

## Testimony before the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing:

### *Crackdown on Religious Freedom in Nicaragua November 15, 2022*

#### **Introduction**

Nicaragua has turned into the totalitarian state that Daniel Ortega desired to impose in the 1980 and couldn't. Now, since 2018 and 2022 the regime has achieved effective control of the lives of its citizens, their future, his dynastic power uses fear, violence, hate, and clientelism to rule.

It is important to assert a proportional response to the impunity, abuses, and miscarriages of the regime, in order to bring democracy and freedom to Nicaraguans, starting with pressure to release of political prisoners and restoring self-esteem among Nicaraguans so they can believe that peace, and prosperity can also prevail in their nation.

#### **A totalitarian ambition**

After the electoral fraud of November 2021<sup>1</sup> and with his third illegitimate inauguration, Ortega promised a "clean slate."<sup>2</sup> His speech affirmed what became the radicalization of the regime, which has consisted of outlining a way to *Talibanize* Nicaragua that includes to continue trials against leaders of civil society and the private sector, sentencing, eliminating civic and political pluralism, persecuting any sector that does not accept or sympathize with the regime, including censoring and imprisoning religious authorities. Likewise, the human rights situation continues to be precarious, with constant humiliation of political prisoners, prohibition of religious freedom, banning of books, the denial of entry to the country to Nicaraguan citizens, confiscation of passports of relatives of prisoners, including illegal incarceration of prisoners' relatives as a form of coax a person to turn itself.

Nicaragua is a society living in fear, under siege, and with no hope of improvement in the short term. The prevailing and overwhelming impunity has surpassed any sense of decency against humanity. The regime of Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo have radically escalated their repression with a trajectory that goes back several years and has secured a single party rule.

- Between 2014 and 2016, democratic and institutional checks and balances were eliminated (through electoral fraud and the gradual elimination of opponents); constitutional reforms in 2014 approving China to build infrastructure under terms that compromise the country's sovereignty was introduced (since 2008 it was extending its presence, eliminating competition in the country's municipalities)<sup>3</sup>;
- in 2018, repression was used against civic protests, killing innocent people and leaders, while imprisoning others.
- in 2019, the political agreement that Ortega signed to introduce political reforms was rescinded; instead, the government imposed new taxes on the country's businesses, and penalized civic engagement;

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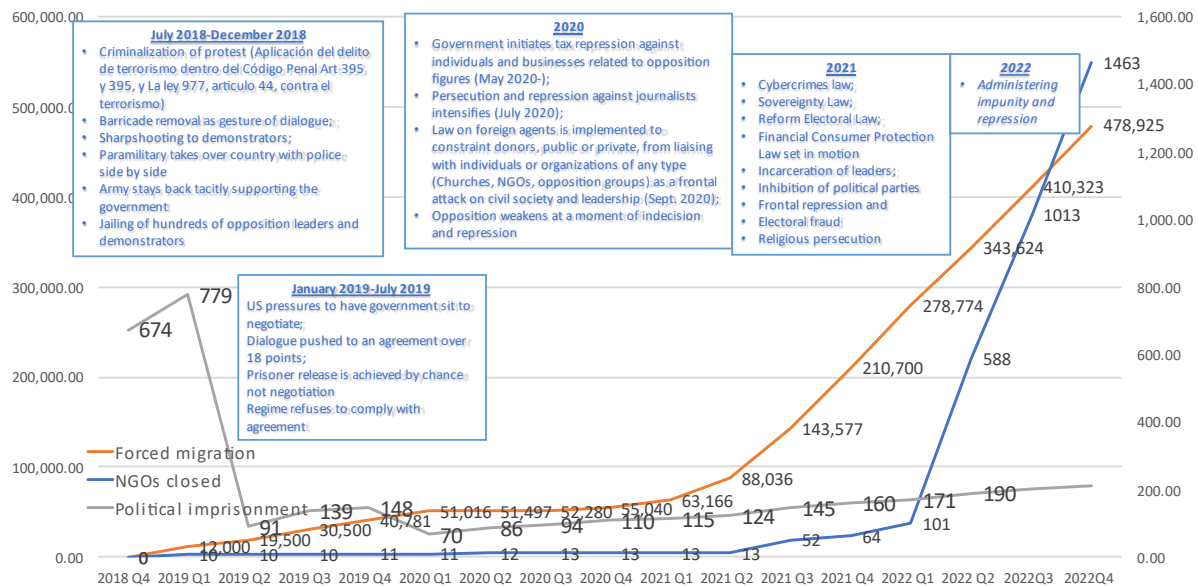
<sup>1</sup> The November 2021 presidential elections were considered by national and international observers as fraudulent and illegitimate. According to OAS member states, the elections "were not free, fair or transparent and lack democratic legitimacy."

<sup>2</sup> <https://elpais.com/internacional/2022-01-11/ortega-pide-borrón-y-cuenta-nueva-en-una-investigación-que-refleja-su-aislamiento-en-nicaragua.html>

<sup>3</sup> Orozco, Manuel, [Testimony before the Lantos Commission](#), The Evolving Human Rights Crisis in Nicaragua, Sept. 2018.

- in 2020, laws criminalizing freedom of expression, association, movement, and political participation were passed.
- In 2021, Ortega and Murillo, using these laws premeditatedly imprisoned more than 50 prominent people and then committed an electoral farce in November 2021;
- During 2022 the regime used the law to end pluralism, while expelling more than 300,000 Nicaraguans this year, and extending political persecution against religious authorities, parishioners, withholding passports of prisoners' relatives and other citizens, and completing territorial control of its party across the country.

*The sequence and consequences of repression and impunity in Nicaragua:  
prison, migration, elimination of NGOs and inequality.*



Source: Own elaboration, Inter-American Dialogue, October 2022.

The political balance is one with...

- A praetorian police force of 20,000 people in a country of 1.6 million homes: 1 policeman for every 100 homes (as many policemen as there are in Honduras, a country 30% more populated and with 9 daily homicides).
- More than 300 assassinations in impunity.
- More than 200 imprisonments, 45 of them for false accusations against prominent leaders.
- Emigration of 400,000 Nicaraguans between 2021 and 2022.
- Per capita income less than \$2,000 (similar to 2017).
- International isolation by democracies and international organizations, accompanied by a breach of international obligations.
- State corruption supported through foreign indebtedness that oxygenates financing to the regime (international loans invested in activities outside development plans, without transparency and reliability of results).
- Systematic censorship and persecution of journalists accompanied by the closing of 56 media outlets.

- Persecution of religious authorities, academics, and other notable individuals
- Economic favors to paramilitaries and local Sandinista leaders in exchange for loyalty from the grassroots.
- Electoral farse in national and municipal elections.
- Banning of books, public meetings, even of religious nature.
- Persecution of prisoners' relatives, confiscation of their passports.
- Denial entry and return to the country to Nicaraguan citizens.
- A military alliance with Russia, Cuba and Venezuela: in 15 years Nicaragua has purchased weapons from Russia amounting to sales equal to arms purchased by Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador combined; it allowed a Russian satellite to operate in the country to gather intelligence and requested Russian military advisors to enter the country in 2023. Effectively, Daniel Ortega altered the military balance in the Caribbean Basin.

#### **A proportional response from the International Community<sup>4</sup>**

In this era of complex global and regional cooperation, Nicaragua is a non-cooperative, conflictive, and aggressive state.<sup>5</sup> It insults international authorities, makes verbal attacks to diplomats, declares them persona non grata, Nicaragua is a rogue state. The international community needs to step up and change the status quo in Nicaragua to counterbalance the repression and impunity prevailing in this country.<sup>6</sup> It is important that these efforts bring together allies, as well as concrete actions. At the very least is important to

1. Increase sanctions against those who facilitate repression and corruption. Contrary to assumptions, sanctions affect the ruling elite, not Nicaraguans, they signal accountability when the rule of law is nonexistent.
2. Ensure that international financial institutions are held accountable for the loans they give and that these in turn demand greater transparency from the governments receiving their loans: loans have oxygenated repression and clientelism so far as the government has shifted state resources toward the security forces: the budget for the policy increased from 3% to 11% in 4 years.
3. Recognize and promote the role of the Nicaraguan diaspora as a civic and peaceful actor for change: there are more than 500,000 Nicaraguans who left the country since 2018, including civic and political leaders, working parents and children. An organized diaspora is a powerful ally in restoring democracy;
4. Continue multilateral pressure in international forums, particularly within the Organization of American States (OAS). International players do not want to go alone, they want coordinated and sustained pressure, the US leadership is essential to its success.
5. Lobby for the full implementation of the Renacer law. The Act contains nine important tools to exert pressure on the regime, to exact justice when there is none. Its implementation is still short of effective and it is urgent to make it work after one year of its being in effect.

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<sup>4</sup> Orozco, Manuel. [Dictatorial Radicalización in Nicaragua](#). Washington, DC, Nov. 2022.

<sup>5</sup> <https://cnnspanol.cnn.com/2022/10/10/union-europea-declara-persona-non-grata-a-jeffa-de-la-mision-de-nicaragua-orix/>

<sup>6</sup> Orozco, Manuel. [A Push for Freedom](#) Washington, DC 2022.