of democracy in Nicaragua, Ortega knew how to keep US policymakers in his corner.<sup>91</sup> For instance, he understood the value of counter-narcotics operations in the Western Hemisphere and ensured Nicaragua's military always participated alongside US forces. Nicaragua's Navy, in particular, has been singled out by the US as one of the most cooperative and enthusiastic partners in the region.<sup>92</sup>

For Ortega, cooperation with US Southern Command, an institutional relationship that the Nicaraguan Army valued, dissuaded his occasional provocations and earned him significant material support. (Nicaragua even participated in Operation Orion, spring 2020 naval exercises in the Caribbean aimed ostensibly at countering narcotics trafficking from Venezuela.) Since 2007, Nicaragua has received \$36.1 million in US military and police assistance.<sup>93</sup> Support continued for Ortega's military, even while US officials warned of inadequate government transparency and democratic backsliding.

Meanwhile, Ortega cashed in on US development aid too. Development aid peaked at nearly \$40 million in fiscal year 2008, before gradually declining as Ortega's regime grew more autocratic. Still, the US government has allocated more than \$250 million in development assistance since fiscal year 2007 (Figure 6).<sup>94</sup> (Combined with Venezuela's largesse, which went beyond traditional aid, including the purchase

**Figure 6. US Assistance Appropriated to Nicaragua, 2007–19FY**

Source: ForeignAssistance.gov.

of Nicaraguan exports at above market rates, Ortega, his retinue, and COSEP benefited tremendously.)

A significant rupture in the US position toward Ortega occurred in September 2016. In the lead-up to Nicaragua's presidential campaign, the country's slip into autocracy was obvious to all.<sup>95</sup> While past elections could be described as highly 'managed' affairs, with nominal but little actual competition, Ortega opted to forgo even the patina of electoral legitimacy in 2016. His government denied entry to international elections observers and stripped the main opposition candidate, Eduardo Montealegre, of his political party. Ortega cemented the family dynasty by installing First Lady Murillo as vice president and two of their children to top positions in large state enterprises, growing ostentatiously wealthy in the hemisphere's second-poorest country.

The US Congress responded forcefully to the deterioration in democratic conditions by addressing the financial support Ortega had long received from the International Monetary Fund and other multilateral lending bodies. The House of Representatives passed the Nicaraguan Investment Conditionality Act (NICA Act), which instructs the US to vote against loans to

Nicaragua in all multilateral financial organizations until an independent judiciary and electoral council is confirmed; support independent, pro-democracy organizations in Nicaragua; and push for free, fair, and transparent elections with international and domestic observers (Table 1). The presidential election delayed Senate passage of the bill, which technically became law only after the April 2018 protests erupted in Nicaragua.<sup>96</sup> Most recently, the US Treasury strengthened its authorities by incorporating the NICA Act into its sanctions framework, providing a wider range of justifications beyond national security to designate individuals.<sup>97</sup>

In response to Ortega's brutal repression, the US launched a sanctions campaign in July 2018 with actions against three top officials charged with human rights abuses, including Ortega's close ally Francisco López Centeno, the head of Albanisa.<sup>98</sup> This was followed by President Donald Trump signing Executive Order 13851 in November 2018, which declared the situation in Nicaragua to be a national security threat to the US and sanctioned officials close to Ortega, including Murillo and the couple's national security adviser, Nestor Moncada Lau.<sup>99</sup>

**Table 1. Financial Inflows to Nicaragua From Multilateral Institutions (Millions), 2008–17**

2008	Year									Total 2008–17
	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	
\$460	\$654	\$488	\$529	\$533	\$534	\$562	\$606	\$624	\$773	\$5,763

Source: Central Bank of Nicaragua, "Informe de Cooperación Oficial Externa 2017."

In April 2019, the Trump administration maintained its focus on the Ortega family by sanctioning one of his sons, Laureano Ortega, and Bancorp, a bank the US government alleges served as a "slush fund" for the family.<sup>100</sup> In June 2019, the Trump administration targeted several government ministers and the head of the National Assembly, this time with Canada.<sup>101</sup>

In November, US sanctions were applied to the deputy director of the Nicaraguan National Police, the president of the Supreme Electoral Council, and the director of the Nicaraguan Social Security Institute.<sup>102</sup> December 2019 saw sanctions against another Ortega family member, his son Rafael Ortega, and three Nicaraguan companies implicated in money laundering.<sup>103</sup> The US then sanctioned the Nicaraguan National Police as an entity and three high-ranking police commissioners.<sup>104</sup> In another action, the US designated Gen. Avilés, commander in chief of the Nicaraguan Army, and Ivan Adolfo Acosta Montalvan, minister of finance and public credit, and froze their assets.<sup>105</sup> Most recently, the US designated another one of Ortega's sons, Juan Carlos Ortega and his public relations firm (the recipient of lavish state contracts) and José Mojica Mejia, a well-known financial front man and money launderer for the Ortega family. This brings the total number of US sanctions to 22 individuals, including four members of the Ortega-Murillo family and seven entities and companies.<sup>106</sup>

Despite labeling Nicaragua and its leadership as part of the so-called "troika of tyranny" menacing the Western Hemisphere, other than the occasional sanctions announcement, the Trump administration has largely ignored Ortega's role in destabilizing the region.<sup>107</sup> When announcing US policy toward

the troika, former National Security Adviser John Bolton said, "The Nicaraguan regime, like Venezuela and Cuba, will feel the full weight of America's robust sanctions regime."<sup>108</sup> Yet, crippling US sanctions have taken aim at Venezuela and Cuba and left Nicaragua comparatively untouched. Further, sanctions have not proceeded in any fashion one could consider methodical, with due consideration for the importance of targeting and sequencing. It is high time to tune up US strategy.

## Turning Up the Heat

The enduring relevance of international pressure in Nicaragua's political history is of paramount importance. Not only did international pressure help the Sandinistas expel the Somoza dynasty in 1979, but, perhaps more importantly, it also led Nicaragua to return to democracy in the 1990s with the election of Violeta Chamorro.

In today's struggle, international pressure has helped induce the release of political prisoners. Groups of 50 to 100 prisoners have been released before a number of key events: hearings of the UN Human Rights Council, meetings of the OAS Permanent Council, the one-year anniversary of the protests, and highly anticipated hearings of the US House of Representative's Committee on Foreign Affairs.

Throughout the crisis, however, the Ortega regime has beguiled with the promise of several national dialogues and used them to string along negotiations, further consolidate power, and exacerbate the divides within the opposition. Negotiating an exit for Ortega and Murillo is unlikely given the entrenched nature of the regime, a propensity to enter into dialogue in

bad faith, and a currently disorganized and fractious opposition movement; rather, a general election scheduled for November 7, 2021, represents the best opportunity for Nicaragua's opposition to contest the National Assembly and the presidency. In preparation for this moment, two main opposition groups have united to challenge Ortega.<sup>109</sup>

The uprising and subsequent political repression has come at a cost to the Ortega regime: The duo leading the country is more insular and isolated than ever before. Entrenched as they are, cracks in the ruling couple's pillars of control are starting to emerge.<sup>110</sup> Even more, however, the leadership vacuum left by the regime's dangerous and criminal response to the COVID-19 pandemic affords the opposition an opportunity to form a united front, command the attention of the Nicaraguan people, and establish a working relationship that could guide its work through the election season.

US policy, too, can fill the glaring vacuum of leadership. Policymakers should proceed on the assumption that the humanitarian crisis stemming from COVID-19 is the most pressing short-term issue, followed by medium- and long-term actions aimed at weakening the Ortega regime's pillars of control. Accordingly, policy recommendations are categorized as immediate, medium, and long term.

### Immediate Action

The following recommendations should be pursued most urgently, as they pertain to the leadership vacuum left by Ortega and Murillo and the current disunity of the Nicaraguan opposition.

**Recommendation: US Diplomats Must Press Nicaraguan Opposition Groups to Set Aside Their Differences and Unite Into a Coherent Political Force to Defeat the Ortega-Murillo Regime.** Recent polling by Gallup spells significant danger for the Ortega-Murillo regime's future, if the opposition can remain united. Seventy percent of Nicaraguans reject the regime's approach to the coronavirus and believe the country is headed in the

wrong direction generally. Ortega has the highest disapproval rating in the country, followed by Murillo with the second highest.

Even the Sandinista base appears to be shrinking. Just 23 percent of Nicaraguans responded that they would vote for the current government "if the general elections were held today [June 19, 2020]."<sup>111</sup> Yet, the same poll found, shockingly, that the Ortega-Murillo regime would narrowly win reelection in this hypothetical matchup because of an opposition mired in dissent and lacking a consensus candidate.

US diplomats must engage to unify the opposition in a highly polarized and divided country. The US must step gingerly into this process, since forging unity among the Nicaraguan opposition necessitates the inclusion of parties that are corrupt and have colluded with Ortega in the past, such as the Constitutionalist Liberal Party (PLC). It also requires careful outreach to the sizable number of disaffected Sandinistas who broke ranks with Ortega over his heavy-handed response to the April 2018 protests (reaching discontented former members of the Sandinista base will be key to winning the election and expanding the opposition's base of support). Yet, the US and the Nicaraguan opposition must thread the needle between unity and political coherence and allowing the PLC (and others) to determine the direction of political change in Nicaragua.

Further, rumors that COSEP (especially the old guard close to the Ortega regime) supports a split in the opposition should be clarified, and US pressure should prevent COSEP from encouraging fragmentation. (To keep the group's attention, the US might consider making an announcement that it is studying Nicaragua's suspension from the CAFTA-DR—see the last long-term recommendation.) Elections for COSEP's leadership in September will determine the working relationship between the group and Nicaragua's opposition. As the polls reveal, anything but tight unity and coherence will fail to defeat the Ortega-Murillo regime with a playing field tilted heavily in their favor. Internal dissension could also discourage many Nicaraguans from voting, given that 41 percent expressed support for none of Nicaragua's political parties, fed up with a lack of leadership and

the impression that opposition parties are supremely self-interested.

Lastly, as part of its efforts to reach unity and political coherence, it is imperative that Nicaragua's opposition decide on the political vehicle best suited to challenge Ortega in elections. Neither the Civic Alliance for Justice and Democracy nor the Blue and White National Unity—Nicaragua's two largest opposition groups—are officially registered political parties. Moreover, recent changes in electoral law shorten the length of time required to register a political party with the Supreme Electoral Council. This may appear as a major concession on the part of the Ortega-Murillo regime at first blush; however, in practice, it would allow the ruling couple more time to see the political field forming before registering or engaging so-called "*partidos zancudos*"—colluding parties meant to provide the appearance of opposition while sapping support from Nicaragua's legitimate opposition parties.

**Recommendation: Fill the Vacuum of Leadership Left by a "Disappearing" Ortega Acting with Total Negligence During the Coronavirus Pandemic by Forming a National Emergency Committee.** The use of natural disasters and pandemics for political advantage is not without precedent in Nicaragua. Indeed, the Somoza regime's corrupt response to a devastating earthquake in 1972 helped sow the seeds of its later demise at the hands of the Sandinista-led uprising.<sup>112</sup> Likewise, the Nicaraguan opposition should seek to make the Ortega regime's criminal response to COVID-19 its greatest liability.

As the poll numbers show, Ortega and Murillo are arguably in their most vulnerable political moment ever due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Blamed by opponents and their own partisans alike for sheer negligence, the ranks of the FSLN have been deeply affected, representing a sizable portion of deaths. (Somewhere between 100 and 200 rank and file Sandinistas have died.<sup>113</sup>) As mentioned, public polling shows a low level of support for the FSLN and large majorities of Nicaraguans saying the country is heading in the wrong direction. Yet, unity within the opposition's ranks is still required to defeat the Ortega-Murillo regime.

After encouraging a modicum of unity within Nicaragua's opposition, US diplomacy should urge the formation of a National Emergency Committee. By forming a National Emergency Committee, the opposition and civil society, along with an alliance of medical associations and the Catholic Church, can fill the vacuum of leadership in Managua. With the help of a National Emergency Committee, the opposition could overcome four principal challenges: (1) earning the trust of the Nicaraguan people, (2) uniting several disparate factions in a common cause, (3) eroding any last vestige of Ortega's legitimacy, and (4) showing that Nicaragua's response to the coronavirus epidemic should be constituted by more than the capricious Ortega-Murillo regime and what serves their desire to retain absolute political control.

The opposition has struggled to form a national coalition that encompasses the three opposition parties and umbrella organizations that command the greatest amount of popular support—*Unidad Nacional Azul y Blanco* (UNAB), *Alianza Cívica por la Justicia y la Democracia* (ACJD), and *Ciudadanos por la Libertad* (CxL). The current union between UNAB and ACJD augurs well for the 2021 election. CxL must be convinced to join as well. The US is in a unique position to gather the various personalities and competing interests to impress upon them the importance of unity—if it wants to exert leadership.

The National Emergency Committee would be prudent to consider including the Catholic Church, especially given it has been the tip of the spear in the fight to restore democracy in Nicaragua.<sup>114</sup> During the pandemic, Nicaragua's medical doctors have emerged as powerful voices of reason in an otherwise vast ocean of public health incompetence. There exists more than 20 medical associations and including some in a National Emergency Committee could galvanize public opinion and ensure the committee's proposals to combat the pandemic are guided by evidence-based policymaking.

A National Emergency Committee, and indirectly the political forces represented by it, could sap the ruling couple of any remaining legitimacy and encourage a fractious opposition to set aside its differences and work toward the common good. Fractures in the

opposition during the election would allow Ortega to divide and conquer, possibly clearing the 35 percent hurdle in the first round to win another term without a runoff. To build the emergency government, each participating organization should put forth one candidate to serve, making for a board of five or six total members. Any larger and the committee risks becoming too unwieldy.

The committee's platform ought to be compelling and offer more than mere anti-Ortega rhetoric or calls to return to democracy. This would give voters confidence, display competent and effective leadership, and help overcome political apathy, possibly driving voter turnout. First, the committee should pressure the Ortega regime to end its denial of humanitarian aid and underfunding of the pandemic response.

For instance, the country is desperately short on personal protective equipment. Funds are available at multilateral institutions to assist Nicaragua in purchasing medical supplies and equipment. As these are humanitarian funds, they clearly meet the exemption carved out in the NICA Act for such emergencies. Yet, the Ortega regime refuses to claim these moneys and use them to address the COVID-19 crisis.

Ultimately, the National Emergency Committee should push a nationwide stay-at-home order to flatten Nicaragua's epidemic curve. The committee should push the army to enforce the stay-at-home order as public policy, opening a rift between Ortega and the armed forces. It is likely that many institutions would defy Ortega's orders to remain open if the committee credibly called for a national quarantine approximating the public health policies of neighboring countries.

### Medium-Term Action

Medium-term actions are those that should start in several months. They pertain to the orientation, calibration, targeting, and sequencing of the US sanctions campaign, regional diplomacy initiatives, US congressional activity, and the establishment of government offices to spearhead these important efforts.

**Recommendation: The US Should Calibrate Its Sanctions Architecture to Ensure Minimum Standards for a Free and Fair Election in Nicaragua.** The US government is gravely mistaken if it thinks that the current level of pressure is sufficient to ensure that Ortega concedes to freer and fairer elections in 2021. Further, there is broad-based support in Nicaragua for more sanctions against regime officials. In a poll, 63 percent of Nicaraguans said that deposing Ortega was more important than the economy's performance, while 70 percent said Ortega must resign immediately.<sup>115</sup> Given the support for more action, the extent of Ortega's repression, the politicization of Nicaragua's electoral mechanisms, and a biased and besieged media landscape, the US should apply more pressure in the form of targeted sanctions on key individuals to achieve fundamental alterations in Nicaragua's domestic political environment before the elections.

First, the US should push for new leadership of the Supreme Electoral Council (*Consejo Supremo Electoral*, CSE) to depoliticize the institution. Second, it should reiterate the essentiality of elections observers—both international and domestic—under the auspices of the OAS, the EU, the International Republican Institute, or the National Democratic Institute. Elections observers should adhere to recognized standards, such as the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation and Code of Conduct for International Election Observers.<sup>116</sup>

Third, sanctions policy should aim to ensure all Nicaraguans have the right to vote (including the more than 100,000 forced to flee) by coordinating countrywide voter registration, opening voting to the large Nicaraguan diaspora that has the right to vote abroad according to Article 122 of the Electoral Law (the Ortega regime has simply ignored this law), and considering candidates from both Nicaragua and the Nicaraguan diaspora. Fourth, a transparent and participative candidate consultation process or primary election (with funding and assistance from the International Republic Institute and National Democratic Institute) is the most strategic move to lend legitimacy to the opposition and decrease political apathy among Nicaraguans. Fifth, US policy should aim to guarantee the restoration of basic political rights to

all Nicaraguans. The release of all political prisoners, arbitrary arrests, and the immediate disbanding of roving paramilitary groups that terrorize and intimidate is central to this end. Sixth, sanctions should seek to ensure equitable access to media time for the opposition.

These reforms are consistent with a 2017 memorandum of understanding Ortega signed with the OAS under pressure from the US and European Union, which recognized the urgent need for political and electoral reform.<sup>117</sup> (The memorandum has since lapsed and has not been renewed.) While Ortega has committed to these reforms before (at least on paper), electoral reforms should be more ambitious still.

Of course, the Ortega regime's systematic undermining of the entire electoral system will make restoring complete integrity impossible by next year's elections. But Ortega's unpopularity means this is a matter of degree—the closer to the “free and fair” standard the Nicaraguan people approximate, the higher the chances of opposition victory.

**Recommendation: The US Treasury Department Office of Foreign Asset Control (OFAC) Must Target, Synchronize, and Sequence Its Sanctions.** To achieve these goals, OFAC should target and synchronize sanctions with the demands of the moment for the Nicaraguan opposition on the ground. Identifying the right sequencing will also be important to provide officials in the Ortega regime an off-ramp, as OFAC ratchets up pressure. The US should consider issuing ultimatums with a defined calendar tied to a number of reforms that provide Ortega officials with highly defined consequences for their inaction.

Recent sanctions on Nicaragua's National Police, a top army general, and several of Ortega's family members cannot be left in a vacuum. A more comprehensive list of figures should be designated to lay bare the full extent of Nicaragua's human rights abuses. The US must hold accountable members of the judiciary who are directly under Ortega's control and involved in serious human rights violations. This includes individuals in the public prosecutor's office, who fabricate cases against members of the opposition, the attorney general's office, and the court system.

The US should also seek designations against murderous mayors who are central to the regime's political control at the local level by coordinating paramilitary groups' actions. (Thus far, none has been sanctioned.) To further curtail the activity and arming of paramilitary groups, the US should sanction high-level figures in the Nicaraguan Army—both retired and active duty. Beyond current figures such as Gen. Avilés, retired generals who still maintain influence in the FSLN, such as Glauco Robelo, should be fair game.

The US must round out its sanctions policy against the army by targeting its investment fund. IPSM is one of the most profitable investment funds in the country and maintains extensive economic holdings in the US. Murky accounting practices make it nearly impossible to ascertain the fund's approximate total value, but in 2012, it held somewhere around \$100 million, of which some 35 percent is estimated to be invested in US stocks and bonds managed by US companies.<sup>118</sup> Therefore, the fund is highly exposed to potential US sanctions. IPSM's benefits extend only to the upper brass of Nicaragua's military, meaning asset freezes and sanctions on these funds could drive a major wedge between Ortega and the upper echelon of the country's military, many of whom countenance the reputational damage Ortega has dealt their institution in exchange for considerable financial benefits. Hitting IPSM with sanctions could be sufficient to bring the upper brass of Nicaragua's military to the negotiating table.

Above all, the US should present the case for sanctions against Ortega himself under the purview of the Global Magnitsky Act. Police officers have committed egregious human rights abuses with impunity, yet Ortega has promoted them and pushed for a broad amnesty law for human rights abusers that entered into force in June 2019.<sup>119</sup> Invoking the Global Magnitsky Act on Ortega would be justified and send just the right message—that his murderous regime has no place among the nations of this hemisphere.<sup>120</sup>

Practically, sanctions on Ortega could divide the ruling couple further, and US strategy should seek to deepen the rift.<sup>121</sup> Simply put, sanctions on Ortega could further split the matrimony of convenience ruling the country.<sup>122</sup>

**Recommendation: The US Should Lean on Central American Nations and Members of the OAS Commission on Nicaragua to Push for a Resolution in the OAS Expressing the Importance of Nicaragua's Elections.** The US should rally Central American nations deeply affected by Ortega's forceful expulsion of over 100,000 Nicaraguans and those countries most involved in this issue (such as members of the OAS Commission on Nicaragua) to pass an OAS resolution. Costa Rica, which has received Nicaraguan migrants and refugees for years, is one possible candidate to lead such an effort (though it could be dismissed by Ortega as a disgruntled neighbor). Other possible sponsors of an OAS resolution include: Canada, Jamaica, and Paraguay (members of the OAS Commission on Nicaragua), as well as Colombia. Secretary General Luis Almagro is likely to support such a resolution enthusiastically.

Indeed, at Almagro's urging, Haiti's permanent representative to the OAS, which holds the rotating presidency, called an Extraordinary Session of the body dedicated to Nicaragua by invoking Article 20 of the Inter-American Democratic Charter.<sup>123</sup> (This is the third such session seeking to lead Nicaragua back to a democratic path since June 2019.) However, this session was full of talk about the importance of reconciliation but short on policy details for getting there.

Rather, an Extraordinary Session under the auspices of Article 20 represents an opportunity to discuss a hemispheric resolution that should lay out minimum conditions for a legitimate election in 2021, establishing a timeline for electoral reforms that goes well beyond those previously agreed to by the Ortega regime. At the latest, reforms should begin in October 2020 and guard against any cosmetic reforms proposed by the Ortega regime. (While there have been changes to the registration process for political parties, there are rumors the ruling couple will propose a number of shallow electoral reforms in late summer to placate the opposition and the international community.) The earlier legitimate electoral reform begins, the earlier the Nicaraguan opposition can start the organizing process.

Above all, the resolution must focus on deconstructing the remnants of the country's dirtiest

political deal—the so-called *El Pacto*. This set of electoral rules permitted Ortega to win with only 38 percent of the vote in 2016, the lowest level of support ever for a winning presidential candidate in Nicaragua. Proceeding with an election under the 35 percent rule will permit Ortega to continue his strategy of divide and conquer with opposition parties.

Beyond Ortega, others involved in forming *El Pacto* continue to reap its material benefits. Former President Arnoldo Alemán, his wife María Fernanda Alemán (now a rubberstamp congresswoman), their daughter (now a member of the comptroller's office), and members of the Constitutionalist Liberal Party (PLC) continue to enjoy the ill-gotten gains of this agreement and could be called again to play the role of ersatz "opposition" in the 2021 elections.

At a meeting of leftist foreign ministers, and after the resignation of Bolivian President Evo Morales for electoral fraud in October 2019, Ortega framed the use of fraudulent elections as a "revolutionary tool." If this instrument fails, he says, violent struggle is justified to retain power.<sup>124</sup> Ortega is clearly still shaken by the events in Bolivia, the emerging fault lines in his government, and his personal security. Ultimately, the OAS resolution should promise to withhold recognition from Ortega's government in two possible scenarios: (1) in the event that Ortega postpones the election and remains unconstitutionally in power and (2) in the event of a stolen election in which the OAS suspects or discovers significant fraud.

**Recommendation: Pass Another Bipartisan Resolution Through the US Congress Urging a Major Ramp-Up in US Sanctions and Reiterating the Importance of Free and Fair Elections.** Restoring democracy in Nicaragua is an area of deep bipartisan interest and regional consensus. The US Congress should continue to pass bipartisan resolutions urging the Treasury Department to ramp up its due diligence and sanctions campaign and support the creation of a special envoy to Nicaragua in the State Department. (See next recommendation.) In addition to maintaining momentum for the pressure campaign, a bipartisan resolution should obliquely refer to specific entities, individuals, and

public posts that deserve greater scrutiny, placing human rights violators, corrupt officials, and Ortega cronies on notice that sanctions are likely forthcoming. This is one major difference from resolutions passed before. The US Congress should seek to place individuals on notice and induce cracks in the ruling regime.

In December 2019, the US House of Representatives passed Resolution 754, which calls for the immediate release of all political prisoners and the implementation of electoral reforms.<sup>125</sup> Likewise, the Senate recently passed, unanimously, Resolution 525 to amplify the pressure on Nicaragua to allow free and fair elections.<sup>126</sup> Both are excellent starting points, but more must be done.

Additionally, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo should deliver a major speech on Nicaragua, stating clearly the US government's minimum expectations for free and fair elections in Nicaragua. Such a statement would clarify any ambiguities the Ortega regime might seek to exploit with cosmetic electoral reforms and draw the international community's attention to the importance of Nicaragua's general election next year.

**Recommendation: The US State Department Should Appoint a Special Representative to Nicaragua to Coordinate Sanctions Policy and Serve as a Liaison to Nicaragua's Sundry Opposition Groups.** The US State Department and US Congress should allocate money to nominate a seasoned foreign policy professional to serve in a newly created position: special representative to Nicaragua. A special representative for Nicaragua is necessary because officials at the US State Department lack the personnel dedicated exclusively to Nicaragua. Such a move would elevate the country's crisis in the Latin America agenda where there are many other challenges pulling US diplomats away from Nicaragua. Establishing a special representative for Nicaragua has the additional advantage of activating and scaling up a US government response.

Appointing a special representative will also be key to increasing the involvement of other OAS member states and the European Union in the run-up to the

2021 elections. The envoy would help formulate US policy, serve in the interagency policymaking process, spotlight greater attention on Nicaragua from EU and Latin American countries, and coordinate US policy with Nicaragua's opposition groups. A special envoy is central to aligning international and domestic pressure. Ideally, the position should be time-limited through November 2021.<sup>127</sup>

## Long-Term Action

Long-term actions are those that should begin in early 2021 and, in some cases, refer to last-resort policy options to maintain unity in the Nicaraguan opposition.

**Recommendation: Regain Momentum on the Push to Use Nicaragua's Noncompliance with the Inter-American Democratic Charter.** In late 2019, momentum had been growing for a decisive vote on the future of the Ortega regime's membership in the OAS. The OAS Commission on Nicaragua had finished its work and released its damning report on the rupture of the constitutional order. The Nicaragua Working Group, the OAS Commission on Nicaragua's predecessor, produced five reports on human rights abuses and the alteration of the regime in Nicaragua.

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights also released a report. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights discovered evidence of indiscriminate murder, politically motivated arrests, and the existence of torture centers. Innumerable nongovernmental organizations have uncovered similarly grim realities. In sum, the evidence of suspension-worthy crimes is already exhaustive.

The time for fact gathering has concluded. Reams of evidence provide an opportunity to form a shared narrative about what happened in Nicaragua and unite an international response. US diplomats should drum up support for achievable actions under the Inter-American Democratic Charter, specifically Article 19 and Article 20, which ratchet up pressure but fall short of full expulsion.

If it remains unclear by mid-2021 that elections in Nicaragua will be freer and fairer than past elections under Ortega, an extraordinary Special Session of the OAS should be called to debate Nicaragua's possible expulsion from the multilateral body under Article 21 of the Inter-American Democratic Charter. US diplomats must recover the momentum for this maneuver that existed before the explosion of COVID-19 in Latin America.

Of course, the vote to establish the Commission on Nicaragua passed by a razor-thin margin, and Nicaragua counts the support of key Caribbean countries to avoid the ignominious fate of expulsion. Yet, pushing for a Special Session of the OAS would keep the focus squarely on Ortega.

**Recommendation: As a Last Resort, Credibly Threaten to End Nicaragua's Participation in CAFTA-DR, Thereby Maintaining COSEP on the Opposition's Side.** One of the strongest and most effective non-sanctions tools the US has in its arsenal is the CAFTA-DR, of which Nicaragua is a part. As with the NICA Act, when the US reconsidered its support for Nicaragua within multilateral financial institutions, the US has an interest in reconsidering and ensuring its free trade agreements do not serve as economic lifelines to increasingly authoritarian governments. While Nicaragua slides further into recession, Ortega continues to reap rewards—taxing the Nicaraguan economy to fund the machinery of repression. Military and police budgets increase as he pursues a fiscal policy that risks increasing poverty and unemployment for average Nicaraguans.

Nicaragua's recent economic growth derived largely from CAFTA-DR and an association agreement with the EU. Exports to the US represent 40 percent of Nicaragua's annual GDP (about \$3.6 billion in goods in 2018). Finding the proper legal basis to threaten Nicaragua's participation in CAFTA-DR, on which more than 125,000 jobs (and, in turn, more than 500,000 families) rely, would garner the attention of many in Ortega's regime.<sup>128</sup> It would have the additional benefit of keeping COSEP honest and working toward Ortega's electoral defeat.

Given its outsized influence and previous role as a pillar of Ortega's control, maintaining COSEP's constructive participation in the effort to defeat him in a free and fair election will be crucial. As mentioned, COSEP broke with Ortega after the April 2018 uprisings. Since, it has vowed to fund opposition candidates.<sup>129</sup>

The US can use its leverage with COSEP, many of whose members run businesses that enjoy tariff-free access to the US market, to ensure COSEP remains working toward Ortega's exit. If the group does not, the US should be ready to suspend elements of the CAFTA-DR agreement for Nicaragua (possibly under the purview of the NICA Act) on the grounds that Ortega's regime violated clear protections for workers' rights and the freedom of association clause contained therein.<sup>130</sup>

Any reduction in benefits should be applied gradually to provide room for policy reversal by the Ortega regime (or COSEP). Additionally, the leverage and credibility of this threat would be amplified considerably if the US and the EU issued a joint statement declaring the importance of free and fair elections in Nicaragua in 2021, or else the country could face simultaneous threats to its continued participation in both CAFTA-DR and the EU's Association Agreement. The EU has adopted a targeted sanctions framework against Nicaragua, although thus far it has withheld any designations.<sup>131</sup>

Defeating the political juggernaut of Daniel Ortega, Rosario Murillo, and their cronies in Nicaragua will be a task that requires considerable effort, finesse, and organization, especially in a country where the presidency can be won in the first round well short of majority support. Most immediately, the US must exert diplomatic pressure to maintain opposition unity and encourage the creation of a National Emergency Committee to fill the void of leadership currently threatening the country's public health and survival.

Beyond that, the US must recalibrate its sanctions strategy in light of Ortega's pillars of control and the Nicaraguan opposition's progress on the ground to ensure that minimum standards for free, fair, and professionally monitored elections prevail

in November 2021. If enacted, the policy recommendations elaborated here would elevate Nicaragua's crisis to its rightful place in US foreign policy toward the Western Hemisphere and give the Nicaraguan people the best chance of regaining their liberty and democracy through the elections scheduled for November 7, 2021.

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