

Roots of Crisis

Nicaragua 2018



Ovide Bastien

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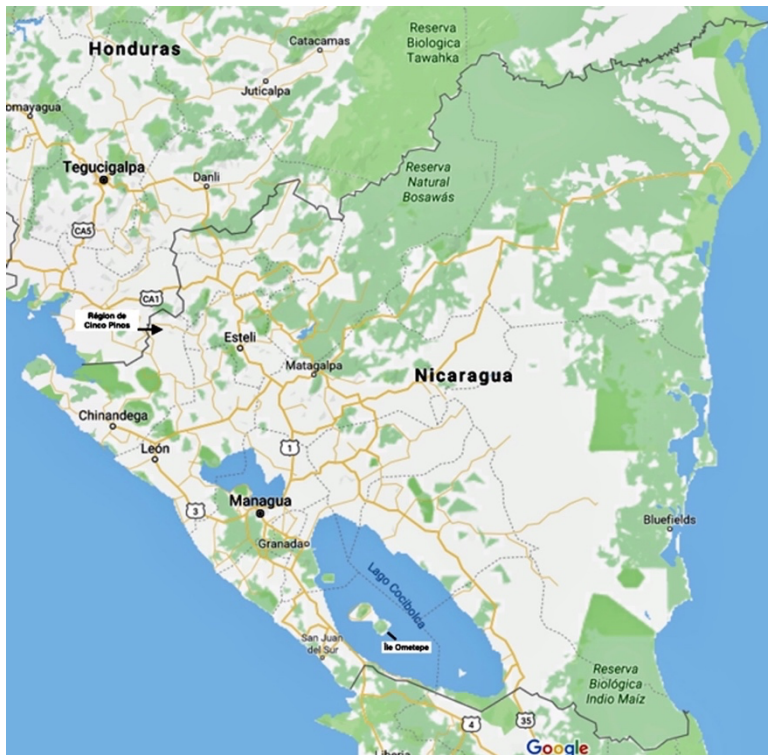
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To the people of Nicaragua, in particular all those wonderful peasants with whom I have bonded when visiting Nicaragua annually in the last 23 years

To my Dawson College colleagues, and to the hundreds of North South Studies students with whom I have lived unforgettable experiences in Nicaragua



Nicaragua

Other Books Published by Author

[Chili: le coup divin](#) published by “Les Éditions du Jour” in September 1974, in Montreal, Canada. Republished on Amazon as an eBook in 2014 and in paperback in 2015.

[Chile: el golpe divino](#), published on Amazon as an eBook and in paperback in 2017. It includes a new section, Epíloga 2017.

[Chile: The Divine Coup](#) published on Amazon as an eBook and in paperback in 2017. It also includes a new section, Epilogue 2017.

[CHILE: Underside of Economic Miracle](#) published as a class manual at Dawson College from 1995 to 2011. Updated and republished on Amazon as an eBook in 2014 and in paperback in 2015.

[My 9/11 Awakening to America's Moral Crisis](#) (Diary and Letters, Chile: 11 September 1973 Military Coup), published on Amazon as an eBook and in paperback in 2015.

[Love or Money: What Makes the World Go Round?](#) published on Amazon as an eBook and in paperback in 2015.

[Cry of the Earth – Cry of the Poor](#), published on Amazon as an eBook and in paperback in 2015.

[Globalization Under Attack](#), published on Amazon as an eBook and in paperback in 2017.

[Life of the Mind According to Aimé Forest](#), published on Amazon as an eBook and in paperback in 2018.

[La vie de l'esprit selon Aimé Forest](#), published on Amazon as an eBook and in paperback in 2018.

[Carl R. Rogers' Crisis: Subjectivity vs. Objectivity](#), published on Amazon as an eBook and in paperback in 2018.

[La crise de Carl Rogers: Subjectivité vs objectivité](#), published on Amazon as an eBook and in paperback in 2018.

[History of Zelaya Blandón Family](#), published on Amazon as an eBook and in paperback in 2018.

[Historia de la Familia Zelaya Blandón](#), published on Amazon as an eBook and in paperback in 2018.

Conferences and Interviews

To see the talk I gave on Chile during the Social Forum in Ottawa on 22 August 2014:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LJqi5bSLN0c>

Christ Dayo from the CHRY News Collective interviewed me in late September 2014. To listen to this half-hour radio interview on the Chilean Coup:

<https://www.mixcloud.com/discover/ovide-bastien/>

To see my 5-minute 2014 homage (mostly in French) to Sister Marie Denise Dubois, a woman who dedicated her life to the marginalized in Chile and Honduras:

[Marie Denise Dubois ou l'autre visage de l'Église](#)

To see the talk I gave on Chile – I was invited by the Egyptian Canadian Coalition for Democracy – during the World Social Forum in Montreal on 10 August 2016, go [here](#) (The talk is in French)

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Introduction

I find it very painful to see, day by day, the dramatic events that have been taking place in Nicaragua since mid-April 2018.

When the crisis erupted I had just finished publishing the biography of an influential Sandinista Nicaraguan family, and I was starting to work on another one that would relate the life of my close 80-year-old Nicaraguan friend, the remarkable leader of the 1980 literacy crusade in the municipality of Cinco Pinos, Chinandega. He has been organizing [North South Studies'](#) home stays and small development projects in his region for the last fifteen years.

According to most reports, there are presently approximately 322 dead and more than 2,000 wounded. On Ometepe Island, where North South Studies students had home stays for several years, the Sandinista House in Altagracia was burned down, presumably by protestors, on May 26¹. A friend of mine told me that in Chontales a full day curfew was imposed for several days, one which was eventually reduced to night curfews. In Masaya some 1,000 policemen and Sandinista hooded paramilitaries carried out an intense seven-hour attack in the indigenous Monimbó community on July 16 dismantling some of the very last barricades in the country and thus nearly completing the vast national clean-up operation against protestors (Operación Limpieza). Given that the entire city was systematically cordoned off by the police,

¹ [“IACHR Urges Nicaragua to Dismantle Parapolice Groups and Protect Right to Peaceful Protest”](#), OAS Press Release, June 1, 2018, https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/media_center/PReleases/2018/124.asp, consulted on August 23, 2018.

reporters were not able to be present to cover what was happening.

I find it very painful to see these dramatic events because of the very deep bond that I have developed with the people of Nicaragua over the last 40 years.

Sandinista revolution of July 19, 1979

Like all progressives in the world, I was fascinated by the Sandinista revolution that in 1979 overthrew the decades long US supported dictator Anastasio Somoza.

When studying for my Master's degree in economics at McGill University in the late 1970s, I befriended Carlos Chamorro who was then also studying economics at McGill. For Christmas 1977, Carlos, son of Pedro Joaquim Chamorro and Violetta Chamorro, returned to Nicaragua for the winter break, accompanied by his Lebanese girlfriend. [On January 10, 1978](#), his father, owner and editor of *La Prensa*, a newspaper that was very critical of the Somoza dictatorship, was assassinated by the dictator. This event triggered a massive anti-Somoza demonstration during the historical funeral service.

When I had coffee with Carlos's girlfriend after she returned to Montreal – Carlos had chosen to stay in Nicaragua – she described in detail, and with considerable emotion, this demonstration: “Ovide, when I participated in the demonstration, such was the spirit of the people that it is clear that it is the end of the dictatorship!”

I listened to what she was saying but did not really believe her. I thought that her love for Carlos was rendering her overemotional and leading her to exaggerate.

However, events proved that she was right. Pedro Joaquim's assassination deepened and accelerated the armed uprising against Somoza and the dictatorship was toppled on July 19, 1979. And Carlos, who had remained

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in Nicaragua to join the struggle against Somoza, became the director of [*La Barricada*](#), the newspaper created by the new Sandinista revolutionary government, a position he held until the early 1990s.²

In October 1984, I spent two weeks in Nicaragua, and played the role of international observer in the first national elections following the 1979 Sandinista victory. Daniel Ortega was elected as president of Nicaragua on the same day that Ronald Reagan was re-elected president of the United States. In the days preceding the elections, the United States used collective psychosis techniques by repeatedly flying over Nicaragua's airspace with SR 71 high altitude jet fighters, better known as Blackspawns, which, upon breaking the sound barrier, would cause

² Carlos gave a talk to North South Students in January 2006 and explained to us how he had left *Barricada* in 1994. Here is what appears in my diary. "Daniel Ortega disagreed with the freedom that the *Barricada* reporters were taking. While he had initially agreed that *Barricada* sever its links with the FSLN, Ortega changed his mind when he became the object of criticism. He asked Carlos to resign; Carlos refused. He thus simply fired him. 80 % of the *Barricada* reporters left at the same time as Carlos. The paper was completely rearranged under the leadership of Tomas Borge and *Barricada* went bankrupt four years later." A new online [*Barricada*](#) was created July 3, 2018 by youth who defend the Ortega government. The message they posted on Wikipedia to explain its creation: "On July 3, 2018, motivated by the events of the coup attempt against the elected government (2017-2021) and media misinformation, a group of young communicators took on the task of giving life to a new information portal called *Barricada*, taking up the name of the first official information media of the Sandinista Popular Revolution in the late 70's."

explosions similar to bombs. By then the [Contra](#)³ attacks had already caused some 7,000 casualties.⁴

Profoundly influenced by the Sandinista Revolution and my direct experience of the brutal Chilean military coup that ousted Salvador Allende on September 11, 1973, I cofounded in 1994 the Dawson College North South Studies social science profile that includes a one-month long student field trip to Nicaragua.

I have spent several weeks in Nicaragua every year in the last 23 years. From 1995 to 2010, I accompanied, with fellow teachers, some 20 to 25 students each year, helping them integrate into and bond with their host families in Nandaime, and later in hamlets in the municipalities of San Juan de Cinco Pinos and Santo Tomas del Norte, in the department of Chinandega.

In the semester preceding each trip, I taught students a multi-disciplinary course on Nicaragua titled Preparing Field Trip, in which I explained key events in the country's history, focusing on the Sandinista Revolution of the 1980s, the Contra War, the neoliberal governments of the 1990s, men women relationships in Nicaragua, culture shock, etc.

Moreover, following my retirement in 2011, I continued traveling to Nicaragua for a few weeks annually, cooperating in various development projects in collaboration with North South Studies. For example, projects to help Nicaraguan villagers and students, in the

³ “The **Contras** were the various [U.S.](#)-backed and funded [right-wing](#) rebel groups that were active from 1979 to the early 1990s in opposition to the [socialist Sandinista Junta of National Reconstruction](#) junta in [Nicaragua](#). Among the separate contra groups, the [Nicaraguan Democratic Force](#) (FDN) emerged as the largest by far. In 1987, virtually all contra organizations were united, at least nominally, into the [Nicaraguan Resistance](#).” Wikipedia, consulted August 22, 2018.

⁴ Gabriela Selsa, *Banderas y Harapos*, Managua, Nicaragua, 2016.

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remote and very poor rural area of Cinco Pinos where libraries are unheard of, have access to high speed Internet; projects to help various hamlets in that region have access to potable piped water, with solar powered water grids.

Both pro-Ortega friends and anti-Ortega friends

Part of the pain that I presently feel because of the recent unrest comes from the fact that Nicaragua has become like a second home for me, a place with which I have developed very deep bonds. I feel compassion for those Nicaraguans who have lost their loved ones, for those who have been wounded, for those who have been tortured and imprisoned, for those who have disappeared, for those who are now living in fear and fleeing.

And part of the pain that I presently feel comes from the fact that I have very close friends on both sides of the political spectrum. Among those who still staunchly defend the Ortega government, and among those who have been massively protesting against this government. It is probable that many of my friends who were in favour of the government three months ago, are now among those protesting against it.

One of the lessons I have learned while managing student field trips, and later while managing development projects in Nicaragua, is the following: in order to promote the integral development of both students and faculty, and in order to promote the integral development of communities in Nicaragua, conflict resolution skills are a must.

Helping resolve conflicts that develop among students participating in field trips, and among faculty accompanying these students, represents one of the most daunting and yet most important tasks facing a coordinator who wants to ensure the success of a field trip.

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And helping resolve conflicts within a Nicaraguan hamlet, conflicts whose origin sometimes dates back years, is often more important, to ensure the success of an Internet Center, or a water project, than finding the money to finance those projects.

I vividly remember an encounter I managed to organize between two members of families that were very influential in a hamlet. Families that have been experiencing conflicts for decades. The mediation process was painful, there were tears on both sides, but repressed feelings and thoughts emerged, an honest and transparent dialogue took place, and the development project, previously blocked because of the conflict, managed to go ahead.

As the crisis deepens day by day, and the death toll keeps mounting, I feel, in many ways, totally helpless. However, there is one area where I think that I can perhaps be of some help.

What strikes me when I speak to Nicaraguans about what is going on in their country, and when I read articles from various sources, is the profound diversity of views.

My friends who side with the Ortega government – these include numerous peasants, present and former mayors, municipal government employees, a former director of an important Nicaraguan NGO – tend to adopt the narrative set forth by the Ortega couple. They contend that a minority of Nicaraguans, mainly financed by the United States, is attempting to carry out a coup d'état against the revolutionary Daniel Ortega, who has rendered the country peaceful and secure, allowed it to develop very rapidly in the last decade, and implemented policies that considerably reduced poverty, fostered renewable energy – presently 75% of the electricity grid is powered by renewable energy – and significantly increased

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investments, in particular in transport infrastructure and tourism, a sector that has been flourishing.

My friends who are protesting against the Ortega government – these include Nicaraguans working in NGOs, peasants in an agricultural cooperative founded during the Sandinista Revolution, the director of Confidential, Carlos Chamorro, who also directs the popular TV news programs on channel 12 *Esta Semana* and *Esta Noche* – adopt a totally different narrative. Their belief is that the Ortega couple has virtually high jacked the Sandinista Party, developed a complete and very undemocratic control of Nicaragua, and is governing the country using the same methods as the previous Somoza dictatorship. They observe that Sandinista members of the national parliament, who hold the majority, are subordinated to the Ortega couple, which has become very wealthy and powerful. The couple, controls the Supreme Court and the Supreme Electoral Council, owns most of the TV and radio stations of Nicaragua -- increasingly used as state propaganda tools, with a strong fundamentalist religious colouring -- and subordinates both army and police to partisan interests.

What also strikes me very much is that there is a direct correlation between the source that I consult and the narrative that is being set forth. When I read *Confidencial*, *La Prensa*, *Envío* or *El Nuevo Diario*, what I invariably find are the views of those opposing the Ortega government. And when I consult more radical progressive sources, such as *Telesur*, [*Investig'Action*](#), the [*Information Clearinghouse*](#), [*Latin America in Movement*](#), I invariably find views defending the Ortega government.

Furthermore, when I discuss with my colleagues and friends of the left, there again the situation is complex. Some, like one who had just read Philip Agee's book *Inside the Company: CIA Diary*, argue that the CIA is

active in Nicaragua just as it was in many countries that have experienced the Arab Spring, such as Libya, Syria, etc. The CIA is busy paying people to oppose the Ortega government, and is even paying people to be violent and to assassinate. Others find that the Ortega couple are really acting like dictators, that their policies are very neoliberal and in no way revolutionary, and that they are holding on to power through sheer violence. A violence that is gross and totally immoral.

What I propose to do in this book:

- Provide the reader with key events of the present crisis from its eruption in April 2018 to August 2018.
- Present, in a detailed and objective manner, the two narratives: that of those defending the Ortega government, and that of those opposing it. To do so, I will draw from numerous sources, making abundant and long direct quotes in such a way that those defending each narrative will find its rendering so faithful that they would be ready to sign it as their own.⁵
- Point out the key points in both narratives: pro-Ortega government and anti-Ortega government.
- Reproduce extracts of my Nicaraguan diary from January 2007 to January 2017. These should help the reader see what in my diary supports the pro-Ortega narrative and what supports the anti-Ortega narrative.
- Make a few critical comments based on the knowledge I have gained in the last four months reading about the

⁵ This said, I must admit that my task -- rendering a narrative so faithfully that its supporters would be willing to sign it -- will most likely be more arduous in the case of those who oppose the Ortega government. The protestors represent an alliance of numerous organizations and movements. Beyond their common objective of getting rid of the Ortega-Murillo couple, democratizing state institutions, and holding early elections, their narrative tends to be less well defined.

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Nicaraguan crisis, but, also most importantly, from the knowledge that I have gained in the last 23 years by teaching a course on Nicaragua for more than a decade, by attending conferences in Nicaragua during field trips, by keeping a diary during each trip, and by communicating with Nicaraguans on a near weekly basis to manage development projects.

Ideas and convictions sometimes impede understanding

Though it is often extremely difficult, emotionally speaking, not to take sides, this was precisely what I had planned to do when I first started on this project. My intention was to refrain from defending a particular point of view, from adhering to either narrative, pro-Ortega government or anti-Ortega government. Just as I would do as a teacher, I wanted to expose readers to numerous pieces of a mosaic or a puzzle, pieces that are sometimes black and white, and blatantly contradict one another, sometimes grey, and sometimes whose colour readers will struggle to decipher.

I strongly believe that one of the first steps one has to make when trying to change the world, to render it more just and environmentally friendly, is to understand it. All too often our ideas and convictions, instead of fostering understanding, actually impede it, ideas and convictions becoming like a pair of tinted glasses that allow us to see only certain facts, and not many other, even fundamental ones.

“Nicaragua’s present drama reopens a debate about what is acceptable and what is not, about what arguments explain what is happening and why it is happening. One always filters things according to one’s mindset, but it is hard to understand that individuals who consider themselves to be well informed would actually ignore basic facts. Every time there is evidence of fever, such individuals, instead of

acknowledging the fever, simply break the thermometer”, asserts Ángel Saldomando.

And he continues: “Subordinating facts to a body of dogmatic-religious affirmations, generates an insurmountable contradiction between the owners of truth and the others. And when this kind of subordination gets carried away, this opens the door to all kinds of aberrations. History is plagued by such aberrations, and numerous were those who justified and legitimized them, presenting the version of others as mere lies. Thus, concentration camps, mass repression, and despotic regimes were not acknowledged. (...) That those responsible for the latter were ideologically on one’s side sufficed to absolve them.”⁶

While acknowledging the danger of clinging too adamantly to a set of ideas and beliefs, and despite my resolution not to take sides, as the weeks went by and I discovered more and more of what was happening in Nicaragua, I started wondering whether I could, deep in my heart and conscience, remain neutral. And the answer, one that became increasingly clear as the days went by, was that I couldn’t. There was no way I could adhere to the pro-Ortega government narrative.

Even though I am turning 76 in a few days and have very deep bonds with the people of Nicaragua, I know that my evaluation of the present crisis is only one drop in the ocean. I do not own truth, and I am discovering new things every day, and sometimes errors that I have made in the past in my evaluations.

Nevertheless, I also know that unless a drop of water dares to be what it is, there will never be an ocean.

This book represents the drop that I am.

⁶ « [Nicaragua : otra vez poder y sangre](#), » Le Monde diplomatique, Chilean edition, July, 2018.

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I am also fully aware of the fact that there are very good, decent people on both sides of the political spectrum in present crisis-torn Nicaragua. Having close Nicaraguan friends on both sides places me in the position of a child, whose parents not only separate but start openly fighting, one ending up dominating the other through sheer force and violence.

My hope is that readers, once exposed to an honest and transparent presentation of both narratives, accompanied by my critical comments, will be able to reach their own conclusions about what is now happening in Nicaragua and why.

However, also and more importantly, my hope is that Nicaraguans in the coming weeks and months will be able to draw from the most fundamental ethical and revolutionary values of the Sandinista revolution of the 1980s. I hope that Nicaraguans are able to overcome the present crisis through transparent and honest dialogue, accepting to listen to each other's narratives in a spirit of respect and compromise, to achieve justice and peace, the cornerstone of all integral individual and societal development.

One more comment. When writing this book, I did not attempt to present a story that would be simple and easy to read, even though I know that in our ever more Twitter-minded world that is often what is most appealing. My main preoccupation was presenting the reader with as much information as possible, so that the full complexity of what has been happening in Nicaragua could be grasped. Reading tons of direct quotes from numerous sources can be a tedious and time-consuming task. However, it is the price one has to pay, I believe, to develop depth, to see events in their historical context, and to avoid judging these events from a shallow, black and white perspective.

Many of the sources that I have quoted in this book are Spanish, and a couple are in French. The translations are mine.

Gossip and conflict in Nicaragua

Above I pointed out one of the great lessons I learned when accompanying North South Studies students to Nicaragua: in order to promote the integral development of both students and faculty, and in order to promote the integral development of communities in Nicaragua, conflict resolution skills are a must.

That conflict resolution skills are in great demand in the crisis presently taking place in Nicaragua is an understatement.

During my trip to Nicaragua in January 2017, I explained to a Nicaraguan friend of mine, who comes from the Cinco Pinos region but now lives in León, how hard I found it to constantly listen to some of the criticisms – a form of gossip – that some Nicaraguan families in the hamlets make against each other. Criticisms that may sometimes be fair and accurate but that are often very outlandish and unfounded, and that make it very hard for a foreigner like me to find out wherein lies the truth.

“Part of the poverty of my country comes from this attitude. Nowadays is paradise compared to a few decades ago. Then people not only talked against each other; the conflict often became physical. Many got killed in machete fights”, my friend commented.

My campesino friends in the agricultural cooperative Bernardino Dias Ochoa, located about six kilometers from Nandaime, founded during the Sandinista Revolution, had made the same comment during one of our home stays there during the 1990s.

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When a situation becomes as polarized as it is today in Nicaragua, there is little doubt that gossip plays a major role. Both sides resort to name calling, and facts and truth are the first casualties. This is something that social media amplifies considerably. Finding out the truth then becomes all the more challenging.

In his remarkable 1992 book [*Life is Hard: Machismo, Danger, and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua*](#), the American anthropologist Roger N. Lancaster dedicates an entire chapter to the importance of and role played by gossip in Nicaraguan culture. Lancaster asserts:

“Torture, atrocities, and assassination simultaneously command silence and enjoin discourse. Thereby their terror is secured and magnified: in gossip, whispers, rumors, murmurs. By this means, too, terror is committed to the political memory of the community -- a way of remembering that sometimes metamorphoses into resistance. The relationship between the clandestinity of gossip, which is the very stuff of community opinion, and the clandestinity of the massing revolution was by no means accidental.

“Gossip, too, was the medium of much political discourse under the Sandinistas. Which officials were enriching themselves at the public expense? Which were shielding their sons from military service? Why were there shortages, and what happened to the food? (...)

“Gossip, then, is not a trivial matter. Rarely seen but ever present, it is the means by which people -- especially women, but also men -- share the information they need to plan meaningfully for the future and to cope with the realities of life. In the Nicaraguan vernacular, *comadre* connotes “gossip,” and this is a telling point. Gossip is an ongoing conversation, at once intimate and practical, conducted among people who have long-standing

relationships, who share interests, and who pool resources and information. It is the medium that supports a host of institutions: *compadrazgo* networks, informal lending relationships, and long-term friendships.

“As an anthropologist working in Managua’s neighbourhoods, much of my information came to me by way of gossip. I imagine that if anthropologists were honest about their sources of information, most of us would have to admit that we work a great deal in and through the medium of gossip.”⁷

⁷ *Life is Hard: Machismo, Danger, and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua*, p. 71-72.

Key Events in Present Crisis: April to August 2018

What follows is a chronology of events. Of course, producing such a chronology while avoiding taking sides in a conflict is a daunting, and in some ways, impossible task. The very choice of events to relate can often be dictated by one's beliefs and convictions.

This being acknowledged, I have tried to do my best in producing an accurate chronology of events. Readers will notice that certain events, such as the interview that Daniel Ortega granted to Fox News, could have been placed in the section "Pro-Ortega Government Narrative", instead of the section "Key Events in Present Crisis...". My decision to place this interview in this latter section comes from the fact that Daniel Ortega is the President of Nicaragua, and that his interpretation of what is happening and why, can itself be seen as a key event. The BBC HARDtalk interview with Juan Sebastian Chamorro also appears in the section "Key Events of Crisis...", even though I could have chosen to place it in a subsequent section.

On April 18, 2018 the Ortega government, in order to deal with a growing social security deficit, announces reforms to the national pension plan. Those receiving pensions will experience cuts and both employee and employer contributions will be increased.

Retirees immediately start demonstrating against the reforms, and they are eventually joined by dozens of university students. Sandinista paramilitaries soon arrive on the scene

and, as they had so often successfully done in anti-canal⁸ and other demonstrations in the last few years, start assaulting and violently repressing demonstrators. This, as the national police stand by watching.

However, some who are present at the scene manage to film, using their smartphones, what is happening and immediately post it on social media.

On April 19, Vice President Rosario Murillo mocks the demonstrators referring to them as “small groups, small souls, toxic and full of hate”, that want to destroy Nicaragua and hamper peace and development. She also labels the demonstrators who have been attacked by Sandinista paramilitaries as “aggressors” and describes the attack on protestors by these paramilitaries as “legitimate self-defence.”⁹

On that same day, ever more university students join the demonstrations, whose momentum increases day by day. Ever more Sandinista paramilitaries, assisted by the national police, violently attack the demonstrators, whose numbers keep multiplying. More casualties and more wounded result in what rapidly turns into an unprecedented uprising against the Ortega government.

TELCOR suspends the transmission of four independent TV channels – channels 12, 23, 51 and *100% Noticias* – that are reporting the news, as well as that of the Catholic Episcopal

⁸ “The **Nicaraguan Canal** ([Spanish](#): *Canal de Nicaragua*), formally the **Nicaraguan Canal and Development Project** (also referred to as the **Nicaragua Grand Canal**, or the **Grand Interoceanic Canal**) is a proposed [shipping route](#) through [Nicaragua](#) to connect the [Caribbean Sea](#) (and therefore the [Atlantic Ocean](#)) with the [Pacific Ocean](#). Scientists were concerned about the project's environmental impact, as [Lake Nicaragua](#) is Central America's key freshwater reservoir^[4] while the project's viability was questioned by shipping experts and engineers”, [Wikipedia](#), consulted on August 22, 2018.

⁹ “2018 Nicaraguan Protests,” [Wikipedia](#), consulted on July 24, 2018.

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Conference, a suspension that is lifted several hours later. However, the government also suspends the free Wi-Fi that it has been offering in the last two years in many public parks of most cities and towns throughout Nicaragua, a suspension that continues, as far as I know, to this very day.

Rosario Murillo asserts that protestors are being manipulated and are trying to “destabilize” and “destroy” Nicaragua.¹⁰

By Saturday, April 21, more than 20 Nicaraguans – students, workers, and a policeman – are reported dead. Hundreds are wounded, and dozens are reported incarcerated or fleeing.

Even though on April 22 President Daniel Ortega holds a press conference in which he announces, in a bid to end the protests, that he is cancelling the pension reforms, the protest movement continues. Fuelled by the profound anger felt by multitudes of Nicaraguans who are revolted to see the brutal violence of the hooded paramilitaries and the police, protests spread like fire to other sectors of the population – workers, farmers and businessmen – and to city after city, and region after region.

Massive protests

On April 23, hundreds of thousands demonstrate in the capital Managua, singing the national anthem and demanding an end to the repression. Some start calling for Ortega’s departure. To protect themselves from potential attacks by police and pro-Ortega paramilitaries, protestors even start building hundreds of barricades in cities. To build these barricades they often use, just as had been done during the insurrection against Somoza, street cobblestones. Others set up road blocks on major highways; dozens of vans, stranded on highways, are unable to deliver their goods. Huge metal decorative tree sculptures, each worth 20,000 dollars and designed with the artistic skills of Rosario Murillo and

¹⁰ “2018 Nicaraguan Protests,” [Wikipedia](#), consulted on July 24, 2018.

glowing with thousands of small lights throughout Managua, are thrown to the ground. Huge billboards, showing in bright colours the photos of Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo on which one reads the revamped motto of the Sandinista Party “Socialist, Christian, in Solidarity,” come crashing to the ground.

On April 24 the United Nations requests that the Nicaraguan government set up “prompt, thorough, independent and transparent investigations into these deaths,” saying a number of them may have been “unlawful.”¹¹

The Ortega government asks the Catholic Church to act as mediator in the crisis. It accepts, but asks all sectors of society, including the government, to strive to maintain an atmosphere conducive to tolerance and provides the four following conditions:

1. Allow the entry of a delegation of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.
2. Suppress paramilitary groups.
3. Stop all police repression against protesting civil groups.
4. Accept to initiate a sincere dialogue with protestors.

Video of Bishop Báez goes viral

On April 27. Leana Astorga, from *Telemundo*, posts [an 8-minute video](#) on YouTube of Bishop Silvio Báez. The latter asserts, and he is actually in tears when he does so, “I have cried, because so many young people have died without necessity and in an unjust way and with a cruelty without limits. I have cried, because many have been tortured in an inhuman way. Last night I learned of three young people from our youth ministry in the parish whose nails were pulled out of their hands while in prison. The stories are terrible, and

¹¹ “Nicaragua: A timeline of one and a half months of deadly crisis,” [Indian Express](#), June 1, 2018.

our youth does not deserve that.” And he goes on to explain that the Episcopal Conference of Nicaragua has accepted to take the risk of accepting Ortega’s request to mediate the conflict through a National Dialogue between the government and protestors. I know this will be a very challenging task. A youth told me, “How can I sit and negotiate with someone who has been torturing and killing my colleagues?” It will be very hard, I know, but we must absolutely find a peaceful solution to the present crisis. We must set aside hatred and revenge.”¹²

The video, titled [*Bishop Silvio Báez weeps and makes Nicaragua weep*](#) immediately goes viral. Comments José Manuel Vidal, “His popularity was growing until, in the last demonstrations, he appeared as its main leader in encouraging his countrymen to speak out freely. He also shows leadership in requesting that they abstain, even after the bloodshed of young and innocent students whose only crime was to demand democracy and freedom, from falling into the perverse dynamics of violence and death of the Ortega regime. (...) The Government of Ortega repeats and copies against Bishop Báez the same techniques the Salvadoran extreme right used against the soon-to-be new saint, Monsignor Romero, which ended in his assassination. They accuse Bishop Baez of being ‘the head of subversion’, and because of this he has received several death threats.”¹³

Nicaraguan government creates Truth Commission

That very same day the president of the National Assembly, Gustavo Porras, announces the creation of a Truth Commission - Comisión de la Verdad, Justicia y Paz - whose

¹² José Manuel Vidal, « [Silvio Báez, el obispo que hizo frente al 'comandante' Ortega](#), » *Religión Digital*, 5 de mayo de 2018.

¹³ José Manuel Vidal, « [Silvio Báez, el obispo que hizo frente al 'comandante' Ortega](#), » *Religión Digital*, 5 de mayo de 2018.

mandate consists of documenting the casualties, violence, and destruction resulting from the unrest. Moreover, the head of the national police, Aminta Granera, who is facing ever more criticism for excessive police violence and complicity with pro-Ortega paramilitary forces, resigns.¹⁴

Opposition forces criticize the creation of the Truth Commission, arguing that all of its members are known pro-Ortega supporters. They request that the government allow the Inter-American Human Rights Commission and the United Nations Human Rights Office to send their own personnel to investigate the killing of protestors.

National Dialogue begins

On May 16, as protests continue, and the death toll keeps rising, tense talks, mediated by the Catholic bishops, take place at the Seminary of Our Lady of Fatima in the first session of the National Dialogue between the Ortega government and opposition groups. President Ortega and his wife and Vice President, Rosario Murillo, arrive at the seminary, in a vehicle guarded by hundreds of policemen and two helicopters. As their vehicle advances, one can hear the surrounding crowd loudly chanting, “Assassins! Assassins!” Even before President Ortega manages to take the floor, one of the student leaders, Lester Alemán, shouts at him: “You are the head of the National Police and the head of the Army. Order immediately, at this very moment, the cessation of the repression by the police, the paramilitary forces, and the mobs of your party that have been massacring and killing us!”¹⁵

Ortega takes the floor for ten minutes, focusing on peace and security, recalling the 50,000 deaths caused by the Contra War, the 2,000 Palestinians wounded in Gaza in the last few

¹⁴ “2018 Nicaraguan Protests,” *Wikipedia*, consulted on July 24, 2018.

¹⁵ [*Suspenden el diálogo nacional con Daniel Ortega por falta de consenso*](#), *Excelsior*, May 23, 2018.

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days, but does not respond to the student request, to order the immediate stop of all repression. He asserts, “Of course, our people want peace. Of course, our youth want peace. Mothers want peace. However, there exists so much violence and so much war in the world.” Ortega goes on to say that police are instructed never to shoot at people. He accuses the protestors of being armed, of attacking policemen, and of causing the death of innocent victims, including many Sandinistas. He mentions the case of a one-year-old child in Matagalpa, shot in the neck by protestors and who died from her wound, a “victim of this irrational violence, of this diabolical violence that has spread in our country.” However, according to the family of the victim -- not a girl, but an 18-month-old baby boy -- the shot killing the baby came, not from protestors, but rather from anti-riot police. The father, who fought for seven years in the Contra War and specialized in artillery, was present when it happened and is convinced that this is what happened.

The Bishop of Estelí, Abelardo Mata, who is present at the National Dialogue, intervenes and with considerable emotion:

“Mr. President, (...) an unarmed revolution is under way in Nicaragua. (...) Here, one does not find an army confronting an army. One finds instead a nation expressing everything that it has been feeling for several years, complaints that we had the opportunity to express to the government [on May 21, 2014](#).¹⁶ Do

¹⁶ Nicaraguan bishops met with Daniel Ortega on May 21, 2014. They then produced a document, “En búsqueda de nuevos horizontes para una Nicaragua mejor” (Searching for new horizons for an improved Nicaragua), which presents to the public what they told him. In this document the bishops praise the Ortega government for its anti-abortion stance, and its opposition to same sex marriage. However, they sharply criticize the Ortega government on many other issues: constantly using religious symbols as a tool to politically manipulate the public, the canal project and lack of respect of the environment and the indigenous, the growing monopoly of certain media groups and lack of press freedom

you want to dismantle the revolution through repression, with rubber bullets, lead bullets, and paramilitary forces?”

The following day, delegates of the Inter-American Human Rights Commission, whose presence the Ortega government ended up accepting, arrive in Nicaragua and issue a statement calling on the government to assure full freedom of the press and immediately end all repression of the protests.

Suspension of National Dialogue

On May 23, after four sessions, the National Dialogue is suspended. Bishop Leopoldo Brenes, head of the Catholic Church in Nicaragua, explains that the dialogue cannot go on because there is a lack of consensus on “an agenda of issues.”¹⁷ Many among the opposition groups are calling for the immediate resignation of the Ortega couple. The Catholic Church proposes the following: that national elections, instead of being held only in 2021, be held in March 2019; that all paramilitary forces be dismantled; that state institutions be revamped – Supreme Court, Supreme Electoral Council – in order to reflect transparency and democracy; that roadblocks and barricades be dismantled throughout the country; that a timetable and action plan be set up for all this to happen; that a committee be set up, composed half of government representatives and half of opposition forces, to oversee the implementation of the agreement.

However, the Ortega government, while vaguely insinuating that it could accept all the reforms proposed, insists that all barricades and roadblocks be immediately dismantled, given

resulting therefrom, the systematic favouring of those supporting the government in the allocation of jobs, obliging public workers to attend sandinista rallies, for fear of losing their jobs, or of their children losing a scholarship. Later in this book, I will reproduce several extracts of this document.

¹⁷ “2018 Nicaraguan Protests,” [Wikipedia](#), consulted on July 24, 2018.

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the harm these are causing to the economy. And that this be done before all other negotiations concerning the democratization of the country be initiated, a proposal that opposition forces do not at all accept.

On May 30, Mother's Day in Nicaragua, a huge march of hundreds of thousands is held in honour of the victims killed during protests. Once again, the police and pro-government paramilitary violently intervene, resulting in another 15 casualties and dozens of injured. The Inter-American Human Rights Commission immediately condemns the new acts of violence, urging the government "to investigate and punish the use of force by paramilitary forces, and to dismantle these groups, and seek a peaceful, constitutional and democratic solution" to the current crisis.¹⁸

Daniel Ortega takes a tough stand against protestors

On July 7, government supporters hold a peace demonstration in Managua. Daniel Ortega addresses the crowd, and takes a firm stand against the ongoing protests: "Here, it is the people who establish the rules in the Constitution of the Republic. They will not change overnight by the will of some coup plotters. If the putschists want to come to the government, let them seek the people's vote in the next elections. With all the destruction they have provoked, we will see what support they will have."

On July 8, the deadliest day since the unrest began, some 38 people are killed in clashes. Most of the casualties are in Diriamba and nearby Jinotepe, where police and pro-government paramilitaries are attacking the protestors in an effort to dismantle the numerous barricades. Many of the protestors in Diriamba, some of them volunteer medics, take refuge in their city's San Sebastian basilica.

¹⁸ "2018 Nicaraguan Protests," [Wikipedia](#), consulted on July 24, 2018.

By then the total death toll is approaching 300. While most of the casualties and injuries, according to the international media, are suffered by opposition forces, a significant number are suffered by police, pro-government paramilitary forces, and supporters of the Ortega government.

Catholic bishops assaulted

On July 9, a group of bishops – Cardinal Leopoldo Brenes; his auxiliary, Bishop Silvio Baez; and Archbishop Waldemar Sommertag, the Vatican representative in Nicaragua – travels to Diriamba in an attempt to mediate the liberation of those protestors who have taken refuge in the basilica. However, when the bishops attempt to enter the basilica, they are assaulted by pro-government sympathizers (A Nicaraguan friend of mine, who prefers to stay anonymous, informed me that most of these sympathizers did not originate from the region of Diriamba, but had been sent there by the Sandinista Party), some of them calling the bishops “murderers.” In a tweet following the assault, Bishop Baez shows the cut on his arm, and states, “Besieged by a fiery mob that wanted to enter the Basilica San Sebastián in Diriamba, I was wounded, beaten in the stomach, robbed of the episcopal insignia and attacked verbally. I’m fine thank God. The basilica as well as those inside it were liberated.”¹⁹

Government Truth Commission publishes preliminary report

On July 12, a close friend of mine in Nicaragua sends me the preliminary report just published by the truth commission set up by the Nicaraguan National assembly, Comisión de la Verdad, Justicia y Paz. It documents the casualties, the wounded, the kidnapped and detained, the destruction of

¹⁹ “[Bishops attacked by pro-government mob at basilica in Nicaragua](#),” *Catholic News Agency*, July 10, 2018, consulted on August 4, 2018.

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buildings - public and private - and ends with a series of recommendations. It states:

“This Commission is concerned that during the events from April 18 to date, we have heard of complaints from citizens, from both sides of the conflict, who have suffered harassment both on their person and that of their family members. As we do not have official information, we are unable to determine the current situation of these individuals.

“It has been observed that during the ongoing violence, kidnapping has been used as a way to create an atmosphere of insecurity, victims being subjected to various forms of torture such as beatings, broken bones, whipping, chemical burns, sexual violations, and burning someone alive, and this even to death.

“This Commission learned that these acts were committed mainly in the sectors where roadblocks and protests were taking place in different parts of the country, and that what predominates is the kidnapping of public officials and persons close to the government. (...)

“This Commission does not yet have the total damage done to property, public and private, during the unrest. However, according to information received from the private sector, (...) 20 supermarkets, 15 appliance stores, 5 restaurants, 4 media outlets, 3 bank branches, 1 cell phone company, 3 fast food restaurants and 9 nine other restaurants in supermarkets nationwide have suffered damage. (...)

“Fourteen Red Cross Ambulances have suffered partial damage from April 18 to June 19, 2018. (...) The following radio stations were partially or totally destroyed: Radio Darío in León, Radio Ya and Radio

Nicaragua in Managua and Radios Estero Yes in Matagalpa.

“The public sector reports significant damages. (...) INIFOM reports damage done in 78 Municipalities: burning of public buildings, destruction of streets, burning of heavy machinery, looting of equipment and damage to parks. (...) The destruction also includes over 89 thousand meters of cobbled streets, 103 heavy machinery, 1,922 computers and 3,572 pieces of office furniture. The most affected municipalities to date are Managua, Masaya, León, Nagarote and Matagalpa. (...)”

“Five police stations have been totally destroyed and 32 partially damaged. These are located in the Departments of Managua, León, Chinandega, Masaya, Carazo, Estelí, Matagalpa, Jinotega, Boaco, Chontales

“Acts of violence leave the Ministry of Health with 18 damaged buildings, 107 vehicles destroyed, 15 of them totally and 92 partially, 64 of which are ambulances; as well as machinery and dental equipment, ultrasounds, mobile clinics, medicines, which directly affect health services and their quality.”

Wednesday July 18 the Organization of American States approves – 21 countries vote in favour – a resolution condemning the Ortega government’s acts of repression against “the Nicaraguan people” and demanding that the paramilitaries linked to the regime be disarmed. Only Venezuela and St. Vincent remain in support of the government.²⁰

²⁰ Iván Olivares, “[Ortega condenado y aislado en OEA](#),” *Confidencial*, 19 de julio 2018.

Massive repression of protestors and removal of all barricades

By July 19, 39th anniversary of the Sandinista Revolution, the last barricades in one of the last surviving bastions of protestors, in the Monimbó community of Masaya, have all been successfully dismantled, thanks to a 7-hour invasion, as mentioned above, by some 1,000 policemen and pro-government paramilitaries. The government clean-up operation, which included inciting poor peasants to seize land and property owned by those supporting demonstrators, is a success.

On that day, Daniel Ortega makes a speech in the presence of thousands of his flag-waving supporters in the lakeside Plaza de la Fe in Managua. He describes the three-month uprising against his government as a “diabolical force”, which is part of a US-backed conspiracy to topple him. “We have to re-establish order in our country. The road isn’t war, but peace and dialogue.”²¹ He makes it clear that to overcome the crisis he will not accept the bishops’ proposal to revamp state institutions, and to have early elections in March 2019, without him being able to stand in re-election. He accuses the Catholic bishops of siding with the opposition in attempting a coup d’état.

Ortega grants Fox News an interview

On Monday night, July 23, Daniel Ortega, who virtually never met the press during his 11 years in power, accords a historical 13-minute interview to Bret Baier of Fox News. Given the importance of this interview, I will reproduce most of it verbatim.

²¹ Tom Phillips, “[Nicaragua: Ortega blames 'satanic sect' for uprising against his rule](#),” *The Guardian*, July 20, 2018.

Baier starts by stating that according to human rights organizations, there have been 350 deaths in Nicaragua in the past 80 days. Then he asks, “Why are paramilitary forces involved in armed actions against those who are protesting your government?”

Ortega: It’s been a week now that turmoil has stopped. Things are now returning to normal and there have been some demonstrations, both against and in favour of the government. It all started as the result of a law reforming the social security system, changes that were indispensable. The response was totally violent. First it started with small demonstrations but then there were attacks by paramilitary groups against the police, against state institutions, and loyal Sandinista families, and then they blocked the whole country. They were closing the country, they started arresting citizens, and torturing citizens.

Baier: You’re saying that you don’t control these paramilitary groups, (...) who controls them?

Ortega: These are groups that respond to political organizations, some of which are in the National Assembly. Members of the Liberal Party and others who have refused to participate in the elections. They’ve been organizing these paramilitary groups for quite some time now and they’ve been taking advantage of every opportunity to launch attacks.

Baier: Mr. President, they are attacking protestors who have called for you to step down. They are attacking protestors who say that you have eliminated term limits. They are accusing you and your wife of setting up an authoritarian dynasty. They are attacking the Catholic Church, that has spoken out against your government. So, you are distancing yourself from all of these attacks?

Ortega: We have attacked none of the peaceful demonstrations. At night when there are no peaceful demonstrations, paramilitary groups, organized by people

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who are against the government, have attacked police stations.

Baier: If you are not funding and arming these paramilitary groups, who is?

Ortega: Some are financed with drug trafficking. Others have obtained financing from organizations that have programs and activities. The money intended for these programs is diverted to help the paramilitary get weapons, in order to murder dozens of policemen using wartime weapons. There has been no persecution of the Catholic Church. We invite the Catholic Church to continue with the National Dialogue so that it can develop.

(At this point Baier interrupted Ortega, blatantly stating that the Catholic Church believes that it is under attack from him, and recalling the plea, made by Bishop Báez, in which he explicitly asks the international community to intervene given the gross human rights violations going on in Nicaragua.)

Ortega: Well, that represents a certain way of thinking. Ever since this bishop came to Nicaragua, he's been saying the same thing. Why wasn't he here during the war? He wasn't here during the war, he was in Rome. There's not a single priest that we persecuted. There's not a single priest who's claimed that he's been attacked by government officials. The Church is provided with all kinds of facilities, and we have no problems at all with the Episcopal Conference, we have no problems with the Catholic Church.

(At this point, Baier asks Ortega to watch a video clip of a Nicaraguan mother crying because of the death of her son and pleading with the international community to intervene, given that youth are being killed by government forces, that some are disappearing, etc.)

Ortega, after watching the video clip: The saddest thing, of course, is the loss of life. These terrorist attacks.... Because

it's really terrorism what's happening here. In addition to seeing the mother crying because of the death of her son, there are other mothers that are shown with a body that is burned after being tortured. This situation is made public to scare people, to sow fear and terror among our people. These are groups obeying to political organizations. Some even have elected deputies in the National Assembly. They are members of the Liberal Party. Others did not participate in the elections, they refused to do so, and they've been organizing these paramilitary groups for some time now and they have taken advantage of every small situation to launch attacks.

(Baier then reminds Ortega that this week Congress will pass a resolution very critical of the Nicaraguan government, condemning the brutal violence against students, asserting that murders, violence, torture and disappearances have continued, that the government has shut down media outlets, denied medical care to protestors, and attempted to poison their food and water, and sanctioned the murder of political opponents.)

Ortega: It's totally untrue. Hospitals have treated everybody. There's plenty of proof of that. People in hospitals have been taken care of. There's been a campaign of lies, terrible lies, to try to hurt the image of Nicaragua and its government and in support of activities that have become more and more prevalent. This is not new, that Congress would deal this way with our country and take measures against Nicaragua. The history of our relations with the United States has been painful.

Baier: Mr. President, 40 years ago you were a revolutionary leader ousting the Somoza dictatorship. Today protestors on the street are chanting, "Somoza y Ortega, la Misma Cosa!" (Somoza and Ortega, the Same Thing!) To end the violence and to help your country, would you consider, you and your wife, stepping down from power?

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Ortega: We have been elected by voters. There are electoral periods, and there are term limits. Our electoral period ends in 2021. (...)

Baier: You agreed in May to have early elections and then you rescinded that decision in June. Would you agree to have early elections, Sir?

Ortega: I have heard this idea of early elections, but I have not given my okay to it. Moving up elections would create insecurity and make things worse.

Baier: Mr. President, why did you accept to have this interview? What message do you have to the American people and maybe to President Trump?

Ortega: We are a small country with a fragile economy, but we deserve to be treated with respect, just like any state in your country deserves to be treated with respect, no matter how small that state may be. They deserve respect, and we deserve respect. We are a country in this hemisphere, and we have strong links of all types with the American people.²²

Systematic manhunt unleashed by government and firing of medical personnel

On July 24, *El Nuevo Diario* reports that “The Nicaraguan Association for Human Rights (ANPDH) revealed that 758 people had been reported as kidnapped by armed hooded civilians and police throughout the country between Sunday and dawn on Monday.”²³ Now that the government has finished its clean-up operation, ridding streets and highways of roadblocks and barricades, it seems to be carrying out a

²² Arlen Cerda, « [Daniel Ortega en Fox News ofrece su régimen de terror hasta 2021](#), » *Confidencial*, 24 de julio de 2018. To watch the 13-minute interview on YouTube go [here](#).

²³ Mauricio González, Katherin Chavarria, Eysi García, “[Denuncian más de 700 capturas ilegales en un día](#),” *El Nuevo Diario*, August 24, 2018.

systematic manhunt to detain and punish those leading the protests.

On July 27, [Confidencial reports](#) that “At least ten doctors, twelve nurses and thirteen workers of the medical school of Oscar Danilo Rosales Argüello Hospital (HEODRA), in León, were arbitrarily fired by Judith Lejarza Vargas, director of the hospital, who informed them that the dismissals were for political reasons.” Among those fired is Javier Pastora, former head of the Department of Surgery and Gastroenterology of HEODRA. He explained that the director of the hospital had told him that there were “no complaints about the work he had done for more than 30 years” in the hospital, and that his dismissal originated from the support he had given to the anti-Ortega protestors. The paediatrician Edgar Zúñiga explained that there are no valid reasons to dismiss so many people. If they were fired, it is simply for “thinking differently, thinking that in Nicaragua we need democracy, freedom and an end to repression.” The government, he says, is systematically persecuting those who think independently, and portraying them as “terrorists.”²⁴

A few days later, more hospital workers are fired in Jinotepe and Masaya, raising the total to 132. Carlos Duarte, secretary of the Nicaraguan Medical Association, qualifies the firings as “arbitrary,” the punishment of those who supported protestors and tended to those wounded by government repression. Normally, the firing of medical workers must follow a complex procedure involving a tripartite commission, but in this case, it was a Kafkaesque trial, according to Javier Pastora. The doctors of León and Jinotepe say that the administration of their respective hospitals never explicitly ordered them not to treat wounded protestors. However, other members of the medical staff, such as trade

²⁴ Mayor Salazar, [Pasada de cuenta orteguista a médicos solidarios del HEODRA](#),” *Confidencial*, July 27, 2018.

unionists, did receive that order. “If you are a trade unionist you have to carry out the orders of the party,” asserts the spokesman of Jinotepe Bismarck Ramos.²⁵

OAS creates Nicaragua task force

On August 3, 2018 Carlos Salinas Maldonado reports that the OAS had just approved -- 20 of the 34 of its active members voted in favour -- the creation of a task force for Nicaragua, whose aim is to “search for a peaceful and sustainable solution” to the crisis, and this “through consultations with the government of Nicaragua” and by encouraging the pursuit of the National Dialogue mediated by the Catholic Church. Nicaragua’s foreign affairs minister Denis Moncada asserts that the “government of Nicaragua will not allow any task force created” by the OAS to enter Nicaragua.” According to former Nicaraguan ambassador for Washington, Francisco Aguirre Sacasa, the decision made by the OAS obviously represents a setback for the Ortega-Murillo government, because it confirms the regime’s isolation and the fact that “the magnitude of repression has been much greater than that acknowledged by the government.”²⁶

Nicaraguans flee to Costa Rica

On August 11, 2018 reports Álvaro Murillo in *El País* “[La huida incierta de miles de nicaragüenses hacia Costa Rica](#)” (The Uncertain Flight of Thousands of Nicaraguans to Costa Rica):

“An endless line of Nicaraguans have fled to Costa Rica since the crisis broke out in April. There are 19,000 registered refugee claims, although the United Nations has reported the entry of more than 23,000

²⁵ Wilfredo Miranda Aburto, “["Limpieza" orteguista se ensaña con personal médico](#), » *Confidencial*, August 7, 2018.

²⁶ « [Derrota política para Ortega en la OEA](#), » *Confidencial*, August 3, 2018.

people into this country converted into a historic destination for migrants from Nicaragua. During the wars of the 80s Nicaraguans searched for security and work to send money to their families. And now, they are once again searching for security. They are fleeing from their own Ortega government and forces allied to that regime and have found "a sanctuary" on their southern border, in Costa Rica, explains Marcela Rodríguez, representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (...)

"We do not want to be a burden, explained David, 20, on Friday as he lined up at a job fair for refugees organized by the UNHCR. We want to work, but we know it's going to be hard to find a job." A student in industrial engineering, David left his home in the symbolic town of Monimbó (Masaya) on July 19, taking advantage of the fact that all the government's police efforts were focused on the capital, on the anniversary of the 1979 Revolution. Two days before, bullets were falling on the roof of my house," he says. That's why he joined two cousins and two friends, also from Masaya, and they went by land to Costa Rica, where other relatives live.

"The Ortega government is hunting for kids like us, students, young people, men," says Carlos, who studied Business Administration. And he is right; it is one of the profiles of victims of the repression detected by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (CIDH) in its report of June 21. This is confirmed by the Migration authorities of Costa Rica: one third of the refugee claimants in the last two months were under 25 years old.

"The student explains that Carlos and three others all entered through the immigration post, but not Moses, a medical student. On the border, Nicaraguan

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immigration agents have lists of doctors or residents who treated the protesters injured by the police and the paramilitaries. The safest thing was to cross without a passport or cell phone. Now I can say that we feel safe, although we do not know what to do. For the moment, we're looking for work," explains the university student."

Government incites poor peasants to seize land of protest supporters

As noted above, one of the ways used by the Ortega government to deal with protestors and those supporting them was to incite poor and destitute peasants to seize land and property owned by those supporting protestors.

On August 11, 2018 Iván Olivares reports, in a *Confidencial* article titled "[Invaden seis propiedades del Grupo Coen](#)" (Six Properties of the Coen Group Invaded):

"Six properties of the Coen Group, representing about 1,892 acres, all in Chinandega, remain invaded by illegal groups without the police authorities having tried to expel them and re-establish the right to private property, explains Olivares.

"When interviewed on the television program *Esta Noche*, which is broadcast on Channel 12, Carlos Zúniga, Legal and Operations Director of that business group, said that these farms represent 19% of the land that the Union of Agricultural Producers of Nicaragua register as invaded. (Note added by author: In other words, nearly 10,000 acres of land would have been seized by poor peasants since the beginning of the unrest)

"Five of these six properties produce five of the most important exportable items in the country: textiles,

harnesses, livestock, gold and sugar, and that affects the economy more, explained Dávila. (...)

“This is a deliberate act of harassment and revenge against the private sector. It is hitting someone below the belt and in no way represents searching for a political solution, said Mario Arana, general manager of the Association of Producers and Exporters of Nicaragua (APEN).

“The invasion of the farm occurred on July 28 when a truck and several pickup trucks full of armed men arrived at the property, seizing the 48 acres that Chimaco rents to the Coen Group to develop the plantation, and another 52 acres - also from the Coen Group - that were not covered by the rental agreement, points out Olivares.

“99% of this project is foreign, explained Juan Fernando Ramírez, legal representative of Chimaco, detailing that the total investment amounts to 19 million dollars to be disbursed over five years. The project aims to generate 1500 jobs in the first phase.”

BBC HARDtalk interview with Juan Sebastian Chamorro

Tuesday morning August 21, 2018 I saw a 24-minute video that a good Nicaraguan friend of mine who, I am sure, staunchly defends the pro-Ortega narrative, had just posted on her Facebook page. The video shows the BBC's Stephen Sackur interviewing Juan Sebastian Chamorro on his program HARDtalk. Chamorro is one of the leaders of the Civic Alliance for Justice and Democracy.

Though my Nicaraguan friend certainly posted this [video](#)²⁷ because, in her opinion, it confirms the validity of her pro-Ortega government narrative, I have decided to place it in this section, which relates key events in the present crisis.

Sackur's interview with Chamorro

Stephen Sackur: You have called Ortega a dictator, and have compared him with Anastasio Somoza, the infamous dictator who was toppled in 1979 in Nicaragua. Of course, there's a fundamental difference between the two. Daniel Ortega wins elections. He won with a big majority in 2016. So, this is an elected president. He is not a Somoza style dictator.

Juan Sebastian Chamorro: Well, that is true if you believe that the electoral results were honest and clean. But there is ample evidence that not only the elections of 2016, but all elections since 2008, municipal elections and national elections, have been the result of an electoral fraud. That is precisely why people are protesting in the streets. (...) And that's why the Civic Alliance is demanding clean and fair elections next year.

Stephen Sackur: No doubt there have been egregious examples of government forces using violence against protestors, but in recent months we've also seen protestors attacking government forces with rocks and homemade mortars. This would seem to suggest that the government is not simply facing a civic protest but rather a militarized opposition.

Juan Sebastian Chamorro: No. There have been people from all walks of life, peasants, students, workers, business leaders, who are putting barricades in the cities to defend themselves from paramilitary forces going around in pickup

²⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b-IZBvvTZK8>, *HARDtalk*, Consulted on August 22, 2018.

trucks and attacking them with live ammunition. And these people are defending themselves with sling shots and homemade mortars. That might be the only tool that they are using to defend themselves.

Stephen Sackur: On July 13, for example, in a commune Marito, in Nicaragua, we had clashes in which four police officers were killed and just one protestor. And this is figures coming from the Nicaraguan Center for Human Rights. So, it is clear that as this thing evolved after April and became more violent in July, it was not just one-sided violence. Yes, there was plenty of violence coming from the paramilitaries and the people loyal to the government but there was plenty of violence going the other way too.

Juan Sebastian Chamorro: Well, I would not discard any information regarding people trying to defend themselves against the paramilitaries (...) With respect to the four police officers who were assassinated there's no clear evidence about who actually did it. But you are right, you're talking about four months of repression and it's expected that some people might be defending themselves. That's something normal. But the big offensive of the paramilitaries, especially by mid-July, was clearly a military operation against mostly unarmed people and that's why the barricades were removed in a matter of days.

Stephen Sackur: I put this to you, Mr. Chamorro. You're an established economist, you're a leader of the Civic Alliance, you come from an elite family, with a very comfortable background in Nicaragua, but many of the people that you've been encouraging to take to the streets are students, they're poor people, people worried about their social security benefits. And THEY are the ones in the line of fire. Yet you keep telling them to keep up the street protests, to keep up the street action. Do you think that is a responsible position for you to take given what is happening on the streets?

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Juan Sebastian Chamorro: Absolutely. That's the only way we can put pressure. I myself was on the streets yesterday in a protest, and I'll be in another one on Wednesday. You have to understand that this is a national revolt by broad sectors of the population, not only students and workers. This is an entire country trying to demand a change. And one thing that is fundamental in the whole process is that it has to be peaceful, things have to be done in a peaceful manner in the struggle for democracy. I think it is very responsible, the marches, the strikes, all kinds of protests. As long as they're peaceful. To put pressure of the government so that we can have what is considered normal in most countries, fair elections.

Stephen Sackur: A letter from a Nicaraguan in Masaya was sent to *The Guardian*. He said that he had witnessed public buildings and houses of government supporters being burned down by protestors, shops being ransacked, businesses, banks and schools being closed because protestors had taken over the town. He said the main secondary school with more than 3,000 students was burned to the ground, and that the police station was put under siege. Are you ready to condemn, here on HARDtalk, what some of the protestors, in your name, are actually doing?

Juan Sebastian Chamorro: Absolutely. We are condemning any kind of violence, wherever it comes from. This is not the solution to our problem. We are talking about a president, Ortega, who is very strong and armed, and it does not make any sense at all to conduct armed activities, or violent actions, to overthrow a president who has demonstrated that he is strong with arms. Our cause is a peaceful cause. For example, if the deaths of these four officers is clarified, we will be the first to condemn. (...) Not a single life should be lost.

Stephen Sackur: The opposition is not coherent, not united, and does not have a simple message. If you look at your own

message, you have talked about insurrection, you've compared Ortega to Somoza, you've said, we have to rid ourselves of this dictator. But then many of the most prominent figures in the opposition are saying there must be early elections. And then you have the Catholic Church in all this, arguing that both sides must get together and make compromises. So, what are the objectives of the opposition?

Juan Sebastian Chamorro: I believe that the opposition is basically united in demanding democracy. They know Ortega is a dictator and they want change, they want early elections. That demand is what the Nicaraguan people want right now.

Stephen Sackur: You keep referring to the 'people' of Nicaragua as if everyone was agreeing with your demands. But of course, they're not. We all see the demonstrations mounted by the Sandinistas, tens of thousands of people waving the Sandinista flag, talking about the achievements of Ortega. After all, you've had 4 percent economic growth for several years, you have the lowest crime rate and the most peaceful and stable country in Central America, and Daniel Ortega has made a point of working with the business community. You put all that together, and actually, Ortega's achievements are not inconsiderable. And many people in Nicaragua think that it's better that he stays in power than have you guys muck things up.

Juan Sebastian Chamorro: Well I think that you're right in the sense that the economic situation was moving relatively well. But everything changed, Stephen, in April 2018. We have a completely different country now. Our economy is in ruins, entire sectors like tourism. Many people came from abroad, one million tourists from the UK and elsewhere, to visit Nicaragua.

Stephen Sackur: But in many respects, that's YOUR fault. You're the ones who told the protestors to put the barricades up thus ruining transportation links inside Nicaragua. You're

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the ones who have encouraged Nicaraguans to take to the streets. We see on our TV screens all these scenes of violence in Nicaragua. Who can you blame but yourselves for the fact that international investors and tourists don't want to go to Nicaragua?

Juan Sebastian Chamorro: Listen Stephen. We didn't ask anybody to put barricades in the streets. The Civic Alliance was an organization formed after the revolt. So, I think in that case you need more information about the process. The Civic Alliance was formed after the revolt as a counterpart to the government trying to find a solution. We never asked people to defend themselves against the paramilitaries. They themselves did it because they saw people being killed in the streets of Managua and elsewhere. The situation of the barricades and roadblocks, those responsible for this are those in the Ortega government who carried out the repression. This was a spontaneous movement from all cities of Nicaragua. Thus, the economic crisis from which we are suffering does not come from individuals asking people to set up barricades on the streets. It is the repression of the Ortega government that triggered the setting up of barricades, and it is the government that is responsible for some 200,000 jobs that have been lost in the last four months. Protestors were being killed from day one. People have the right to take to the streets to ask that people not be killed. The only one responsible for the crisis is the government, not people defending their rights on the streets.

Stephen Sackur: Do you think it's wise of you to have called on the United States to make sanctions against Nicaragua? It revives so many memories of US interference in Nicaraguan affairs, going back to the late 70s and 80s, the Reagan administration support for the Contras. Many Nicaraguans, the last thing they want to see is the US trying to dictate what happens in your country. And yet you seem to be welcoming it.

Juan Sebastian Chamorro: Well, I haven't stated that I'm in favour of sanctions against the people of Nicaragua.

Stephen Sackur: Let's be clear about this. You have repeatedly called for more US intervention in Nicaragua. You want the targeted sanctions expanded to more members of the Ortega family, you say the IMF should stop giving any assistance to Nicaragua for the time being, because it's only going to help the Ortega regime. Everything you say invites more US intervention. And that's going to do more damage to the Nicaraguan economy.

Juan Sebastian Chamorro: I agree. And that's why we have an issue about calling for more sanctions, or the IMF not giving Nicaragua any more money.

Stephen Sackur: Wait a minute. I've got a quote here from you stating, "additional sanctions would be a step in the right direction." Did you not say that? You're certainly quoted in the media as saying it.

Juan Sebastian Chamorro: There's a big difference between asking for sanctions against Nicaragua and asking for more sanctions against individuals in Nicaragua who are responsible for repression. That's a very different matter. We have not asked for sanctions that would affect the people of Nicaragua. Like cutting loans going to improve health and education. Obviously, we are against such cuts.

Stephen Sackur: I know this question is a very touchy one. But I want to put one more question to you. The White House, on July 30, issued a statement saying, "The US has announced an additional 1.5 million dollars to add to an ongoing 30-million-dollar program to support 'freedom and democracy' in Nicaragua, including civil society, human rights groups, and independent media." Are you receiving American money?

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Juan Sebastian Chamorro: Not any of the 1.5 million, because that was an announcement made only one month ago. The thinktank that I direct has received in the past funds from different organizations to conduct economic analyses, etc.

Stephen Sackur: So, you get money directly from the US government. Because Daniel Ortega characterizes you and others leading the Civic Alliance as people aiding and abetting terrorism using foreign funds. And when you tell me that yes, you have had some American money, then Ortega can say to his people that he has a point.

Juan Sebastian Chamorro: No, absolutely not. We've been conducting economic studies for ten years and we've received grants from different governments. It's something normal that a thinktank in Nicaragua would do. We've been working on studies on issues like education, health, social security, etc. And we have been very public about this. We've been receiving money from the American government, from the Swiss, from the Germans, from the private sector. That's what NGOs do for a living. Try to get grants and conduct studies. What president Ortega is trying to do is say that we are using these funds to finance arms, coup d'états, etc. Things that are obviously not true.

Online Comments About Sackur-Chamorro Interview

When I watched the video on YouTube on August 21, it was followed by numerous comments by viewers. All of them except a couple were very supportive of the pro-Ortega government narrative and critical of Juan Sebastian Chamorro.

A sample of those comments:

Will Duarte: The smoke is finally cleared, now the people know the truth about the opposition and its coup. #terrorists .

Paula Guzman: If there was repression in Nicaragua this traitor of our country (vende patria) would already be behind bars (in

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Colombia he would already have been killed) but you see, he goes ahead and says all these stupidities, and nobody says anything ... They are the ones responsible for tanking the Nicaraguan economy... Let's be honest, you degenerate!

Julio Rueda: Those peaceful protesters vandalized my home with rocks twice; don't tell me that maybe they were trying to defend themselves, I was doing no harm to anybody!

Pablo Mendoza: Juan Sebastian Chamorro, Nicaragua Opposition Leader -- motherfucker terrorist. Before April 19, 2018, Nicaragua was a country of peace, prosperity, with an economic growth of 4.8%, the best in Central America and one of the best in Latin America. It was the political opposition, led by this ignorant and delinquent - Juan Sebastian Chamorro, who brought violence, deaths, and destruction to the economy of Nicaragua after April 19, 2018. The most affected were the tourism sector, the service sector, and the small and medium enterprises. I make the Nicaraguan political opposition and this pig responsible for the current economic situation in Nicaragua - Juan Sebastian Chamorro. Because of them, Nicaragua now has more unemployment, more bankruptcies, more violence and delinquency. These are not normal political opponents, they are delinquents, as they supported the crime of destroying ambulances, schools, state universities, radios, health centers, and killing members of the Sandinista party and this for the mere fact of being a member of the party. The opposition are delinquents who do not respect the constitution of Nicaragua, the laws that regulate when and how to change governments in Nicaragua. These delinquent opponents want to change the government of Nicaragua with violence and deaths etc. And that is not so! Nicaragua has been growing economically for 11 years, and Nicaragua has become the economic model of the region, even a model of peace, tranquility, and security, without drug trafficking, without gangs, with few deaths. Nicaragua was growing thanks to that, and the tourism sector is the one that most benefited, since many tourists came to Nicaragua. Therefore, it was the violence of the Nicaraguan opposition that destroyed Nicaragua's peace and tranquility and its economy. In 2017, Nicaraguans voted for Daniel Ortega, who won 72% of the votes and was democratically elected by the people. Therefore, the

opposition is the only to blame for what has happened and what is now happening in Nicaragua. This delinquent Juan Sebastian Chamorro should shut up or be imprisoned for crimes and terrorism.

Ortega unleashes raid against protestors, takes control of popular independent TV channel

Saturday August 25, 2018, anti-government demonstrations take place in various Nicaraguan cities. The Ortega government once again reacts by implementing repressive measures. Reports *Confidencial*:

“Forces of the National Police and the paramilitaries of the Ortega regime carried out a massive raid on Saturday illegally arresting demonstrators and university leaders who wanted to participate in protest marches in different cities of the country. At least 32 people were captured in Carazo, Matagalpa, León, and Managua and transferred to the prisons of El Chipote and only 20 were released at the close of our edition.”²⁸

Following the dismantling of all barricades and road blocks in Nicaragua, the Ortega government bombards the population in its numerous official media outlets with the message that everything is back to normal in the country. However, the few existing independent media, and in particular the most popular of the latter, TV channel Acción 10, keep reporting otherwise and their audience rapidly expands, the public obviously finding their reporting more professional and reflective of what is really happening.

Ortega thus takes aim at Acción 10. Reports Iván Olivares:

“After sending a political commissar to assume control of Action 10, one of the most popular TV channels in Nicaragua, the Government of Daniel

²⁸ Wilfredo Miranda Aburto, “[Ortega desata una redada masiva contra manifestantes](#),” August 26, 2018. Consulted the same day.

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Ortega launched, through the Financial Analysis Unit (UAF), an accusation of money laundering against Carlos Pastora, general manager of the channel, who had to seek protection in the embassy of Honduras, his country of origin.”²⁹

²⁹ “[Periodismo se une en defensa de Acción 10](#),” *Confidencial*, August 26, 2018. Consulted the same day.

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Camilo Mejía: Open letter to Amnesty International

On June 13, 2018, Camilo Mejía addresses a letter to Amnesty International, “[Open Letter to Amnesty International by a Former Amnesty International Prisoner of Conscience](#),” in which he makes a scathing criticism of its report on the situation in Nicaragua titled “[Shoot to Kill: Nicaragua’s Strategy to Repress Protest](#).”

“Camilo Mejía was born in Nicaragua, the son of famous musician Carlos Mejía Godoy, explains Rick Sterling. His mother was a staunch Sandinista activist but separated from the father soon after his birth. She brought Camilo to the United States as a single mother in 1994, four years after the Sandinista electoral defeat. Living in Florida, Camilo struggled to make ends meet and joined the U.S. Army to pay for college. Just a few months before completing his service, Camilo was ordered into the 2003 invasion of Iraq. After serving one tour of war duty, he refused to return and was imprisoned for nine months.

“Camilo was honored as a 'Prisoner of Conscience' by Amnesty International, continues Sterling. Thus Camilo's criticism of the Amnesty report on Nicaragua has special significance. Camilo is Nicaraguan, a member of Veterans for Peace, and a hero to both VFP and Amnesty. He is also the author

of the compelling autobiography, 'Road From Ar Ramadi.'"³⁰

In his open letter to Amnesty International, Camilo Mejía asserts:

“The operating narrative, agreed-upon by the local opposition and the corporate western media, is as follows: That president Ortega sought to cut 5 percent from retirees’ monthly retirement checks and was going to increase contributions, made by employees and employers, into the social security system. The reforms sparked protests, the response to which was a government-ordered genocide of peaceful protestors, more than 60, mostly students. A day or two after that, the Nicaraguan government would wait until nightfall to send its police force out in order to decimate the Nicaraguan population, night after night, city by city, in the process destroying its own public buildings and killing its own police force, to then culminate its murderous rampage with a Mothers’ Day massacre, and so on.”

“While the above narrative is not uniformly expressed by all anti-government actors, the unifying elements are that the government is committing genocide, and that the president and vice-president must go.”

Mejía argues that Amnesty International relied mostly on testimonies of “anti-government witnesses and victims, or the uncorroborated and highly manipulated information emitted by U.S.-financed anti-government media outlets, and non-profit organizations, collectively known as civil society.” The three main media outlets cited by Amnesty’s report are “*Confidencial*, *El Nuevo Diario*, and *La Prensa*, (...) sworn

³⁰ “[Camilo Mejía wrote an open letter condemning the Amnesty report for being biased and actually contributing to the chaos and violence.](#)” Telesur, August 28, 2018.

enemies of the Ortega government.” And most of these opposition news media, notes Mejía, “are funded by the United States, through organizations like the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), which has been characterized by retired U.S. Congressman, Ron Paul, as ‘an organization that uses US tax money to actually subvert democracy, by showering funding on favoured political parties or movements overseas.’”

Mejía goes on to accuse *100% Noticias* of airing “manipulated and inflammatory material to generate hatred against the Nicaraguan government.” This TV channel shows “footage of peaceful protesters” but avoids showing “that the protesters were carrying pistols, rifles, and were shooting at police officers.” Instead, it simply depicts the incidents as “acts of police repression of opposition marches.” On the Mother’s Day demonstration, this TV channel used footage that reports “the purported shooting of unarmed protesters by police shooters, including an incident in which a young man’s brains were spilling out of his skull.”

Mejía also questions one of Amnesty’s main claims, namely that state hospitals are denying medical care to those injured during protests. The source used for this claim, an article in *La Prensa*, actually blatantly contradicts the claim, he says, as it shows the Chief of Surgery asserting that state hospitals serve absolutely everyone with no discrimination whatsoever.

While Amnesty’s report paints the picture of a genocidal government “bent on committing atrocities in plain sight” and murdering peaceful protestors, the fact of the matter, pursues Mejía, is that “the number of dead among Sandinista supporters and police officers continues to rise.” The report points out that “ballistic investigations suggest that those shooting at protesters are likely trained snipers, pointing to government involvement, but fails to mention that many of the victims are Sandinistas, regular citizens, and police

officers. It also does not mention that the “peaceful protesters” have burned down and destroyed more than 60 public buildings, among them many City Halls, Sandinista houses, markets, artisan shops, radio stations, and more; nor does it mention that the protesters have established “tranques” or roadblocks, in order to debilitate the economy as a tactic to oust the government. Such “tranques” have become extremely dangerous scenes where murder, robbery, kidnapping, and the rape of at least one child have taken place; a young pregnant woman whose ambulance wasn’t let through also died on May 17th. All of these crimes occur daily and are highly documented but aren’t included in Amnesty International’s report.”

Mejía stresses the fact that those organizing barricades and roadblocks “are only interested in destabilizing the nation” and “have created a state of sustained fear among the population, imposing “taxes” on those who want passage, persecuting those who refuse to be detained, kidnapping them, beating them, torturing them, and setting their cars on fire. In a common practice, they undress their victims, paint their naked bodies in public with the blue and white of the Nicaraguan flag, and then set them free, prompting them to run right before shooting them with homemade mortar weapons. All of this information, which did not make the report, is available in numerous videos and other sources.”

The author argues that the social security reforms that triggered the initial unrest were quite modest. The IMF had suggested a more radical reform, namely raising the retirement age from 60 to 65, and “doubling the number of quotas necessary to get full social security from 750 to 1500.” This, he says, would have negatively affected approximately 53,000 retirees, part of whom belong to “the families of combatants who died in the armed conflict of the 1980s, from both the Sandinista army and the Contra. The Nicaraguan government countered the IMF’s reforms by rejecting the

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cutting out of any retirees, with a proposed 5% cut to all retirement checks, an increase in all contributions to the social security system, and with fiscal reform that removed a tax-ceiling that protected Nicaragua's biggest salaries from higher taxation. The business sector was furious."

Having provided an alternative narrative than the one dominant in the local opposition and international media and well reflected in Amnesty International's report, Mejía then recalls the many gross US interventions in Nicaragua. Augusto Sandino's struggle, in the 1920s and 1930s against the occupying US forces, the 40-year US supported Somoza dictatorship, its toppling in July 1979 by the Sandinistas, the US backed Contra War against Nicaragua throughout the 1980s, the elections from 1990 to 2006 of neoliberal governments, and then the return to power of the Sandinistas in 2007 under the leadership of Daniel Ortega. In addition, he suggests that the United States' present aggression against Nicaragua is not only motivated by the Ortega government's close ties with Venezuela, Cuba, Russia, and especially China with "whom the country signed a contract to build a canal." Also, and more importantly, the aggression originates from the fact that "Nicaragua's highly successful economic model" represents "an existential threat to the neoliberal economic order imposed by the US and its allies."

Mejía then describes the main characteristics of Nicaragua's "highly successful economic model." Since Ortega took office in 2007, he:

"Cut poverty by three quarters. Prior to the protests in April, the country's economy sustained a steady annual economic growth of about 5% for several years, and the country had the third fastest-growing economy in Latin America and was one of the safest nations in the region. The government's infrastructural upgrades have facilitated trade among Nicaragua's poorest citizens; they have created

universal access to education: primary, secondary, and university; there are programs on land, housing, nutrition, and more; the healthcare system, while modest, is not only excellent, but accessible to everyone. Approximately 90% of the food consumed by Nicaraguans is produced in Nicaragua, and about 70% of jobs come from the grassroots economy - rather than from transnational corporations - including from small investors from the United States and Europe, who have moved to the country and are a driving force behind the tourism industry.”

“The audacity of success, of giving its poorest citizens a life with dignity, of being an example of sovereignty to wealthier, more powerful nations, all in direct contradiction to the neoliberal model and its emphasis on privatization and austerity, has once again placed Nicaragua in the crosshairs of U.S. intervention. (...) The United States will never tolerate such a dangerous example,” concludes Mejía.

Francisco Arias Fernández, Information Clearing House

On July 6, 2018, Francisco Arias Fernández publishes an article in *Information Clearing House* (previously published in Granma) titled “[Nicaragua, Unraveling A Plot](#)” in which he provides evidence that the United States has been plotting for some time to overthrow Daniel Ortega. Between 2014 and 2017, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) dished out 4.2 million dollars “to train new leaders” in Nicaragua to this end, he says.

Recalling, as Mejía does, that the streets of Nicaragua were until recently “a regional example of security, peace, and prosperity, where a hardworking, tranquil people proudly enjoyed the social and economic advances achieved by the Sandinista government, that had established a national

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consensus,” Fernández asserts that US legislators in 2017 passed, “with no reason whatsoever” the Nicaraguan Investment Conditionality Act (NICA Act), a bill meant “to create obstacles to the awarding of international loans to Nicaragua, hamper foreign investment, and put a brake on socio-economic development in the country.”

The pretext for the bill? An “alleged lack of democracy” and the will to “guarantee electoral transparency and fight corruption.”

Arguing that the “most reactionary legislators in Congress” are again “attempting to reinvent the Contras and get rid of the Sandinista government”, Fernández asserts that the US “coup-manufacturing machinery” is busy laying the foundation “for a media campaign in coordination with agencies specialized in carrying out dirty wars and soft coups, working with U.S. intelligence and the CIA, in particular.”

The international press media have well documented the fact that USAID, NED, and other US agencies “have been working meticulously, since Daniel Ortega was first elected, to re-invent a ‘new leadership,’ selectively infiltrating key sectors of the economy, targeting youth, students, medium and small businesspeople, environmental and feminist groups, among others, to undermine the foundation of support for the Sandinista government”, he says.

And Fernández continues:

“At the end of 2008, the media reported that USAID had provided at least a million dollars in Nicaragua that year to NGOs, radio broadcasters, and political groups like the Communications Research Center (CINCO), to intervene in municipal elections. This financing, as was denounced at the time, contributed surreptitiously as “small donations,” that were not to exceed 25,000 dollars, was part of a large-scale U.S. plan to overthrow the government of Daniel Ortega,

carried out since then by internal agents from the Nicaraguan right.” (...)

“A Swedish journalist reported, this past June 4, that three students from Nicaragua were conducting a tour of Europe to raise support for a plot against the Sandinista government, stating that at least one of the youths represented an organization created and financed by the United States, asserts Fernández.

“Jessica Cisneros, he reported, was active around the issue of the involvement and participation of youth in political processes and was a member of the Movimiento Cívico de Juventudes (Civic Youth Movement).

“Another of these “agents of change” who promote hatred towards the Sandinista government and support a coup, was Yerling Aguilera, from the Polytechnic University in Managua (UPOLI), notes Fernández. She specializes in research on revolution and the feminist movement, and, according to the reporter, has been an employee and consultant for the Institute of Strategic Studies and Public Policy (IEEPP) in Nicaragua, an institute that works to “strengthen the abilities of political, state, and social actors for a better informed public via creative, innovative services,” and which has received 224,162 dollars from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) between 2014 and 2017. (...)

“The USAID, NDI, and NED have been busy in the country, with thousands of activists trained to “change society.” Hundreds of NGOs, universities, and political parties have received funds and materials as part of the subversive plan that was not conceived to advance through traditional political organizations, but rather those invented to give the impression that

they emerged “spontaneously” from dissatisfaction, hiding the true interest of the North at work. (...)

“In their political, diplomatic, and media advice to the coup-plotters, Washington has insisted on demonizing Daniel Ortega and his government, an effort carried out not only by the White House, and its agencies, allies, satellites, and mercenaries, but also the corporate media monopolies and fabricators of lies, which magnify internal problems and accuse authorities for all types of human rights violations, totally omitting the crimes and destruction committed by individuals who have been “empowered” by the USAID, NDI, NED, and CIA, who have caused the failure of talks and calls for peace. As is the case in Venezuela, Donald Trump and his advisors, architects of a thousand invasions, do not believe in dialogue or pacts, opting for war on all fronts, concludes Fernández.”

Benjamin Forcano, *Latin America in Movement*

In a similar July 10, 2018 article, “[Nicaragua: Una mirada nueva](#),” published online in the media outlet *Latin America in Movement*, Benjamin Forcano recalls the immense revolutionary struggle carried out by the Nicaraguan population in its heroic opposition to the Somoza dictatorship, and the many US imperialist interventions of the past.

“In the life of each nation, there are moments that are considered crucial for the development of their history. One of them in Nicaragua is the Sandinista Revolution.

“Because it was the struggle of the whole people, united, courageous, and resolved until the end, against a 45-year dictatorship. A struggle supported and blessed by the Catholic Church; one that evicted the

ruling classes from power; one that managed to integrate diverse forces: Marxism, Sandinism, and Christianity. The very first struggle carried out with and not against the Church, and the first, as Gunter Grass writes, to have implemented, on a political level, “the forgiveness preached in the Gospel,” points out Forcano. (...)

“It is absolutely necessary to recall that the Sandinista revolution was a benchmark for justice and liberation for other peoples, and was hailed internationally for its heroic anti-imperialist Yankee struggle. Whoever does not remember or simply ignores that fact will not be able to make out what is happening in Nicaragua today. (And in other Latin American countries. According to scholarly studies the United States intervened, from 1948 to 2017, about one hundred times in Latin America to ensure its domination: invasions, overthrow of governments, harassment and suppression of popular uprisings, destabilizing terrorism, assassination of leaders ... And all this accompanied by the role of the OAS, always subservient to its dictates). (...)

“In the 90s, the Sandinistas lost the elections and starting in 2007, Daniel Ortega was re-elected president for two consecutive terms (in the last with 72% of votes), notes Forcano.

“Over the years the alliance (ALBA, CELAC, ...) of Latin American countries was consolidated economically and politically, an alliance that unmasked, slowed down and reduced US invasions and gringo domination.

“The Sandinista Daniel Ortega, with his achievements, his neoliberal pacts and his mistakes, continued to emphasize his independence from the US

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in international politics and ensured new collaborative relations with Russia, China (Agreement to build an interoceanic canal), Iran, Libya, Cuba, Venezuela. The Nicaraguan army (after its last dispatch to the Iraq war) stopped participating in imperial wars and President Daniel continued to advance in this line thanks to the brilliant presidency of the UN Assembly through his Minister Miguel d'Escoto,” asserts Forcano. (...)

“The unforeseen explosion of protests and demonstrations against the government of President Daniel Ortega, cannot be understood by the simple decree reforming social security, which was rapidly withdrawn, and not even by the repression exercised. (...)

“Anyone who is not aware of or forgets the arrogant Yankee imperialist domination will not be able to make sense of what is happening in Nicaragua today. US realpolitik has shown with facts what it is, insists Forcano.

“And three months after the April revolts, several authors have, in rigorously documented articles, exposed what it was not foolhardy to assume: that associations, groups and youth delegations, whose names have remained hidden, were advised, coordinated and financed by the NED: National Foundation for Democracy (CIA affiliate organization) and USAID: United States Agency for International Development, (key instrument for political interference, and destabilization).

Luis Manuel Galeano and Peter Orsi, *The Independent*

Above Benjamin Forcano notes that the Ortega government obtained 72% of the votes in the last 2016 national elections. The November 2, 2016 article "[How the wife of Nicaragua's president became the figurehead of his re-election campaign,](#)" published in the Independent by Luis Manuel Galeano and Peter Orsi, illustrates just how popular the Ortega government was in 2016, and highlights the powerful role played by Rosario Murillo in this popularity:

"That woman is the one who rules in the country. She is powerful," said fruit vendor Roberto Mayorga. "If 'the man' dies, she'll be there. She has been his shadow. There is nobody who can keep her from being next. (...)

"Murillo has taken on ever greater responsibility during the last decade that her husband has been in office. She is said to run Cabinet meetings and many Nicaraguans credit her for social programs that have helped keep the ruling Sandinista party's popularity ratings high, explain Galeano and Orsi. (...)

Murillo is beloved by many poor Nicaraguans and Sandinista faithful, consistently polling around 70 percent approval. (...)

"When the government makes public announcements, they usually come in Murillo's voice. She has represented Ortega overseas on diplomatic and trade missions. She spearheaded the installation of giant metal "trees of life" sculptures in the capital, a beautification campaign that opponents have criticized as costly but which many residents appreciate, note Galeano and Orsi.

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“Said to be a tireless worker, Murillo broadcasts daily TV and social media messages in which she offers everything from world news to culinary tips in a style that draws on religious, revolutionary and poetic rhetoric.

“I mean she's in people's homes all the time now... She's become really the public face of the administration, and I think that's helped her popularity immensely,” said Christine Wade, a political scientist at Washington College in Maryland.

“That's particularly true among the poor and women, who see her as responsible for programs she announces: putting roofs on homes, doling out micro loans, funding school lunches and running women's clinics, comment Galeano and Orsi.

“Our aspiration is for all women in Nicaragua to play a full role,” Murillo said in August after being named to the ticket. “We are more than 50 percent of the population and we have the possibility, the duty, the right to fill decisive positions.”

“Who better than 'the *companera*?'” Ortega said.

“Recent surveys give the husband-and-wife team over 60 percent of voter preference compared with just 12 percent for a smattering of little-known candidates, conclude Galeano and Orsi.

Ollantay Itzamná: Catholic Church declares holy war

On July 11, 2018, writing in the same online news outlet as Camilo Mejía, *Latin America in Movement*, Ollantay Itzamná writes a scathing criticism of the Nicaraguan Catholic Church, “[¿Guerra santa en Nicaragua?](#),” providing footnotes to videos purporting to provide evidence substantiating his criticism.

Asserts Itzamná:

“On July 9, at the Minor Basilica of San Sebastian, in the city of Diriamba, Carazo, about 40 km south of Managua, a crowd of Nicaraguans forced open the doors of the Basilica and found inside a group of armed people opposed to the government. In that act, the multitude of the faithful physically and verbally assaulted the Cardinal, the Apostolic Nuncio, several bishops and priests who came to liberate the entrenched "crusaders."

“Already in past weeks, inside another catholic temple of the country, according to demonstrators, government opponents kidnapped and raped a national police agent, notes Itzamná.

“This act of protest and rejection of the Catholic hierarchy was described and denounced by the Catholic Church as a sacrilege (affront to consecrated persons). But, the protesters, who filmed and posted their actions on social networks, believe they have the right to protest against their pastors and bishops who are promoting and protecting criminals involved in bloodstaining the country.

“In another of the videos broadcast, a burly priest, dressed in clergyman, and with tense veins and eyes full of hatred, blows violent harangues at the top of his lungs, calling for the overthrow of the democratically elected government, asserts Itzamná. (...)

“The indignant people who unmasked the Catholic hierarchy in Diriamba are not criminals, much less a ‘mob’, as the Catholic Church portrays them. Most of them are faithful and conscientious Catholics. Had they been a "mob", we would now be attending the burial ceremony of several bishops and priests

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(promoters and defenders of criminals entrenched in the temples) killed by their faithful, adds Itzamná.

“Why is it that a mere three months ago the Catholic hierarchy perceived Daniel Ortega as an exemplary ruler, and that now he has suddenly turned into an enemy? Why do bishops and priests, using badges and sacred cassocks, preach hatred against Ortega and the toppling of his government? Why is there not a single pronouncement or communiqué from the Catholic Church against armed criminals who barricade themselves in Catholic churches, in order to murder from there those believers who are sympathizers of Daniel Ortega?

And Itzamná concludes:

“As in the Middle Ages, the Catholic hierarchy in Nicaragua believes that it has the power to anoint and dismiss earthly rulers. Could it be that they do not realize that we are living in the 21st century? Why do they openly declare a "holy war" against a government elected by the people?”

Alex Anfruns: new Contra war failing

On July 13, 2018, Alex Anfruns publishes an article in the online media outlet *Investig'Action*: “[Au Nicaragua, l'opération “Contra bis” est-elle en train d'échouer?](#)” (In Nicaragua, Is the New Contra Operation Failing?). This is an article purporting to illustrate the bias of the media coverage of the Nicaragua crisis. He asserts that the crisis seems to be coming to an end, thanks to the clear message of Ortega during the peace demonstrations of July 7 – “Coup plotters, if you want to become the government, become candidates in the next elections. After all the destruction you’ve caused, we’ll see if people support you” – and thanks to the fact that the people of Nicaragua are increasingly supporting the

Ortega government in its effort to dismantle the barricades set up in those places representing the heart of the insurrection.

Anfruns presents basic principles of war propaganda, clearly suggesting that these are presently being used in Nicaragua. He states, for example:

“In a recent article, I examined a number of contradictions in the way international media cover Nicaragua. One of the principles of war propaganda is to present the aggressor as the victim. The schema is as follows: First, an opposition sector, one that refuses dialogue with the government, plans to control some parts of the capital and other cities by means of barricades. These areas are then considered ‘liberated from tyranny’, and thus represent the fire of insurgency that must ignite throughout the country, in order to defeat the operations of ‘repression’ of the police. This tactic of deploying barricades has been theorized upstream as an effective means of preventing the authorities from gaining control over the national territory, because it is ‘impossible for the government to have enough personnel to control every inch of the country’. The first obvious thing to emphasize is that this is not a completely spontaneous crisis that emerges from a mass popular mobilization, but that there is indeed an insurrectional plan in place and one able to stand up to the government for months. We are facing the first phase in the development of an unconventional war to overthrow a democratically elected government.

“Then, a number of clashes take place in these areas ‘liberated’ by the opposition. At this point, it is not trivial to note that the activists who defend these barricades are no longer peaceful protesters, as the mainstream media would have us believe. Images of hooded youths handling homemade mortars and other

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explosive devices are impossible to conceal. In fact, they even contribute to creating a ‘romantic’ dimension of popular resistance in the context of face-to-face confrontations between police and protestors. This is where the second phase of the unconventional war comes in, namely the decisive role played by media corporations in systematically feeding the public with a dominant, and one-sided narrative of the crisis. It is easier for the public to identify with a young demonstrator who is rebelling, than with a young police officer obliged to use force in order to enforce the law. Thus, when there are deaths around barricades, it becomes complicated for an outside observer to know the truth, asserts Anfruns.”

Arguing, just as Camilo Mejía had done a month earlier, that mainstream media have been systematically presenting a biased version of events, highlighting the casualties on the side of protestors and downplaying and even ignoring those on the side of the police and pro-Ortega government supporters, Anfruns presents a list of events that paints a more complex picture:

- “On June 19, the authorities launch an operation in Masaya to release the Deputy Director of the National Police Ramon Avellan and his agents, who were entrenched in the police station, surrounded by barricades since June 2. Every night, protestors fired mortar fire at the police station, accompanied by threats. (...) Then, the mortar fire recommenced near the police station ... Under the pretext of playful action, a video shows how protestors posted behind a barricade intone menacing songs against General Avellan, accompanied by shots. According to the ANPDH organization, as a result of the police rescue operation, six people - including three whose identity

remains to be verified - were murdered in several surrounding neighbourhoods. (...)

- “On July 3, two people were sequestered in Jinotepe by a group of armed hooded police officers: police major Erlin García Cortez and ENACAL worker, Erasmo Palacios. Three days later, Bismarck of Jesús Martínez Sánchez, a worker from the Managua City Hall, was also sequestered. A week later, relatives had still not received any sign of life from them.
- “On July 5, the lifeless body of National Police officer Yadira Ramos was found in Jinotepe. She had been sequestered, raped and tortured. She had been forced to get off her vehicle and her husband had been killed on the spot.
- “On July 6, FSLN member Roberto Castillo Cruz is killed by opposition hoodlums who hold barricades in Jinotepe. His son, Christopher Castillo Rosales had been killed just a week before him. In a video published shortly before his own murder, Castillo Cruz denounced the murderers: "This criminal gang on the right has killed my son, I only ask that justice and peace prevails so that our children do not lose their lives!"
- “On July 8, during a night-time clash in Matagalpa, a 55-year-old man named Aran Molina was killed while rescuing Lalo Soza, a Sandinista activist who was under attack. The following day, the FSLN paid tribute to him through a procession. The same day, two other people were killed: the social assistant Tirzo Ramón Mendoza, executed by hooded people after being sequestered, and a third victim whose identity remains unknown.
- “On 9 July, the authorities dismantled the barricades that prevented free movement in the towns of Diriamba and Jinotepe. Many residents then testified

about the many violent actions of the opposition, including torture of Sandinistas. At the same time, representatives of the Episcopal Conference arrived. Citizens of Jinotepe then entered the church, where they found opponents disguised as religious practitioners. Residents accused Church officials of protecting them and of not saying anything or doing anything to stop the violence unleashed in the last two months. In Diriamba, the inhabitants also discovered an arsenal of mortars hidden in the San Sebastian church.

- “On July 12, a criminal gang attacked the Morrito Town Hall in Rio San Juan. A historical fighter of Sandinism, Carlos Hernandez, is sequestered there. Seriously wounded and unable to escape, a Sandinista youth activist, two police officers, and their superiors are murdered. A Sandinista activist receives a bullet in the abdomen. Later, schoolmaster Marvin Ugarte Campos will succumb to his injuries. The version of the opposition? It claims the massacre was ... a "self-attack by paramilitaries"!

In a very long section, Anfruns then reminds readers of the importance and depth of US foreign intervention in the 20th and 21st centuries and asserts that the US is still busy “exporting democracy through dollars.”

“The ‘conservative restoration’ of the last years, with the ‘soft coups’ to overthrow Lugo in Paraguay, Zelaya in Honduras, Rousseff in Brazil; the failure of the peace process in Colombia, the judicial persecution against Jorge Glas, Lula Da Silva and now Rafael Correa, is the perfect context for the OAS, this obsolete organization, to even try to put an end to the memory of the social conquests of recent years, insists Anfruns. (...)”

“Today, the interference continues to go through the financing of opposition movements, often in the form of training programs for ‘young leaders’ ready to defend tooth and nail the values of sacrosanct ‘democracy’ and to overthrow ‘dictatorships’ in their countries of origin. From 2014 to 2017, NED has distributed \$ 4.2 million to Nicaraguan organizations such as IEEPP, CPDHN, Invermedia, Hagamos Democracia and Fundacion Nicaraguense para el Desarrollo Economico y Social.”

While mainstream media highlight the ongoing conflicts and casualties on the side of protestors, points out Anfruns, other sectors of the opposition carry out a National Dialogue with the Ortega government, but refuse to be reasonable in this dialogue by basically demanding that the Ortega couple simply step down.

“All over the world, continues Anfruns, the role of the police is to repress those disturbing public order. But it is hard to understand why a government would order its police to attack civilians wildly and arbitrarily at the same time that it is holding a peace dialogue. On the other hand, one could expect such an attitude from those who, refusing to participate in an authentic dialogue, would seek to sabotage it, seeing an interest in this process derailing. It is thus not unlikely that hooded thugs have been posing as police on several occasions.

“However it may be, the above version is no less credible than that of these hooded groups, who claim that the Ortega government would have given the green light to camouflaged civilians, requesting that they destroy public infrastructure and kill other civilians! (...)

“But in the fairy tale that the mainstream media manufacture from morning to evening, and on the internet 24 hours a day, it is not even conceivable that the government of Nicaragua is facing difficulties whose causes would be complex and multiple. The media hype and the positions of foreign political figures serve as irrefutable proof! As has been the case in Venezuela in recent years, taking the public hostage in this way is an insult to its intelligence. Of course, not everything is explained by the tentacles of the imperialist octopus. But for those who have studied the history in the last two centuries of inter-American relations, considering this influence as a thing of the past and ignoring its weight makes little sense.”

Sao Paulo Forum supports Daniel Ortega

From July 15 to 17, 2018, 625 delegates from 168 organizations meet in the Foro Sao Paulo held in Havana, Cuba: progressive political parties, social and intellectual movements, and observers from some 20 non-Latino countries and 60 parliamentarians from all over the world. Present are delegates of progressive political parties from Argentina, Aruba, Barbados, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Curacao, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Martinique, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, Trinidad and Tobago, Uruguay and Venezuela.

Among the resolutions they adopt at the end of their meeting, one finds the [following](#)³¹ in support of the Ortega government:

“We reject the interference and foreign intervention of the United States government through its agencies in

³¹ « Resolución del Foro de Sao Paulo sobre los sucesos en Nicaragua, » *Unidad y lucha*, consulted on August 6, 2018.

Nicaragua, organizing and directing the local far right to apply once again its well-known formula of the so-called "soft coup" in order to overthrow governments that do not respond to its interests, as well as the partiality of international organizations subordinated to the designs of imperialism, such as the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (CIDH).

“We condemn the destabilizing, violent and terrorist actions of the rightist coup plotters that, using the same strategy applied in other countries such as Venezuela, have attempted but failed to overthrow the Sandinista government led by Commander Daniel Ortega Saavedra, a government that has promoted dialogue and consensus as a way of overcoming the present crisis.

“We denounce the serious acts of barbarism and violation of human rights committed by the Nicaraguan rightist coup plotters, which have denied the right of free movement, destroyed and burned homes and public buildings, kidnapped, tortured and murdered. We denounce the kidnapping of entire cities by criminal hordes of fascist groups at the service of US imperialism, imposing terror and death among its inhabitants and, in particular, among the Sandinista followers.

“We recognize the legitimate right of defense, exercised by the Sandinista government in the face of aggressions perpetrated against it by the lackeys of the empire. A legitimate defense that the media of the right has tried to portray as the massacre of the population. These rightists are portraying criminals and torturers who have been captured by the Nicaraguan authorities, as mere political prisoners.

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“We express our deep sorrow for the deaths that occurred as a result of the wave of violence that has plagued Nicaragua, established and encouraged by reactionary sectors related to US imperialism. Deaths that the media on the right have manipulated, presenting them as a product of massacres perpetrated by the authorities, when in reality they have been the result of confrontations provoked by the fascist right, as demonstrated by the fact that there is a similar amount of dead on both sides, among the anti-government protestors and among those supporting the government, as recognized by the experts sent by the OAS. While for its part the IACHR - despite its evident bias against the government - has been forced to admit that those detained by the National Police have not been tortured, in sharp contrast to the coup plotters when people have fallen into their hands.

“As a consequence, we support the continuation of the investigations and clarification of all the crimes committed, as well as the punishment of those responsible. In this regard we highlight the role that the Truth Commission has been playing.

“We support the calls made by the Nicaraguan government in favour of peace and overcoming the situation through dialogue within the framework of the Constitution and laws.

“We support the Nicaraguan government for its progress in the restoration of order, as well as the rights of the Nicaraguan people, violated by the coup leaders of the right, including the right to free movement.

“We call on all the progressive and revolutionary forces of the world to strengthen solidarity with the struggle of the brotherly people of Nicaragua for the

restoration of peace in the face of the criminal destabilizing attempts of the oligarchy and the pro-imperialist right, all of us adhering to the slogan #NicaraguaQuierePaz.

“Given in Havana, Cuba, on July 17, 2018.”

Maurice Lemoine: by criticizing Ortega, armchair leftists support the right

In “[*La voix dissonante du Forum de São Paulo*](#),” published in *Investig’Action*, Maurice Lemoine discusses what happened at the above forum, refers to recent statements made by progressives all over the world condemning the Ortega government, and asserts that progressive forces in Latin America are thus now facing two opponents:

On the one hand, the conservative right that has been making a comeback in recent years, sometimes by elections and sometimes through soft coups. And, on the other hand, “certain sectors of what was once called the far left -- “post-Trotskyists”, “irresponsible anarchists”, “top ranking academics”, “radical Khmer” environmentalists (not to mention the undercurrent “Narcissistic Marxists” who, from Paris, Caracas, Buenos Aires or Quito, flood social networks).

This far left, like the institutional left, has lost its bearings and its fundamentals,” says Lemoine. Though it represents a tiny minority locally and is “devoid of political weight,” it exerts “a real influence through the networks of its allies, friends and international groups (in particular European).”

And by making “outrageous denunciations and extravagant analyzes”, instead of limiting itself to “a necessary and legitimate criticism of progressive forces,” it is, for all intents and purposes, supporting and joining “the offensive of the right and extreme right.”

And what are these “outrageous denunciations and extravagant analyzes” according to Lemoine? The “supposed *authoritarianism of Correa* during his ten years of power, *the national-Stalinist regression* of Maduro, and *the return of the dictatorship* in Nicaragua (without, moreover, without ever having the idea, in one of their brilliant forums, to raise their voice against the silent extermination of popular and social leaders in Colombia - more than 300 since 2016).”

Vice President Rosario Murillo addresses nation

On July 18, 2018, vice-president Rosario Murillo, who, for several years, has been broadcasting TV and social media messages to Nicaraguans every day at noon from Mondays to Fridays, addresses the nation. Below, I reproduce [the speech](#), which was posted on the new, online version of *Barricada*, set up by young Sandinistas on July 3, 2018. All capital and bold letters are those appearing in the original Spanish version in *Barricada*.

“Good afternoon, Comrades; good afternoon, dear Families of our Blessed Nicaragua, this Nicaragua that we want more and more United, this Nicaragua Always Free!

“Comrades, first of all our gratitude to God, to God, to God, for the restoration of Security, Peace and Life, throughout our Territory.

“Our Heroic People, Combative, Revolutionary, Victorious, all the Institutions of the Government, of the State, we have worked to restore Security, Peace and Life, in a single Voice and with a single Heart. And in a single Voice and with a single Heart we also give thanks to God Our Lord, for advancing in the Restitution of the Right of Nicaraguan Families to Security, to Peace, to Work, and to Life. That Security, that Peace, that Work, and that Life in

Harmony, that we all want, we keenly desire, we need, and we deserve.

“Our **Government**, all the Institutions of the Nicaraguan State, and our Heroic People, Combative, Revolutionary, Victorious, in this **Nicaragua, Blessed and Always Free**, we give thanks to God for the Victories that we are achieving, which are Triumphs of Peace, of Love, of the Great Christian, Socialist and Solidary Spirit of this Homeland of Darío and Sandino, of the Heroic, Formidable People of Nicaragua.

“The Government of Reconciliation and National Unity, all the Institutions of the Nicaraguan State, and our Heroic, Combative, Revolutionary, and Victorious People, reiterate to Nicaraguans all the Generous and Unwavering Commitment of a Homeland of All, and for the Good of All, a Homeland for All, where every day, with Good Heart, Good Hope, Good Faith, and with the Hand of God, we will continue advancing in the strengthening of Institutions and in the Path of the Common Good, which make up the Strength of our Revolution. Our Preferential Option for the Poor rises up against all the perversities of the Plan of the Terrorists and Coup Plotters, a Plan that, **accompanied by an infamous and false media campaign**, a minority full of hatred wanted to impose in our Nicaragua.

“The Government of Reconciliation and National Unity, all the Institutions of the Nicaraguan State, and our Heroic People, Combative, Revolutionary, and Victorious, we have rejected with the Invincible Force of our History and our Revolutionary Present, Coup Plotting, Terrorism, crime, kidnapping, torture, rape, satanic rites, destruction, looting, pyromania against Families and Institutions. Our United People have

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rejected and continue to reject the extortion of those who kidnapped entire communities, believing that by so doing they would manage to conquer the Spirit of Nicaraguan families. Our United People reject and repudiate all those who disrupted Peace and are still calling for war, poisoned individuals who are now confronted by the advance of Love and Good Hope.

“The Government of Reconciliation and National Unity, all the Institutions of the Nicaraguan State, and our Heroic, Brave, Revolutionary, and Victorious People, who had become captives of criminals and terrorists, are fostering today, together with their State, Government, and Institutions, that Peace that we have been recovering, a peace originating from our absolute Conviction that God is Just, and **‘loves the Peace of his Servants ...’** and thus allows **‘our Hearts to take courage’**.”

“Faced with Terrorist Coup Plotters, our People have shown Wisdom and Leadership. May we, as Christians who Profess Faith and are Committed to Love of Neighbour, of Freedom, Dignity, and Fraternity, of Family and Community, move Forward, with that Strength and Spiritual Greatness that we are known for, and that is also recognized in the World.

“Praise Be to God!

“Praise Be His Holy Name! “Viva Nuestra Nicaragua, Blessed, United and Always Free!

“Today, July 18, we proclaim our Victory, our Advance, over those dark, diabolical, terrorist, criminal Forces that for three months - as of today it's been three months - lashed out and wanted to kidnap Peace in Nicaragua ... They kidnapped Peace in Nicaragua!

“But they did not manage to! The Soul of the Nicaraguan, his Courage, Dignity, and Pride are much stronger! And thus, we move forward, Proud of Our Country, Proud of the Nicaraguan Race which has faced so many Struggles, but always with great Honour, with great Dignity, with the great Spirit of Sandino, and with the great Spirit of Darío! And now we will move forward, and we will scrupulously guard over every millimeter of our Sacred Homeland, so that never again, never again, will anyone try to invade us with darkness, with diabolic, perverse, and evil energies! May such dark Forces never again occupy an inch of our Territory.

“For this we give Thanks to God and Bless God by Proclaiming our Faith and Love, and our Victories, Let's Move Forward! And tomorrow, July 19, in all the Municipalities of our Country, we are going to celebrate the 39th Anniversary of our Liberation, and we are going towards the 40th Anniversary.

“We will celebrate in all the Municipalities, in the head town of each municipality, Commemorating the Victory and Moving towards New Victories. Thanks to the Hand of God, we are heading, for the Glory of God, towards ever More Victories. Times of Victories, by the Grace of God, and for His Glory.

“And, Comrades, we are thus being convened to commemorate the 39th Anniversary tomorrow throughout our Sacred Territory, moved by Christianity, Christian Love, and Love of Neighbour, in Socialism, and in Solidarity; on the path towards Numerous New Victories that the Plan of God has for our Country ... Victories of Work, of Entrepreneurship, of Productivity, of Hardworking Nicaraguans! Victories of Reconciliation and Peace!

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Victories for the Prosperity of all Nicaraguan Families!

“Many thanks. A Big Hug from our Commander Daniel to each and every one of you. And may we all restore in all our Territory Love and Commitment to the Common Good, Strong Hope, Strong Faith, Love of our Neighbour, a Christian Spirit, Family and Community Values, together with Security, Peace, Work and Life.

“Thanks, comrades. If necessary I may reach out to you at any moment; otherwise, tomorrow bright and early I will, if so wills God, be communicating again with you in order to celebrate Victories and giving Thanks to God for having restored Peace throughout our territory. Thank you.”

On the following day, July 19, Rosario Murillo makes [a speech](#), this time in the rally celebrating the 39th Anniversary of the Sandinista victory against the Somoza dictatorship. This speech simply repeats the very same ideas of her speech the preceding day. She makes numerous references to God and Christianity, and systematically paints the protestors as a minority, coup plotters, forces of evil, blind and virtually satanical souls full of poison, who had kidnapped numerous Nicaraguans, depriving them of peace, security, the freedom to move, etc.

Following Murillo’s speech, published by the same *New Barricada*, one sees messages of support from Venezuela and Cuba. Former leader of Cuba, Raúl Castro writes:

“Dear Daniel and Rosario, I reiterate our unwavering support and solidarity against the attempts being made to overthrow the legitimately elected government of our sister nation.”

Long *Telesur* interview with Daniel Ortega

On July 24, 2018 Patricia Villegas of *Telesur* [interviews Daniel Ortega](#), an interview posted on the *New Barricada* and which represents one of the very first interviews granted by Ortega during his 11 years in power.

Patricia: How did Nicaragua end up in a situation like the one it has been experiencing in the last three months? How is it that the Sandinista Revolution ended up like this?

Ortega: Well... It's an accumulation of violence, one that has not disappeared from this country over the years. First, we reached a peace agreement. Then, during the 1990s, there was a period from 1990 to 2007 when we had other governments, governments that represented the Somocismo that had been overthrown. Their intention was to totally wipe out Sandinistas. We had three such governments -- there were three elections. They -- the rightists and sectors of the US government, would tell people not to vote for the FSLN because doing so would bring back war with the United States. Of course, to create fear.

Meanwhile, groups of extremists that had been part of the Contra, and which did not understand peace and the reconciliation process, started mobilizing in rural areas and killing Sandinistas; many of the latter were murdered in this period of time. And the Army fulfilled its duty, trying to control these armed groups, who were assassinating Sandinista families simply because the latter were not giving them the support they were asking for.

And these armed groups that I refer to as criminals, fell into the hands of drug trafficking operating in border regions. They wanted to free Nicaragua of Sandinistas, to eliminate them, and they thus saw themselves as freedom fighters. In other words, they not only wanted to control the government, but they also wanted to wipe out Sandinistas.

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And when we were elected in 2007, these groups had become more important, to the point that the rightist press started presenting them as freedom fighters. Social media and other media, headquartered in Miami and Costa Rica, started saying freedom fighters had to mobilize against Sandinistas whose return to power would now bring war to Nicaragua. Even though, as a matter of fact, Nicaragua was actually in a period of peace, stability, and reconciliation.

One part of the Contra made peace with us and even became our allies. But another part did not, and thus the basis of Somocismo survived.

Patricia: And is it that part of the Contra that has been intervening in the last three months?

Ortega: They are the bearers of liberalism, of the Liberal Party, which is that of Somoza. In other words, we are once again confronting Somocismo, but a new version of it.

Patricia: Is it a replay of the war of the 1980s?

Ortega: That is the case. They started organizing these groups, which not only assassinated Sandinistas, but also attacked the police. They would take over small police headquarters in rural areas, killing police, assassinating them. And when the police counterattacked, those who died were portrayed as martyrs, as human rights organizations and the right-wing media advocated for them, presenting as victims those who as a matter of fact were criminals. It was an ongoing media campaign.

Eleven years of stability, security and peace did not manage to eliminate forces of violence, revenge, and hatred. These are the forces that have been accumulating recently.

Patricia: What caused the trouble? Was it your attempt, as a Sandinista government, to reform pensions, as the international media are reporting it?

Ortega: This was one element. We had an economic alliance with business sectors. Sectors that had generally opposed the Sandinista Revolution, and supported the Contra, and moved to Miami.

Many business sectors welcomed our openness to build an alliance between workers, businesses, and government. An alliance that paved the way for a very fragile economy like that of Nicaragua -- the second most fragile after Haiti -- to experience impressive growth, improving living conditions of Nicaraguans. Benefits were shared, and I believe that the business sector was happy and content.

Patricia: And if they did well, why did the alliance with the business sector break up?

Ortega: There's always been a group of US Congressmen, based in Florida, and who are enemies everything that smacks of revolution. Enemies of Cuba, enemies of Venezuela, and therefore also enemies of Nicaragua. They are the ones who welcomed the Contra in the 80s, who provided it with money.

They just couldn't stomach the fact that the FSLN had regained control of the government, they just couldn't tolerate that! They couldn't. They had supported a war whose purpose was to kick us out, and now, to see us make a comeback through the electoral process was something unbearable to them!

And so was launched in the US a campaign so that the cooperation money that their country was providing us be cut. We see this cooperation money as an investment, because Nicaragua provides a service to the United States fighting drug trafficking and organized crime. Furthermore, the number of migrants going from Nicaragua to the United States is very low. However, despite this invaluable contribution of ours, the United States started slashing their cooperation money.

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Another thing that jeopardized our alliance with the business sector was the passing of the bill known as the Nica-Act, a US law aimed at blocking Nicaragua's access to funds from multilateral organizations. That split the business sector, some agreeing with the Nica-Act and lobbying for its approval, and others disagreeing with it because they realized the devastating impact it would have, not so much on the government but especially for the whole country.

That's how the conflict between the business sector and the government started. Shattering the previous alliance, which was strictly a business one, not a political one. While the business sector agreed with us in economic matters, it never refrained from criticizing the government, on matters that were political and institutional.

Patricia: In the last hours the Nicaraguan business sector declared, just as you have also done in the public square, that one of the losers in these three months of violence is the country's economy; growth projections are now considerably lower than what they were at the beginning of the year.

Have you met with the business sector again? Would you consider doing so? Would you again entertain the idea, for the prosperity of the country, of forming a government-business alliance as you did in the past? Or has that opportunity already passed, since you clearly identify that the problem did not originate from your proposal to reform pensions, but rather from the aspirations of this business sector?

Ortega: For me, the heart of the problem is the Nica-Act, the new US interventionism in Nicaragua. If the United States respects Nicaragua, and respects what we Nicaraguans say, regardless of ideology; if it respects an agreement between the business sector, workers and government, an agreement that allows our country to advance, to have security and

stability, and to grow, then, the Nicaraguan business sector would go along with the government of Nicaragua.

And then the pension reforms would have been approved. Everyone had agreed that these reforms were necessary. The IMF had already been here, it had met with the business sector, and it was clear that the reforms had to be approved, and everyone had to carry their share of the burden, employers, workers, and the government.

Patricia: Would you put the pension reforms back on the table?

Ortega: Given the blow to our economy caused by the recent unrest, the pension reforms are even more urgent. They are essential to make social security sustainable in the future. And now it will be even harder to collect revenues to make it sustainable.

Therefore, today it is more urgent than ever to approve this reform, and we have to look for ways to get it approved. We need to achieve consensus, especially with the social security affiliates. The business sector is critical of the fact that the reform would increase their contribution by a few points. It did not like the 3.5 increase that would be applied to them in that reform, which would have been applied gradually, 2 points for this year, 1 point for the year 2019, and 0.5 for the following year. It was a gradual reform.

So, the business sector reacted negatively, even though it knew that the reform was necessary, and even though it had already spoken with the IMF and had itself acknowledged that the reform was necessary. When the reform was implemented, it called it into question, and this allowed the destabilization plan³², which had already been set into motion in previous weeks on the occasion of the Indio Maíz forest

³² Ortega does not use the word destabilization in his interview. I gave myself the liberty to add it because that is what he is clearly referring to.

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fire, to go on with even more intensity. That's when the full-fledged destabilization plan began, financed with resources originating from US organizations, and involving the training and preparation of cadres.

Patricia: Did you see this coming, Comandante? Did you see the situation you are now facing come?

Ortega: Of course! With Indio Maiz we were seriously worried, because the protest movement started spreading the news through international social networks -- there were international organizations acting behind the scene on this very sensitive issue, nature, the environment -- that the government was responsible for the fire, and even allowing it to spread.

Actually, American experts sent by the same government of the United States came, experts in forest fires, and after analyzing the situation here, they told us that putting out this fire would take a long time, even several months.

This got complicated for us, it got complicated for us because the conditions were there for the destabilization plan to develop. Those behind the plan would have plenty of time to collect even more weapons than they had, and with which they had been carrying out crimes in rural areas and towns.

It so happens that the Indio Maíz Reserve is located in a zone where it rains very hard, though it had not rained for some time. And suddenly, when it did start raining, water was falling, as we say, by the bucket, and the fire was stopped. That meant that the Indio Maíz destabilization plan fell.

Patricia: But this, in your opinion, is what triggered the unrest?

Ortega: Yes, and it left those implementing the plan, so to speak, in motion, but a bit frustrated because the fire went out. When we proposed the pension reform, they immediately jumped on the opportunity to pursue it.”

Patricia: Despite the role played by the business sector in the unrest and violence, would you consider holding a dialogue with this sector to find solutions?

Ortega: Yes, we started with the principle that dialogue, understanding and consensus is necessary; we maintain that principle, regardless of the situation we are currently experiencing.

Patricia: Are there any signs of them wanting to enter a dialogue with you again?

Ortega: None from COSEP (Consejo Superior de la Empresa Privada en Nicaragua). But we are communicating with business sectors not represented in this association. They are participating in meetings called by the government to address specific issues pertaining to certain sectors of the national economy. That is a positive signal.

However, COSEP, which of course has considerable influence, is still undecided; it is still under the influence of the forces that have destabilized our country. We are open to dialogue and agreements, taking into consideration the new conditions that we are now facing. Our past experience, in which we enjoyed relative harmony with the business sector, will not simply return without alterations.

Patricia: And what would a new agreement look like in these new conditions?

Ortega: I believe that a new agreement would have to be based strictly on the role of the private sector, in terms of contributing to the development of the country's economy. Not the type of agreement that we had before, one in which the government allowed the private sector to participate and comment on different topics, including laws. No law would be approved without the agreement of the private sector.

We maintain our willingness to cooperate in the adoption of laws, and to obtain the consensus of the private sector before

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approving them. However, the scope of this cooperation would have to be reduced, relative to what it was before. Were it to be like it was before, the private sector would be accused by the extreme right, which is behind the present coup attempt, of being too close to the government, of being its accomplice.

Patricia: And what about the Catholic Church. Would you consider sitting down with the Church, given that Nicaraguans are a very Catholic population? Even though, as we have all seen -- there's considerable footage of this -- churches have been used by snipers during the unrest, arms have been stored in them, and bishops and priests have been openly siding with protestors, and accusing your government of being repressive?

Ortega: I would echo the words of Cardinal Brenes, who told his parishioners in Church this Sunday, that we should all strive for peace. And that we all have, in each one of us, a demon inside. And that priests have two demons within their inner-selves. And I believe that it's true that we have two elements in us. One is love, and one is hatred. Sometimes it's hatred that has the upper hand, and sometimes it's love. And this, in all spheres.

When Cardinal Brenes states that he wants peace, I believe him. Not all bishops in the Episcopal Conference behaved in the way you just described. In this attempted coup (intentona). It was the case of a few priests, whose behaviour bishops ignored, or tolerated. Priests who allowed protestors to use their churches as barracks, in which some of the kidnapped in roadblocks would be even be tortured. And in one instance, outrageously, even in the presence of a priest. Of course, we are humans, in the end we are humans.

Patricia: Are you suggesting that you would forgive them, and accept to sit down and dialogue with them?

Ortega: Not only with them would I establish dialogue, but with everyone.

Patricia: Do we have the appropriate conditions for such dialogue to take place, Mr. President?

Ortega: We have to create these conditions. So far, that which is being said does not foster dialogue, but rather the contrary. However, Cardinal Brenes' words on Sunday suggest that there is hope. They're a starting point.

Patricia: And do you read Pope Francis' message in that perspective?

Ortega: Yes, he has always been a staunch defender of peace.

Patricia: Dictator, assassin, director of paramilitary groups. These are terms that have appeared all over the international media. I would like to ask you directly: is the government of Nicaragua sponsoring paramilitary groups that are persecuting the population of Nicaragua, as is affirmed all over the world in the news?

Ortega: It's necessary to make it clear what one means by paramilitary groups. Here in Nicaragua they are the groups that I've mentioned earlier in this interview, groups that have been organizing for years, and that started gaining ever more strength as of 2007. Groups that are assassinating peasants, soldiers, police officers. Groups whose members, when killed by the police or the army, are portrayed by the right-wing media as patriots.

These are the paramilitary groups that we have in Nicaragua, groups are armed by the right, paid by the right, and acting under the auspices of organizations that, obviously, come from the United States. They are the ones that started launching armed attacks on April 19. When the pension reform was announced on April 18, there were only small protests and with minor incidents.

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Patricia: Were there many people who were really upset about the proposed pension reform?

Ortega: The protestors were not the retirees, those receiving pensions. The latter agreed with the proposed reform. Those protesting were right-wing political groups who opposed the government, and those who called for abstention in each election. They were NGOs and right-wing political parties.

The first day, there were some incidents -- just a stone hitting the head of one of the NGO leaders -- with some young people from the Juventud Sandinista. The police intervened, and this without hitting anyone, and then left as soon as the situation subsided, the groups withdrew, and the night was quiet.

The following night, however, there suddenly appeared armed groups attacking police headquarters, attacking offices of the FSLN and the homes of Sandinistas throughout the country. They were attacking, and were armed, they were armed! Then the fighting started and there were battles, confrontations.”

Patricia: And the fights were who against whom?

Ortega: Armed right-wing groups attacking the police, attacking town halls, attacking Sandinista headquarters. Not attacking government buildings where mayors are of the right; only those with Sandinista mayors, this in an effort to take control of them. However, as the attacks were expected, comrades from these buildings started fighting back, defending themselves. Some of those attacking used AK rifles.

Patricia: From what I gather, your government did not finance or sponsor paramilitary groups. Would that be your answer to all those headlines presently appearing in the international media?

Ortega: Yes. If we're going to talk about paramilitary groups, the only ones that exist are those of the right. Here's the way I see it: on the one hand we have armed forces, the army and the police, both recognized by the constitution; and on the other hand, we have clandestine armed forces, which have become instruments of death of the right-wing coup.

Patricia: There are many youths in some of these violent protests! I have seen photos and video footage of young men carrying artisanal weapons. Did you know that this was coming? Could you anticipate that youths were being trained? Has this surprised you? I'm asking you this, Comandante, because the scenes I saw were, in many instances, very similar to those experienced in Venezuela during the time of the 'Guarimbas'.

There are also similar symbols: One sees a boy playing the violin in Managua, just like one could see a boy playing the violin in Caracas. And in the midst of supposed attacks by Nicaraguan government forces, one sees a girl shouting, 'I am fighting for my country, for democracy in my country', just like one saw a girl shouting the same thing in Maidan, in Ukraine, in Altamira, in a Venezuelan Plaza. Do you see any similarities here?

Ortega: Yes, there are similarities. The unrest in Nicaragua was not spontaneous, but well prepared. Prepared for what? To transfer to Nicaragua the know-how gained in other countries that have experienced similar coups.

There are even Venezuelan youths, among those who had participated in the 'Guarimbas', who came here to help protestors manage social media, transferring to Nicaragua what they had learned there. And some Nicaraguan youths, financed by US organizations, traveled to Venezuela and the United States to gain experience.

Some of these youths are unquestionably students, and others not. Others are simply impoverished youths that ended up

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joining gangs. Such gangs existed in the last eleven years and had artisanal weapons. The police decided to intervene, in order to help these gang members to change and integrate back into normal life. In exchange for giving up their weapons and changing their attitude, the police would give them sports equipment and school supplies, so they could go back to school.

In Nicaragua there are groups armed with artisanal weapons. However, these groups never developed to the extent that gangs have elsewhere, like the maras (gangs) in Honduras. These armed groups clashed with the Nicaraguan police, and the latter learned to deal with them through various means. By developing closer ties with families in neighbourhoods, families that have children who are not gang members and who feared gangs.

Patricia: And these gangs reappeared in the middle of the present protests?

Ortega: Yes. These gangs were incorporated as a shock force in the protests. Protestors paid them. And they did so in all of the municipalities of Nicaragua.

Patricia: With more than 200 victims of these acts of violence, how will Nicaragua ever recover? Are you already thinking of the way you are going to try to heal these wounds?

Ortega: The hardest thing is always trying to heal wounds that result in death. The economy can eventually recuperate. However, it is impossible to bring back to life those who died. And we have so many casualties! Even today, three Sandinista comrades were killed in the rural area of the department of Matagalpa by these groups that I call paramilitary groups. Policemen killed! Entire families are suffering and calling for justice.

Patricia: And will they be heard? Will there be justice?

Ortega: We're presently involved in the struggle so that justice be done.

Patricia: Even though you have said in this Interview with Telesur that you are willing to dialogue, to sit down again with the private sector and with the Catholic Church, are you nevertheless committed to making sure that those guilty of crimes are brought to justice?

Ortega: Of course! Of course! There must be justice. Even though it is impossible to bring someone back life, those responsible for crimes should be brought to justice. This is something that will help affected families heal.

Patricia: And if it were found that some of your government officials were involved in some acts of violence, do you guarantee that same justice?

Ortega: Justice has to be applied to everyone in the same manner. Of course, it would be justice for all!

Patricia: Commander, let's talk about the geopolitics of what you have called an ongoing coup d'état, a coup d'état in the making. In the first part of this interview you pointed out that coup operations began even before April 18th or 19th. You described the role played by the Nicaraguan private sector, that of the Church, also that of the so-called paramilitary groups which are financed, you said, by both internal and external factors, just as the Contra was in the 1980s.

Could you be more specific about the external factors? You referred to American imperialism, but could you tell us exactly who these people are and where the money is coming from? Have you identified who they are? And what are you going to do now? What's your plan?

Ortega: The heart of all this is in Florida. Conservative senators and congressmen. They feel it is their duty to get rid of the Sandinistas. And since they did not manage to do this in the 1980s -- the Sandinistas lost some elections but then

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made a comeback -- they're back at it again. And they are literally obsessed with this idea. They're clearly earmarking Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua. And they are providing the money for this through various channels. There's the 31,000 US coming from USAID and from other organizations.

Patricia: You and the people of Nicaragua managed to defeat the Americans in the war of the 1980s. Are you going to do it again?

Ortega: We are going to work for peace. We managed to stop the coup.

Patricia: Do you think that you already managed to stop it?

Ortega: I think so. I think we have defeated the coup as it was being implemented. Of course, they are going to carry on, not stay with their arms crossed, and even more so now that actions are being taken in the United States, even some from the Congress of the United States, against Nicaragua.

Patricia: Would it be possible for you to have a face to face dialogue with Donald Trump, in order to alter or soften US policy regarding Nicaragua?

Ortega: That would be the ideal situation. However, in the present circumstances, things are being managed in the US by these conservative groups. The latter are even trying to reach a deal in which the US government would pass harsh laws against Nicaragua, in exchange for their approval of laws regarding the US itself. That's how much power they have.

Patricia: And they have votes in the Organization of American States (OAS) as well.

Ortega: That's correct.

Patricia: Did you expect that the OAS would react the way it did against your government and you personally? Initially, you seemed to have good relations with the Secretary General, or so it seemed judging by press reports.

Ortega: We did have a respectful relation. We were involved in a process whose aim was to improve the electoral system of Nicaragua for the elections of 2021.

Patricia: Some viewed that as a concession made by your government to the OAS.

Ortega: It is possible that they saw it that way, but we must recall that in Nicaragua it was necessary to move in this direction, and to improve the electoral system, either with the cooperation of the OAS or with that of some other organization.

Of course, what is happening now places the electoral reform on the backburner. Why? Because what we are seeing in the OAS is that a group of countries, which were mobilizing against Venezuela, are now doing the same against Nicaragua. When I say countries, I am referring to their leaders, not the people themselves. For I am sure that the people of these countries do not share the views of their leaders, leaders that are motivated by a mindset of revenge.

That is, they do not understand that being elected does not authorize them to impose certain policies on other countries with which there do not have any ideological and political affinity. Latin American countries that are governed by leaders of the left have more maturity and are respectful of countries that think differently. For example, when CELAC was set up, the left, which ruled in the majority of countries, did not try to impose anything on countries ruled by right-wing governments.

Patricia: But presently CELAC and UNASUR are, for all intents and purposes, very weak and virtually inactive. The so-called Group of Lima is lobbying against Venezuela. And the countries that form this group are the same ones that are now mobilizing against Nicaragua.

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Ortega: The problem in Latin America right now is that right-wing governments are on the rise, governments that are motivated by a spirit of revenge and are becoming interventionist. What they did with Venezuela, they are now doing with Nicaragua. (I omitted a short part of the interview here)

Patricia: How are you going to defeat these enemies, let's say, of the Latin American and Caribbean Integration, enemies that are behind the attempted coup against you?

Ortega: They will be defeated by their voters. Everything has its time. The population of their countries will defeat them. And when this happens, then these countries will have governments respectful of all governments, regardless of ideological differences. Governments that prioritize Latin American and Caribbean integration; that think in a really constructive way, for the benefit of everyone.

Patricia: Some long time and well-respected Sandinistas, such as Ernesto Cardenal and members of the Sandinista Reform Party (MRS), have been extremely critical of your government, and even of Vice President Rosario. What would you tell these people, whose voice has been powerful in the international media, if they were here, in front of you?

Ortega: Look, what they're saying is nothing new. They've been making these critiques for years. Ever since when? Ever since they decided to leave the Sandinista Party.

Patricia: Were they, in your opinion, a key factor in the attempted coup?

Ortega: Let's say that they gave them a voice to campaign against Nicaragua. And by joining this campaign they of course helped the coup. But as a matter of fact, they left the FSLN after 1990. When the party was still in power, they stayed and held responsibilities in the government. When the party no longer governed, they left. And they started talking

against the Sandinista government of the 1980s. They tried to simply wash their hands..., becoming critical and saying that they had nothing to do with what happened then, even though they obviously had been part of the process. It would have been okay to be critical, but within the party.

Then the MRS was formed, and it ended up turning towards the right and allied with and supported candidates of the right in national elections. That is the best proof we can have of who they really are. In other words, they have simply stopped being Sandinistas for a long time now.

Patricia: But these are the voices that some listen to and that have generated statements such as those of Pablo Iglesias of Podemos in Spain, of former president Pepe Mujica of Uruguay, and of the Chilean intellectual Manuel Cabieses, statements that you have read. Could you, through this interview with Telesur, reply to these leaders of progressive movements in the world, leaders who obviously do not have the same interpretation of events in Nicaragua as you do?

Ortega: Well, I have to respect them. I have to respect their opinion, their point of view. An opinion that I think is based on friendship. Why? Because of course they are intellectuals, they are friends, they know one another. And what one says influences what the other says. That's how I see things. It's that simple. If only they knew more about the history of Nicaragua, how they left the FSLN, after our party lost the elections in 1989. Before, they did not leave. Ernesto held the Ministry of Culture until April 25, 1990, the day we handed over the government to Violeta. Before, he didn't leave. No, he stayed and was very staunch in his defense of the Sandinista government. And after Ernesto, others left, even Sergio Ramírez who was my vice-president! He also left. Well, they decided to take another path, they cannot be forced, they decided to take another path. What's wrong in all this, what's, so to speak, dishonest, is to take another path and, washing their hands, to say that they had nothing to do

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with what happened in the 1980s. As if they had not been part of the Sandinista government.

Patricia: In finishing this interview, could you tell us what error you may have made in these three months of unrest, and what would be your greatest accomplishment? Let's start with the error. What would you not do again?

Ortega: Errors are unavoidable. I could say that it was a mistake to allow people like Ernesto Cardenal and Sergio Ramírez to be part of the FSLN and to give them leadership positions during the Sandinista Revolution. To have Sergio as my vice president of the republic and to have him run as a candidate for the vice presidency in the elections of 1990.

That, one could consider an error. However, this was a stage in the revolution. The cooperation that we had, one required by the political juncture, was not solid in ideological terms, but it did allow the revolution to move ahead.

Some could consider that it was a mistake for me to make an alliance with the business sector. That, in my opinion, was not a mistake. Why? Because it allowed Nicaragua to move ahead economically like it never had done before. And the people of Nicaragua know that. They're very aware of that. And they're also aware that, all of a sudden, virtually overnight, with the attempted coup and road-blocks all over the country, suddenly there's insecurity, terror, and a paralyzed economy. Thus, there's a huge contrast between the Nicaragua of pre-April 18, and the terror-ridden Nicaragua of the post-April 19th coup plotters.

So, I believe that it's hard to speak of mistakes when speaking of a process in which there are so many different players, so many individuals, some moving forward together for a certain period of time, then, all of a sudden, separating and each going their own way. This in no way implies that the convergence, however temporary, did not accomplish its role in the process.

And there are those who tell me, but how in the world could you accept to have this vice president, if you knew that he was never from the left, that he came from the Somoza family? That's what some comrades would tell me about Sergio, and that was way back, at the time of the revolution. They would complain. But one must understand that it was part of an effort to add people to the struggle, to reunite people from different sectors, so as to be able to better resist the aggression that the revolution was suffering after its triumph in 79.

Patricia: And what, in your opinion, would be your greatest accomplishment in the past three months? Being able to decipher where your enemy was? Many told me your biggest achievement was managing to achieve peace. Is that what you think?

Ortega: Protestors were mobilizing and causing increasing terror and destruction. For quite a while, we were patient, not seeking to provoke things and avoiding the appearance of an overreaction. This confused the coup plotters, who started to think that we were weak, and that people had stopped being Sandinistas. Some of them told us that the FSLN had no strength. So, what did we do? We allowed them to carry out their strategy, and to say it clearly, what they really wanted, which was to overthrow the government.

Patricia: And have early elections? You already declared that there would be no early elections.

Ortega: That's right. They're still trying to overthrow the government. They are still repeating that the government must go.

Patricia: At the first session of the National Dialogue: 'You must go'.

Ortega: Yes, that's what they said. Then they implemented their strategy. Because we remained calm and patient, they

began to think that we were weak, that we were defeated. That is what they thought! However, we waited for the right moment to step in, to restore peace, to re-establish peace in Nicaragua, and to normalize the country.

Max Blumenthal: US behind coup plotting in Nicaragua

Max Blumenthal, award-winning journalist, argues in a July 2, 2018 article “[US meddling machine boasts of ‘laying the groundwork for insurrection’ in Nicaragua](#)” that the US is obviously behind Nicaragua’s social unrest:

“In early June, Nicaragua’s leading young activists went on a junket to Washington DC, on the dime of the US government-funded right-wing advocacy group Freedom House. The Nicaraguan student leaders were there to [beseech Donald Trump](#) and other right-wing US government officials to help them in their fight against Nicaragua’s Daniel Ortega.

“On the excursion to the US capital, the young activists posed for photo-ops with some of the most notorious neoconservatives in the US Congress: Senators Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio and Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (see tweets later in this article). The Nicaraguan student leaders were also shepherded to meetings with top officials from the State Department and the US government soft-power organization USAID. There, they were reassured that they would have Washington’s full-throated support, asserts Blumenthal.

“A month before the student protesters’ meetings with ultra-conservative lawmakers in Washington, a publication funded by the US government’s regime change arm – the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) – bluntly [asserted](#) that organizations backed by the NED have spent years

and millions of dollars “laying the groundwork” for insurrection in Nicaragua.

“This article openly [boasting of US meddling](#) was published in the Latin-America-focused news [website *Global Americans*](#), and was authored by US academic [Benjamin Waddell](#) – the academic director of the School for International Training in Nicaragua. Following publication of this piece, *Global Americans* replaced the term “insurrection” with the more innocuous word “change.” The original headline could, however, still be seen in the article’s URL – until that was changed too,” concludes Blumenthal.

Max Blumenthal interviews Daniel Ortega

Max Blumenthal spent much of July 2018 in Nicaragua meeting with both supporters and opponents of the Nicaraguan government. He interviewed Daniel Ortega on July 25, 2018. Asserts Blumenthal:

“I learned that Washington’s narrative of a despised dictator mowing down unarmed demonstrators wasn’t exactly accurate. Across the country, I observed widespread support for Ortega and the Sandinista movement. It also became apparent from the moment I arrived that Western media had covered up the brutality of the opposition, as well as its anti-democratic agenda. In the midst of what seemed to be a misinformation campaign reinforced by right-wing members of Congress and the Organization of American States, I approached the Nicaraguan government for a chance to hear Ortega’s side of the story. He agreed, granting me one of his first interviews in 11 years.”

To watch this one-hour interview posted by *Grayzone Project*, go [here](#).

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Below, I reproduce the twelve key points from that interview, as Max Blumenthal himself presented them in his article, [“Max Blumenthal speaks to the Latin American leader who says his country has just defeated a US-backed coup”](#), published in *The Canary*. Blumenthal asserts:

Armed groups

“1) Ortega and his government were shocked at the outbreak of coordinated violence that gripped the country on 19 April. He said he had no advance intelligence warnings and that “it was well worked out.” Ortega blamed armed groups that had begun to form since he was inaugurated in 2007 and which were linked to criminal networks in Miami and Costa Rica, as well as to US intelligence services. He likened them to the right-wing, US-backed Contras of the 1980s, detailing their campaign of lethal violence against Sandinista mayors, political secretaries, police officials, and average citizens. “They are presented as patriots” in Western media outlets, Ortega lamented.

“2) For perhaps the first time, Ortega acknowledged the presence of pro-Sandinista paramilitaries. He explained that he had ordered his national police to remain in their barracks as part of the National Dialogue he initiated with the opposition. He had hoped that the Catholic bishops and his opponents would take the order as a good-faith signal and lower the intensity of opposition attacks; but instead, they exploited the security void to ratchet up the violence. This meant that, for 55 days – while police were resigned to their stations (where they found themselves under siege), sections of the opposition embarked on a campaign of blood vengeance against Sandinistas. “It was really a matter of defending their lives,” Ortega said of the pro-Sandinista paramilitaries, “because those armed elements staging the coup were on a Sandinista hunt,

going into their homes, looting... Sandinista families were victims of these attacks. Citizens have a right to defend their lives when they are under attack.”

Social media attacks

“3) Ortega’s government was overwhelmed by the social media blitz that drove the protests in April and ultimately mobilized a full-scale campaign for regime change. He recalled how the social security problem that he inherited from his predecessor – neoliberal president Enrique Bolaños – became a pretext for an online campaign that he described as a testing ground for this year’s coup attempt. In 2010, following the sudden spread of an #OccupyINNS hashtag campaign (referring to Nicaragua’s social security system), students descended on the social security building alongside Catholic priests, demanding reforms while building opposition to Sandinista rule. “We incorporated the changes they demanded, but that weakened the system even more,” Ortega said. “That was the first social media attack we experienced.”

“The second attack occurred around the fire that raged in the Indio Maiz reserve earlier in 2018, which the opposition accused Sandinistas of setting. “They internationalized the issue of this forest fire, claimed we set the fire,” Ortega said. “One could see that this was being articulated with other movements here in the cities. They were thinking in broader terms. But it didn’t occur to us that this would be an attempted coup d’etat. We thought this was just one battle to drag the government down. Firefighters told us it would take months to put it out and then it rained.” Even though the fire was doused, the political firestorm grew into a full-scale regime change operation.

Washington's role in Nicaragua

“4) Ortega heaped scorn on the White House and international networks like CNN for blaming him and his government for 100% of the over 300 deaths that have occurred in Nicaragua since April. He pointed out that victims of common crime, accidents and opposition violence were conflated with the deaths of protesters in reports by local human rights groups. He also referred to the scores of Sandinistas who had been murdered by armed opposition elements, including a 25-day-old baby – the child of Gabriela María Aguirre – who died on June 13 in Masatepe of bronchoaspiration when her ambulance was held up at an opposition roadblock. (Ortega's analysis of the manipulated death toll is generally backed up by a meticulously detailed [study by independent researcher Enrique Hendrix](#).)

“5) In response to my question about the meddling of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the US government's regime change funding apparatus, asserts Blumenthal, Ortega said his government was planning measures to limit the group's influence, but he stopped short of vowing an absolute ban. He pointed to the role of Felix Maradiaga, the main channel for NED money into Nicaragua, and the group's top trainer, recalling how Maradiaga was caught on camera plotting with armed thugs at UPOLI, the first public university occupied by the opposition in April. Noting that Maradiaga is currently in Washington to secure more funding for anti-Sandinista activity, Ortega warned that he may face legal consequences if he returns to Nicaragua. He also described a new government task force, the UAF, that will investigate the use of foreign money to finance “terrorism”, saying: “The US protects itself from terror attacks and has laws [to protect itself] ... The US is careful to not let that

happen, and we have the right to not let that happen too.”

Sanctions

“6) Asked about the role of sanctions in driving opposition to his rule and preparations for a deepened US attack on the Nicaraguan economy, Ortega put Washington’s hostility in historic context. “US policy is the same as it ever was,” he said. “They want governments that are entirely submissive to their decisions. They’ve always rejected the possibility that we’d return to power. Colin Powell came down here to tell Nicaraguans not to vote for us. So, before every election, some big shot from the US would come down and say not to vote for us. When we did win in 2006, we knew the US would do everything it could to degrade and wear down our government.” Ortega explained that Barack Obama imposed the first sanctions on his government, accusing him of ceding to pressure from the Miami lobby of right-wing Cuban, Venezuelan and Nicaraguan exiles.

“7) The sanctions have disrupted the tripartite alliance that Ortega’s government forged with unions and the business community of Nicaragua. “It was not an ideological deal, but one to strengthen the economy and combat poverty,” he explained. “This alliance started to be torpedoed in Washington, with political parties and NGOs involved in the coup lobbying in Washington to criticize the business sector for allying with Sandinistas. That is where the Nica Act was born. That was a very important element to create destabilization here for their coup attempt.” Ortega also said that another set of sanctions, the Global Magnitsky Act, targeted businesses that worked with his government, and thereby generated a fracture in the tripartite agreement. Big business “was threatened by the

Magnitsky Act, and it created conditions for the coup attempt by attacking the alliance. We know that a law like this would affect first and foremost the poor, campesinos, and families. And laws like this one violate agreements and norms under which we operate with international organizations.”

Nicaragua’s record under Ortega

“8) Ortega emphasized Nicaragua’s role as a “stopper” of mass migration and drug trafficking to the north and warned that the US-backed campaign of destabilization his country has witnessed will change all that. “These terrorist activities have not only caused loss of life, but many people have lost their jobs. The economic growth that Nicaragua had – that was sustainable and impacted the fight against poverty – created conditions where there were fewer immigrants to the US. Now, with the unemployment caused by this crisis, people will flee to Costa Rica and also the US.” Ortega warned that, if the US continues to undermine Nicaragua’s security, it will help to “break open the borders and that will also mean the borders will be open to organized crime, to drug trafficking... If that is broken down, then organized crime, youth gangs that are already penetrating Costa Rica will end up having an influence on the Panama Canal.”

“9) Asked about allegations of corruption and nepotism, Ortega dismissed the charges. He highlighted the economic progress his government has made through the ALBA alliance of economic cooperation with Venezuela, pointing to poverty reduction programs like Zero Usury, which gives credits to small businesses with a zero-interest rate, and the Zero Hunger initiative, which has given the rural poor small plots of farm land and animals for free to make them productive economic citizens. Most of the participants

in these programs have been women, Ortega emphasized. “People can’t understand these programs, so they mock them,” he said before ticking off further achievements like road building and public parks with funds from mayors’ offices and the ALBA program.

Other players in the crisis

“10) Despite being condemned by 21 members of the Organization of American States, an international body currently dominated by right-wing, US-allied governments, Ortega will not terminate Nicaragua’s membership, points out Blumenthal. “We need to continue the battle and defend our point of view,” Ortega said. He accused the US of weakening institutions like the OAS by preaching human rights while refusing to sign on to binding human rights agreements. “What most weakens it is the revanchist attitude of right-wing governments that are now a majority in Latin America and which have joined forces with the US and are guided by the US or the Miami lobby to fight those countries that favour relations of respect for sovereignty – non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries,” he said. Ortega added that many of the governments that had condemned him were responsible for human rights violations that are scarcely discussed at the OAS: “If the practice of the OAS were to judge every country that has problems, death, disappearances, crushed uprisings, they’d be talking about every single Latin American country. But that doesn’t happen. Countries in these groups have terrible crimes and there is no oversight by the OAS or the US.”

“11) The relationship with the Catholic church, whose bishops participated directly in the effort to oust the Sandinistas this year, remains a source of bitterness. “They were saying they didn’t have experience as

mediators,” Ortega recalled. “And in the end, the influence of the opposition and the pressure of the opposition and the media made it impossible to work [with the bishops] in the dialogue.” He also lamented that, “in the first day, they would take the floor and clearly take the side of the opposition. And by doing so, they undermined the authority of the Bishops’ Conference.” Ortega singled out Silvio Báez – the Auxiliary Bishop of Managua – as a particularly bad actor, criticizing him for “[tweeting] on his cellphone in the middle of this serious dialogue in favour of the opposition and against the government, explains Blumenthal.”

“12) Asked about the fraying bonds of solidarity between the Western left and the Sandinista movement, Ortega thanked Nicaragua’s allies in the US and Europe for “sticking to your principles.” “Please look carefully at how your authorities behave,” he urged Americans and Europeans. “What right do your authorities have to punish a country in a way that they haven’t punished other countries and impose sanctions, putting into practice measures that interfere in their internal affairs?”

Max Blumenthal: death toll manipulated to facilitate coup

Blumenthal, in another article “[How Washington and Soft Power NGOs Manipulated Nicaragua’s Death Toll to Drive Regime Change and Sanctions](#)” published on July 30, 2018 asserts:

“A detailed study of the death toll that has been recorded in Nicaragua since a violent campaign to remove President Daniel Ortega and his Sandinista government shows that at least as many Sandinista supporters were killed as opposition members. The

study, [“Monopolizing Death,”](#) demonstrates how partisan local NGOs conflated all deaths that occurred since April, including accidents and the murders of Sandinistas, with killings by government forces. Washington has seized on the bogus death count to drive the case for sanctions and intensify pressure for regime change, explains Blumenthal.

“The manipulated death toll was the centerpiece of a July 25 harangue by Republican Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen on the House floor, says Blumenthal. While drumming up support for a bipartisan resolution condemning Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega for supposedly ordering the massacre of demonstrators, Ros-Lehtinen [declared](#), “Mr. Speaker, four hundred and fifty! That is how many Nicaraguans have been killed by the Ortega regime and its thugs since April of this year.”

“The congresswoman’s portrayal of a dictatorial regime gunning down peaceful protesters like helpless quails in a canned hunt was designed to generate pressure for an attack on the Nicaraguan economy in the form of sanctions packages like the Nica Act. Her narrative was reinforced by Vice President Mike Pence, who [condemned](#) Nicaragua’s government for “350+ dead at the hands of the regime,” and by Ken Roth, the long-serving executive director of Human Rights Watch, who also [suggested](#) that Ortega had personally ordered the killing of “300 demonstrators against his corrupt and repressive rule.”

“Throughout the past two weeks, explains Blumenthal, I have been in Nicaragua interviewing scores of victims of the US-backed Nicaraguan opposition, asserts Blumenthal. I have met police officials who saw their colleagues gunned down by well-armed elements while being ordered to stay in

their stations, Sandinista union leaders whose homes were burned down, and average citizens who were kidnapped at *tranque* roadblocks and pulled out of their homes to be beaten and tortured, sometimes with the assent of Catholic priests. It was clear to me that the Nicaraguan opposition was anything peaceful in its bid for regime change.”

Peter Bolton takes aim at *The Guardian*’s coverage of Nicaragua

On July 27, 2018, Peter Bolton, writing in *The Canary*, makes a *scathing* criticism of *The Guardian* for its coverage of the present crisis in Nicaragua. In an article titled [“Guardian slammed for ‘wildly inaccurate coverage’ in open letter signed by 28 academics, journalists and activists,”](#) he states:

“Opponents of the government claim that Ortega’s government has become increasingly “authoritarian” and that he has been attempting to establish a political dynasty. But others, including award-winning journalist Max Blumenthal, have argued that public unrest has been cynically seized upon by upper-class and Washington-backed opponents of Ortega, who have long held the objective of forcing him from office.

“Either way, the protests have become increasingly violent and confrontational, and have in turn been met with a robust response from state forces which are attempting to contain the upheaval. Street battles have ensued between opposing sides. But while there have certainly been recorded incidents of violence on the part of both pro- and anti-government factions, most of the Western press has focused almost exclusively on the opposition’s stance (that the government’s response to rioting has been disproportionate, if not

outright repressive) without giving sufficient attention to incidents of violence on the part of the opposition, points out Bolton.”

Signatories of the open letter to *The Guardian* argue that “despite plentiful evidence of opposition violence, almost all your 17 reports since mid-April blame Daniel Ortega’s government for the majority of deaths that have occurred.” They also simply repeat the opposition’s demand that Ortega resign, while not mentioning the fact that “international bodies mediating the crisis (the UN, Organisation of American States and the Central American Integration System) have all rejected this as being unconstitutional and likely to produce chaos.”

Also and more importantly, the signatories accuse *The Guardian* of not reporting the detailed evidence showing that opposition groups in Nicaragua “benefit from millions of dollars in US funding aimed at ‘nurturing’ the Nicaraguan uprising,” evidence that Max Blumenthal himself [outlined](#) recently, adds Bolton.

To show just how biased *The Guardian* coverage of Nicaragua has been, Bolton cites Dan Kovalik, a human rights lawyer and professor at the University of Pittsburgh, who just visited Nicaragua:

“I am convinced, says Kovalik, that the mainstream coverage of the situation there represents the greatest misinformation campaign I have ever witnessed.

“There has been no mainstream coverage I have seen about the violence perpetrated by the extreme opposition, though that violence has been substantial. As just one example, we met with the staff of RadioYa!, which was burned down to the ground by right-wing forces with 22 staff people inside.

(Luckily, they managed to get out alive.) They told us that we were the first Western reporters to visit them and to listen to their story. There has simply been no attempt by the mainstream press to provide balanced coverage of these events, and the result is that the public has been greatly misled about what it is happening there. In short, the public is being led to believe that what is in fact a violent counter-revolution is somehow a peaceful, progressive revolution.”

And Bolton concludes:

“Clearly, the long-heralded standard-bearer of left-leaning coverage in the UK has – on Latin America at least – turned into just one more mouthpiece for the pro-Washington, pro-neoliberal consensus of the mainstream Western press.”

Kevin Zeese criticizes *The Guardian* on Nicaragua

In “[The Guardian on Nicaragua – An Open Letter](#)” Kevin Zeese, of *Popular Resistance*, also makes another scathing criticism of *The Guardian* for its coverage of the crisis in Nicaragua, and reproduces an open letter to *The Guardian* signed by progressive activists. Below, this article, published in *OffGuardian* on August 3, 2018, followed by the open letter itself:

“*The Guardian* has been one of the most inaccurate outlets for reporting what is occurring in Nicaragua. What is happening is a US regime change operation, working with oligarchs and big business interests in Nicaragua and supported by the Catholic Church, a long-time ally of Nicaraguan oligarchs. The US operates by spending tens of millions annually over many years to create an NGO complex that dominates Nicaraguan human rights groups,

environmental, women's groups and others. They have also given aid to a small minority of right-wing youth with tens of thousands of dollars and training, points out Zeese.

"Some of these youth also made a trip to Washington, DC sponsored by Freedom House, long noted for its ties to the CIA, where they met with extremist, Republican Senators Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz and Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, asserts Zeese. Just yesterday, Rubio threatened war in Nicaragua claiming it was in the national security interests of the United States because the conflict would result in mass migration and drug trafficking into the US. He seems willing to make anything up to achieve regime change, comments Zeese.

"Here are three articles with lots of links that provide information on what is really occurring in Nicaragua. They analyze the political context, the alliances working with the US on regime change and the economic realities in Nicaragua:

[NICARAGUAN LABOR GROUP URGES PEACE HIGHLIGHTS RIGHT-WING VIOLENCE & US REGIME CHANGE.](#)

"This article by a Nicaraguan-UK labor group provides excellent analysis of the violence of the right-wing coup and the peace efforts of the Ortega government, according to Zeese. (*The Guardian* gets this upside down, ignoring the violence of the opposition.) It also provides analysis of the US funding and long-term regime change efforts. It provides an excellent summary of the economy under Ortega and how it is a bottom-up economy lifting up the impoverished and economically insecure. Also included are Rep. Ileana Ros-

Lehtinen calling for regime change in Nicaragua, Bolivia, Cuba, and Venezuela on the House Floor and Sen. Rubio's comments warning of war in Nicaragua.

[VIOLENT COUP FAILS IN NICARAGUA, US CONTINUES REGIME CHANGE EFFORTS.](#)

“This article, written by me, examines the failure of the coup, the massive celebration on the 39th anniversary of the Sandinista Revolution that showed the unity of the people of Nicaragua. It also discusses how the US is escalating funding for regime change operations in Nicaragua as well the introduction of the Nica Act in the Senate, introduced on the anniversary of the revolution, which would escalate the economic war against Nicaragua, explains Zeese.

[CORRECTING THE RECORD: WHAT IS REALLY HAPPENING IN NICARAGUA?](#)

“This article which I co-authored with Nils McCune, describes the strategy of the right-wing coup in using violence to try to force the government to respond with violence to restore order, asserts Zeese. It also describes the widespread false media coverage by western media as well as how the opposition, trained by the United States, used social media to put out a false narrative. We examine the alliances in Nicaragua, who is behind the coup and supportive of it, and who opposes the coup. Finally, we examine the Nicaraguan economy and how it has reduced poverty, made health care and education available, provided microloans to small businesses and shrunk the gender gap. Further, how the Ortega government has used property law to provide land titles to Indigenous Peoples, who now own one-third

the land in Nicaragua, women, and peasants. This is why Ortega won re-election by more than 70% for a third term in office.

Nicaragua – Letter to the Editor of *The Guardian*

[This version of the letter was sent to the editor in chief but not published; *The Guardian* received a shorter version for publication, which has also not been published.]

For the past three months, there has been a political crisis in Nicaragua, with opposing forces not only confronting each other in the streets but fighting a media war. *The Guardian* should be at the forefront of balanced and well-informed reporting of these events. Instead, despite plentiful evidence of opposition violence, almost all your 17 reports since mid-April blame Daniel Ortega's government for the majority of deaths that have occurred. One of your most recent articles ("The Nicaraguan students who became reluctant rebels", July 10) leaves unchallenged an opposition claim that theirs is "a totally peaceful struggle." Only one article (July 4) gives significant space to the government version of events.

While most of the recent violence is associated with opposition barricades erected across the country, you still refer to a "wave of violence and repression by the government" (June 24). Not once do you refer to the numerous deaths of government supporters or the 21 deaths and hundreds of injuries suffered by the police, including the killing of four policemen observing a "peace" demonstration on July 12. Nor did you report the only attack on a member of the "National Dialogue" set up to try resolve the crisis, when student leader Leonel Morales was shot and

left for dead on June 12; he is a government supporter.

Your report from Masaya (June 12) failed to mention that the protestors had burnt down public buildings, ransacked shops and destroyed the homes of government officials. Nor did you record the kidnapping of hundreds of long-distance lorries and drivers, who spent a month in effective captivity despite efforts by their ambassadors and international mediators to secure their release (eventually achieved by the government on July 8). Your report of the shooting of a one year-old boy in “the latest round of government repression” (June 25) does not mention video evidence that he was killed by opposition youths.

The author of several articles, Carl David Goette-Luciak, openly associates with opposition figures. On July 5 he blamed the police for the terrible house fire in Managua three weeks earlier, relying largely on assertions from government opponents. Yet videos appearing to show police presence were actually taken on April 21, before barricades were erected to prevent police entering the area.

Several times you cite “human rights activists” who are often long-standing government opponents (such as Vilma Nuñez, April 28, who told the BBC on July 10 that Ortega now has an “extermination plan”). You unquestioningly quote Amnesty International (May 31) even though their reports turn a blind eye to violence by protesters. You do not refer to detailed evidence that opposition groups benefit from millions of dollars in US funding aimed at “nurturing” the Nicaraguan uprising (theglobalamericans.org, May 1).

On June 6 you said that “Ortega has lost control of the streets” and on June 11 that Nicaragua is “a country of barricades.” Since then the government has successfully worked with local people to restore order and remove the vast majority of barricades. Armed bands have been arrested in the process, including members of notorious gangs from El Salvador. This goes unreported.

Most of the articles refer to protestors’ demands that Ortega should simply renounce the presidency, but not that international bodies mediating the crisis (the UN, Organisation of American States and the Central American Integration System) have all rejected this as being unconstitutional and likely to produce chaos. You have given sparse coverage to the many marches by government supporters calling for a peaceful, negotiated outcome.

Recently, Simon Jenkins wrote in a different context (July 5) of “the rush to judgment at the bidding of the news agenda” in which “social media and false news are weaponised.” In our view this is precisely what is happening in mainstream reporting of Nicaragua. We call on *The Guardian* to take a more responsible stand, to challenge the abundant misinformation and in future to provide a much more balanced analysis of the crisis.

Ellen Barfield, *Baltimore, MD Chapter Veterans for Peace*

Brian Becker, *Radio Show Host, Loud & Clear*

Carol Berman, *Nicaraguan Cultural Alliance*

Max Blumenthal, *journalist*

Al Burke, *Editor, Nordic News Network*

Lee Camp, *head writer/host of Redacted Tonight*

Maritza Castillo, *Nicaraguan activist*

Sofia Clark, *political analyst*

Mitchel Cohen, *former Chair, WBAI radio Local Board*

Don DeBar, *writer and radio journalist*

Warwick Fry, *writer and radio journalist*

Greg Grandin, *journalist*

Peter Grimes, *sociologist and author*

Paul Baker Hernández, *singer, song-writer*

Chuck Kaufman, *Alliance for Global Justice*

Dan Kovalik, *human rights lawyer*

Barbara Larcom, *Baltimore Coordinator, Casa Baltimore/Limay*

Abby Martin, *journalist and presenter, The Empire Files*

Arnold Matlin M.D, *Rochester (NY) Committee on Latin America*

Camilo Mejia, *former Amnesty International prisoner of conscience*

Nils McCune, *IALA Mesoamerica*

Nan McCurdy, *Methodist missionary*

Ben Norton, *journalist*

John Perry, *writer*

Stephen Sefton, *writer*

Patricia Villegas, *President, Telesur*

S. Brian Willson, *Lawyer activist*

Kevin Zeese, *co-director, Popular Resistance*

Vice President Rosario Murillo addresses nation

On August 17, 2018 Rosario Murillo [addresses the nation](https://barricada.com.ni/declaraciones-de-rosario-murillo-17-de-agosto-del-2018/)³³. Below several extracts of that address (the capital letters are hers, not mine):

“Good afternoon, dear fellow women; good afternoon, dear families; good afternoon today Friday ... Today is Friday, August 17, the beginning of another Weekend,

³³ New Barricada, <https://barricada.com.ni/declaraciones-de-rosario-murillo-17-de-agosto-del-2018/>, consulted on August 18, 2018.

for Recreation, for Devotion, and for Work and Peace!
So many families busy earning their lives honestly on weekends, so many families making the social economy work, as we travel from one place to another, and we are thereby all winners. We visit one another, we express love for each other, and we all winners in this our Always Beautiful Nicaragua!

“There are tons of ongoing Festivities ... In Palacagüina, Queen Virgin Mary; in Comalapa, San Bartolo; all traditions expressing of our Popular Religiosity; there is also a Crab Festival that is being prepared, the Crab Soup Celebrations commemorating the Abolition of Slavery, in Corn Island, asserts Murillo. (...)

“Such is our Nicaragua that is coming back to life, recovering, getting back on its feet, feet solidly embedded in Christianity, in Family, in Socialism, and in Solidarity.

“Only the enemies of Peace and Work are busy, from the comfort of their homes and offices, making frequent trips abroad with the intention of pursuing their work of denigrating our Nicaragua. They are making it clear that they are enemies of Peace and Work.

“Only the small-minded, the puchos, the chingastes, as people call them ... Oops, a tiny minority! But they are out there doing their utmost to plan instability, create problems, they who financed Classist, Terrorist, Criminal, and Sacrilegious coup plotting actions against a People of Faith.

“Planning a coup against the Poor, against the Majority of Nicaraguans who are struggling to get out of Poverty, and against a Government that is supporting their struggle, denounces Murillo.

Pro-Ortega Government Narrative

“The Sin of this Government is to have supported Workers, Working Families, and the Poor. However, the real Sinners are those planning a coup. The real Sin, the Sacrilege, lies in going against the Poor and all the Institutions Serving the People of Nicaragua.

“People who know exactly who it is that destroyed their Ambulances, their Health Centers, their Hospitals, their Schools, their Technological Centers, their Universities, their Streets, their Roads, their State Institutions, their Homes, and their Businesses ... Nicaraguans know who destroyed them! That is why we say: Pain of a people now mourning its dead, and Shame for them, the destroyers, exclaims Murillo.

“A pain that cries for Justice ... And people want Justice! A Pain permanently embedded in the Hearts of Families that lost Loved Ones, and this throughout Nicaragua. However, we are demanding Justice and Human Rights for All! Justice and Peace!

“And there are those who continue attacking Peace and Work from their position of comfort, a comfort that the social unrest did not at all disrupt, because behind their Acronyms, they are responsible for seeking the ruin of the Poor, and this in favour of the Kingdom of the Powerful. In other words, the ruin of the Poor who are struggling to get out of poverty, and the rise of the Kingdom of the Powerful. No, that is not the Kingdom of God on Earth! That is not the Kingdom of God on Earth! That is a Sin, a Mortal Sin! Assaulting the Poor and all Programs designed to Combat Poverty is a Mortal Sin!

“Shame! They should feel terrible shame for all the pain they have caused to Nicaraguans, and for all the outrageous things they have done to working families. Shame on them, and Pain for the dead, our dead, for all

the losses we suffer! Shame on them, and Pain for the People of Nicaragua, Pain that will gradually go away and be overcome, "Pain that will become a Force moving us forward. Shame on them, for having perversely gambled with the destruction of Nicaragua, says Murillo.

"Shame because their motivation was perverse, they were acting through purely selfish political interests. Shame because they attacked our Homeland, because a Loving Heart that wants Nicaragua's well-being and Fights for Nicaraguan Families is something of which they seem totally deprived!

"Shame for the Crimes committed! Shame ... Shame ... Shame ... Shame on them! Pain for the People who, thanks to God, are already recovering, recovering with an Infinite Force. People who know perfectly well who deprived them, for three months, of the Right to Work, the Right to Life, and the Right to peace!

"How does one recognize someone who is soulless, someone without a Soul, someone who does not think about his or her neighbour, someone who is not Christian, who does not believe? They all say they are Christians, and yet they do not think about the Poor, they do not think about their neighbour ... They do not think about them, the destroyers! The tiny minority, the small-minded, they do not think of others, the Majority of Nicaraguans who are struggling, who are suffering, and who have suffered losses of all kinds. They burned their homes, ransacked their homes, looted their businesses. The minority, the small-minded, assaulted the majority!

"Shame on them! Pain for a People who will always mourn their dead. Shame on those who are now continuing, from other countries, in their efforts to

Pro-Ortega Government Narrative

throw more wood on the fire of social unrest. Because here that will simply not work... They will not succeed, God Forbid! They view Nicaragua as their own farm, and Nicaraguans are part of their own affairs, Peons,” asserts Murillo.

“Shame on those corrosive minds who still believe they can assault the Nicaraguan Soul by initiating an International Media Campaign that serves the Empires; a campaign full of lies, slander, infamies, intentional distortions ... Fake News, well! (...). And that hoax, that false news, who believes it?,” asks Murillo.

“Those living here in Nicaragua know very well that such news does not impress anyone, that they reflect a minority of small-minded versus a Majority of Powerful Working People. A people that wants to continue advancing, that wants to continue fighting for Justice and Peace, that wants to continue doing honest work to provide daily bread to and support their families, their children, and to do it in peace!

“They will not succeed! We simply will not allow it! We are the People of Darío and Sandino, as I said yesterday, a people full of Faith, of Love, whose Hearts are full of Hope, we know exactly who we are, we know our History, our Legacy, and our Spiritual Power, and we have declared that we are Free and that we will never again be slaves!,” asserts Murillo.

“Infamies and lies, however often repeated and repeated and spread through international contacts, will not allow you to go anywhere... They are Fake News, False News, and this every day! Truth and Love are stronger than Hatred and Lies. We are sure that the World will come to see the Reality of a People that did not deserve the infamy committed by those who are

now coiling within themselves, such is their embarrassment.

“No Pasaron! No Pudieron! No Pasarán! No Podrán! They did not succeed! They tried and failed! They will not succeed! They just won’t be able to! We have Wings of Faith and Hope, and we are crying out with Darío: Peace, Peace, Peace! And we all know that Peace is the Fruit of Justice and that Crimes committed by the minority, by the financiers, the financiers of the small-minded, will not go unpunished!

“Neither the slander, nor the defamation, nor the loss of prestige, the desire to discredit us, nor the artificial and false international media campaign being waged to denigrate our People, who, full of National Love, Self-esteem and Recognition of our Spiritual Power, know that everything, everything is possible in Christ who strengthens us, and as Christians, as Believers, as Sovereign People, Worthy, People of Faith, People of God, Let’s Go Forward!,” says Murillo.

“No matter how great the Challenge facing us, God is bigger and the plan that we know God has for Nicaragua is that we are going to restore, we will continue to restore Love, Coexistence and the Path of Honest Work, to consolidate Justice, Peace. We are going to restore a Solid Economic Direction for our country, because that is the Will of God and it is the Will of the People!

“So, we know that Truth will conquer Falsehood, and that many of those who are presently involved in lies and sabotage, because that is really what our country is facing, a media sabotage, will stop doing so, because no lie can forever hold out, no evil can last forever, and no hatred can ever conquer... There is no hatred that will ever be Victorious,” concludes Murillo.

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When presenting the narrative of those defending the Ortega government, I draw exclusively, with one single exception, from sources written and interviews given following the crisis that erupted in Nicaragua in mid-April 2018.

However, in presenting the narrative of those opposing the Ortega government, I have chosen a different method. Given that the roots of the problem, according to this latter narrative, have less to do with the immediate events triggering the protests -- the Indio Maíz Reserve fire, and then the pension reforms -- and more to do with the authoritarian and dictatorial nature of the Ortega regime, as illustrated by the violent and brutal attacks against protestors, I will also draw from sources describing key events that occurred during Ortega's 11-year term in power.

Dora María Téllez: Ortega has taken over the FSLN party and gutted its revolutionary values

In "[El Frente Sandinista colapsó, ahora es la maquinaria política de una familia](#)" (The Sandinista Front has collapsed, now it is the political instrument of a family) an article published by *Envío* in its January 2013 issue, historian Dora María Téllez, one of the top FSLN guerilla leaders that toppled Somoza in 1979, Health Minister of the FSLN during the 1980s, and now leader of the Movimiento Renovador Sandinista (MRS, or Sandinista Renovation Movement), explains how the FSLN party has been virtually taken over by Daniel Ortega and his wife Rosario Murillo.

As this article, I believe, may help the reader understand some of the roots of the 2018 crisis in Nicaragua, as viewed

by those supporting the protestors, I will attempt to present its key ideas, citing abundantly. Téllez notes, in particular:

“When we claim that the Ortega government is behaving like a dictatorship, there are people who tell us that it is not a dictatorship because it is not killing people in the streets. But who ever said that the Somozas were always killing people in the streets? That did happen, but in times of big crises and, especially, in the last two years before they were toppled.

“Whenever there were crises, the Somozas would impose a harsh repression and then settle with the conservatives and everything would go back to normal, asserts Téllez. It was a dictatorship in which people had already learned to keep silent, to say what they had to say to avoid problems. The success of a dictatorship is when it is not necessary to impose censorship. A dictatorship is successful when people already say what it wants them to say, when they avoid saying what they were about to say, or when some request to be paid so as not to speak... And that is already happening in Nicaragua.” (...)

“What the Sandinista Party has experienced is not properly a process of involution. It is a collapse, says Téllez. The involution took place for years. And we must recognize the merit of Daniel Ortega: he has been the head, the inspirer and the designer of the process that led the Sandinista Party to move from a revolutionary party to a legitimately Somocista party.

“Has anyone heard of the political orientation of the Sandinista Party? (...) Does anyone know the direction of the Sandinista Party? Does the Congress of the Sandinista Party meet to deliberate things? What are the rules of that party?

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“The last thing we saw before the municipal elections of 2011 were the demands of the grassroot bases of the FSLN in some 40 municipalities. They were protesting against the so-called "dedazo", that is against the fact that Ortega was imposing his own mayoralty candidates. And what happened to those who were protesting? They were all neutralized, eliminated, explains Téllez. The "dedazo", the imposition of the candidacies, without consultation and without debate, was another expression of authoritarianism. Anyone who believes that a political party that functions in an authoritarian manner within its own structures, can foster democracy when it governs a country, is badly mistaken. If a political party wants to produce democratic transformations in society, it must itself be democratic.”

Téllez explains that when the revolution occurred in 1979, no one in Nicaragua had ever had any experience of such a thing as the separation of powers -- parliament, judges, the Supreme Electoral Council, etc. And never in Nicaragua's history had any political party in power ever lost an election through a transparent and democratic vote.

Of course, concrete conditions following the success of the revolution did not favour the separation of powers, says Téllez. The Contra War meant that there had to be plenty of discipline, and that decisions had to be taken in a military manner, quickly and from the top. And the new constitution adopted in 1987 basically consolidated the old model, one in which the president of the republic had all powers and others virtually none at all.

Though there were several debates in the FSLN during the revolution about the need to democratize the party, explains Téllez, decisions to advance in this direction kept being placed on the backburner because of the ongoing war.

It is only when the FSLN unexpectedly lost the elections in 1990, points out Téllez, that this debate resurfaced. Some argued that it was necessary to move in the direction of ever more democracy within the party, and others, like Daniel, argued against that, claiming that conditions were not yet appropriate. And he ended up winning.

“By the mid-90s Daniel Ortega had already managed to impose himself on the Sandinista Front, explains Téllez. He did it in two ways. Thanks to the fact that he had become the most prominent public figure of the Front in the 1980s. And because of the well-known strategy that every time someone did not agree with him he would simply mount a campaign against him or her: "traitor", "sold out", "agent of the CIA, of imperialism..." For many people, that campaign worked. I was still meeting, five or ten years later, people who would apologize to me. Once a man stopped me in the street. "I want to apologize to you", he said. "And for what?" I answered. "Because I said stupidities about you, saying that you were a traitor. And now I realize that it was a lie, that you were right."

“The fact of the matter is that people often do not see arguments, they see personalities. If Daniel Ortega asserts that it is okay to make a pact with Arnaldo Alemán and have breakfast, lunch and dinner with him, and that that is what the revolution requires, there are many people in the Sandinista Party who will simply go along with this. And if the next day Ortega says the exact contrary, many will simply make an about face and once again agree. Because when a person is deified, the reference is not facts, principles, or programs but rather what the deified person says and does. When Daniel Ortega made a pact with Arnaldo Alemán, many people in the

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Sandinista Party said, "How intelligent the commander is, he got that barbarian out of a tough situation through that alliance." But if Dora Téllez were to make a pact with Alemán they would say: "What a betrayal! Dora Téllez abandoned all principles and made a pact with Arnaldo Alemán." That's how many people think."

Dora Téllez goes on to explain that Daniel Ortega, gradually and very systematically, got rid of virtually all historical players in the FSLN party -- "liquidating the last vestiges of the leaders of the Sandinista Front that had to do with the past and referring to them as the *scrap metal of the revolution*" -- concentrating ever more power in his person, and even in his own family.

"Now those who form the party are the young. And why the young? Because of their qualities? No. Because these youths are unconditional disciples and are totally subordinated to those who put them there. They are not taught to have a critical attitude; they are invited to simply toe the mark, to obey."

Téllez then mentions a second factor, which, in her opinion, caused the collapse of the FSLN: Daniel Ortega's increasing pragmatism, his tendency to prioritize ever more deal-making in order to hold on to power, even if this meant abandoning principles, and moving away from the program of the party.

"In the past the FSLN was against a free trade agreement (FTA) with the United States and today it is negotiating an FTA with the United States, just to mention an example. The same with the IMF and the World Bank. Before they were demons, now they are their "mentors." If you analyze Ortega's decisions in the National Assembly you will see that one day the party says A and the next day it says B, the complete

opposite, and being contradictory does not seem to bother them,” asserts Téllez.

“In the hands of the Ortega-Murillo family, the Sandinista Party has eliminated its political program. The concentration of power in the Ortegas and the hyper-pragmatization of politics has meant liquidating the tradition of collective leadership that the Sandinista Party had and the political orientation it had as a force aspiring to transform reality.”

The third factor which, according to Téllez, caused the collapse of the FSLN is money. Following the Ortega-Alemán pact, the salaries of members of parliament skyrocketed. They went from about \$1,400 per month to nearly \$5,000 per month, and many perks -- a thing that did not exist before -- appeared.

“A fourth process that explains the collapse of the Sandinista Party is that, prior to the 1998 pact with Alemán, Daniel Ortega and his group had concluded that in Nicaragua, politicians, to be successful, had to go about things as they had in the past. And how had they always operated? Through pacts, patronage, perks, corruption and impunity. Ortega recently added another key element: family. This was the policy of the Somoza dictatorship: family, pacts, impunity, corruption, perks and political patronage. And at that time, also military power. While Ortega has not yet neutralized military power, he is moving, day by day, in that direction, asserts Téllez. (...)

“The current FSLN stopped being a revolutionary party, stopped being a leftist party, stopped being a party with a desire to transform Nicaraguan society. And it even stopped being a party. It is now a mere political tool at the service of a family in power, with a single objective: to conserve power at all costs. Why

conserve power? That question has become irrelevant. (...)

“Has Hugo Chávez's politics and his money influenced the apparatus of Ortega's power and the current political model? Definitely. We are talking about 2,500 million dollars in the last years, a considerable amount of money, which has contributed powerfully to consolidate the current prebendary model of Daniel Ortega. (Note added by author: about 500 million dollars per year, which represents nearly a quarter of the national budget) But a model of this nature, influence peddling, nepotism, impunity, and corruption, can be implemented only when a society allows and supports it, recalls Téllez.

“Chávez may have wasted 2,500 million dollars but had the FSLN members of the National Assembly not consented that this money be given directly to the FSLN party, and not to the government of Nicaragua where it would appear in the national budget, things would have been very different. Our MRS deputies were the only ones demanding that this money go through the budget. We even wrote letters to President Chávez requesting that it go to the government. (...)

“It must be said in honour of the truth that the opposition in Nicaragua is not a minority. The municipal elections of last November and the presidential elections of November 2011 illustrated the fact that Ortega is still a minority force in Nicaragua. If the votes were counted properly, Daniel Ortega would already be out of power through civic means. If Ortega had a majority, why would he be stealing elections? One steals that which one cannot obtain in a legitimate manner, points out Téllez. (...)

“What are we to do? Continue doing what we have been doing: strengthening community leadership, the organization of communities, the organization of society. And as far as we are concerned, as MRS, we have to build a political option consistent with what we are proclaiming.

“We are confident that everything will unravel in a shorter period of time than some assume. Because Nicaraguan society is sick and tired of the deep sectarianism that has flooded the country: sectarianism of a family caste, of family castes; the sectarianism in municipalities of the political secretary and his family discriminating against the rest of the people. Today how many Nicaraguans believe that state institutions are fair and serve all of us? None. Nobody believes that anymore.

“People are sick and tired of a system in which one has to pay those in power for everything. They are sick and tired of having to stand in line and kneel before the FSLN in order to get a scholarship, a job, tuition ...

“Nicaraguans are sick and tired of being treated as people without dignity. When a teacher is told he or she has to attend a pro-Ortega government rally, what will he or she do? Refuse to go? But what if she or he happens to have four children, and lives in a family where there is only one income? He or she will obviously attend the rally, even though doing so means being upset for being treated with indignity. The regime of Daniel Ortega is treating the immense majority of Nicaraguans in an unworthy manner. It is treating them as beggars, as objects, and forcing them to do things against their will and against their conscience, denounces Téllez.

“That feeling of not being respected, of not being treated as persons, is buried within each Nicaraguan. It is there. But one day, like any underground current searching for a way to come out, it will erupt. That hour will come, ominously prophesizes Téllez.

“In the meantime, what are we to do? Continue strengthening the dignity of Nicaraguans, continue empowering them, continue strengthening their demands and their just struggles. And keep organizing and acting to make that hour arrive.”

Anti-canal protestors key element in popular revolt

Among the hundreds of thousands of Nicaraguans protesting in the popular revolt that erupted in April 2018, one finds many of those who had been participating in the anti-canal project demonstrations in the last four or five years. Two of the most well-known leaders of these anti-canal demonstrations, Medardo Mairea and Pedro Mena, along with some 400 other protest-related political prisoners, are presently in jail. Mairea and Mena, along with some 137 other prisoners, are accused of several “crimes, including terrorism, murder and organized crime.” Mairea and Mena were detained on July 13, 2018 at the International Airport of Managua.³⁴

On Wednesday August 15, 2018 thousands of Nicaraguans demonstrated in the streets of Managua demanding the release of all political prisoners.

Reports Wilfredo Miranda Aburto, who was present in these demonstrations:

³⁴ Eduardo Cruz, [Los “pecados” del líder campesino Medardo Mairena](#), *La Prensa*, July 22, 2018.

“They were shown on all government television channels. Now there have been three hearings and they have been suspended because there is no proof of anything. They accuse them of weapons and terrorism,” explains Guadalupe Sánchez. “My sisters were bringing food to some of our nephews, and (...) paramilitaries captured them.”

“Patricia Sánchez Moraga and Yolanda del Socorro Sánchez were accused by the National Police on July 12 of the crime of illegal possession of firearms, and then they were also accused of terrorism.

“Guadalupe, the sister of the detainees, refutes the police version and says that it is a detention with political motives. According to this woman, her sisters suffered ill treatment in El Chipote cells.

“I would like Daniel Ortega to have his children there (in prison) so that he would feel the pain of looking for one’s relatives,” complained Guadalupe Sánchez. The woman led the march along with other relatives of political prisoners.”³⁵

What exactly is the canal project? And why have peasants like Medardo Mairea and Pedro Mena been protesting for several years against the canal project, a project that now seems to have been abandoned?

Lori Hanson, in her 2015 article [Daniel Ortega and the Interoceanic Canal](#), explains³⁶:

“For Carlos – a university student, self-avowed socialist, and government employee living far from the affected zone – President Daniel Ortega’s recently initiated Nicaragua canal project is a dream resurrected and a source of national pride. If polls in

³⁵ [Grito por la libertad de los presos políticos](#), *Confidencial*.

³⁶ Briarpatch, June 30, 2015.

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Nicaragua are to be believed, Carlos' sentiments reflect the majority view that the interoceanic canal – one of the largest megaprojects in world history – will favourably alter the fate of Nicaragua, bringing prosperity and progress, development and jobs. And so, he cautions me. Write about the canal, he says, but “don't humiliate Nicaragua. Bring us more investment.”

“Like most of the people I talked to in progressive organizations concerned about the canal's construction, Carlos' mother, Rosita, disagrees, says Hansen. “He wants to see Nicaragua as relevant internationally, and he thinks the canal will get us there,” she says. As the director of an agro-ecofeminist NGO working with women farmers, Rosita has a very different opinion of both Ortega and the canal. As feminists, her organization's members participated in this year's International Women's Day marches, which were once again met by anti-riot squads. As an agroecologist, she has worked with the organized opposition to the canal. And as a mother, she shakes her head at her son's political allegiance to Ortega, but she understands how much he wants to believe in this project, in Ortega, and in this country. (...)

“The Nicaragua Interoceanic Grand Canal project is indeed a reincarnated dream, continues Hansen. Historians have recorded 72 previous plans for it, spanning 500 years and involving such infamous leaders as Louis Napoleon Bonaparte III and such outrageous means as nuclear explosions. The current incarnation involves a 278-kilometre canal that begins in Brito on the Pacific side, passes through the huge Lake Cocibolca (Lake Nicaragua), and then extends through the autonomous lands of the Rama and Creole

peoples along the Punta Gorda River to the Caribbean Sea. Beyond the 105-kilometre passage through the lake, the canal's path traverses 100,000 hectares of primary forest, two of three national biosphere reserves, six conservation areas, and the habitats of 22 endangered species, including tapirs, jaguars, manatees, freshwater sharks, and five species of sea turtle.

“The Nicaragua canal will dwarf Panama's century-old 77-kilometre canal and allow the passage of new Ultra Large Container Ships (ULCS) that carry up to 25,000 shipping containers each (for perspective, the Panama Canal currently accommodates 5,000-container ships but is expanding to accommodate 12,000-container ships). The work of dredging and keeping the route free of sludge for the passage of such gargantuan vessels includes the excavation of five billion cubic metres of material – mostly from the bottom of the massive lake, which is Central America's largest reserve of freshwater and rich in biodiversity.

“Eight sub-projects are being contemplated, including access roads, two ports, an airport, a free-trade zone, a cement factory, a tourist resort, and housing facilities. Current costs are projected at US \$50 billion – about five times Nicaragua's annual GDP – but are likely to rise significantly. Supported by the government of former Marxist revolutionary Daniel Ortega, the project is to be funded by the enigmatic Wang Jing, a Chinese telecommunications billionaire, traditional Chinese medicine practitioner, and chairman of the Hong Kong Nicaragua Canal Development Investment Company (HKND), a privately held company with no documented experience in infrastructure projects. Thanks to sweeping and

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quickly implemented legal reform in Nicaragua, HKND was granted a 50-year renewable concession for the project. The investors supporting the project remain unnamed.

“Even with only one per cent of the profits to go to Nicaragua during the first 10 years of the concession, proponents claim that the project is the fastest way to pull Nicaragua out of poverty and address the almost 50 per cent underemployment rate. Telémaco Talavera, Ortega’s appointed Canal Commission spokesperson, boasts that Nicaragua’s economy will grow to double digits, and that the project will create 50,000 jobs during construction and 200,000 afterward. The fine print in HKND’s plan, though, suggests only 25,000 construction jobs for Nicaraguans, and gives no clear post-construction employment projections. Such optimistic bias does not go unnoted. Respected independent economist Adolfo Acevedo notes that 25,000 jobs represent only 0.6 per cent of the total labour force. Further, he suggests that given the planned confinement of workers to company camps, from which outsiders are strictly prohibited, the likelihood of the project benefiting even informal labour such as food vendors is very low.

“Yet, “what else were they going to do?” muses political analyst Frederico, who wishes to remain anonymous. “You can’t depend on agriculture to get us out of poverty, the international investors aren’t creating much employment, and tourism isn’t enough.” Nicaragua exceeded four per cent growth again in 2014, but it would take 40 years to get out of poverty at current economic growth levels. Besides, he says, “elections are less than two years away. This

canal is an outcome and an expression of the crisis in governance.” (...)

“The Nicaraguan government passed Law 800 in July 2012, creating the canal authority. The process of creating Law 800 was at least “somewhat consultative,” according to Madriz Paladino, with “civil society organizations participating in the process ... with guidelines that could ensure the protection of the environment, consultation with Indigenous groups ... and with a public-private system of ownership” in which Nicaragua retained 51 per cent of shares. But by June 2013, with only hours of legislative debate, Law 800 had been replaced by Law 840 and a canal framework agreement. Both laws, written in English and granting sweeping powers to HKND, spawned street protests and legal challenges, notes Hansen.

“Law 840 and the framework agreement give HKND and its contractors virtual carte blanche to proceed. Under prior constitutional law and by virtue of having ratified the International Labour Organization’s Convention No. 169 on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the government should have had to follow protocol for informing and seeking consent for the project from the Indigenous groups in the 28 per cent of Nicaragua’s land that is designated as autonomous. Existing environmental legislation would have required an independent impact assessment prior to any agreement, says Hansen.

“Instead, according to the lawsuit brought forward by lawyer Mónica López Baltodano and 183 plaintiffs, most of whom are from Indigenous communities, Law 840 violates no less than 40 articles of the Nicaraguan Constitution. Article 12 even gives HKND the power to expropriate whatever resources it needs for project

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completion, including lands within autonomous territories and nature reserves. If enacted, the Humboldt Center projects the potential displacement of some 277 mestizo, Rama, and Creole communities with a combined population of 100,000 people.

“Unsurprisingly, the Supreme Court overturned López Baltodano’s legal challenge, so plaintiffs have taken the case to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. (...)”

“Requesting anonymity, K.M., who works in the Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources, whispered to me during an interview in his home that “not a word about the canal is permitted even at lunch time,” for if you are overheard, the “ears” will ensure that your job disappears. True or not, the fear is real. But even in the face of it, so is street protest. Dozens of anti-canal protests have been held to date, including a large national protest in Managua in December, in which 21 people were injured and 33 detained. Such tactics are not reserved for Nicaraguans. Five foreign journalists have been detained and had material confiscated by police, while Belgian photographer Michéle Sennesael was deported.

“Scientists and academics have also been harassed, pursues Hansen. In one instance, the government delivered a memorandum to the largest publicly funded university, the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua (UNAN), just hours before a public meeting was scheduled to discuss Law 840. The memo stated that discussion of the canal was strictly prohibited “within its walls or anywhere near campus.” According to T.R., one of the event co-organizers, “the move was effective; many organizations and academics withdrew in fear of reprisal.” In another well-publicized case, Dr.

Salvador Montenegro-Guillén, professor and head of CIRA (the UNAN-affiliated aquatic institute), lost his job for going public with CIRA's assessment of the environmental risks to Lake Cocibolca. (...)

“For one of Nicaragua's leading academics, engineering professor Pedro Jose Alvarez, “the real danger of the project may be that it gets started, but not finished,” dividing Nicaragua in half and then leaving the “two sides disconnected.” Such a metaphor seems apt to describe the social cleavage wrought by the canal even before its construction, concludes Hansen.

State terrorism of 2013: the 2018 precursor of state terrorism

On June 22, 2018, Luciana Chamorro and Emilia Yang, in the article [#OcupaInss, un precedente de Terrorismo de Estado](#), present what they consider to be a precursor for what happened in Nicaragua in mid-April 2018: the protests initiated by retirees in 2013, and the violent government repression that followed. In the interview that he accorded to Max Blumenthal on July 25, 2018, and whose key points I present above, Daniel Ortega himself also refers to this event, which he also identifies as a precursor for what happened in mid-April 2018.

As the two versions are altogether different, I will reproduce both of them integrally so that readers can draw their own conclusions.

The Canary reports what Ortega said about this event, which occurred in June 2013, but that Ortega mistakenly places in 2010, in the following terms:

“Ortega recalled how the social security problem that he inherited from his predecessor – neoliberal president Enrique Bolaños – became a pretext for an

online campaign that he described as a testing ground for this year's coup attempt. In 2010, following the sudden spread of an #OccupyINNS hashtag campaign (referring to Nicaragua's social security system), students descended on the social security building alongside Catholic priests, demanding reforms while building opposition to Sandinista rule. We incorporated the changes they demanded, but that weakened the system even more, Ortega said. That was the first social media attack we experienced."

I carefully listened to this part of Blumenthal's interview with Ortega, and these are Ortega's precise words when he refers, in the [interview](#), to the OccupyINSS campaign:

"Not long after the FSLN was elected in 2006, a movement of retirees started. Retirees who, at the time, were not receiving any pension at all from the National Social Security Institute (INSS), because they hadn't paid their full 15-year quota required to receive a pension. And when we came into government, the social security system was already in great difficulty, but because we're sensitive to social issues we had to come up with a just answer. So, we began thinking of what we could do to address this problem.

"However, barely were these retirees out on the street when suddenly there appeared a hashtag called #OcupaINSS (Occupy the building of the Social Security Institute), which immediately went viral internationally. And suddenly we found ourselves confronted by a cluster of social networks that was really quite powerful. One that sort of represented a precursor of what we would later have to face. Young people who heard about the hashtag came down to the INSS and entered the building. Many of these youths were supporters of the political parties that had

governed Nicaragua for 17 years, when the retirees without the necessary 15-year quota were not getting any pension money at all.

“And that was also the first time that the bishops of the Catholic Church got involved in a conflict of this nature. Because they too went into the INSS building and were talking with the young people who were there. And they were also talking with the young Sandinistas who were there, Sandinistas who were in favour of the request being made by retirees, but who disagreed with the attacks that the FSLN government was receiving. So, what we did was to accept the request of the retirees, but that ended up weakening the financial sustainability of the INSS even more. That was our first experience with the kind of media campaign that you’re talking about.”

Luciana Chamorro and Emilia Yang, authors of [#OcupaInss, un precedente de Terrorismo de Estado](#) (OccupyINSSs, a precursor of state terrorism), present an altogether different version of the same event. Below I am reproducing their whole article:

“The repression, five years ago today, of the just protest of the retirees of the National Unit for Retirees (UNAM), for a reduced pension, and of the university students who spontaneously joined them in solidarity, appears as a precursor. The state terrorism launched at that time reflects that which has been unleashed in the last two months in response to the civic and popular insurrection that began in Nicaragua on April 18, 2018. The analysis of the protest known as [#OcupaINSSs](#) allows us to deconstruct the tactics of repression, denial, accusation, terrorism and appropriation that the Ortega regime has applied, using the state apparatus to suppress any demand of

the people, and thus trying to maintain an aura of popular legitimacy,” write Chamorro and Yang.

“Repression of protest and arbitrary arrests. On June 17, 2013, after requesting the right to a reduced pension, this through the proposal of a law that was not accepted, UNAM initiates a national protest. The retirees occupy the central office of INSS in Managua, and the offices of INSS in several departments (the equivalent of a state in the US). They announce that they are willing to die in order to obtain what they are asking for and ask the population to support them and to show solidarity by providing them with basic food items. The government immediately implements harsh measures against the retirees, using approximately 200 National Police officers to keep them surrounded and incommunicado, this without water, or access to toilets and food.

“This situation incites many youths to spontaneously answer the plea of the retirees of UNAM, and, thanks to social media and the hashtag #OcupaINSS, they start organizing and mobilizing in order to supply the retirees with basic goods such as water, food and medical assistance, note Chamorro and Yang. Some of the retirees, after being evicted from the building, join the group of young people and relatives who are outside who are trying to pass food and water to those inside the INSS building. Because they had joined the retirees in their protest, around ten youths are arbitrarily detained for several days. As ambulances are denying attention to the retirees who are inside the building, medical students create a temporary medical post and between 50 and 100 youths spend the night in vigil to support them in case of a police eviction. Protestors adopt creative non-violent action strategies,

such as dancing, lighting candles and singing in front of the police.

“Denial of the facts. On the TV and radio stations it owns and controls, the Ortega government avoids covering the occupation of the INSS building by retirees, and the violence used by police on that occasion. The official spokesperson, Rosario Murillo, in her news bulletin of June 18, makes no reference whatsoever to the protests of the retirees, and simply declares: “So Much Good News! How beautiful it is to live in Peace! To See Such Tranquility in our Country!” The other state institutions, when questioned about the event by independent reporters, also keep tight-lipped about the issue. The police spokesman, commissioner Fernando Borge, denies that young people have been arrested, accuses the retirees of causing damage, and also denies that any harsh measures are being used by the government against protesting retirees.

“Accusation against the retirees and #OcupaINSS. Unable to deny the facts and the support that retirees are obtaining from the population, the government chooses a strategy whose purpose is to delegitimize the demands of retirees and their supporters and thus to demoralize them, write Chamorro and Yang.

“On June 21, Gustavo Porras, then deputy of the FSLN, presents a new narrative to explain what is going on: the retirees are being "manipulated" by elements of "the right", and the right "has a plan to destroy the Social Security system"; the protest, he claims, "is an action against the government of President Daniel Ortega ", and therefore, it is “an action against the aspirations of the people.”

“Porras declares that there will be no negotiation whatsoever with UNAM, and that the government's only response will be a show of force: state workers throughout Nicaragua will be mobilized in a counter-march, this to show that "the nation" is on the side of the government and not on that of the retirees. The police spokesman also accuses demonstrators of provoking violence, including "hurting police officers", and obeying "dark and malicious interests that perversely seek to discredit and delegitimize the work of the police." Portraying protestors in this manner, as public “enemies” that must be eliminated, legitimizes using police violence against them, argue Chamorro and Yang.

“State Terrorism: # J22NoSeOlvida. At dawn on June 22, 2013 at 4 o'clock in the morning, the camp of protestors is attacked. Approximately 300 hooded armed civilians linked to the Sandinista Youth July 19 (JS) arrive at the site in four trucks, property of the Mayor of Managua. They assault more than 50 youth and 35 retirees, spraying gasoline on them, threatening them with death and rape, stripping and assaulting them with sticks, hammers, machetes and firearms. In addition, they steal about \$ 80,000 of their personal belongings, including seven cars and donations they had received in support of the protest. Cars passing by the scene notify state firemen, but the latter refuse to come and help the protestors who are victims of aggression. And all this happens in the presence of at least 30 members of the National Police who are present, guarding the INSS building.

“The use of state resources and institutions makes it ultra-clear that the whole operation is planned by the top leaders of the Ortega regime. The auxiliary bishop

of Managua, Monsignor Silvio José Báez, describes this operation as "state terrorism."

"This was not the first time, note Luciana Chamorro and Emilia Yang, that para-military forces had used violence in urban areas of the country; however, the level of violence against the #OcupaINSS camp exceeds that previously used. The logic of such violence in the operation was clear: spreading fear in youth so that, by humiliating them with torture techniques such as undressing them by force, they would never again dare to participate in protests.

"Appropriation of the demand and dissemination of information in social networks. Two hours later, garbage trucks from the City Hall of Managua show up on the site and collect what is left of the medical and protest camp. Simultaneously a group of the Sandinista Youth July 19, led by Pedro Orozco, who according to journalistic investigations was the organizer of the operation of violence, appear on the site with their T-shirts, on which is printed "Peace and Love", the words stolen from John Lennon's song.

"The Sandinista Youth July 19, when questioned by the media and authorities of the Catholic Church, affirm that they are in favour of a reduced pension for the retirees.

"To portray a violent assault as an act of "Peace and love" appears, to say the least, very cynical, note the authors.

"In an effort to counter the online discourse of protestors, the government organizes workshops to train its activists in the use of social media, creating the hashtag #AmiNoMeEnganaLaDerecha (The Right Won't Fool Me) and false profiles (bots). The Ortega couple thus demonstrates its ability to change

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organizational tactics, by trying to control all public spaces, in the media, and on the Internet.

“Two days later, on June 24, an event called "Act in Support of the Government and Retirees" is held, in which the government, with no shame whatsoever, tries to transform its discourse, alleging that the march was is being held in support of the demand of retirees for a reduced pension.

“The "defense of the rights " of retirees thereafter turns into a key element of official government propaganda. And three weeks later, in front of a square full of spectators celebrating the 34th anniversary of the Sandinista Popular Revolution, Daniel Ortega issues Decree, No. 28-2013, which restores the reduced pension requested by the retirees.

“Basically, the government was willing to give in to the demand for a reduced pension, but only after removing from the equation those portrayed as the "enemy", namely the youth who had spontaneously supported the protest of retirees. Thus, making it clear that in this dictatorship "only the FSLN" can speak on behalf of the people and their interests.

“The case of #OcupaINSS illustrates how the Ortega government operates, using state resources, including trucks from the mayor's office in Managua, the public health and first aid system, the National Police, and the justice system in carrying out a high-profile criminal act. The violence and robbery experienced by the youth protestors in 2013, though properly reported to authorities, has gone nowhere in the last five years, the Public Ministry and the National Police refusing to follow up on complaints. Being able to commit such crimes, with the complicity of the State and in total impunity, represents the symptom of the

profound decomposition of state institutions and their lack of autonomy, relative to the Ortega-Murillo couple.

“To face the present popular insurrection that has erupted in Nicaragua, the Ortega government has used, and is still using the same strategies analyzed in this essay and that were used in 2013. However, now that the regime has gone to the point of killing protestors, these strategies are not working, and the government is unable to govern without using force and continuing to massacre. As it loses popular legitimacy, state terrorism in the last two months has adopted a new dimension, instilling terror with the use of snipers, arming the paramilitary with war weapons and even using chemical weapons. However, our own history is witness to the fact that power cannot be sustained with weapons alone.

“It is up to a free Nicaragua, conclude Luciana Chamorro and Emilia Yang, to investigate the depth of the state terrorism apparatus that is being implemented, and to bring to justice those who, in their position of power, are behind it. To bring about a Nicaragua of truth and justice, we cry out louder than ever before #J22NoSeOlvida.”

Gioconda Belli: open letter to OAS secretary general

On June 7, 2018, the renowned and award-winning Nicaraguan writer, [Gioconda Belli](#), addressed an [open letter](#) to Luis Almagro, Secretary General of the OAS. Below, extracts of her letter:

“I can understand that it is difficult for you to fathom that Daniel Ortega, one of the nine leaders of the Sandinista Revolution, has become a dictator.

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“The beautiful accomplishment of our revolution blinds those who still think that the FSLN that returned to power in 2007 in Nicaragua is the same one they supported in the seventies and eighties, asserts Belli.

“Unfortunately, this accomplishment confuses those who imagine that in Nicaragua there is a left that deserves their support. (...) Ortega has undoubtedly been very adept at disguising the maneuvers that have allowed him to take absolute control of the Nicaraguan state and its institutions. (...)

“Ortega and Murillo have unleashed a hate campaign, asserts Belli. Paramilitaries, police and anti-riot police are sent every night with a license to kill, to sow chaos. It is not the first time this happens. Since 2008, this tactic of launching mobs against demonstrations of discontent citizens has been used against many Nicaraguans. Protestors have been beaten while the police watched and guaranteed the impunity of these violent attacks. It is through fear that our rulers during the last eleven years have controlled the streets of the country. Now they are attempting to do the same thing, but this time people have lost their fear. The widespread and constant presence of people protesting in streets, despite these daily punishments and murders, has led the Ortega government to lose all restraint and resort to falsehoods to cover up its responsibility. In a country that has been at peace and is qualified as “the safest” in Central America, the euphemism of calling protestors "criminal gangs" is the government's way of allowing itself the license to attack and treat them as criminals. People defend themselves with homemade stones and mortars. They are attacked with paid thugs and personnel carrying military weapons such as Draganov sniper rifles, and

who have the expertise to kill in cold blood, asserts Belli. (...)

“Daniel Ortega is a man whose stepdaughter accused him of sexually abusing her since she was 11 years old; a man married to a woman who made a pact with him and acted against her daughter in exchange for a share of power. Daniel Ortega is a man who was able to accuse members of the FSLN of treason, and thus incite hatred of Sandinistas against their own comrades. Honest people, heroes of the revolution, have been slandered and persecuted. Whoever opposes Ortega is cursed and accused of all kinds of lies. I myself appear as a terrorist in a video they have distributed recently, denounces Belli.

“Daniel Ortega is a man who negotiated with President Arnoldo Alemán, condemned for his corruption and looting of the State. He did this to win elections in the first round with 35 and not 45% of the votes as previously established. To win over the Catholic Church, he went from being an atheist to a fervent Christian, and made an agreement with his former enemy, Monsignor Obando y Bravo, accepting to support the absolute prohibition of therapeutic abortion in our country, a right that has existed since the 19th century for women whose pregnancies represented a risk to their lives. It was with the votes of the FSLN that this law was reformed and passed in the National Assembly, recalls Belli.

“How could one ever call a democracy, Mr. Almagro, a system where there is no separation between the state and the FSLN party, where a duly elected FSLN deputy was removed from power for refraining from voting in favour of granting a Chinese businessman the right to build an interoceanic canal through our territory, a concession of sovereignty with multiple

repercussions, and that the Ortega dominated assembly approved in five days?

“And what about the electoral frauds, in the municipal elections of 2008, and the 2011 unconstitutional re-election, the result of a flawed process as international organizations were able to ascertain? That maneuver allowed Ortega to obtain a sufficient majority in the Assembly to change the constitution and be able to be re-elected indefinitely. The National Assembly, the Supreme Court and the Supreme Electoral Council function as partisan instruments, doing what they are told to do. These institutions are not independent, not any more than the police and the army. Codes were changed so that Ortega supporters could be repeatedly re-elected as head of the police and head of the army, says Belli. (...)

“Though what I am telling you is true, and though my letter will appear in the few independent media, neither my letter nor the report of the IACHR will be known by the Nicaraguan majority, given that the presidential couple and their children are the ones who control the majority of TV channels and radio stations in Nicaragua. (...)

“What Nicaragua demands is that the OAS condemn the Ortega massacre and support the majority of the Nicaraguan people in their demand to obtain the resignation of Ortega and Murillo, to facilitate, through a constitutional transition, a government that organizes, with your assistance, a reliable and transparent electoral process, to choose new authorities as soon as possible.

“As a woman, as a Nicaraguan mother, united to the pain of so many mothers who have lost their children in this wave of ongoing repression, I am writing this

open letter to beg you to stop oxygenating this government that, called into question by its own people, uses your endorsement to pursue with its excesses, thus causing the death of ever more Nicaraguans,” concludes Gioconda Belli.

Daniel Ortega’s pact with Arnoldo Alemán

Both Dora María Téllez and Gioconda Belli refer to the pact made by Daniel Ortega with Arnoldo Alemán in 1999, something they obviously view as negative and condemnable. Given the importance of this pact, I am reproducing below a blog that explains its nature.

The reader will note that the pact, though concluded with a man who was basically a criminal, gave Ortega two major advantages. He knew that the FSLN would not obtain much more than 35% of the vote, and he had just been charged by his stepdaughter Zoilamérica for having sexually abused her for years when she was a teenager. Reducing the electoral threshold to 35% would sharply increase his chances of winning future elections. Moreover, as the pact also ensured both Ortega and Alemán seats in the national assembly for the next two terms, Ortega knew that the immunity afforded by being a member of parliament would prevent Zoilamérica from bringing him to court.

[El Pacto entre Ortega y Aleman](#) (The Ortega-Alemán Pact) posted on February 11, 2008, Just another WordPress

“Nicaragua offers an extreme example of legislative alliance between two parties. This case is obviously an opportunistic form of cooperation shaped by Ortega (FSLN) and Aleman (PLC) to control Nicaragua’s politics.” The formation of the bipartisan system that has dominated Nicaragua in recent years began in the late 1980s with the development of a conservative electoral opposition to the revolutionary

Sandinista movement. However, the solidification of two-party dominance was not orchestrated until 1999, when a cynical political pact, called *el Pacto*, was brokered between the two leaders. This undemocratic arrangement, which was negotiated by self-serving political elites to the detriment of the electorate, has been continually characterized by corruption and represents a telling blow to a free electoral process and legitimate governance, explains Just another WordPress.”

“The pact made in 1999 gave to the two leaders a strong control over around 90% of the legislature:” The 1999 political pact between Daniel Ortega and Arnoldo Alemán (president from 1996 – 2001 who is now facing 20 years in jail for fraud and embezzlement) is the culmination of years of political venality from which Nicaraguans are clearly trying to escape with the 2006 election. The agreement united their two parties in the National Assembly and gave Ortega and Alemán control over nearly 90 percent of the legislature – granting the unified duo near dictatorial powers over the nation. The leaders used their majority control for the cynical assertion of conclusive influence over many facets of Nicaraguan public life, including the Supreme Court and the Supreme Electoral Council (CSE). [...] The pact also ensured both Ortega and Alemán seats in the national assembly for the next two terms, a position coveted by both men because of the parliamentary immunity that it afforded. Because of this privileged protection, Ortega and Alemán avoided prosecution for various crimes committed in previous years, Ortega for sexual abuse charges (Note added by author: Zoilamérica Affair) and Alemán for fraud and embezzlement, explains Just another WordPress.

El Pacto has also had effects on the electoral behaviour of the parties since: “The Ortega and Alemán-controlled National Assembly passed legislation in January 2000 that **increased the electoral threshold** for political parties seeking to participate in the National Assembly, further establishing the dominance of the FSLN and the PLC. Lastly, Ortega saw to the passing of legislation through the National Assembly that lowered the percentage necessary to win the presidency in the first round to 35 percent of the popular vote (In the case that no one candidate reaches 35 percent of the vote, the two top candidates are subject to a runoff election). [...] The duopoly created by means of *el Pacto*, effectively brought about the gutting of Nicaraguan democratic legitimacy, concludes Just another WordPress.”

Dora María Téllez interviewed about popular revolt

Carlos Salinas Maldonado, of *Confidencial*, interviewed Dora María Téllez on July 8, 2018 about the ongoing crisis in Nicaragua.³⁷ Below, extracts of that interview:

Téllez: What all Nicaraguans are asking is that they leave now! Leave now! Before there were 300 dead, one could talk. But, 300 deaths later? No way! Advanced elections may be held in December, in January, February or March, but there must be a transitional government that guarantees transparent electoral conditions, which guarantees that the voice of Nicaraguans be heard and their decision respected, but without the Ortega-Murillo family in power. That is an essential thing; they are responsible for the blood shedding of hundreds of Nicaraguans.

³⁷ [Dora María Téllez: “el MRS está en todas partes.”](#)

Maldonado: Would Ortega be willing to leave power or are we going to see more bloodshed in Nicaragua?

Téllez: I do not think Ortega is willing to leave, but neither was Somoza and, in the end, the latter had to sign his resignation. The point is not whether Ortega is willing to or not. The point is that he and his family know that they have a time limit. What happens is that they want to prolong it as much as possible and in the meantime, they want to make Nicaraguans pay the highest possible price, because that is exactly the criminal nature of the Ortega-Murillo couple: they know that they have to go, that a time will come when Daniel Ortega will have to sign his resignation, but he wants to make Nicaraguans pay the price in blood. That has no name. They know perfectly well that they are going to harm everyone. Those who believe otherwise are those who are masked. But people in every neighbourhood know exactly who these masked individuals are; they know their names.

Maldonado: Do you see risks of a new civil war in Nicaragua?

Téllez: Not of a civil war, but rather a war launched by the Ortega-Murillo couple -- a mafia group, criminal, and armed -- against the Nicaraguan people. That's the reality. The offensive that was launched against Sutiaba to shoot at the Nicaraguan people was made by groups -- virtually an occupation army -- led by the Ortega-Murillo family. If you watch the videos and see how the paramilitary groups entered Sutiaba, you will see that they looked like an occupation army. People were closing the doors of their house while these paramilitary groups, walking alone in the streets, were shooting at everything that moves. And they have done this everywhere: in Masaya, in Granada, etc.

Maldonado: Do you see the possibility that people in this country that still have weapons can stand up to this violent situation?

Téllez: I believe that the immense majority of the Nicaraguan people are demonstrating tremendous discipline and carrying out an authentic civic struggle. How many legal weapons can there be in Nicaragua? Thousands. The police know exactly how many. There are certainly thousands of legal weapons, because the peasant has his 22, and he has a pistol. Where are those weapons? One does not see them appearing. Had Nicaraguans decided to take up arms, the paramilitary groups would already be wiped out.

Maldonado: Is it possible to continue negotiating, can the National Dialogue be maintained with Ortega unleashing this massacre in Nicaragua?

Téllez: I believe that making this dialogue effort is the only thing to do. But who has been paralyzing the National Dialogue in the last 15 days? Ortega just keeps on procrastinating, and not providing answers to the demands being made. I think the Civic Alliance has done very well in unmasking Ortega. 'I am willing to talk, we want a constitutional solution,' says Ortega. That is what Ortega and Murillo are instructing their representatives at the National Dialogue table to say! 'Dialogue yes, but the constitution must not be violated'.

Well, the Civic Alliance has already managed to unmask Ortega, to make clear the cards that he is playing. The Civic Alliance was ready to participate in the Justice Commission? And why did this not materialize? Who blocked it? It was Ortega. And who is also blocking the Security and Verification Commission? Daniel Ortega. Who is blocking the Electoral Commission? Daniel Ortega.

Ortega does not want dialogue, what he wants is to buy time; he's forever looking for a way to stay in power. However, he's a dead duck! Ortega's time in power is drawing to an end, and he knows it. No matter how he manoeuvres, no matter what cards he plays, and no matter what damage he

does to Nicaraguans, he and his family have reached the end of their reign and they are perfectly aware of that.”

Maldonado: And is March 2019 the end of their reign?

Téllez: At the very latest! We have to put an end to this government, because Ortega cannot go on killing so many Nicaraguans. That is why we are calling on protestors to increase their civic mobilization, and to increasingly go out into the streets.

In all the communities of Nicaragua people are demonstrating. Demonstrations have started in Rio Blanco, last week in Muelle de los Bueyes, (...). Granada is now demonstrating... There are dozens of Nicaraguan cities and communities where people are now invading streets even though repression is intense; and we have to keep up the pressure. We have to give a blow to Ortega, we have to make him realize, as we did on the day of the national strike, that “all avenues in Nicaragua are now closed to him”.

Maldonado: President Daniel Ortega's advisor, Paul Oquist, maintained in an interview on an international network that a ‘coup d'état’ was brewing in Nicaragua and accused the MRS of being involved in that coup. What do you think of those statements?

Téllez: That man is not at all serious. He goes around making such assertions and thinking that people are so stupid as to believe him. He will not be able to lead people into this trap because they have information. Paul Oquist has the cynicism characteristic of the Ortega-Murillo regime. It is this same cynicism that Rosario Murillo illustrates when she appears every day on television and on the radio and says the same thing as Oquist. While the Ortega government is busy filling the neighbourhoods and communities of Nicaragua with blood, Rosario is proclaiming that Nicaragua is a place of love and peace. Now that is real cynicism! Oquist does what he is told to do, he is an employee.

Maldonado: What is the relationship of the MRS with the protests? Are they involved in the barricades and roadblocks that are being built all over Nicaragua?

Téllez: Our party has been involved ever since Daniel Ortega came to power in 2007. We opposed Ortega and we said so very clearly, just as Herty Lewites did so when he said: ‘I was born in a dictatorship, but I do not want to die in another one.’

What did Herty mean by that? He was referring to Daniel Ortega, to his behaviour, one that clearly suggested that Nicaragua could eventually return to a dictatorial regime. And move towards very negative extremes. Nobody, however, ever imagined that the Ortega government would ever go to such extremes as we are now experiencing. (...)

Numerous leftists condemn Daniel Ortega’s repression

On the very day that Rosario Murillo made her very celebrative and religious speech to Nicaraguans, July 18, 2018, El País published an open letter -- [Declaración urgente por Nicaragua](#) -- initially signed by numerous Latin American progressive intellectuals and social activists, and then eventually by other progressives from all over the world:

“We -- intellectuals, social activists and academics -- want to express our deep revolt in the face of the very serious situation of state political violence and human rights violations that Nicaragua is presently going through, responsibility of the current regime of Ortega-Murillo, and which in the last three months has resulted in about three hundred deaths.

“That such a political aberration is committed by leaders and a government that proclaim to be left-wing, only doubles our indignation, pain, and sense of historical frustration. What can be more painful than

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seeing a leader who, though calling himself revolutionary, as a matter of fact emulates the criminal behaviour of the dictator who he himself participated in toppling! And our indignation is made all the worse when this panorama of state political violence is accompanied by the complicit silence of political leaders and intellectuals who self-proclaim themselves leaders of the left. The connivance of a certain intellectual establishment -- one that assumes to have the exclusive representation of the 'left' -- has mutated in the heat of governmental power into a substitute for the most unbridled cynicism.

“Denouncing this situation, which is as painful as it is unacceptable, and speaking up against the abuses of the most basic freedoms and rights that the current Nicaraguan government has been carrying out, is not only a duty of humanitarian solidarity. It is also an act and a collective call to defend the revolutionary memory; to try to avoid the consummation of this political degeneration that is underway.

“There is no worse theft than that of crushing the hope of a nation.

“There is no worse looting than that which is aimed at preying on those very rebellious energies that are fighting for a just world.

“There is no worse imperialism than an internal colonialism, which, coated with anti-imperial rhetoric, becomes oppressive violence.

“All this is happening in Nicaragua. A nation, which represented an extraordinary symbol of hope at the end of the 1970s, has turned into a land of authoritarianism.

“The tainted memory of what was and still is, like that of Sandino, one of the noblest and most hopeful revolutions in Our America; the memory of the anti-capitalist struggles of a people, suffering but very courageous, now being crushed in an effort to cover up the typical ordinary violence of another dictatorship, similar to those that Latin America has repeatedly experienced in its history. The former revolutionary leader, once honoured by the confidence of his people, has now turned into a dictator, blind with power and his hands stained with the blood of the young. Such is the violently bitter landscape of our beloved Nicaragua.

“We raise our voice to publicly condemn the dictatorship that the government of Ortega-Murillo has become. We express our solidarity with the people and youth in Nicaragua, who once again are mobilizing and resisting. We support and accompany their demands for dialogue and peace, and for an end to an illegitimate and criminal government that today usurps the Sandinista memory. We do it with the conviction that this is not just about ‘saving the honour’ of the past, but, also and more importantly, about rescuing and caring for the emancipatory seeds of the future, which today have been put at risk.”

Catholic bishops’ 2014 complaints to Daniel Ortega

Earlier, in the section of this book titled *Key events of the crisis: April to August 2018*, I quoted the very emotional intervention of the bishop of Estelí, Abelardo Mata, during the historical National Dialogue that took place between the Ortega government and protestors:

“Mr. President, (...) an unarmed revolution is under way in Nicaragua. (...) Here, one does not find an

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army confronting an army. One finds instead a nation expressing everything that it has been feeling for several years, complaints that we bishops had the opportunity to express to the government [on May 21, 2014.](#)”

For the Ortega government and its supporters, this emotional intervention reveals that Bishop Mata, like Bishop Silvio Báez and a couple of others, instead of acting as mediator in the National Dialogue, is siding with the opposition.

In order to allow readers to understand what Bishop Mata meant by this very emotional declaration, I reproduce below excerpts of the document “[Searching for new horizons for an improved Nicaragua](#),” which represents a summary of what the Nicaraguan bishops told the Ortega government on May 21, 2014:

“Despite the government's efforts to overcome the problem of poverty, Nicaragua still suffers from what Pope Francis has called the "culture of indifference." Much of our population lives in misery, unemployment is alarming, the cost of living and poverty grow continuously while at the same time, as has always happened in the history of this country, a few individuals and power groups continue to become ever richer. The poor in Nicaragua ‘are no longer down, on the periphery or without power’; they are simply excluded. The excluded are not the ‘exploited’; they are merely waste, ‘leftovers’.

(Paragraph 8)

“We are concerned by the fact that many of the donations for hospitals and public health centres, such as medications and surgical instruments, that we receive from abroad as donations, are submitted to such red tape in customs procedures, that a large part of these donations run the risk of deteriorating or

expiring. The government of Nicaragua must facilitate things and get rid of all unnecessary red tape so that these donations can reach their final destination with greater speed and efficiency. This, for the sake of our brothers most in need. (Paragraph 10)”

North South Studies Stops Bringing Pharmaceutical Products to Nicaragua

Comment by Ovide Bastien

From about 2007 to 2013, North South Studies would take down to Nicaragua during each field trip about \$60,000 Cdn. of pharmaceutical products, which would be distributed to public health centres in the municipalities of Cinco Pinos, Santo Tomas del Norte, San Francisco del Norte and San Pedro del Norte. These pharmaceutical products were donated by Canadian companies, and we obtained them through the cooperation of Health Partners International of Canada. We gave up doing this, in large part because the amount of red tape that we had to face each year at Nicaraguan customs was increasing to the point of being unbearable. A Nicaraguan friend of mine who managed for years all the aid coming to Nicaragua from Austria, both governmental and non-governmental, told me that he had had the same experience. Because of growing red tape when trying to go through customs, he also gave up trying to bring donations of pharmaceutical products to Nicaragua.

The Nicaraguan bishops criticize the “cruel, degrading, and inhuman treatment” to which prisoners are submitted, especially in the El Chipote prison, and they call for its closure:

“Although we are pleased that, thanks to funds seized from international drug trafficking, procedures for the construction of the new prison of Bluefields are progressing, we know through our National Penitentiary Pastoral, human rights organizations and

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even the Nicaraguan Procurator's Office, that the prison population lives in such alarming and dangerous conditions of overcrowding that this endangers the life and integrity both of prisoners and prison guards. In recent years there have been increasing instances where prisoners, Nicaraguans as well as foreigners, have been submitted to cruel, degrading, and inhuman treatment, especially in the prison of the Directorate of Judicial Assistance known as 'El Chipote'. We have sufficient documentation of the people who have suffered such abuse from different parts of the country. (...) Given the abuse and mistreatment suffered by many of our brothers in prison, we ask ourselves: on what values is our national penitential system based? What training do officers who work there receive, especially in terms of human rights? What kind of criteria are used to select these officers? (Paragraph 11)

"We urge the government to take into consideration the law project, duly documented and presented by the Nicaraguan Human Rights Association (ANPDH) before the National Assembly in September 2013, calling for the final closure of the 'El Chipote' prison and its transformation, for the reasons mentioned above, into a national museum." (Paragraph 12)"

In the gray box below, I reproduce an article that appeared in the Costa Rican newspaper, *Tico Times*, which claims that an estimated 2,000 protestors have been detained in El Chipote since the beginning of the popular revolt in April 2018. Some of them, says the author, are being treated in a very inhuman manner.

Torture, Nicaragua prison holds protesters

By Maggy Donaldson

The [*Tico Times*](#), June 18, 2018

The compound now known as El Chipote once served as a nerve center of military dictatorship under the Somoza political dynasty, where the primary means to squash rebellion was torture.

Ortega himself was held at the complex, while fighting with guerrilla forces that ultimately toppled Somoza. But upon assuming power, Ortega opted to keep the infamous prison open. (...)

On June 12, 2018 police forcibly arrested the son of Wilder Octavio García Saldana, 37, and took him to the infamous El Chipote prison, shrouded in lush vegetation high atop Managua, Nicaragua's capital city.

The institution's reputation for brutality is as deeply entrenched as its underground cells, which reach far beneath a rugged hill in the city's center.

Saldana is one of an estimated 2,000 people who have been incarcerated at El Chipote since the start in April of a popular uprising against Ortega, a former leftist guerrilla who since 2007 has gripped power for three consecutive terms.

His mother has joined dozens of people protesting the sudden imprisonment of their relatives and friends. (...)

In the early days of the anti-Ortega protests that began April 18, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) said it documented "a pattern of massive and arbitrary arrests."

Detainees were sometimes stripped of their belongings and deprived of food and water, the agency said, with some "shaved, handcuffed with rigour and subjected to asphyxiating blows."

The legal director of the CENIDH, Gonzalo Carrion, was 18 when the Sandinistas ousted Somoza, and now expresses shock when describing the "tragedy" of the past months.

"This police force is at the service of family and power," he says.

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The Nicaraguan bishops express their concern over the fact that prisoners who have completed their jail sentence are oftentimes not released, and that this fosters the creation of delinquent criminal groups:

“Another serious problem suffered by many Nicaraguans who are in prison is that once they have completed their jail sentence, authorities simply do not free them from prison. We assure you, Mr. President, that this is a painful problem for many families. We are also deeply concerned by the fact that inside these prisons delinquent criminal groups are being organized, groups that carry out new organized crimes both within and outside prison. It is necessary to urgently address this problem, which could have serious consequences for social peace. (Paragraph 13)”

The bishops say that unemployment in Nicaragua is leading to the emigration of many Nicaraguans, who are thus exposed to various kinds of exploitation, and call for the implementation of a broad national development plan:

“It is extremely painful to observe that ever more Nicaraguans, young people and adults, are leaving the country in search of employment, exposing themselves in this way to various types of exploitation, ranging from the violation of their rights to falling into the hands of organized crime and sex tourism. (Paragraph 16)

“Nicaragua needs to develop a broad national plan whose aim would be to reduce poverty without excluding anyone, to raise the quality of education, to encourage environmentally friendly productivity, to create jobs and allocate them without party discrimination, to foster socio-economic development

with equal opportunity, and promote unrestricted respect for individual freedoms. No such plan exists.”

Then the bishops ask for an end to all police abuse against peaceful demonstrators, and denounce the fact that violent groups often assault demonstrators, while the police, who are present at the scene, stand by in obvious complicity, their arms crossed:

“While we acknowledge the great efforts made by the National Police in guaranteeing citizen security and fighting against crime, **we believe it is urgent to put an end to all police abuse when Nicaraguans are peacefully demonstrating for their rights. We believe that it is urgent to ensure that the national police as agents of order do not simply stand by, impassively and with indifference and disinterest, when violent groups attack defenceless youth, women, and merchants.** (Paragraph 18. Given the relevance of this passage to understanding the views of those supporting the protestors in 2018, namely that it was the violent assault of paramilitary groups affiliated to the Ortega government, and this in the presence of passive and indifferent police officers, that sparked the massive April social revolt, I have taken the liberty to place it in bold).”

There is blatant discrimination in the job market, the bishops argue, and they make specific proposals to address this problem:

“We propose that the lack of respect for human rights in terms of jobs be eliminated. More specifically, through the implementation of strategies and concrete actions to address:

a) The lack of permanent employment and the inequality of opportunity shown by the fact that only certain powerful sectors of the population (grupos de poder) get rich.

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- b) The present public policy where jobs are allocated primarily to those who are in favour of the government.
- c) The fact that the government often obliges public employees, even those not affiliated with the FSLN, to participate in government partisan political activities and to contribute a certain portion of their salary (retention of salary) to the governing party.
- d) Labour rights violations such as work and sexual harassment against women in companies operating in the free trade zones. (Paragraph 19)”

Existing environmental laws, the bishops claim, are often not respected. They recall the complaints of the indigenous who live near nature reserves that are exploited by businesses and individuals in total disregard for environmental laws and with the “corrupt protection of municipal and national authorities”:

“We propose that the government firmly address the serious problem of disrespect for the environment and natural resources. We have been receiving systematic and repeated complaints from ethnic groups living on the banks of River Coco, in the northern zone, in the Atlantic zone, and in other areas of the country, about the existence of a wood mafia that has been depleting the few remaining nature reserves: those of Bosawás and Prinzapolka, of Cordillera Dipilto-Jalapa, of Indio Maíz, and other zones no less important for biodiversity. **Individuals and organizations are operating in these reserves, pursuing their predatory work without restrictions of any kind and totally ignoring the many existing environmental laws. And they are doing so under the corrupt protection of municipal and national authorities.**” (Paragraph 20)

Fire in Indio Maíz Reserve in March 2018

Note added by Ovide Bastien

The mid-April unrest in Nicaragua was first triggered by university student demonstrations linked to the fire raging in the Indio Maíz Reserve. The students were protesting because they felt that the fire was being mismanaged by the Nicaraguan government, and that letting the fire go on actually benefited the government because part of this reserve was land that would eventually serve for the interoceanic canal project. They also were aware that Nicaragua's reserves were being exploited by businesses close to the Ortega government, and this in violation of all existing environmental laws.

These demonstrators were attacked with violence by the Sandinista Youth July 19, according to a pattern that existed in Nicaragua for some time, if one judges by the statement above, of the Catholic bishops. In the interviews that he granted to TV stations such as Fox News, CNN and Euronews in July 2018, Daniel Ortega presented this demonstration as step one in a well-planned coup attempt and emphasized what in his opinion were wild stories -- the government itself started the fire -- posted on social media by internationally well-connected protestors.

I took the liberty of placing two sentences in the above paragraph in bold, because they identify a key factor underlying the student demonstrations regarding the Indio Maíz fire, one left out by Ortega, but important to understand the narrative of those supporting protestors.

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One of the complaints of those supporting the anti-Ortega government narrative is that the Ortega-Murillo family has taken over most of the TV channels and radio stations of Nicaragua. Another one of their complaints is the fact that the immense oil-related aid package coming from Venezuela has been privatized by the Ortega family, is managed in a secretive manner, and does not appear in the national budget. While not specifically mentioning the Ortega family and the Venezuelan aid package, the bishops decry the fact that the government does not respect freedom of expression and violates the constitution by not disclosing matters “concerning the management of the state:”

“We are concerned by the fact that the government does not foster and often does not respect the right to freedom of expression. Groups that do not favour the plurality of information have been obtaining a growing monopoly of the social media; furthermore, discrimination exists against a large sector of other media and professional reporters. We propose that the government foster and practice unrestricted freedom of expression in accordance with the constitutional precepts and laws of the nation. Equally worrying is the lack of access to public information, despite the fact there is a specific law to this effect, and that the constitution itself establishes it clearly. The population has the right to know with absolute transparency everything concerning the management of the state. (Paragraph 21)”

When the FSLN won the elections in 2006, it did so with a new slogan, “Socialist, Christian, in Solidarity”. And Vice President Rosario Murillo, in her daily noon addresses to the nation, repeatedly invokes God, Christianity, and tends to identify the latter with the FSLN, its achievements, and the government. The Nicaraguan bishops clearly denounce this way of using religion to partisan ends:

“We wish to share with the government our concern about state policies that distort the religious experience of Christians and hinder a respectful Church-State relationship. One should not use religious signs to manipulate people for political interests; nor should one arbitrarily appropriate the terminology and values of Catholicism and incorporate them into slogans for supporters, thus distorting their real and true meaning. Unfortunately, the imaginary of popular piety is now being distorted, God as Providence being transformed into Party as Providence. What is basically the promotion of the political ideology of a party is being fed to Nicaraguans as ‘Worshiping God’; an individual human being is, through this false messianism, being deified. (Paragraph 30)”

The bishops assert, as did Dora María Téllez, in her 2013 *Envío* article quoted above, that the dignity of Nicaraguan public employees is not respected, as they are obliged to attend FSLN rallies regardless of their own political convictions. They acknowledge several of the achievements of the Ortega government, but reiterate their concerns about the growing authoritarianism of the government, the violence used against peaceful protests, the identification of the state with the FSLN Party, corruption, and electoral fraud:

“We are also concerned about the fact that people, through a strategy of dependency and fear, are being obliged, even against their will in many cases, to participate in events favouring the political party of the government... (Paragraph 34)

“At the beginning of the first FSLN government in 2007, we did not hesitate to recognize some positive aspects in the management of the state. Among them we can recall: solving Nicaragua’s dramatic energy crisis; offering government technical support and

accessible loans to small producers; providing free education and granting subsidies to parochial educational centers; making efforts to improve the health system; implementing housing projects favouring the poorest Nicaraguans; making notable improvements to Nicaragua's road infrastructure. (Paragraph 38)

“However, very soon dark and worrying clouds began to appear in the social, economic and political landscape of the country (...) It is discouraging, we stated (...) in that same letter of August 15, 2008, to observe that instead of choosing leaders of quality and who are committed to the common good, everything seems to be in favour of powerful individuals and groups within the government party. (...) By April 23, 2010 (...) we noted the growing lack of separation and independence of state powers and other government institutions. **In that same year we observed with increasing concern the appearance of acts of street violence against people and groups opposed to the government. (...) Institutions should not be instruments in the hands of those who govern to transform their abuses and ambitions of power in legally justified forms and actions.** (Paragraph 39. Bold is mine)

“Throughout these years (...) authoritarian regression (...) has been reaching considerable levels in Nicaragua. In this social phenomenon, the role of the Supreme Electoral Council has been decisive. It has not managed to exercise its functions responsibly and honestly, so much so that in 2011 we qualified its behaviour as not only unethical, but also sinful (...) Starting with the results of the 2011 elections, concentration of power, government corruption, identification of state and party, subordination of the

powers of the state to the will of the executive, disrespect for the laws, lack of legal security, influence peddling, political intolerance, domination over almost all of the mayors of the country, all this, including the last constitutional reforms, has aggravated in an extremely alarming way the current situation of the country and its future. (Paragraph 40)”

Given this situation, the bishops make two concrete proposals to President Ortega: the holding of a National Dialogue reuniting all sectors of Nicaragua, and profound reforms to state institutions:

“Given the current political and institutional situation of Nicaragua, we wish to submit to you two concrete proposals, that we are sure our people will welcome with hope and joy. The first is the carrying out of a National Dialogue in which all sectors of the country would participate, (...) the government, opposition parties, and civil society. (...) This in the hope of arriving at (...) an authentic democratic consensus and a new social pact that ensures political, legal, social and economic stability to the country and that addresses the great problems of the population. (Paragraph 43)

“The second proposal that we, as an Episcopal Conference, submit to the government (...) is that of undertaking a profound political reform of the entire electoral system of the country. We ask, with all respect, that you give us your word of honour that the 2016 Nicaraguan elections will be absolutely transparent and honest, that the new and honourable members of the Supreme Electoral Council will integrally respect the popular will, (...) and that the electoral process will be unrestrictedly open to scrutiny by national and international organizations.” (Paragraph 44)”

Carlos Chamorro repressed by Ortega government

In their May 21, 2014 document, Nicaraguan bishops complain about the lack of press freedom in their country. They assert:

“Groups that do not favour the plurality of information have been obtaining a growing monopoly of the social media.”

This statement undoubtedly represents, as noted above, a criticism of the Ortega family that has taken over most of the media in Nicaragua. To help readers understand in greater depth this criticism, I will reproduce below an article by Tina Rosenberg [The Many Stories of Carlos Fernando Chamorro](#) that appeared on March 20, 2009 in *The New York Times Magazine*.

“Whatever ideals Ortega may once have stood for, he now stands for only himself. He was first elected president of [Nicaragua](#) in 1984 and, after losing power in 1990, regained the presidency in 2006, this time not as a Marxist-Leninist, not even really as a leftist. His government now embraces business and the Catholic Church warmly. Although he won the presidency with only 38 percent of the popular vote, he has abused the powers of his office to win near-total dominance of Nicaragua. For instance: in January, the Supreme Court, which Ortega controls, overturned the corruption conviction of a former president, Arnoldo Alemán, the dominant force of Nicaragua’s right-wing party; the same day, Alemán’s party gave the F.S.L.N. the votes it needed to control the National Assembly, writes Rosenberg.

“Late last year, the European Union and the United States announced they were cutting off Nicaragua’s aid because of credible evidence that the F.S.L.N.

stole the municipal elections held in November. In addition, Ortega is trying to amend the Constitution to eliminate term limits, so he can run again in 2011. He has become an old-fashioned Latin *caudillo*. His ideology is no longer Marxism but simply Danielism. (...)

“If you are an independent journalist in a country in which independent journalism is seen as a danger to those in power, you sometimes cross a line from reporting the news to being the news. That is what is happening to Carlos Fernando Chamorro, says Rosenberg.

“On a hot, dry Monday in January, Chamorro drove to the studios of Channel 8 to tape the day’s episode of “*Esta Noche*” (“Tonight”), a half-hour talk show of his that runs every weeknight at 10. “The owner says this is the Rolls-Royce of Nicaraguan television,” he said, smiling, as we walked into a studio that rather more called to mind a dented-up 1983 Plymouth. There was one room, with three cameras surrounded by three different sets of chairs and tables. He sat down, and a young woman brushed powder on his forehead.

“Chamorro also runs a weekly newsletter, *Confidencial*, and the top-rated “*Esta Semana*” (“This Week”), a “60 Minutes”-style investigative magazine program that runs every Sunday night. “*Esta Semana*” regularly generates controversy with investigations of government corruption or cronyism and analyses of electoral fraud or the travails of Nicaraguan migrants in Costa Rica. It does this on a total budget, including all salaries, of \$23,000 a month, comments Rosenberg.

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“Chamorro is 53. He and his wife, Desirée Elizondo, have three children and a grandson. He has been bald since he was a young man and wears glasses and hearing aids, and his daily uniform is a button-down long-sleeve shirt and chinos. He is relentlessly unglamorous. On and off camera he comes across as serious but warm, with a youthful energy.

“On that evening’s episode of “*Esta Noche*,” Chamorro talked about press freedom with visitors from the Inter American Press Association: Enrique Santos, the editor of *El Tiempo* in Colombia, and Robert Rivard, editor of *The San Antonio Express-News*. They talked about how [drug cartels](#) are silencing or killing journalists in Mexico and about Hugo Chávez’s refusal in Venezuela to renew the license of an opposition TV station. But mainly they discussed the escalation of attacks on the press in Nicaragua, a country that the [Committee to Protect Journalists](#) calls Latin America’s “ground zero” for the use of government institutions to silence critical reporting. Santos and Rivard noted that the Nicaraguan government recently released from jail two men convicted of killing journalists and also pressured two different TV stations to drop a talk show run by a fierce government critic. They also discussed other cases of intimidation they had heard about from Nicaraguans they interviewed — among them Chamorro himself, whom they had spoken with that morning. Now he was interviewing them.

“The next day on “*Esta Noche*,” another set of Chamorro’s guests continued the discussion. The subject that evening was the government’s recent attack on Cinco, the Center for Communication Research, a small social-research and journalism organization run by Chamorro himself. In October a

team of prosecutors, backed by 40 police officers, raided the Cinco office and over the next 13 hours took the files, computers and books. They announced they were looking for evidence of fraud and money laundering against Cinco and its leaders, Chamorro and Sofía Montenegro. (The basis for the charges, absurdly, was Cinco's work with a feminist group that lacked official legal status.) Montenegro, a colleague of Chamorro's for 30 years, is a journalist and Nicaragua's most outspoken feminist. On Chamorro's show that night, she and two other guests talked about a rare victory — the charges had been dropped, and the day of the TV show prosecutors began to hand back the contents of Cinco's office. But the government was publicly threatening to continue to go after Cinco by other means, says Rosenberg.

“It was an unusual week; normally, Chamorro's shows are not about his own cause. And at least on the surface, there was something incongruous in discussing repression of the press on a highly rated national TV show. After all, in some countries, TV programs simply vanish when they begin to offend the powerful — or their journalists do. But the game of intimidation that Ortega plays with Chamorro is subtler than the Somoza family's crude aggression against Chamorro's father. Nicaragua, despite its recent wars, is one of the least violent places in Latin America, and assassination is not common. The Ortega government, in addition to not having majority support at home, is heavily dependent on international donations — not only from Chávez, Ortega's own personal Soviet Union, but also from governments that care about democratic freedoms. So, it must tread carefully.

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“At the same time, Ortega and his wife, Rosario Murillo, continue to carry out personal vendettas and stifle critics by drawing on the nonviolent mechanisms of the state: subservient courts and prosecutors; large budgets for advertising in newspapers and television that can disappear overnight if the government is displeased; control of the price of newsprint, broadcast licenses and legal permissions, says Rosenberg.

“At stake is more than just press freedom. Nicaragua is a country in which the parts of the state that are supposed to check the president’s power — courts, prosecutors, Congress, supposedly impartial agencies like the election commission — are controlled by the president. The function of government watchdog has fallen to journalists and members of civil society. Chamorro is walking point for both. He is resisting being silenced with every tool at his disposal: his airtime, his famous name, his credibility and his reputation for impartiality (after the Cinco raid, writers from all over the world, including such icons of the left as Eduardo Galeano of Uruguay and Ariel Dorfman of Chile, signed a public letter of support for him). If he loses his fight, the defense of democratic liberties will be left to people with much more limited weaponry.

“Chamorro makes a particularly inviting target for a reason that goes beyond the values that he stands for today, asserts Rosenberg. Ortega and Murillo direct special fury at their former allies and intimates. And during the *comandantes*’ time in power, the editor of the newspaper *Barricada*, the official voice of the Sandinistas, was the committed revolutionary Carlos Fernando Chamorro. (...)

“The government’s decision to raid Chamorro’s office in October seems to have come from the very top. After trying to arrange interviews with about a dozen Sandinista officials, I was granted one by Rafael Solís. He is a Supreme Court judge and an adviser to Ortega. Solís told me that the decision to raid Cinco was made by the government’s security chief, Ana Isabel Morales. “It could have come from the presidency,” he allowed later. “Whether she took the decision with the president or on her own as minister, it was still coming from very high.” (Morales’s office did not respond to a request for comment, notes Rosenberg.)

“It was not a surprise. The government’s displeasure with Chamorro and Montenegro dated back to the days of *Barricada*’s independence in the ’90s; the authoritarian left has always reserved its strongest wrath for the democratic left. But there have been other provocations. Recently, for instance, there was the matter of Zoilamérica Narváez. She is the daughter of Ortega’s wife, Murillo, from a previous relationship and as a teenager was adopted by Ortega. In 1998, at the age of 30, she stunned Nicaragua by announcing that Ortega had been sexually abusing her since she was 11, and she supplied a 48-page dossier of details. Murillo immediately called her a liar. Ortega, who denies the charges, initially used his legislative immunity to avoid them, then three years later had the matter turned over to a Sandinista judge who dismissed the case on the grounds that the statute of limitations had passed. But the case has not been dropped by Latin American feminist groups, who organize protests wherever Ortega visits, calling him a rapist.

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“Montenegro, too, has been outspoken in her support for Narváez and her fury at how the case was handled. She has also enraged the government for her attacks on a recent ban on abortion, which until 2006 was legal to save the life or health of the mother. But during his campaign, Ortega supported its complete illegalization, a move that neutralized the opposition of the Catholic Church. For months, the Web site of the president’s office carried on its home page a headline that said “An Agent Named Montenegro” — a link to an article from Murillo’s personal magazine that claimed Montenegro was a C.I.A. agent.

“Another story that stoked the government’s anger was a segment on “*Esta Semana*” in 2007 that captured on tape a businessman being asked for a \$4 million bribe in a matter concerning a land dispute with peasant cooperatives. The fixer who was to resolve the legal problems was a confidant of Ortega’s. The government’s immediate response was to attack the accusers. Its TV channel accused the businessman, his associates and Chamorro of drug trafficking. Chamorro’s picture appeared on TV alongside some of the businessmen in the style of a “Wanted” poster, with the following list of accusations at the side: “Crimes: stealing land, swindling cooperatives, attempt to bribe and export, falsification of documents, notes Rosenberg.”

“When prosecutors announced in January that they were not going to press charges in the Cinco case, Chamorro tried to portray this as proof that citizens can stand up to their government. But it probably had more to do with his name and prominence, and in any event, it was only a partial victory. The prosecutor who dropped the case went on to recommend that the government use its administrative power to pursue

“evidence” that Chamorro was diverting money from Cinco to himself and his family. Chamorro disputes these charges convincingly; Oxfam Great Britain, the major source of the money, says it has full confidence in him and Cinco.

“The government may be trying to use the Cinco case to tighten its controls on civil-society organizations, says Rosenberg. Officials have talked about introducing legislation to prohibit nongovernmental groups from engaging in “political” activities — it would be permissible, for instance, to feed the poor, but not to work to change antipoverty policy. Government officials are also discussing instituting a requirement that all foreign donations (which finance virtually every organization in Nicaragua) be approved by the foreign ministry. Ortega may also try to remove Cinco’s legal status or push Chamorro off the air. Channel 8, which carries both his programs, depends heavily on government-paid programming and ads, and its license is up for renewal soon.

“Solís, the judge and Ortega adviser, argued that I was making too much of these conflicts between the media and the government. “There has been total freedom of the press except for a few isolated cases,” he said. “We have half a dozen TV channels, a quantity of newspapers, and they publish freely. And there is not a policy against civil society — if it had been otherwise, we would have begun to requisition the books of some 4,000 organizations. Some people have tried to use isolated cases to create the perception of a policy of harassment. There is no such policy. The situation of these organizations is very particular. Some have confronted government policies like abortion. Some have made very critical personal

attacks on the president and first lady.” What struck me was that Solís considered this a defense.

“I asked Chamorro if the intensity of the attacks against him ever led him to think that he was in physical danger. “The moment you become a government target, there’s a risk,” he said. “When people asked my father that, he’d reply that yes, he was afraid, but would then quote a Mexican saying: ‘Each person owns his own fear.’ That’s the way to try to live.” Chamorro has no bodyguards. At his wife’s insistence he agreed to get a driver for his Toyota S.U.V., but he often drives alone anyway, as his father did, concludes Rosenberg.”

Ortega government losing public opinion battle

Given the fact that most of the TV channels and radio stations in Nicaragua are owned by the Ortega family, one would think that protestors have little chance of winning the public opinion battle in the crisis that has been unraveling in Nicaragua for more than four months. In a recent interview Daniel Ortega asserted that when his government cracked down on those setting up barricades and roadblocks, “people welcomed the police with joy, as they were terrorized by the crimes being committed” in barricades and roadblocks³⁸.

However, according to Mildred Largaespada -- [Nicaragua: La batalla por la opinión pública](#) -- (Nicaragua: the battle for public opinion) this is exactly what is presently happening: protestors and the opposition are actually winning the public opinion battle. And the Ortega government is busy trying to revamp its approach, in the hope that it will be successful.

Asserts Largaespada:

³⁸ Uriel Velásquez, “Ortega no recibirá a comisión de la OEA,” *El Nuevo Diario*, August 7, 2018.

“Now all of the channels for communicating Ortega’s story have been weakened: his TV stations lost audiences; no one believes his newscasts and few watch them; ditto his pages on the social networks, says Largaespada. Rosario Murillo’s midday discourses are listened to, but only to know what new insult the regime has bestowed on the dead and the protesters: ‘miniscule people’, ‘ants’, ‘vandals’, etc., explains Largaespada.

“In other words, they’re listened to because they provide fuel to the fire that was lit in April. The same thing happens when Ortega speaks in the public plaza; it helps maintain the people’s ire and reveals his strategies. The huge signposts with the images of the smiling regime leaders are now garbage; the vice president’s “trees of life” are a forest of downed iron; they were always weak on social media because they’ve always considered it frivolous entertainment. That’s the worst possible situation for a politician – weakened communications channels with almost nobody on the other end of them, only those who are loyal to their orders and commands, who at any rate don’t need to be convinced.

“Basing itself on Ortega’s mistaken analysis that it was the empire and not the people who were protesting, the entire content was then erroneously established, points out Largaespada. This analysis led him to order his people to shoot and to begin to kill. And with that, he blew up the entire communications strategy on which the information that cushioned his anti-democratic regime rested. The regime weakened its own communications strategy, and in any case the official media already lacked robust content; it was uniform and thus tiresome.

“In managing to get public opinion completely turned against him, Ortega did the most effective thing: he opted to launch a political discourse about terror instead of a struggle of ideas, says Largaespada. He chose to

construct a story about fearing the leader, and in that way strengthened his image as a monster. Acting in an authoritarian manner, imposing terror by means of assassinations in cold blood, all of this just revealed the brutality of his discourse.

“Today, neither national nor international public opinion accepts the Ortega regime’s story, notes Largaespada. Today, he’s seen as a liar, a manipulator of the political times, an assassin, a torturer, a mediocre politician who erred in the simplest of analyses: it wasn’t the tentacles of the empire, but just some young people who wanted the forest fire to be put out. He erred in his political response: almost 400 people killed under his command. He went from being the President to becoming the killer of young people and children. His presidential period became known as that of the worst civilian killings in peacetime. (...)”

“The recent interviews offered on the Fox News channel, with Oppenheimer on CNN, with Euronews, with Telesur are within this scheme: to begin to make the communications channels more robust. The regime isn’t giving interviews to specific journalists, although the ego of some of the interviewers would have them believe otherwise, but they’re trying to select certain groups of the public – now the Trump supporters, now the Latin American audience, now the Europeans, now those who follow the propaganda of the ALBA countries. (...)”

“The independently organized protest movement in Nicaragua includes many people who used to sympathize with Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo. Yes, people who sympathized with their regime even though it was anti-democratic.

“Among the protesters there are former members of the Sandinista Youth; people who were trying to get

businesses started and who gravitated to the group in power in order to find a way to stay afloat; people who religiously cling to whoever's holding power at the moment; and many people who are simply very poor, recalls Largaespada. All of these people abandoned or distanced themselves from the Ortega regime when it began to slaughter people. Will the Ortega government manage to reach out to these people and reconnect with them through a new communications' strategy? Will it manage to regain their sympathy, asks Largaespada.

"Of course, anything can happen with a creative and efficient communications strategy where one has something to say, someone to say it to, and money, lots of money for carrying it out. And time, lots of time for the message to sink slowly into people's minds.

"However, there's only one piece missing to make such a communications strategy work: credibility. That quality, both subjective and objective, that is deeply interwoven with truth, honesty, trust, and being informed. Does Ortega's story reflect truth? Is it honest, and worthy of trust? Do Nicaraguans have a good enough idea about the events that have occurred recently to make up their own minds about what happened?

"Credibility, after all, is not owned by the person speaking. It is the unique property of the person listening to the one speaking: the people of Nicaragua, concludes Largaespada."³⁹

³⁹ [Nicaragua: La batalla por la opinión pública](#), *Confidencial*, August 3, 2018.

Heartfelt testimony of a protestor

Below, I am reproducing extracts of a very emotional and heartfelt testimony -- [Hay que reinventar la izquierda, que está urgentemente enfrentada a retos nuevos en un contexto nuevo](#), -- of one of the young Nicaraguan protestors.

Choosing to stay anonymous he simply signed Juanónimo:⁴⁰

“Forget preambles and introductions. Who I am matters little. I’m one of the many who has been wearing a mask. I was born in Nicaragua in the middle of the war and the Revolution of the 80s. From my mother I learned the values of Sandinismo and to be committed to social justice. And my father ... I only have a photo of him dressed as a militia; he was carrying me in his arms a few days after I was born.

“I am one of the many who had to put on a mask when the government unmasked itself, asserts Juanónimo.

“What drives me today - or rather obliges me - to write these lines is a feeling of rage, of ‘encachimbamiento’ as we say here - which comes from deep inside, a rage felt by a multitude of Nicaraguans. (...)

“This feeling of rage is like a state of internal fermentation, the fruit of multiple and repeated, setbacks, anger, frustrations and humiliations, all buried in one’s subconscious and whose slow maceration ends up suddenly wiping out fear and causing highly flammable vapours. And it is precisely the eruption of this rage that triggered the crisis in which Nicaragua is immersed since April 19, states Juanónimo.

⁴⁰ [Hay que reinventar la izquierda, que está urgentemente enfrentada a retos nuevos en un contexto nuevo](#), August 8, 2018, Nicaragua Investiga.

“But now another rage has started boiling in me and in many of my comrades. We are very upset, even mad, at the reaction of the traditional international left to Nicaragua’s present crisis.

“Very upset about this traditional left, with its doubts, its misgivings and its silences that basically make it an accomplice of the bloody repression exerted against a genuine movement of civic insurrection. (...) Because while these high priest leftists are busy debating and glossing in their forums and their think tanks about ‘soft coups’, ‘color revolutions’ and the imperialist theses of Gene Sharp, the thugs of the Ortega-Murillo regime, emboldened and strengthened in their ‘revolutionary’ holy war, are busy carrying out a systematic manhunt, kidnapping and killing opponents - preferably unarmed, of course - that they portray as ‘vandals’, ‘criminals’ and ‘terrorists’, asserts Juanónimo.

“What marvellous ideological theses these are, capable of transforming what is a legitimate social protest into a mere CIA coup plot! And how useful for Ortega and Murillo, who can defend the businesses they own and justify their numerous misdeeds while presenting themselves as irreproachable revolutionaries being harassed by a horde of young ‘right-wing vandals financed by Imperialism’ ... youths who were just trying to do exactly what they did 40 years ago during the revolution, remove a dictator! How ironic!

“And what contempt! Could it be that whenever a popular uprising is not framed within an adequate strategic context, does not take place at the right time, and is not decided by them and directed by them, it has no validity? Could it be that struggling against a dictatorship is okay when the latter is right-wing, but

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not okay when it proclaims itself to be left-wing, asks Juanónimo.

“It must be that we are young, uneducated, short-sighted, with no theoretical basis and no life experience whatsoever. For what we perceive as a democratic struggle against authoritarianism, they view as a large-scale conspiracy against the left, and a strategic battle that the left, which has been losing space, cannot afford to lose. What bad luck that our struggle would happen to be too similar to those coined ‘color revolutions’ to be approved by the high priests of revolutions!

“Allow me, gentlemen of the traditional left (I say gentlemen, because unfortunately there are virtually no women in this group) to share the following reflections with you.

“For one thing, we know our history. A story marked by the misfortune of having been born in the backyard of an empire with all that that implies, and also because Nicaragua, before it even existed as a country, was the designated place for the construction of an interoceanic canal, a project that occasioned more than one civil war and many invasions of Yankee marines. (...)

“We are not naive. We know that the gringos will always try to interfere and try to abort or recuperate to their advantage all authentically revolutionary processes of social change, however incipient or soft these may seem.

“However, responding to that ever-existing threat by portraying as a coup any spontaneous popular revolt in which the government is massacring its own people, and this in the name of revolutionary principles, is not only immoral and inadmissible, it is

also totally counterproductive. For while that happens, the gringos are able to appear as the good guys, the only protectors of democracy and human rights. And this leaves the left with the uncomfortable role of defending causes that are absolutely indefensible.

“In the name of what principles and what ethics can such perverse and cruel punishment of the Nicaraguan people be justified? Because that's really what this is about: the exemplary punishment of protestors -- ungrateful, unruly, and capricious -- who are causing havoc in the farm that the Ortega-Murillo couple so placidly control.

“How can one govern with such hatred? How deranged must one's mind be to order that hospital doors be closed to young people who are bleeding? Or to fire doctors for the simple fact of having attended to injured protestors? Or to deliver poisoned food to students tending roadblocks? Or to pour acid into the faces of protestors? Or to send someone to kill a policeman who did not want to be part of the massacre? Or to give a bonus 2,500 córdobas per month to municipal workers of Managua for them to go hunting with a license to kill and steal? And when all roadblocks and barricades have been removed, to continue persecuting, issuing threats, kidnapping, and torturing, asks Juanónimo.

“Just to mention some absolutely proven and irrefutable facts.

“To confuse this murderous drift and this nepotism of a banana republic with a socialist, Sandinista or minimally leftist project, to defend it, or even to feign neutrality before it, is not only a gross error, it is a shame that history will hardly forgive.

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“It is one thing to recognize that today the empire has refined its methods with strategies much more difficult to detect and more in line with the new era of mass communications and social networks.

“However, it is an altogether different thing to mechanically apply such an analysis to a situation of civil protest or to exempt from responsibility a government just for the fact that it self-proclaims itself socialist and revolutionary. In the name of those sacrosanct principles the population of Nicaragua should not have to endure crimes and horrors that not even Somoza committed in such a short period of time.

“This would be nonsense, an insult to intelligence and above all an attitude of profound elitist contempt for the struggle of unarmed Nicaraguans (for how long ...?), who, after facing repeated abuse from their authoritarian government, lost fear and massively took to the streets, thus recovering their memory and their dignity.

“This would be nonsense, in the first place, because the Ortega-Murillo regime is in no way a progressive government, no matter how much it tries, using a sickening pseudo-revolutionary verbiage, to disguise its neoliberalism. The only thing this government has that is left-wing, is the name and letterhead of its party, a party whose progressive agenda has been completely eliminated by Ortega and Murillo, a party that has been turned into an electoral and repressive tool at the service of their political and economic interests, notes Juanónimo.

“What would Sandino say, he who waged a battle against mining companies installed in Nicaragua, were he to discover that the government that today

usurps his name has sold most of the subsoil of the country to large extractive multinationals? Not to mention the sale of the concession for the construction of the interoceanic canal to a dubious Chinese company, and arbitrarily seizing land from peasants without even consulting them or at least trying to negotiate with them and obtaining their consent.

“What is left-wing about a man capable of concocting numerous schemes in order to perpetuate himself in power, he, his wife and their numerous sons and daughters, each of them in charge of companies, businesses, concessions, TV channels, etc.?

“How can a man like Ortega continue being a reference of the left after it has been more than proven that he sexually abused his stepdaughter Zoilamérica for several years, when she was still a teenager?

“How can a man be considered left-wing after agreeing with the Catholic Church on a medieval law that criminalizes abortion, even if it is therapeutic?
(...)

“Dear left-wing intellectuals: instead of continuing to twist reality to make it fit into your obsolete theories, instead of defending the indefensible, try to at least find a hole in your speculations to justify that a handful of very revolted people -- without weapons, without resources, and with no contact whatsoever with the CIA -- have the right to exist, to express themselves and to fight for their rights and their progressive ideals, asserts Juanónimo. (...)

“The left is now facing urgent and pressing challenges and this in a new context, one in which there are no clear questions and no clear answers and much less absolute certainties or theories. There are things that the left does not manage to understand. But there is

something much worse than not understanding: being convinced that one understands and coming up with inappropriate answers. Be it as it may, there are principles, in the meantime, that must be grasped. Without ethics and humanism there is no such thing as a left, concludes Juanónimo.”

Envío’s August 2018 editorial

Envío, whose articles I have often cited in this book, is a magazine founded in 1981 by the Jesuit university in Managua known as the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua (UNAN). Initially, it defined its mission as offering critical support to the Sandinista Revolution of the 1980s, inspired by the values of liberation theology. And in the 1990s it also started to “cover [Central America](#) and the [Caribbean](#) region as a whole, along with international sociopolitical themes.”⁴¹

In its August 2018 issue, *Envío* writes an editorial titled, [El mundo ya sabe lo que pasa en Nicaragua](#) (The World Now Knows What’s Happening in Nicaragua). In this editorial, it recalls the many warnings that Ernesto Cardenal made in recent years about the growing authoritarianism of the Ortega government. And it argues that the massive April social revolt and the harsh repression with which it was met, proves that he was right.

During the Sandinista Revolutionary government of the 1980s, Ernesto Cardenal was Nicaragua’s Minister of Culture. His brother Fernando, also a Jesuit priest, was Minister of Education, and organized the United Nations award winning Literacy Crusade that took place less than a year following the toppling of the Somoza dictatorship. In his 2005 book *La revolución perdida* (The Lost Revolution), Ernesto Cardenal presents a fascinating account of the

⁴¹ [Wikipedia](#), consulted on August 12, 2018.

revolution and its main achievements and denounces the fact that the FSLN party has shifted away from its revolutionary values. His critique of Rosario Murillo in this book is particularly scathing.

Below, excerpts of *Envío*'s editorial:

“With the first deadly shots fired by riot police on April 19, the civic insurrection began. Thus started the first repressive phase of the Ortega government. Later, there were mass mobilizations and protestors raised hundreds of roadblocks and barricades throughout the country. The second repressive phase consisted in “clean-up operations” that caused rivers of blood. We are now in a third phase. The high cost in lives of civic rebellion has triggered increasing international pressure. The Ortega government is now repressing -- kidnapping people, jailing them, and submitting them to trials ... and considers that the country is now ‘normalized’. However, Nicaragua is experiencing an obvious abnormality and although the future is uncertain, civic resistance seems prepared to manage it. (Italics are those of Envío)

“In the last few years the priest and poet Ernesto Cardenal, lifelong “ambassador” of Nicaragua in many parts of the world, would constantly repeat wherever he would travel: ‘The world must know what is happening in Nicaragua’. Besides reading his poems, he would point out that Daniel Ortega had taken absolute control of all state institutions, committed considerable and repeated electoral fraud, was guilty of corruption and impunity, that his regime expressed an authoritarianism bordering on dictatorship. Cardenal warns that a dynasty is in the making, asserts *Envío*.

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“Some would listen to Cardenal, and others would blame his messages on the metaphorical excesses of a poet. After all, world public opinion about Nicaragua was not negative: the country was experiencing economic growth, there was foreign investment, there was stability and security, extreme poverty was diminishing, the widespread violence being experienced in neighbouring Central American countries was not present in Nicaragua, and, also and most importantly, the Nicaraguan people, so deeply affected by war in the past, seemed to feel at peace and satisfied with their situation. April changed everything. Within Nicaragua. And beyond its borders. Today the world now knows what is happening here, argues *Envío*. (...)

“From mid-June to mid-July terror spread throughout the country. The Ortega government then launched what it called "clean-up operations." Policemen and paramilitary groups arrived at each municipality as an army of occupation, intimidating with their presence and shooting indiscriminately at whoever was in the streets, targeting in particular those defending barricades and roadblocks. They were accompanied by mechanical shovels that demolished the structures erected with cobblestones, stones or other material. Thus fell the symbols of the rebellion in the still resisting neighbourhoods and communities, artisanal walls built by the population as a defense against invasions of police and hooded paramilitary groups.

“Particular cruelty and criminality were used by the Ortega government in dismantling the roadblocks in Jinotepe, Carazo. That single operation resulted in 24 casualties and dozens of people were abducted and then imprisoned, according to the Nicaraguan Center for Human Rights (CENIDH). Cruelty was also used

in the 'clean-up' of barricades protecting Masaya and Monimbó, barricades that had managed to successfully resist 19 violent previous attacks, says *Envío*.

"The dismantling of the roadblock in Chontales was also a dramatic and tragic event. This roadblock was the first one erected by peasants back in May, and an agreement had just been made, thanks to the mediation of local church leaders, to peacefully remove it. However, the Ortega government simply ignored this agreement and assaulted protestors guarding the roadblock, leaving an as of yet undetermined number of assassinated peasants.

"The Follow-up Mechanism for Nicaragua (MESENI) of the IACHR, present in Nicaragua since the beginning of July, confirmed that in different places where government clean-up operations were carried out, "a dialogue was being held in order to arrive at the spontaneous and peaceful dismantling of roadblocks in the near future" and as a gesture of collaboration so that the National Dialogue could move ahead in reaching agreements. But repression prevailed, says *Envío*.

The last barricades that fell, leaving three dead and a dozen wounded and another imprisoned were those of the "Sandino" neighbourhood in Jinotega, known as "el Monimbó del Norte." It was on July 23.

"Human Rights Watch Director, José Miguel Vivanco, made the following comment about the Ortega government massive 'clean-up operations', notes *Envío*:

"In about 30 years of observing the human rights situation in different countries of the world I have never seen anything like what I have been seeing in

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Nicaragua. Nowhere have we witnessed joint actions of heavily armed policemen and thugs going all over the country, community by community, shooting, kidnapping, and then celebrating in the streets as if they had defeated an enemy in war ... It's shameful, it's brutal; this repression is ruthless.”

“The "clean-up operations" increased the death toll, both on the side of those who defended the barricades and roadblocks, as well as the police and paramilitaries who were attacking them.

“CENIDH provides a detailed follow-up of the casualties that Nicaragua presently mourns. The human rights body has documented 306 casualties from April 19 to August 4. Of these, 51 are police and paramilitary. The president of CENIDH, Vilma Nuñez, affirms that those who oppose the regime have also caused deaths when attacked. Even with handmade weapons one can kill.

"What we are living," asserts Nuñez, "is not a war between equals. Of course, we also know that not all protestors are praying angels... and that police and paramilitaries have died. We also find those deaths painful and we document them. The government is responsible for those deaths because it has sent them not only to kill, but also to die ... I also do not rule out that the government has been causing some of those deaths. They are capable of everything."

(Author's note: this seems to corroborate the testimony of the anonymous protestor whose testimony I presented above. What is revolutionary, he said, about the Ortega government "sending someone to kill a policeman who did not want to be part of the massacre?") (...)

“Of the 306 people killed, 21 are children and adolescents, under 17 years of age. The number of injured is quite inaccurate because most of those who were injured did not go to hospitals or health centers for fear of being captured. CENIDH estimates that 2,200 individuals were injured, many of them seriously and many with lifelong disabilities. Equally imprecise is the number of kidnapped and captured without a warrant. Of these, according to the CENIDH, 300 individuals, most of them young, were detained in different police units as of August 4. In the jail known as El Chipote in Managua, 70 individuals were imprisoned, asserts *Envío*. (...)

“How many of the more than 2,000, arrested and imprisoned have been tortured in prison? According to a lawyer from CENIDH, "only 14 reported being tortured, but we believe there are many more, as victims who suffer torture do not usually report it. What we do know for sure is that in practically all the cases of those against whom charges are being laid, and a process is being initiated against them, relatives have told us that they have been tortured."

“According to CENIDH, there are at least 2,500 individuals throughout the country who have been arrested and then released after only a few days in prisons. The Catholic Church, as well as members of the Civic Alliance who were part of the "verification commission" that emerged from an agreement reached at the National Dialogue table, played a fundamental mediating role in these releases. This commission would present to the government lists of detainees for which it advocated and got them to release some. However, the government stopped responding to the

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commission since the dialogue stalled in June, says *Envío*. (...)

“In the third phase of repression, once the "clean-up" operation was completed and all barricades and roadblocks had been removed, the Ortega government focused its energy on another type of clean-up: ridding Nicaragua, in a nation-wide crackdown, of all leaders of the protests, and of all public employees ‘unloyal’ to state institutions. Some are kidnapped by police and paramilitaries and then prosecutors and judges lay charges against them. Others are simply fired and lose their jobs. All are considered terrorists.

“In the case of the captured and incarcerated, although the route that took them from their home to the courts is full of arbitrariness and illegalities, the regime, expert for eleven years in functioning with the appearance of legality, has now used the same technique, comments *Envío*.

“On July 16, as a matter of urgency, the National Assembly, controlled by a majority of FSLN deputies, approved an anti-terrorist law, which imposes penalties of between 15 and 20 years to anyone who intends, in any way "to alter the constitutional order." The law sanctions "who by whatever means gathers, captures, channels, deposits, transfers, secures, administers, protects, intermediates, lends, provides or delivers assets to commit terrorist acts." According to the Ortega government, such acts could be anything from participating in a demonstration, to constructing a roadblock, or organizing a meeting, or simply printing flyers... "Terrorist" is the label that Ortega and Murillo have placed on peasants, doctors, journalists, lawyers ... who oppose his government. In the narrative of the regime, "terrorism" is equivalent to exercising the right to protest. (...)

“The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights - with the presence of a team in Nicaragua, thanks to the pressure of the bishops and the Civic Alliance, warned that the Anti-terrorism Law approved in Nicaragua could be used by the government to "criminalize protests." In fact, that's what the regime was already doing before hastily passing the law and that's what is has continued doing, notes *Envío*. (...)

“In the third phase of repression dozens are arrested and prosecuted, including university or sectoral leaders such as peasant leaders Pedro Mena and Medardo Mairena, who is a member of the Civic Alliance and coordinator of the anti-canal movement; Irlanda Jerez, the leader of the Eastern Market of Managua; and territorial leaders such as the young leaders of the April 19 Movement of Matagalpa and Masaya ...

“Dozens are captured without arrest warrants, both on the street and in their homes, both day and night. Dozens are today collectively prosecuted with countless legal anomalies in closed-door trials, without their relatives seeing them, without having lawyers of their choice, flagrant victims of a total lack of guarantees ... They are political prisoners, says *Envío*. (...)

“The Nicaraguan Medical Association denounced the arbitrary firing of 135 doctors, surgeons, specialists, nurses, even orderlies, from public hospitals throughout the country. They are reprimanded for having attended to, treated or cared for, those wounded in protests or in "clean-up operations" or for not having shown "loyalty" to government policy. The dismissals began with the León hospital, followed by

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Jinotepe, then Masaya ... and so on throughout the country.

“Those fired by the Ministry of Health receive a brief note, in which, without any legal basis and without any express justification, they are told to leave. All of them feel resentful for losing their jobs for political reasons, recalls *Envío*.

“In an interview with CNN, the cardiologist Carlos Duarte, who treated wounded young people in the UNAN on several occasions when the university campus was attacked, said that 30 doctors, -- and he is one of them -- had to flee the country because of the threats received. Of these doctors, 20 are in Costa Rica, 4 in Panama and 6 in the United States. Another 16 remain hidden in Nicaragua to protect themselves from official violence.

“Mass dismissals of the "non-loyal" have also begun in public universities, colleges and other state institutions. Thousands have lost their jobs because of the tanking of an economy in full crisis, and ever more are losing their jobs because they are victims of an irrational policy of revenge.

“The attacks and threats of the Ortega government and its followers against Catholic bishops and priests have been quite strong in all three phases of the repression, asserts *Envío*.

“Attacks on social networks that denigrate them. Attacks by paramilitary groups, who threatened them when they rang Church bells to warn people that they were arriving, or when they heard them openly encouraging people in their homilies to exercise their rights. Several churches have also been desecrated in different municipalities: mobs encouraged by the government would enter a church, loot it, turn things

upside down and destroy, steal and even throw consecrated hosts on the floor ...

“Behind this "war" is the discomfort that the attitude and words of the bishops, as mediators and witnesses of the National Dialogue, and as coordinators of parish priests throughout Nicaragua, have produced in Ortega and in Murillo. The governing couple expected that the bishops would play a condescending role of "neutrality", one that favoured the interests of the government. But that is not what happened.

"We are mediators in the dialogue, but we are also pastors of the people and sensitive to their suffering; we cannot be neutral," the auxiliary bishop of Managua, Silvio Báez, told a media outlet owned by the Ortegas.

“In the "war" against the Catholic Church, one of the high points occurred on July 9, when the archbishop of Managua, Leopoldo Brenes, his auxiliary bishop Silvio Báez, the pope's representative, Nuncio Waldemar Sommertag, and several priests, arrived at Diriamba to rescue young people who had taken refuge in the basilica of San Sebastian and thus prevent them from being captured by the paramilitaries after their extremely violent "clean-up operation" in that city.

“Pro-Ortega mobs, predominantly male, harassed the clerics, insulted them, and once inside the church, beat them, wounded them and robbed their cell phones. Even the pectoral cross worn by Bishop Báez was stolen.

“Hours later, in the Santiago de Jinotepe parish, other pro-Ortega mobs, this time predominantly female, insulted the parish priests and entered the church, destroying everything they found inside. They turned

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things upside down, robbed, and threw into the street church pews, the confessional and the medicines that were kept there to care for the wounded. Then they set fire to everything that had been thrown into the street. Similar attacks took place in parishes of Masatepe, Rivas, Jinotega, Matagalpa.

“For some, the statistics and facts of the Nicaraguan tragedy - the deaths and thousands of wounded and displaced people - plus an economy in free fall, set the stage for a humanitarian crisis.

“In June, security expert Elvira Cuadra stated: "The situation in our country is defined as a humanitarian crisis because at this point repression and state violence against a population - which is unarmed and resisting - have produced a number of victims that have no comparison with those of any other country in Latin America or with any other similar situation on the continent. "

“The social unrest that erupted in April - the demand for freedom, for democracy, for putting an end to corruption and impunity - could soon evolve into protests and popular revolts for economic reasons. That is just around the corner due to a rapidly tanking economy. Thousands of debtors are in default, credit is virtually inaccessible, unemployment is growing due to irrecoverable losses in the tourism sector and the drastic decline in trade and services ...

“For that reason, one cannot rule out the possibility of a civil war if the economy continues tanking and the regime does not give in and find an early exit, warns *Envío*. (...)

“The world now knows what is happening in Nicaragua. And if it may not have a clear picture of the accumulation of grievances, abuses, arbitrariness,

and crimes that have led to and triggered the popular revolt of April, it is watching with mounting concern the unacceptable present and the uncertain future of Nicaragua. Documentaries, testimonies, videos, information ... show the whole world the ruthless attack with which Ortega is responding to the right to protest exerted by a good part of the Nicaraguan people, and its demand for a new government. What they are hearing and seeing reveals the criminal nature of a regime of state terrorism. (...)

“Ortega's triumphalist and bellicose speech (on July 19, 39th anniversary of the Sandinista Revolution) accumulated "coals on his head," and at the same time that he was declaring himself victorious after spilling so much blood, his international image seemed to be worsening. A few days later, Ortega, who never grants interviews to the media, requested them and granted them to six media outlets. Among them: Fox News, Telesur, Euronews and CNN.

“If the purpose of these interviews was to improve his image, it did not work. Each journalist was given different versions of the facts, especially about the hooded paramilitaries who have terrorized the population, a key issue raised in each interview. In the interview granted to CNN's Andrés Oppenheimer, Ortega incriminated himself when affirming that the paramilitaries are "voluntary policemen." Since he himself is head of the national police force, he thereby confessed, perhaps without realizing it, that the hooded men who kill are his subordinates, says *Envío*.

“Concerning Ortega's constant contradictions in the interviews, the Spanish journalist Óscar Valero, who spoke with him for Euronews, said: "I do not know whether this is calculated on his part and he is trying

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to confuse people, or whether he has simply not been able to come up with a unified version."

"One issue on which there was no contradiction in the interviews Ortega granted to the four TV channels was that there would be no early elections, that he was going to stay until the end of his mandate in 2021. (...)

"The interview given in the same time period to CNN by Humberto, Daniel Ortega's brother who was Head of the Army (Author's note: during the Sandinista Revolution, from 1979 to 1990 and even under the Violeta Chamorro government in the early 1990s), represents a total denial of the confusing message, calculated or not, of President Ortega.

"Humberto Ortega described as "condemnable" the violence with which the Ortega government responded to the first university student protests in April. "The government did not know how to handle the situation," he said. He made it clear that the state was "the main one responsible" for the "indiscriminate repression" that followed. And when he said state, he was insistent about the fact, in all answers he gave to other questions, that he meant the government of Nicaragua, whose leader is Daniel Ortega.

"Humberto Ortega said that "the most important problem that we have to solve at the National Dialogue table is that of the paramilitary forces, which are outside the law. Everyone could see them all over the place, causing terror and accompanying the Police ... They are the ones that have provoked the greatest amount of violence and death," asserted Humberto. He warned that "the government cannot legitimize armed irregulars," and was especially emphatic by

stating that "the Army cannot tolerate that!" For Humberto Ortega, the solution lies in elections. Early elections "are the key." He also gave his support to the bishops and to the format of National Dialogue that already exists, considering it the place where agreements must be reached to put an end to the crisis and organize early elections, concludes *Envío*."

Jaime Wheelock, top historical Sandinista leader, interviewed by Carlos Chamorro

Jaime Wheelock, who was one of the nine 'Comandantes' leading the Sandinista Revolution of the 1980s, and who remained in the leadership of the party until 1994, was interviewed by Carlos Chamorro on the TV program *Esta Noche*. Iván Olivares reported on this interview in *Confidencial* on August 9, 2018: "[Ortega tiene la opción de renunciar](#)" (Ortega has the option of resigning)

Jaime: I see two paths ahead for Daniel Ortega: that of confrontation, which is the one he has now taken and where everyone is a terrorist or coup plotter, or that of acting as a statesman and acknowledging that this is not the case and that it is necessary to solve the current crisis through dialogue, to seek a political solution that will put the country on a path of national consensus.

To achieve national peace and concord, Ortega must take a decision on one of the three levels in which he has authority, something he has so far failed to do: as president of the Republic; as the leader of his party, and as the father and head of a family he must protect.

As a statesman, Ortega is obliged by his ministry to seek the welfare, economic development, peace and stability of Nicaragua, but with hundreds of deaths, he must know that one of his options is to resign, if he wants to act as a statesman and not destroy this country.

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As the leader of his party, his task consists of orienting it, allowing it to grow and become stronger. And should the FSLN have committed errors that are such that these seriously threaten the party's very survival, what he should do as its leader is search for a solution through dialogue, try to find a solution that allows the party to fall back on its feet in the coming weeks or months.

However, if Ortega decides to resort to armed forces or paramilitary forces, or tells his militant base to arm, that surely means a civil war and chaos. In that case, he would not be assuming his responsibilities.

Should Ortega not want to act like a statesman or like a true party leader, should he take the attitude 'I don't care about Nicaragua nor do I care about the FSLN party' and continue following the route of confrontation and bloodshed, even then, he could consider, as head of his family, the harm this could do to his family.

Dialogue represents the solution at all three levels of his authority. And to create a climate of tranquility that fosters dialogue and possibly a solution, two things have to happen:

1. The paramilitary forces should be dissolved and disarmed. They are illegal, undermine the institutional framework, are a danger to the stability of the country, and contradict the constitutional forces, which are the Police and the Army.
2. All persecution must come to an end and political prisoners must be freed.

Carlos: The government portrays what happened as a 'soft' coup, which is a new modality that is attributed to these forms of civic rebellion or nonviolent protests.

Jaime: From what I can see there exists a resistance on the part of the Executive to acknowledge what really happened. They find it difficult to appear before public opinion and

admit that they have been wrong, that mistakes were made. So instead they come up with a whole series of delinquent figures, something that does not really correspond to reality. What I saw happening was a population profoundly upset that unarmed students were attacked by armed groups. This revolt was generalized and Nicaraguans immediately expressed solidarity with the university students. I would not even call it a rebellion. It was a very profound popular revolt in which Nicaraguans asked the government to resign. Presidents in other countries resign for five times less than what happened in Nicaragua.

Carlos: What about the so-called historical Sandinismo? Why did it keep silent, in an attitude of ambiguity?

Jaime: It is important to mention that Sandinismo has been present in this social unrest. A great many of those who expressed solidarity in support of students, those who have been beaten, those who have been arrested, and those who have been killed are Sandinistas.

Sandinismo is on the streets, not carrying the flags of the present FSLN, but with the same ideals as Carlos Fonseca; with the ideals of the martyrs ... Sandinismo is alive. It is a very weird to see that suddenly, the bulk of Sandinismo is denouncing Ortega and demanding that he who appears as the official leader of Sandinismo, with the flags and the signature of Sandinismo, resign.

Carlos: What really represents a party, that officially presents itself as the Sandinista Front, and that Daniel Ortega convenes on Hugo Chávez Avenue?

Jaime: It's undeniable that the correlation of political forces has shifted in Daniel Ortega's favour. Some have abandoned him, but others, including a circle of close collaborators, remain faithful. However, even within that circle, there are people that I know who do not agree with the fact that there

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have been so many deaths, nor do they agree with the ongoing repression.

They consider that historically, neither the Sandinista Party nor the Sandinista Youth have ever turned their rifles against their own people, but now we see them hooded and bearing FSLN flags; we see jeeps with FSLN flags repressing the population. The population: youth, villagers, workers, those who protest.

Carlos: Ortega accused the bishops of being coup leaders, and now wants to neutralize them or remove them from the National Dialogue. What options do you see for such a dialogue?

Jaime: Dialogue for now, is the only instrument that Nicaraguans have, and that the government has to begin to resolve this crisis. I believe that the role of the Catholic Church is fundamental, and that its mediating role should not be changed.

The mediators have a delicate position where they have to have considerable balance, because they are mediators and witnesses, and at the same time, they are pastors who must protect their flock.

They must go about things in such a way that their neutrality as mediators is not violated. The objective of the National Dialogue should be to find points of consensus that are necessary in order to get out of this crisis quickly, without bloodshed. Then other very complex issues could be left for subsequent dialogue sessions.

One should not amalgamate in the dialogue process those issues needed to solve the matter of government exit, with other important items such as thinking about organizing a provisional government, or working on a government plan, issues that should be addressed later by the political parties. The dialogue can be put in danger, if suddenly, instead of

focusing on those demands deemed crucial and fundamental by the population, it is perceived as an attempt to replace the political parties.

Carlos: What future do you see for the Sandinista Front as a political party after this massacre that has already killed more than 320 people, and because of its connection with the Ortega-Murillo family?

Jaime: The Sandinista Front as an organization with a large political base is seriously weakened, but I do not believe that the FSLN has lost its validity. After all, one finds many Sandinistas among the protestors, and I know that within the Sandinista Party supporters there are many who are worried, who have things to say, who disagree with the ongoing repression.

In my view, if the government, if the leadership, acts responsibly, the FSLN still has a future.

Carlos: In this unarmed revolution, are we facing a kind of parallelism with what happened with Somoza in 1979?

Jaime: Somoza agreed to leave. Somoza agreed to negotiate with us. We were willing to be part of the army, excluding the cadres that had been repressive, and there would be a transfer of power. Somoza accepted. What happened is that later Somoza retracted his offer, and that is why we had to topple him.

We in the National Directorate, (Daniel is the one who announced it), we decided to hold advanced elections in 1989. (...) We did it to avoid bloodshed; to prevent us and the Sandinista Party from falling into chaos. And thanks to that initiative we managed to get another government that played a very decent role. We slipped into the background, but years later, the Sandinista Party was once again in government.”

Police officers, no longer wanting to participate in repression, leave police force

On August 27, 2018 Frauke Decoodt published an article titled “[Hay policías que matan y andan con paramilitares, otros deciden irse](#)”.⁴² (There are police officers who kill and accompany paramilitaries, and some who decide to leave the police force) The article discusses the role played by the police in Nicaragua, and in particular raises the issue of the many police officers who, during the massive popular revolt, decided to leave the police force. Below, I reproduce long extracts of that article:

“It was a normal day, a day of clashes, one of the many now being experienced in Managua. It was maybe ten o'clock in the morning. Suddenly, I became meditative and quiet. My colleagues asked me what was wrong with me. When we got back to the Police station, I took off my uniform, dressed up with my civilian clothes and left all of my police-related belongings there,” confided a former police officer, who prefers to stay anonymous, to Frauke Decoodt.

“Pedro, as Decoodt calls the anonymous ex-police officer, is one of hundreds of police officers who have defected in Nicaragua since the crisis began in April. By July 30, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) had reported 317 deaths, of whom 21 were police officers. A local human rights organization estimates that 30 other paramilitaries and supporters of the government have died,” notes Decoodt.

“Many Nicaraguans were surprised by the repressive capacity of a National Police force that was previously celebrated for its community model. What

⁴² Confidencial.

caused even more consternation is that the National Police carried out operations accompanied by armed civilians. Most of the latter are young people; they used to go around on motorcycles armed with bars and clubs, but eventually they started showing up as groups armed with military weapons, well trained and hooded. They are the ones who carried out most of the attacks and murders in Nicaragua. According to national security experts, these shock forces, which evolved into a paramilitary force, are composed of former FSLN combatants, ex-military, ex-policemen, public employees and members of the Sandinista youth, writes Decoodt.

It took you such a long time to come home, we've been waiting for you...

“Pedro was accompanying those civilians who terrorize the people. He belonged to an institution that became a repressive apparatus at the service of the president and his wife, explains Decoodt.

“Pedro’s journey has been a long one, and he opened up to me only after I promised that I would hide his identity, says Decoodt. Defecting from the police force transforms me into an “enemy of the nation”. Defecting means that I have become a fixed target for snipers. Even talking to a reporter can be risky, said Pedro.

“One day I said goodbye to my colleagues. Nobody asked me why I was leaving. I hopped into the bus. I pondered what I was leaving behind, and what I was gaining. I thought of my companions, those who manage to kill, those who want to leave but do not dare to, and of the radicals who do not mind killing at all,” explained Pedro.

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“That day, when Pedro arrived home, he was sad; but his sadness disappeared as soon as he saw his family. They were all there, crying, hugging and kissing him. It took you a such a long time to come home, we’ve been waiting for you, they told him.

“My children kept following me for several days, Pedro explained. I couldn’t even go to the bathroom alone! It’s as if they felt that I had been in danger, and that I was involved in a very ugly operation.”

“His daughters were not wrong. Pedro was indeed involved in a very ugly operation. For several months, whenever someone would shoot at the truck he was in, whenever he was surrounded by thousands of very annoying protesters, or when bullets would come from all sides during clashes, he feared for his life. Many were the nights in which he could hardly catch a glimpse of sleep.

“Several times when we were conversing, Pedro could not contain his tears. It was excruciatingly difficult, when protesters shouted at them, calling them “killers, and murderers!”

“One day an old man asked Pedro permission to let him go through. I told him I could not, that there was a big fight going on ahead. The old man replied: “You have to let me go beyond this point because my son is over there. Do you not have children? If you were to believe that your son might be killed, wouldn’t you not go over there no matter what? If they kill me, let them kill me!” ...

“That day, Pedro explained to Decoodt in a low and sad voice, I broke down. The long silences between his sentences spoke of the horrors he had seen, and the demons he was still facing inside.

“Another day, Pedro took a risk. Members of an anti-riot squad, having received the order to stop and detain, were chasing a friend of mine. I stopped them and told them that they had to let my friend alone. Had they not listened to me, I would have felt that they were betraying me.

How come there are so many casualties?

“There were other moments when Pedro began to doubt. At the beginning, he explained, I had hoped that things would calm down rapidly. Our superiors had convinced us that there were only a few people who were against the government. They told us that there were about 200. However, when I realized that there were crowds of approximately 100,000, then it became clear that it was virtually the whole population that was protesting.

“He also had doubts when the first casualties occurred. From the very beginning of the unrest, I had resolved not to shoot, Pedro explained. When Alvarito Conrado, a 15-year-old boy, was killed by snipers while he was carrying water to the student protestors, I started wondering what I was getting into. If we the police were just using rubber bullets, how could this kid have died, and how come there are so many casualties?

“Pedro swears that he never heard anyone issuing orders to kill. However, he has no doubt whatsoever about the responsibility of the police. He saw people firing who were not policemen, but they were with them. Instead of arresting those government supporters who were firing, and who carried high-caliber weapons, the police gave them free rein. One cannot side with a civilian who is shooting at other civilians, explained Pedro.

“The day he left the police force, maybe what was on his mind was this: police officers accompanying civilians who are shooting at other civilians, (...) the large number of protestors and the equally large number of casualties. By leaving the police force, Pedro abandoned the great dream of his life.

“I always wanted to be a policeman in order to serve my fellow citizens. People trusted us. We did not attack criminals with force. When one entered a police unit where those principles were respected, it was wonderful.

The president's brother

“Security analysts agree with Pedro: indeed, the Nicaraguan police were known to prioritize prevention and community action. And before April 18, Nicaragua was also known as the safest country in Central America. Its low rates of violence were attributed to the relationship that the police managed to develop with the community. Several times I heard that in Nicaragua, people used to consider police officers as “brothers”. However, when one looks at Nicaragua today it is hard to understand why these “brothers” would be killing their own people.⁴³

“According to Roberto Orozco, an expert in security and organized crime, repression occurs in Nicaragua

⁴³ In Fall 1998, I went on a three-month trip with my wife, Danielle Turcot, visiting eight Latin American countries. In mid-October, as we were crossing from San Juan del Sur, in Nicaragua, into Costa Rica, we were taken off the bus by Nicaraguan soldiers and detained for several hours. They told us we had not have some pass we were supposed to obtain. Danielle was literally panicking. I was very relaxed and chatted with the soldiers. “These guys are my brothers,” I told Danielle. And I really meant it, having studied the history of Nicaragua.

because these “brothers” are no longer those of the people, but rather those of the president.

“After the revolution in 1979, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) abolished the National Guard, the guardians of the Somoza regime. The Sandinistas transformed the Police, separating Public Security from National Defense. They created a system where the police had very close ties with the community.

“In 2007, Daniel Ortega returned to power with the determination never to lose it again, as had happened in the 1990 elections. He began the centralization and politicization of many state institutions, including the police. The police force became less and less an institution of the state, and more and more that of the FSLN Party, and more specifically that of the president and his wife, Vice President Rosario Murillo. This instrumentalization of the police was consolidated in 2014 when Law 872, which regulates the police force, was revamped. With the reform, President Ortega himself became the supreme head of the National Police.

“Such instrumentalization of the police force responded to mutual interests. While the police force was able to grow in importance and power, Ortega obtained a strong and faithful institution. And thus, from being the guardian of the people, the police became the guardian of President Ortega. Any criticism of Ortega and his regime could easily be interpreted as a threat to the police institution itself. Moreover, perceived threats could be met with violence, and this with total impunity, since the other state institutions had also become politicized and loyal to Ortega.

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“This politicization and total fidelity to the regime is something that Pedro lived in his own flesh. In Nicaragua few people, he says, escape from having to prove their fidelity. To be able to get a job, not only, for example, in the National Police, but even sometimes in the private sector, you have to have the approval of the local politician, you have to show that you are a Sandinista and obtain a political endorsement.

“If one is not an Orteguista (a supporter of Ortega) when one enters the police force, one soon inevitably becomes one. They brainwash you, oblige you to adhere to something whether or not it corresponds to your conscience, explained Pedro, indignant.

“I entered the police to serve the people, not a political party or a president. Many police officers adopt the values proclaimed by their bosses in order not to have any problems with them. And their bosses in turn only hold the job they have because of their loyalty to the president.

“At the Police Academy every day we had to sing the National Anthem of Nicaragua, but also that of the FSLN Party. In meetings after a long day of work our superiors constantly bring up politics. They insist that the police force is Sandinista, and that only Daniel Ortega's government is good. The message is always the same: Defend the Comandante Daniel!

“Ortega has very faithful and fanatical people, people who pray for him and his wife, noted Pedro. People who say, I am ready to die for my president. He himself does not at all feel at ease with this kind of fanaticism. At no time does the law dictate that one must faithfully die for one's president, Pedro recalls.

“However irrational this may be, history has already taught us that faithful and fanatical people can kill for their ideals. Daniel Ortega has thousands of fanatical followers. There are some who really believe that by defending Daniel, they are serving the people. Pedro makes it clear that while they do not specifically give orders to kill, the brainwashing is such that one comes to believe that one must defend the FSLN Party at all costs.

Obliged to stay

“According to Pedro, not all police officers shoot because they have become fanatics. They were never trained, he insisted, to deal with such a huge number of protestors. And he can understand that a policeman, as a human being, when surrounded by a crowd and told they could kill him, would feel threatened and start firing.

“There are many policemen who are not as faithful and radical as their bosses would like them to be. Pedro estimated that more than half wants to leave. The police officers are told by their superiors that presently resignations are not accepted. If that if they were to leave, they -- even perhaps with as much as 25 years seniority -- would lose all their social benefits. So because of this, they do not resign, and are left with the fear that someone will kill them. Or even with the fear that the police themselves will kill them for wanting to resign. On July 8, a policeman died in a confrontation in Diriamba. His mother claims that his son had asked to be discharged and that his boss threatened, should he defect from the police, to kill him and his family.

“According to Pedro, there are many policemen who do not leave the police force out of fear. If one

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resigns, like I did, then one fears for one's life. I could be shot in the head anytime. For that reason, I can no longer live in Nicaragua, and I'm trying to get out of the country with my family.

“Finding out how many police officers have deserted is hard. They're never going to tell you that, Pedro pointed out. In his own police unit, Pedro said that fifteen policemen had left before he did.

“According to security and organized crime expert, Roberto Orozco, human rights organizations have a total of 300 files, cases in which police officers have reported harassment and persecution for having abandoned their positions. It is the only statistic about police officers who quit their job that exists, but Orozco believes there are many more police officers who have defected than that. (...)

Specialized marksmen

“Although their strategies of resistance are mostly peaceful, Pedro has seen guns among the protestors and was himself under attack. However, he stresses that it is an unequal confrontation. (...) He estimates that the weapons of protestors are not even 10% of the weapons that the pro-government forces have. The government also has many well-trained people. Although these young protestors are very brave, they have no training, they have never lived through a war. That's why there are so many deaths on one side and not on the other.

“For Pedro, there is no doubt that the pro-government paramilitaries who confront young protestors have a different training than that of the police. Those who died did so as the result of wounds produced by very accurate shots in the head, and in the thorax. I, being in the Police, and with years of practice in firing

ranges, I can tell you that hitting a target from a distance of 30 meters is not easy! Those shots came from highly specialized people, asserted Pedro. (...)

Decoodt points out that “Ortega has sometimes denied the existence of pro-government paramilitary groups, (...) or argued that they are from the opposition; recently he said that they are “voluntary police officers”. Some followers of Ortega, both inside and outside of Nicaragua, as well as some people of the left, ignore the irrefutable evidence. However, it is difficult to deny the fact that these groups are the main ones responsible for the majority of the 317 deaths and the violence that plagues Nicaragua, says Decoodt. It is also difficult to deny the evidence showing the state’s complicity in all this. The police force coordinated with these paramilitary groups, escorted them, and protected them. It is difficult to refute the fact that the first responsibility of any state that claims to be democratic, should be to disarm groups of armed civilians, not to protect them. (...)

“Pedro recognized that removing Ortega from power will be difficult. (...) Going back to normal, with or without Ortega, will also be almost impossible. It will be difficult to control those paramilitary gangs that have enjoyed the power of violence with total impunity, he said. (...)

“I am very sad, Pedro says, as one hears the sound of mortars a few streets away. I always wanted to be a policeman, I know I went for a good cause, and I know that what the people are fighting for is fair. But I get melancholic. If ever they manage to get this guy and all the fanatical bosses out, will the people of Nicaragua ever trust the police again? And will peace ever return to Nicaragua again? I certainly hope so”.

UN produces damning human rights report on Nicaragua

On August 29, 2018, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights produced its report titled [Human rights violations and abuses in the context of protests in Nicaragua - 18 April to 18 August 2018](#)⁴⁴. The report denounces, among other things, “disproportionate use of force by the police that sometimes resulted in extrajudicial killings; enforced disappearances; obstructions to access to medical care; widespread arbitrary or illegal detentions; (...) pro-Government armed elements, including those known as “shock forces” (*fuerzas de choque*) or “mobs” (*turbas*), acted with the acquiescence of high-level State authorities and of the National Police, and often in a joint and coordinated manner.”

Below, I reproduce the executive summary appearing at the beginning of the report.

“The present report describes the patterns of human rights violations and abuses committed between 18 April and 18 August 2018 in relation to the social protests and ensuing political crisis in Nicaragua. The report is based on human rights monitoring conducted by the OHCHR Regional Office for Central America and, since 26 June, by an OHCHR team deployed in Managua. It is produced pursuant to the universal mandate of the High Commissioner for Human Rights under General Assembly resolution 48/141.

“The serious human rights crisis in Nicaragua since the social protests began on April 2018 has been characterised by multiple forms of repression and other forms of violence that resulted in thousands of victims, including approximately 300 deaths and

⁴⁴ Consulted on August 30, 2018.

2,000 persons injured. As noted by the High Commissioner for Human Rights on 5 July 2018, the repression and the violence “*are products of the systematic erosion of human rights over the years, and highlight the overall fragility of institutions and the rule of law.*” This crisis has deepened the polarization within Nicaraguan society.

“In early April, demonstrations led by environmental groups, the rural peasant population and students erupted in different parts of Nicaragua to denounce the slow and insufficient response of the Government to forest fires in the Indio Maíz Biological Reserve. From 18 April, more massive protests spread across the country after the Government announced reform of the National Institute of Social Security and the reduction of pension payments. The crisis has taken several forms and experienced different phases. The initial phase was characterized by the State’s repressive reply to public demonstrations and by protests spreading across the country in different formats (including barricades and roadblocks). The second stage (mid-June to mid-July) saw the forcible removal of roadblocks and barricades by State authorities and pro-Government armed elements. The third and current stage, which followed the suppression of the protests, has seen the criminalisation and persecution of those who participated in the demonstrations or are otherwise perceived as Government opponents.

“Based on analysis of information available to OHCHR, the overall response of the authorities to protests failed to meet applicable standards of the management of assemblies, in violation of international human rights law. Although some demonstrations turned violent, the majority of

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protesters were peaceful. In cases where protesters were violent, the use of lethal force by authorities against non-lethal threats and the reliance on pro-Government armed elements, also violated international human rights law. This response systematically repressed dissent against the Government.

“Human rights violations documented by OHCHR include disproportionate use of force by the police that sometimes resulted in extrajudicial killings; enforced disappearances; obstructions to access to medical care; widespread arbitrary or illegal detentions; prevalent ill-treatment and instances of torture and sexual violence in detention centres; violations of freedoms of peaceful assembly and expression, including the criminalization of social leaders, human rights defenders, journalists and protesters considered critical of the Government. At the time of writing this report, the number of protests has decreased which indicates the chilling effect of repression.

“Information obtained by OHCHR strongly indicates that pro-Government armed elements, including those known as “shock forces” (*fuerzas de choque*) or “mobs” (*turbas*), acted with the acquiescence of high-level State authorities and of the National Police, and often in a joint and coordinated manner. These groups participated in raids and attacks against protesters and carried out illegal detentions. Although the Government no longer denies the existence of pro-Government armed elements, it condones their actions and allows them to operate with impunity.

“The human rights crisis in Nicaragua is ongoing, and authorities continue to resort to smear campaigns, threats of prosecution, arbitrary dismissals of civil

servants and other forms of harassment or intimidation against individuals perceived as critical of the Government. Leaders of rural movements (*Movimiento Campesino*) and of student movements have been particularly targeted. This pattern has created a climate of fear and mistrust amongst the population. The level of persecution is such that many of those who have participated in the protests, defended the rights of the protesters, or simply expressed dissenting opinion, have been forced to hide, have left Nicaragua or are trying to do so. According to UNHCR, 23,000 applications have been filed by Nicaraguans (from April to July) for refugee status in Costa Rica.

“According to estimates made by non-governmental organizations, as of 18 August at least 300 individuals, including human rights defenders, were facing trials for serious crimes, including charges of terrorism and organized crime, for having participated or supported the protests. On 16 August, the National Assembly adopted legislation to include new crimes related to terrorism. The trials of people charged in relation to the protests have serious flaws and do not observe due process, including the impartiality of the courts.

“The overall enjoyment of the rights to health, work, education and food has been severely impacted since the beginning of the crisis. The approval on 14 August by the National Assembly of cuts to the national budget will likely further undermine the enjoyment of these rights in the context of a deteriorating economic situation.

“Rather than recognizing responsibility for any wrongdoing during the crisis, the Government has placed the blame on social and opposition leaders,

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human rights defenders and media outlets for what they have termed “coup-related violence”; as well as for the negative impact of the political crisis on the country’s economy. Moreover, the Government has attributed the responsibility for all violent actions to those who participated in the protests, including concerning the 197 deaths it had recognized as of 25 July. It has not acknowledged any disproportionate use of force or illegal action by police agents.

“The repression of protests by the police and pro-Government armed elements led to violent clashes with protesters and outbursts of violence that have spread in urban and rural communities throughout the country. Serious abuses committed by individuals who took part in the protests, including the killing and injuring of police officers and members of the Sandinista party and the destruction of public infrastructure, should be duly investigated and those responsible should be penalized within fair trials. These abuses do not legitimize in any way a response by the State that is not in line with international human rights law.

“The State’s lack of will to carry out prompt, impartial, thorough and independent investigations on alleged human rights violations and abuses seriously jeopardizes victims’ rights to justice, truth and an effective remedy. The lack of independence of the judiciary and reported irregularities of the Office of the Attorney-General and the Legal Medical Institute pose serious concerns in terms of accountability.

“The OHCHR team in Nicaragua has faced obstacles to conduct monitoring. OHCHR continues to request full and unfettered access to the whole country, including to places of detention and stands ready to

engage in dialogue with the Government, including on technical cooperation.

“OHCHR offers recommendations to the authorities of Nicaragua, including to the national human rights institution, to the Human Rights Council and to the international community aimed at addressing the serious human rights violations documented in the report and at preventing further violations.”

Key Points in Pro-Ortega Government Narrative

Having presented above, first the key events in the Nicaraguan popular revolt from April to August 2018, and then the narrative of those who defend the Ortega government and that of those who agree with and defend the protestors, I will now attempt to present the key points in both narratives. Below, the key points of those defending the Ortega government.

Excellent economy and impressive social programs

Nicaragua's economy has been very successful during the 11-year reign of Daniel Ortega. This is mentioned by:

- **Camilo Mejía: Ortega** “cut poverty by three quarters. Prior to the protests in April, the country's economy sustained a steady annual economic growth of about 5% for several years, and the country had the third fastest-growing economy in Latin America and was one of the safest nations in the region. The government's infrastructural upgrades have facilitated trade among Nicaragua's poorest citizens; they have created universal access to education: primary, secondary, and university; there are programs on land, housing, nutrition, and more; the healthcare system, while modest, is not only excellent, but accessible to everyone. Approximately 90% of the food consumed by Nicaraguans is produced in Nicaragua, and about 70% of jobs come from the grassroots economy - rather than from transnational corporations - including from small investors from the United States and Europe, who have moved to the country and are a driving force behind the tourism industry. The audacity of success, of

giving its poorest citizens a life with dignity, of being an example of sovereignty to wealthier, more powerful nations, all in direct contradiction to the neoliberal model and its emphasis on privatization and austerity, has once again placed Nicaragua in the crosshairs of U.S. intervention. (...) The United States will never tolerate such a dangerous example.”

- **Francisco Arias Fernández:** The streets of Nicaragua were until recently “a regional example of security, peace, and prosperity, where a hardworking, tranquil people proudly enjoyed the social and economic advances achieved by the Sandinista government, that had established a national consensus.”
- **Daniel Ortega when interviewed by Patricia Villegas of Telesur:** “Some could consider that it was a mistake for me to make an alliance with the business sector. That, in my opinion, was not a mistake. Why? Because it allowed Nicaragua to move ahead economically like it never had done before. And the people of Nicaragua know that”;
- **Daniel Ortega when interviewed by Max Blumenthal:** “Ortega highlighted the economic progress his government has made through the ALBA alliance of economic cooperation with Venezuela, pointing to poverty reduction programs like Zero Usury, which gives credits for small business people with a zero-interest rate, and the Zero Hunger initiative, which has given the rural poor small plots of farm land and animals for free to make them productive economic subjects. Most of the participants in these programs have been women, Ortega emphasized. ‘People can’t understand these programs, so they mock them,’ he said before ticking off further achievements like road building and public parks with funds from mayors’ offices and the ALBA program.”

April 2018 unrest: a typical US strategy to foment coup

Anyone trying to understand the social unrest that occurred in Nicaragua must place this unrest in a broad historical context. Not doing so means being shallow, short-sighted, and judging things by their mere appearance. And what is this broad historical context? The long history of imperialist, mainly American, interventions against Latin American countries. A history that has been particularly painful for the people of Nicaragua who, for decades, suffered under the Somoza dictatorship. A revolution that cost Nicaraguans more than 40,000 casualties. A Contra War, financed by the US, and that cost Nicaraguans another 40,000 casualties. And now, who in their right mind would be naïve enough to imagine that the US, faced in the last 11 years with a new progressive FSLN government, would just be sitting there, arms crossed, and allowing a revolutionary process to progress in Central America? The hand of the CIA is certainly present in Nicaragua, just as it was in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Libya, etc. And as it is obviously present, asserts Alex Anfruns, in the right-wing interventions in Latin America in recent years: “The ‘conservative restoration’ of the last years, with the ‘soft coups’ to overthrow Lugo in Paraguay, Zelaya in Honduras, Rousseff in Brazil; the failure of the peace process in Colombia, the judicial persecution against Jorge Glas, Lula Da Silva and now Rafael Correa, represents the perfect context for the OAS, this obsolete organization, to attempt to put an end to the memory of the social conquests of recent years.”

The social unrest that erupted in Nicaragua in mid-April 2018 stems from a typical imperialist US strategy. Millions of dollars poured into Nicaragua from USAID, NED, oftentimes through NGOs. Money whose purported purpose was to support women’s organizations, independent media outlets, environmental groups, civil society organizations, etc., but

whose real purpose was to train young leaders to overthrow Ortega. This point was mentioned by:

- **Daniel Ortega in his July 19, 2018 speech to his supporters.** He described the three-month uprising against his government as a “diabolical force”, which is part of a US-backed conspiracy to topple him.
- **Daniel Ortega in his interview with Bret Baier of Fox News:** “Some paramilitary groups are financed with drug trafficking. Others have obtained financing from organizations that have programs and activities. The money intended for these programs is diverted to help the paramilitary get weapons, in order to murder dozens of policemen using wartime weapons.”
- **Daniel Ortega in his interview with Patricia Villegas of Telesur.** When asked if the part of the Contra that survived at the end of the Sandinista Revolution, a Contra backed by conservatives in Nicaragua and hardcore Republicans in Miami, had been intervening throughout the recent unrest, Ortega replied: “That is the case. They started organizing these groups, which not only assassinated Sandinistas, but also attacked the police. They would take over small police headquarters in rural areas, killing police, assassinating them. And when the police counterattacked, those who died were portrayed as martyrs, and human rights organizations and the right-wing media advocated for them, presenting as victims those who as a matter of fact were criminals. It was an ongoing media campaign.”
- **Daniel Ortega in his interview with Max Blumenthal:** “Ortega blamed armed groups that had begun to form since he was inaugurated in 2007 and which were linked to criminal networks in Miami and Costa Rica, as well as to US intelligence services. He likened them to the right-wing, US-backed Contras of

Key Points in Pro-Ortega Government Narrative

the 1980s, detailing their campaign of lethal violence against Sandinista mayors, political secretaries, police officials, and average citizens. “They are presented as patriots” in Western media outlets, Ortega lamented.”

- **By Max Blumenthal:** “A month before the student protesters’ meetings with ultra-conservative lawmakers in Washington, a publication funded by the US government’s regime change arm – the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) – bluntly asserted that organizations backed by the NED have spent years and millions of dollars “laying the groundwork” for insurrection in Nicaragua.”
- **Benjamin Forcano:** “Anyone who is not aware of or forgets the arrogant Yankee imperialist domination will not be able to make sense of what is happening in Nicaragua today. US realpolitik has shown with facts what it is.”

Media campaign to support coup against Ortega

- **Carlos Mejía** points out the role played by “U.S.-financed anti-government media outlets, and non-profit organizations, collectively known as civil society.” He mentions the magazine founded by Carlos Chamorro, “*Confidencial*”, as well as “*100% Noticias* and *La Prensa*, (...) sworn enemies of the Ortega government”, which, in his opinion, are publishing “uncorroborated and highly manipulated information.” Most of these media outlets, he says, “are funded by the United States, through organizations like the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).”
- **Arias Fernández** asserts that the US “coup-manufacturing machinery” is busy laying the foundation “for a media campaign in coordination

with agencies specialized in carrying out dirty wars and soft coups, working with U.S. intelligence and the CIA, in particular.”

- **Alex Anfruns** also argues that mainstream media have been systematically presenting a biased version of events, highlighting the casualties on the side of protestors and downplaying and even ignoring those on the side of the police and pro-Ortega government supporters.
- **The 625 delegates from 168 progressive organizations meeting in the Sao Paulo Forum declare on July 17, 2018:** “We express our sorrow for the deaths that occurred... Deaths that the media on the right have manipulated, presenting them as a product of massacres perpetrated by the authorities, when in reality they have been the result of confrontations provoked by the fascist right, as demonstrated by the fact that there is a similar amount of dead on both sides, among the anti-government protestors and among those supporting the government, as recognized by the experts sent by the OAS. While for its part the IACHR - despite its evident bias against the government - has been forced to admit that those detained by the National Police have not been tortured, in sharp contrast to the coup plotters when people have fallen into their hands.”
- **In her July 18, 2018 address to the nation, Rosario Murillo asserts:** “Our Preferential Option for the Poor rises up against all the perversities of the Plan of the Terrorists and Coup Plotters, a Plan that, **accompanied by an infamous and false media campaign**, a minority full of hatred wanted to impose in our Nicaragua.”
- **Max Blumenthal asserts, following his July 2018 trip to Nicaragua:** “I learned that Washington’s

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narrative of a despised dictator mowing down unarmed demonstrators wasn't exactly accurate. Across the country, I observed widespread support for Ortega and the Sandinista movement. It also became apparent from the moment I arrived that Western media had covered up the brutality of the opposition, as well as its anti-democratic agenda. In the midst of what seemed to be a misinformation campaign reinforced by right-wing members of Congress and the Organization of American States, I approached the Nicaraguan government for a chance to hear Ortega's side of the story. He agreed, granting me one of his first interviews in 11 years."

- **Peter Bolton cites Dan Kovalik, human rights lawyer and professor at the University of Pittsburgh.** After visiting Nicaragua, Kovalik asserts, "I am convinced that the mainstream coverage of the situation there represents the greatest misinformation campaign I have ever witnessed."

Instead of mediating, Catholic Church supports coup attempt

- According to Ollantay Itzamná the Catholic Church, instead of mediating, is simply siding with the opposition and waging a holy war against the Ortega government. He asserts: "Why is it that a mere three months ago the Catholic hierarchy perceived Daniel Ortega as an exemplary ruler, and that now he has suddenly turned into an enemy? Why do bishops and priests, using badges and sacred cassocks, preach hatred against Ortega and the toppling of his government? Why is there not a single pronouncement or communiqué from the Catholic Church against armed criminals who barricade themselves in Catholic churches in order to murder

from there those believers who are sympathizers of Daniel Ortega?

- In his address to his followers on July 19, the 39th anniversary of the Sandinista Revolution, Daniel Ortega makes it clear that to overcome the crisis he will not accept the bishops' proposal to revamp state institutions, and to have early elections in March 2019, without him being able to stand in re-election. He accuses the Catholic bishops of siding with the opposition in attempting a coup d'état.
- Max Blumenthal asserts that Catholic priests have sometimes gone as far as agreeing that pro-Ortega supporters be tortured. "I have met police officials who saw their colleagues gunned down by well-armed elements while being ordered to stay in their stations, Sandinista union leaders whose homes were burned down, and average citizens who were kidnapped at *tranque* roadblocks and pulled out of their homes to be beaten and tortured, *sometimes with the assent of Catholic priests.*"

Satanical forces behind coup attempt

Among all those supporting the pro-Ortega narrative, Rosario Murillo certainly stands out in her analysis. While all other supporters of this narrative emphasize US imperialism and the hand of the CIA, she adopts a fundamentalist spiritual approach. On the one hand you have the people of Nicaragua, the Ortega government, and all state institutions, which represent Faith, Peace and Love, and, on the other you have the protestors, which represent Hatred, Satanical Forces, Forces of Evil, Terrorists.

Daniel Ortega also sometimes adopts this mindset, but to a much lesser extent. For example, in his July 19 address to his supporters he referred to the "diabolical forces" behind the attempted coup.

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FSLN abandons revolutionary values and becomes an Ortega family dynasty

In 1993 Dora María Téllez, key FSLN guerrilla leader that toppled Somoza in 1979 and now director of the MRS Party, argues that the FSLN, under Daniel Ortega, has transitioned “from a revolutionary party to a legitimately Somocista party.” Cultivating a ‘caudillo’ image, Ortega systematically eliminated all historical leaders of the FSLN, branding his opponents as “CIA agents”, “rightists”, etc. In the same spirit as Somoza, he practiced influence peddling, one day making a pact with Alemán, a politician found guilty of immense fraud, another day making a deal with the business sector, and eventually even the IMF, traditionally considered by the FSLN as an enemy. The FSLN was thus gutted of its revolutionary values and became the instrument of a family dynasty.

In their May 21, 2014 document “[Searching for new horizons for an improved Nicaragua](#)” the Catholic bishops of Nicaragua express concern over the “cruel, degrading, and inhuman treatment of prisoners, especially in the prison of the Directorate of Judicial Assistance known as ‘El Chipote’” (clearly suggesting that torture is being practiced there) and request that it be closed. They assert: “it is urgent to put an end to all police abuse when Nicaraguans are peacefully demonstrating for their rights. We believe that it is urgent to ensure that the national police as agents of order do not simply stand by, impassively and with indifference and disinterest, when violent groups attack defenceless youth, women, and merchants.” They denounce the fact that public workers are being forced to attend FSLN rallies and that part

of the pay of these workers is being deducted to support the FSLN; that natural reserves such as Indio Maíz and others are being predatorily exploited “under the corrupt protection of municipal and national authorities”, all environmental laws being simply ignored; the increasing monopoly in the media (without explicitly mentioning that the Ortega family owns most of the media) .

Envío also vehemently denounces the authoritarian and abusive behavior of the Ortega government in its August 2018 editorial, [El mundo ya sabe lo que pasa en Nicaragua](#). It quotes poet Ernesto Cardenal who in recent years repeatedly pointed out that “Daniel Ortega has taken absolute control of all state institutions, committing considerable and repeated electoral fraud, was guilty of corruption and impunity, and that his regime was expressing an authoritarianism bordering on dictatorship. Cardenal warned that a dynasty was in the making.” The brutal and violent crackdown on protestors in past months shows that the poet was right, says *Envío*.

In his August 13, 2018 article [El ADN del autócrata](#) (The DNA of the Autocrat), Carlos Chamorro explains that during the last interview that Daniel Ortega granted him on his TV program *Esta Semana* in 2005, he asked Ortega what democratic model he would implement should he be elected. Ortega replied:

“I want to become president to end presidentialism, to bring about a truly democratic change in this country. I want power to be in the hands of the people themselves. I want to establish Citizen Assemblies in each department (department: the equivalent of a state in the US or a province in Canada), assemblies in which people are the ones making the real decisions. And I want our national parliament to be merely the executor of these decisions, so that power lies at the grassroots level, so that people themselves are the

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ones deciding, with their vote, what seems good or not.”

And Chamorro pursues, showing that Ortega ended up doing the exact contrary of what he had said he would do:

“The second presidency of Ortega laid the groundwork for his first consecutive re-election in 2011, violating the constitution, and imposing a political regime of total concentration of power, through a "coup from above" that demolished democratic institutions. Ortega re-established electoral fraud as a practice, illegalized and repressed the opposition, and established a monopoly over the Powers of the State - the Supreme Court of Justice, the electoral power, and the Comptroller's Office - co-opting the Army and the Police - jewels of the democratic transition. He placed political control into the hands of the presidential couple.

“Since 2009, this antidemocratic system has found a path of legitimacy and stability by concluding a corporatist pact with the private sector, Ortega allowing the latter to co-govern in economic affairs, but at the expense of democracy and transparency. These were years during which the Ortega government received generous Venezuelan aid and implemented welfare programs. More than 4 billion dollars were funnelled through private channels to support the state budget, but above all to finance Ortega's own private businesses and supporters. Ortega was again re-elected in 2016, inaugurating a hegemonic party system, without opposition, pointing to its perpetuation as a dynastic dictatorship in 2021, after installing his wife as vice president in the line of constitutional succession, says Chamorro.

“The autocrat, who promised to end presidentialism, established the most presidentialist regime Nicaragua has ever had, even surpassing with his State-Party-Family system the concentration of power that Somoza had, concludes Chamorro. But when forced to govern without the huge economic aid of Venezuela's petrodollars and confronted with the first popular protests of university students, the Ortega government, which was never designed to govern with a democratic opposition, unleashed an escalation of repression and caused a bloodbath that continues to this day.”

Eruption of massive April social unrest: volcanic explosion of years of repressed suffering

The protestor I quoted above, who anonymously signed Juanónimo, interpreted the April social unrest that led hundreds of thousands of Nicaraguans to take to the streets, calling for justice and an end to the Ortega government and erecting roadblocks and barricades in numerous cities and regions, as the eruption of a long-repressed rage felt by Nicaraguans. That was also the view of Giaconda Belli, Dora María Téllez and many others, such as the bishop of Estelí, Abelardo Mata, who asserted during the National Dialogue, and this with considerable emotion, “Mr. President, (...) an unarmed revolution is under way in Nicaragua. (...) Here, one does not find an army confronting an army. One finds instead a nation expressing everything that it has been feeling for several years, complaints that we had the opportunity to express to the government [on May 21, 2014](#).”

Basic ingredients of this long-repressed rage:

- **The pact Ortega made in 1999 with Alemán.** Both were facing criminal charges: Alemán 20 years in jail for fraud and embezzlement and Ortega for having sexually abused his teenage stepdaughter for several years. The pact assured

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both of them a seat in the national assembly for the next two terms, thus affording them years of parliamentary immunity. While Zoilamérica could not take Ortega to court, Alemán got off the hook for fraud and embezzlement. Furthermore, the pact gave Ortega considerable influence over the Supreme Court and the Supreme Electoral Council, something that would prove very useful for him in the future; he could use judges to go after his political opponents, and he could use the Supreme Electoral Council to hold on to power by committing massive electoral fraud. A third, and very important advantage of the pact for Ortega: it lowered the percentage necessary to win the presidency in the first round to 35 percent of the popular vote. Ortega knew that his FSLN base represented about 35 percent. By making a deal with a man like Alemán whose gross corruption had occasioned a split in the Liberal Party, he not only considerably lowered the percentage necessary to win an election but also deepened the conflict existing within the Liberal Party. Two birds with one stone!

- **Privatization of massive petrodollar aid from Venezuela.** As mentioned by Carlos Chamorro above, this aid amounted to some 4 billion dollars during Ortega's years in power (500 million per year or about 25% of the government's total budget). Instead of having this generous Venezuelan government aid go through normal state channels, the Ortega government maneuvered so that it would go directly to the FSLN. In her article "The Sandinista Front has collapsed, now it is the political instrument of a family", Dora María Téllez explains that her party made efforts, but to no avail, so that the national assembly would

demand that the Venezuelan aid go through regular state channels, appear in national accounting, and be transparent and accountable. While this aid did serve to finance several social programs -- Zero Usury, which gives credits for small business people with a zero-interest rate, and Zero Hunger initiative, which has given the rural poor small plots of farm land and animals for free to make them productive economic subjects --, something that allowed Ortega to strengthen his political support in rural Nicaragua, also and more importantly, as pointed out by Carlos Chamorro above, it served to finance Ortega family businesses and those of his supporters. Among the Ortega family businesses: most TV channels and radio stations in Nicaragua.

- **FSLN Paramilitary groups using violence on protestors, this with complicity of police.** Luciana Chamorro and Emilia Yang, in [#OcupaInss, un precedente de Terrorismo de Estado](#), show that the basic ingredients of state terrorism provoking the April 2018 crisis were already present in the June 2013 protests of retirees. Brutal violence used against protestors; government alleging that protestors are being manipulated by the right, which is acting against the commander Daniel Ortega, and thus against the “aspirations of the nation”; police spokesman accusing protestors of provoking violence and obeying “dark and malicious interests”, and thus presenting them as public enemies that should be eliminated; some 300 hooded armed paramilitaries linked to the Sandinista Youth July 19 subsequently assaulting protestors, “more than 50 youth and 35 retirees, spraying gasoline on them, threatening them with death and rape, stripping and

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assaulting them with sticks, hammers, machetes and firearms” and stealing “about \$ 80,000 of their personal belongings, including seven cars and donations they had received in support of the protest... all this while numerous police officers are present on the scene; then arrival of city garbage trucks to pick up what is left of the protest camp, accompanied by Sandinista Youth wearing T-shirts on which the message “Peace and Love” appears; Bishop Silvio Báez playing a leadership role by publicly accusing the Ortega government of state terrorism in this affair.

In May 2014 the Catholic bishops had denounced the fact that armed groups were allowed to attack peaceful demonstrators, and this with the complicity of police passively standing by. As noted previously, when the Ortega government granted the [building of a canal in Nicaragua](#) to Wang Jing, a Chinese telecommunications billionaire, it faced considerable opposition from environmentalists, the indigenous people and peasants whose land would be expropriated. The Ortega government did not hesitate to repress anti-canal protestors and even harassed scientists and academics. “In one instance, the government delivered a memorandum to the largest publicly funded university, the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua (UNAN)” stating “that discussion of the canal was strictly prohibited *within its walls or anywhere near campus*,” notes Lori Hanson.⁴⁵

On August 29, 2018, the UN released its report on Nicaragua, which condemns the use of armed

⁴⁵ [Daniel Ortega and the Interoceanic Grand Canal, Lori Hanson](#), Briarpatch Magazine, 30 June 2015. Retrieved on 7 July 2017.

civilians by the Ortega government. The report states:

“Information obtained by OHCHR strongly indicates that pro-Government armed elements, including those known as “shock forces” (*fuerzas de choque*) or “mobs” (*turbas*), acted with the acquiescence of high-level State authorities and of the National Police, and often in a joint and coordinated manner. These groups participated in raids and attacks against protesters and carried out illegal detentions. Although the Government no longer denies the existence of pro-Government armed elements, it condones their actions and allows them to operate with impunity.”

That one would find leaders of the anti-canal protests playing a key role in the April 2018 protests is thus not surprising. Nor the fact that one of the key demands of the April 2018 protests was the dismantling of pro-Ortega paramilitary groups.

It is very telling that the dismantling of pro-Ortega paramilitary groups was publicly supported by Daniel Ortega’s own brother, Humberto, who headed the Nicaraguan Army throughout the revolution of the 1980s and even under the conservative government of Violeta Chamorro in the early 1990s. Humberto condemned the violence used by the Ortega government when university students started protesting in April, made it clear that the government was the main one responsible for the “indiscriminate repression that followed”, and said that “armed irregulars” are unconstitutional and simply should not exist.

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- **Ortega makes a pact with Catholic Church in banning therapeutic abortion.** When the Catholic Church launched a campaign in Fall 2006, just weeks before national elections, using posters, billboards and pamphlets to urge people to vote against pro-abortion candidates, Daniel Ortega, who had been cunning enough to make a deal with grossly corrupt Arnoldo Alemán, made a deal with the Catholic Church. In September 2005, he had decided to get married to his already longtime partner, Rosario Murillo, a ceremony presided by his former arch-enemy during the Contra War, Cardinal Obando y Bravo. And now, after observing that the Church's campaign was supported by some 200,000 demonstrators in Managua -- the pro-abortion rally only drew a few hundred -- he made another deal, logically interpreted, not only by his political opponents but also by many within his own Sandinista Party, as yet another "opportunistic vote-grabbing ploy": he convinced the FSLN members of the national assembly to support a bill outlawing all forms of abortion, including therapeutic abortion, and imposing a jail sentence of "six to 30 years for women who terminate their pregnancies and doctors who perform the procedure." The bill was adopted on October 27, 2006, thus overturning a 130-year-old policy that had permitted therapeutic abortion, and placing Nicaragua "among several countries, mostly in Africa and the Middle East, with total bans."⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Rory Carroll, [Nicaragua votes to outlaw abortion](#), *The Guardian*, October 27, 2018.

Catholic Church plays an impressive, courageous, and very humanitarian role

While the Ortega government and its supporters portray the Catholic Church leaders as coup plotters, basically cooperating with those described as terrorists, individuals full of hatred, who kidnapped large sectors of cities preventing, with barricades and roadblocks, people from circulating, etc., the opposition views the role of the Church as remarkable and even heroic.

Reports Carlos Salinas Maldonado, in [Padre Edwin Román: “Todos los ciudadanos estamos perseguidos”](#):⁴⁷

“On Sunday at eleven in the morning the parish of San Miguel Arcángel of Masaya was packed full. Parishioners had arrived early to hear the sermon of Father Edwin Roman, considered in this city a civic hero after opening the doors of his church to attend to the wounded during the brutal repression unleashed by Daniel Ortega's paramilitaries against the civilians guarding the street barricades that challenged the power of the dictator in this city of folklore and crafts. According to human rights organizations there were at least 35 deaths resulting from the siege of Masaya by the armed forces of Ortega, notes Maldonado.

“Masaya, tense and still controlled by Ortega’s death squads, finds in this weekly mass soothing comfort for the immense pain it feels as it mourns its dead. The parishioners listen very attentively to Román, 58. Some women are crying, while he, from the pulpit, criticizes, and this openly and without hypocritical diplomacy, those who imprison, kill and denounce neighbours. False Christians, he calls them. Father Román even confronts those who come to mass to

⁴⁷ *Confidencial*, August 13, 2018.

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record videos of his sermons. "I'm glad that you are recording what I'm saying. When you bring the video to Ortega and Murillo, maybe they will be converted when they directly hear my message." (...)

"Father Román does not hide his repudiation of the man who has unleashed the worst slaughter in Nicaragua in times of peace, says Maldonado. He denounces what he defines as lies, cynicism and manipulation. Manipulation and distortion not only of facts, but also of the Christian message, and even of Sandino, national hero of whom Edwin Román is a direct descendant, because his grandmother, Manuela Calderón, was Sandino's sister. "The image of Sandino was stolen by Ortega," he says. "The guerrilla fighter who fought a dictator has now become a dictator. We have seen how he has gutted the Sandinista party. (...)

"My rectory became a kind of morgue; people were given refuge and it was a place where mothers who were looking for their children would come to inform ANPDH of their missing loved ones. The rectory became a dispensary; about 14 paramedics and four doctors were tending to the wounded.

Maldonado then asks Father Román: "It must have been hard for you to see corpses in your rectory?"

"It was very hard. I have faced death many times, when visiting the sick, but never had I ever seen anything like this; people who had been executed; a boy, barely 15 years old, shot in the chest. As a human being I broke down in tears. It was excruciatingly hard to watch a mother, standing there in total shock, trying to no avail to wake up her son, cuddling him and embracing him. To watch the father kissing his son with tenderness. The mother told me

that she had locked her son in the house, but that he had broken the dresser to get the key, because he said he had to go out to defend Nicaragua. What heroism that of this young boy who goes out to defend his country with a sling shot! He was cruelly executed by a policeman: the boy was in the craft market, kneeling and pleading with the officer, "Do not kill me." But the officer shot him in cold blood." (...)

"In your sermon, says Maldonado, you declared: "They are killing us, they are imprisoning us, our neighbours are denouncing us; that is not being Christian." However, President Ortega defines himself as a Christian ..."

"Go figure! That has been his double discourse since he came to power eleven years ago. However, here we do not see a government that is Christian, because it is killing people. Where is the commandment not to kill? How is it that a government that calls itself Christian is executing its people, is mistreating them, is not respecting their rights as citizens? Here entire families were using barricades as shelter. The barricades in Masaya gave us protection. Now there is no security. Being young is a crime, being a doctor is a crime, being a priest is a crime, replies Father Román."

Extracts from my Nicaraguan Diary

The diary extracts that follow should help the reader understand the historical context in which the April 2018 popular revolt took place. Some of the information in my diaries will support the narrative of those defending the Ortega government. Some will support the narrative of those supporting the protestors who are calling for Ortega's resignation and early elections.

I changed all names to protect people, except my own and those of my fellow teachers accompanying the students.

When traveling to Nicaragua during the reign of Daniel Ortega, I was often torn. Sometimes I felt extremely critical of the government, other times I was impressed by some of its achievements. Most of the community leaders and mayors I worked with in the management of numerous development projects in Nicaragua, were not only Sandinistas but also what Nicaraguans sometimes refer to as *Orteguistas*, that is supporters of the leadership of Daniel Ortega. Most of them were earnestly committed to the development of their communities.

Particularly striking in my diary extracts is the testimony of Pedro Zelaya, the taxicab driver who drove me to the Managua airport in January 2010, and again in January 2014. The first time, as the reader will see, Pedro was extremely critical of the Ortega government. The second time, quite astonishingly, he heaped praise on the same government.

This contradictory testimony from the same person speaks to the complexity of the situation.

Very dedicated Canadian friends who have spent five months per year in Nicaragua, working on a purely volunteer basis in

small development projects, and this for more than a decade, told me a few weeks ago: “Ovide, did you see this crisis coming? We didn’t. It came as a total surprise and really shocked us!”

Balgüe, Ometepe Island, January 12, 2007

On January 10, Merrienne and I watched the inauguration of the Daniel Ortega government with María and Francis in Balgüe. María, a Sandinista, was in great spirits. She occasionally came out with bursts of joy.

The ceremony started about one hour late. According to *La Prensa* of January 13, that was because they were waiting for the arrival of Hugo Chavez. However, I recalled seeing Chavez on TV in Managua at 4 pm. The time the ceremony was supposed to start.

I found the whole inauguration fascinating. I watched it from 4 pm until about 9 pm non-stop!

Hugo Chavez spoke very highly of Daniel Ortega. A leader who struggles for justice and the poor, not one month, one year, or just a few years, but for an entire life: such is Daniel, proclaimed Chavez. Chavez spoke of the Alternativa Bolivariana por las Americas (ALBA), the accord between Latin American countries which is supposed to replace the FTAA. He spoke of Simon Bolivar. Of patria, socialismo o muerte (Fatherland, socialism, or death).

Evo Morales, president of Bolivia, spoke quite eloquently. Anti-imperialism. National resources should be used for the people, he emphasized. Criticism of neoliberalism.

Daniel Ortega did not make his speech in the official inauguration ceremony, as previously planned. Instead, he made it later, in another ceremony that took place elsewhere, and in the sole presence of his hard-core Latin American leader friends, Hugo Chavez and Evo Morales.

Extracts from my Nicaraguan Diary

A leader who took considerable time and place during the official ceremony: Cardinal Obando y Bravo. He spoke for a very long time. His speech was written, and he merely read it word for word. The basic theme: solidarity. The Church, obviously, was leaning to the left with the newly elected Sandinista government. Skilful and very traditional diplomacy.

As I was listening to Cardinal Obando y Bravo, to his remarkably beautiful analysis according to which one must fight against not only terrorism but also poverty; as I was listening to his remarkable commitment to promote sustainable development; to his promotion of an economic model where wealth does not end up in the hands of a few, I thought of the people living in the municipal dump of Managua, La Chureca. Cardinal Obando y Bravo knows these people exist. He knows their condition. What has he done concretely and not just in beautiful rhetoric to improve their standard of living? What has he done? Obras, no palabras, por favor!!!!

Then, later, Daniel Ortega's speech (To watch this speech, simultaneously translated into English, go [here](#)). As he spoke, with no text whatsoever, I remembered the speech he had pronounced immediately following his electoral victory of November 1984, in front of hundreds of thousands of Nicaraguans. A speech that I had attended and whose revolutionary tone had impressed me very deeply.

As he spoke of defending the cause of women (the FSLN has promised that 50% of the higher cadres in the government will be women), I remembered the Zoilamérica case. His sexual abuse, for years, of his teenage stepdaughter. The fact that he got away with that scot-free, untouched, because of a pact he made with Alemán. As he spoke, I remembered the harsh law against abortion, even therapeutic abortion, that he had supported, a few months earlier, in the National Assembly.

As he spoke of participation – I am not the President; each Nicaraguan, each poor peasant is – I remembered how ruthless and caudillo he had been in crushing all opposition to his leadership in the FSLN. Even going to the point of excluding from the Sandinista Party Herty Lewites, because the latter, an extremely popular figure in Nicaragua, had dared to challenge Daniel's role as leader of the FSLN.

Nevertheless, as he spoke, I also remembered the Nicaraguan revolution. The fall of Somoza. I remembered the revolutionary zeal of the people of Chile, as they chanted "El pueblo, unido, jamás será vencido!" (A people, united, will never be conquered!) I remembered the military coup of September 11, 1973 in Chile, and, at that moment, I nearly broke into tears.

I will not privatize water, stated Ortega very boldly. I will eliminate the mega salaries of politicians and top government bureaucrats. I will work for the poor. To do so is to love. To do so is to be Christian. To do so is solidarity.

When I listened to Daniel Ortega, I remembered the immense hope and joy that the electoral victory of the FSLN had given to many of my friends in the Cinco Pinos region. I could see the immense joy of my host father, Francis, and my host mother, María.

I was both happy and sad.

Happy to see the old revolutionary dream being awakened.
Sad to know that he who was representing the dream was, to a considerable extent, fake.

It is not wrong to make people dream. It is wrong, however, to disappoint them. To promise that which one will not deliver.

Hotel Las Hamacas, San Jorge, January 4, 2009

It's 5:30 am. Today, we are going to San Juan del Sur. The trip is going amazingly well. Very few students sick: a record, I believe.

Our speaker in León was excellent. I think that the fact that he was honoured the night before contributed to the excellence of his conference. Also, the fact that I am now close to him, especially after our collaboration in putting together the computer project which resulted in the installation of high-speed Internet in Las Pozas, and soon in the high school in Cinco Pinos.

He ended his conference by showing us, with his projector, a long excerpt of one of Daniel Ortega's recent speeches. In that speech, Daniel refers to his numerous visits to El Espino, in the Cinco Pinos region. To his amazement at discovering the existence of the Nicaraguan NGO APRODESE, founded by a family that has, through its various impressive projects, been carrying on the revolution. This, at a time when neoliberalism, since many years, was being implemented, a neoliberalism that resulted in the privatization of education, health, and cutting all loans to small farmers. His amazement to find a computer centre in El Espino, and to see very poor peasants working on high speed Internet. The water project of APRODESE that gave piped water to several hamlets. The free breakfast being given to grade school children in the region of Cinco Pinos, thanks to APRODSE. The courses to train people in various careers such as carpentry, welding, sewing, handicraft, etc. in the APRODESE training centre of El Espino.

Our speaker asked me to translate the excerpt of Daniel Ortega's speech that he had just quoted.

After I had done so, our speaker went on to say that Daniel Ortega decided to spread the APRODESE model developed in Cinco Pinos to all of Nicaragua. That is why, for example,

the Ortega government is giving hundreds of computers to several Nicaraguan municipalities. That is why the government is providing a free meal to grade school children throughout Nicaragua. Now the town of Cinco Pinos has some computers and the Internet, something provided by the Ortega government. People are being trained on how to use computers and the Internet.

After the conference, while we (Dawson teachers accompanying students on the trip) were having lunch in the restaurant with our speaker, he commented on the threat by the European Union and the United States to cut off aid to Nicaragua, if the fraud that took place in the municipal elections of Nicaragua on November 9, 2008, especially in the cities of Managua and León, was not addressed and corrected. “I don’t believe they will cut the aid in the end”, he told us.

How does he explain what went on? There may have been some fraud in the recent election, he readily admits. However, he claims that the Liberals gained power, ever since the 1996 elections, basically through fraud, a fraud that did not seem to bother the rest of the world. He also points out the double standards: “When Israel bombs Lebanon and thousands die, the world does not seem to care very much. Why all the fuss right now about the elections in Nicaragua?

Balgüe, January 11, 2009

I asked Carlos about the conflict he had with the Consejos de Poder Ciudadanos (CPC, or Citizens Power Committee)⁴⁸. He argued that he and his sons had been thrown out of the CPC because they disagreed with what was going on in the Sandinista Party. “Our Sandinista constitution clearly states that primaries must be held in each municipality before municipal elections in order to choose the mayoralty candidate for the party. However, for the November 9, 2009 elections, Daniel Ortega simply ignored the primaries and named, under the strong and dominating influence of his wife, Rosario Murillo, the candidates. Thus, our candidate in Altagracia was named, for all intents and purposes, by Rosario. The secretary of the Party in Altagracia, a woman, simply follows orders from Rosario.

That is not democratic. Because of that, many Sandinistas in Altagracia simply abstained in recent municipal elections. The elections were very close; the liberals proclaimed they

⁴⁸ See [Los Consejos del Poder Ciudadano en Nicaragua](#), Enric Font Estruch, Rebelión, November 8, 2010.

The CPCs are community organizations created in 2007, the first year of the new Sandinista government. Their creation was the government’s way of fulfilling its electoral promise to return power to the people. They are citizens’ organizations, but their work for all intents and purposes consists in solving problems that exist in their communities. They are open to all the people of the community, neighbourhood or town, without distinction of political creed. (...) CPCs are also an important part of the ideological struggle that is taking place in Nicaragua. The right distorts them, attacks them, perverts them. (...) CPCs and Citizen Power Groups (their local equivalent) are not subordinated to the municipal government, nor subordinated to the central government, they have autonomy and have their own work dynamics. (Author’s note: The CPCs, from all the information I was able to gather during my yearly trips to Nicaragua, are under the control of Rosario Murillo. The latter also controls mayors with an iron hand. I traveled with a mayor from Cinco Pinos to Managua once. He told me that mayors throughout the country would go to Managua for numerous meetings, and that all of these were chaired by Rosario Murillo)

won; however, one week later the Sandinistas announced they were the ones who won. Not at all honest and transparent. Right now, there is considerable polarization in Altagracia. Anti-riot squads are permanently stationed in Altagracia, something unheard of in previous years.

After we Sandinistas lost the elections in 1990, we eventually collaborated, on regional and local development projects, with Liberals and with various people, for example churches of all denominations. That all changed when the CPCs were formed after our recent victory in the national elections. We were told that only Sandinistas could be in these CPCs. My sons and I disagreed with this, so we were expelled from the CPC of Balgüe.

As Carlos talked, I began to see another version of the events as they had been related to me by the high school teacher, Tomaso, and a few others. Maybe I am wrong, I began to think. Maybe Carlos is being persecuted. Maybe the situation is more complicated than at face value.

Leaving aside the possible fudging in which Carlos was perhaps involved in our pedestrian bridge project, and perhaps relieved that I could now agree with him on some important matters, I plunged wholeheartedly into the discussion. I spoke of my concern about the Ortega government repression falling on Carlos Chamorro. About the religious fundamentalism that I could perceive in the present Daniel Ortega government. About Rosario Murillo's recent intervention in a large FSLN rally, calling on everyone to return to the practice of reciting the Holy Rosary daily.

Las Pozas, December 29, 2009

The first time I motorcycled to Cinco Pinos this morning, it was to tell our local leaders that they had to stop in El Carrizal because the students were running out of potable water. When I arrived, there were several people grouped outside the City Hall. I recognized some of them; they were

members of the FSLN. They had come to claim a gas stove with the accompanying gas cylinder, a gift from Daniel Ortega, the President of Nicaragua. According to several people I talked to, Ortega was rewarding them for the work they had done in the electoral campaign.

When I had lunch with the director of the high school of the town of Cinco Pinos, I asked her about this. “Do you not find this unethical, that the central government would be distributing a gas stove to all those, throughout Nicaragua, who had worked in the FSLN electoral campaign? Should not these stoves be allocated to the needy, regardless of political affiliation?”

Her answer stunned me.

“When the Liberals were in power, it was their turn”, she replied very calmly and with no qualms of conscience whatsoever.

“And now that the FSLN is in power, it’s our turn!”

Granada, Hostal Oasis, January 21, 2010

When Danielle and I were walking home after visiting the museum this afternoon, we came across what seemed to be the FSLN headquarters of Granada. Or so it seemed, judging by the big signs painted all over the building. A pickup truck was parked in front of the centre, full of compressed gas cylinders for the thousands of stoves that Daniel Ortega has been distributing to his FSLN supporters. A man was unloading them into the centre.

I saw this happening in Cinco Pinos, Balgüe, and now in Granada. Incredible!

Diary, Managua, Hotel Los Felipe, January 22, 2010

I read today's *El Nuevo Diario*. There is an article (p. 13A) by [Tomás Borge](#)⁴⁹ who seems to write a regular column for the paper.

The present Ortega government is compared by some to Somoza, even to Hitler, writes Borge. These criticisms are totally ridiculous. Look at the record of the present government:

“During the disastrous dictatorship of Daniel Ortega, there has been a sharp increase in the construction of houses, dozens of health centers and hospitals have been built (...), Nicaragua has miraculously turned into one of the countries with the least HIN1 and dengue in the world, (and this did not simply happen by chance), new roads and highways have been built, (...) illiteracy has been wiped out (...), and there is an etcetera of a length and breadth greater than the hatred of all those anti-Ortega government rascals in this land of God. (Y hay un etcétera de una longitud y envergadura superior al odio de cuanto MSC, o ratones o ratos bancarios refunfunen en esta tierra de Dios)”

Another article in today's *El Nuevo Diario*, article written by Roberto Larios Meléndez, the president of the “Union de

⁴⁹ **Tomás Borge Martínez** (13 August 1930 – 30 April 2012, often spelled as **Thomas Borge** in American newspapers) was a cofounder of the [Sandinista National Liberation Front](#) in [Nicaragua](#) and was Interior Minister of Nicaragua during one of the administrations of [Daniel Ortega](#). He was also a renowned statesman, writer, and politician.^[1] Tomás Borge also held the titles of "Vice-Secretary and President of the FSLN", member of the Nicaraguan Parliament and National Congress, and Ambassador to Peru. Considered a hardliner, he led the "prolonged [people's war](#)" tendency within the FSLN until his death. Wikipedia, consulted on August 17, 2018.

Periodistas de Nicaragua.” He argues that it is basically the Chamorro family, which has the monopoly of the two basic newspapers of Nicaragua, that opposes the monopoly that the purchase by people close to the Ortega family of the Channel 8 TV station would create. Why don’t the Chamorros make public the precise owners of *La Prensa*? Of *El Nuevo Diario*? Why don’t they do what they are asking the new owners of Channel 8 to do? And why is it just the Chamorros, and not all the other media, that are complaining so violently about the recent purchase of Channel 8? Why all this talk about the damage to democracy that this purchase entails? What damage? When Channel 8 was owned by Carlos Briceño, it implemented, in my opinion, the worse kind of journalism that one could imagine. (...)

And one also must mention the miserable pay given by Briceño to his journalists, especially the female ones and the young ones, who were literally taken from the UCA school of journalism as cannon fodder, then often forced to defend the governments of Chamorro, Alemán and Bolaños and eventually disposed of at will.

Managua Airport, January 23, 2010

Pedro Zelaya, a taxicab driver of 45 years old who works for clients of Hotel Los Felipe, drove Danielle and me to the airport this morning. As soon as we drove off, I asked him what he thought of the present Ortega government. His answer came very quickly, and he spoke abundantly and with passion until we arrived at the airport.

“The Ortega government is a communist government. It is not at all good for Nicaragua. Since Ortega has been re-elected, tourism has gone down considerably (this seems to be contradicted by a statistic I read a few days ago in *El Nuevo Diario*: in 2009, revenue from tourism has increased by over 18%). Because of the corruption in the last municipal elections,

Nicaragua lost much of the international aid it was receiving from the United States, the European Union and the United Nations Millennium Goal. My son had a job working for the United Nations Millennium goal: he lost it.”

-- I have noticed that Ortega has been distributing gas stoves to people all over Nicaragua...

“Yes, but they are only going to his people. To those who voted for him. Daniel is very clever; he is giving handouts to those who support him. The poor peasants do benefit from receiving a couple of pigs, some chickens, etc: this does help them, and they will continue voting for him. The program that helps people purchase a house is also very popular; when you receive \$80 US per month to purchase a house, you are going to continue voting for the FSLN. The problem is that you have to be a FSLN supporter to receive this help. If I try to get it, forget it!”

“Daniel controls everything in Nicaragua: The Police, the Army, the Supreme Court, the Supreme Electoral Council, and the Comptroller’s Office. We are cornered. About one year ago, when people demonstrated against corruption in the streets, Daniel sent his people to repress the demonstrators. The repression was intense and violent.”

-- And what do you think of the recent purchase by those close to the Ortega family of Channel 8? I read in today’s newspaper that Carlos Chamorro will be airing his last “*Esta Semana*” tomorrow on Channel 8.

“Carlos is one of the only ones that has really stood up to the Ortega government. His programs are excellent. He allows everyone to speak openly on his program and to say what they think. Now, he is being neutralized.”

Extracts from my Nicaraguan Diary

In today's *El Nuevo Diario* on page 5A: "Carlos Fernando se despidió del Canal 8" (Carlos Fernando Leaves Channel 8), an article by Luis Galeano. Nothing really new in this article. Tomorrow, Sunday, Carlos will present a summary of his best programs in the last five years and then explain why he is leaving Channel 8.

Carlos explained to *El Nuevo Diario* why he is not accepting the offer of the new owners to stay on Channel 8:

"The true purpose of asking me to stay with Channel 8 is to use it as a showcase of freedom of speech, as Somoza did with my father Pedro Joaquín. When Somoza would travel abroad, he would take a copy of *La Prensa* along, and hold it under his arm, in an effort to show the world that he was respecting press freedom and democracy, when he was doing exactly the opposite."

Another article on page 4A: "Marchan para que no vuelva el pasado" (They are demonstrating so Nicaragua does not return to what it was). Yesterday, writes Leonor Alvarez, people of the civil society movement gathered at the Crowne Plaza Convention Centre and walked from there to the place where Pedro Joaquín was assassinated 32 years ago. Some of the writings of Pedro Joaquín at the time of the Somoza dictatorship were read and Carlos Fernando addressed a few words to the crowd. He thanked them for pursuing what had been the main battle of his father's life, the struggle for a democratic Nicaragua.

"I have always said that my father's legacy is not the mere heritage of a family, and that it goes far beyond that. His legacy transcends my family because it has profound national roots. The values for which my father fought all his life, the Nicaragua for which he fought, and above all, the ethical coherence between his life and his thought: these are all an essential pillar for building a new Nicaragua."

Granada, January 13, 2012

When we were in Las Pozas, I spent a several hours conversing and having a beer with a Nicaraguan friend who lives in León. He was very upset by something that has happened recently. Manuel Calderón, one of the comandantes that had led the Sandinista Revolution, and now mayor of León, was kicked out of his job by Rosario Murillo in late December.

El Nuevo Diario reported the news on January 3, 2012:

“Manuel Calderón, mayor of León, through a letter, resigned his position as mayor of that colonial city. The letter, written by hand, was addressed to the Supreme Electoral Council, CSE and received by Nelson Artola on December 31, 2011. "They forced me to resign," Calderón said in a choked voice, in one of his meetings with the media.”

According to my friend, this was primarily the work of Rosario Murillo, who never forgave Calderón for what he did. According to the constitution, Daniel Ortega could not run for the presidency of the country, he explained. And so, Rosario was planning to run. However, many in the Sandinista party leadership thought that this would be a big mistake. They therefore developed a strategy to prevent this. They managed to have Daniel run for president, even though this was unconstitutional. That's how desperate they were!

And who was a key leader in this strategy to prevent Rosario from running? Maneul Calderón!

When I read Ernesto Cardenal's book *La Revolucion Perdida* (The Lost Revolution) I thought he was perhaps exaggerating when he harshly criticized Rosario Murillo. Now I realize that he was right, explained my friend. Rosario Murillo really is the person he describes. I will never vote for her.

-- What will be the consequences of the present crisis?

Extracts from my Nicaraguan Diary

I am not at all optimistic.

After saying he would never vote for Rosario Murillo, my friend added another thing that impressed me:

“During the electoral campaign leading to the national elections of November 6, 2011, the Zoilamérica affair came back in the news a couple of times. This is obviously the doing of Rosario. Whenever she needs to control Daniel, she takes that out of her hat.”

In the course of our conversation my friend also mentioned that he had just lost an important and well-funded bi-national project (Nicaragua-Honduras) when the coup d'état took place in Honduras.

“It simply became too dangerous for us to go on. Whenever we would hold a meeting in Tegucigalpa all of our Honduran hosts attending the meeting would be wearing a pistol.

“One day I witnessed something more horrible than all I had seen in Nicaragua during the revolution and the counterrevolution: a group of horribly beaten men entered the room where I was. They were all suffering from machete wounds, some of them very serious. I saw two men die in front of me. My fellow Hondurans told me that in present-day Honduras, such scenes are not rare.”

Diary, January 21, 2014, Managua international airport

Pedro Zelaya, the owner of a taxi close to Hotel Los Felipe, drove me to the airport. If my memory is correct, the last time he drove me to the airport was four years ago. He had then criticized the Ortega government all the way to the airport. And very bitterly, even calling Ortega a dictator.

Quite remarkably, this time he spent his time praising the Ortega government. Ortega, he says, is supported by 60 percent of the population because of the good deeds of the government. The various programs -- Zero Usury, Zero Hunger, building houses, etc.-- have made a big difference for poor people and these programs are still going strong. Before, if you purchased a taxi on credit, you had to pay a huge penalty to the bank if you decided to pay back the amount owed before the three-year period (or whatever other period). Now the government has made that illegal. Furthermore, you can buy a house and only pay 2% interest per month. If your house is worth \$35,000 US or less, then the government subsidizes you; you only pay 1% per month.

When I arrived at the airport, I was very impressed to see how full it was. People everywhere. To see, also, how rapidly the Delta personnel dealt with me. I was out of there in less than three minutes. Going through the security check was also super-fast. Nicaragua seems to be moving ahead very rapidly.

Of course, Pedro was very proud to speak to me about the Canal project. He only sees good things for Nicaragua in this project.

Montreal, just after returning from Nicaragua, January 2015

I was extremely upset by a Sandinista leader, to whom I am very close and have a very deep bond, for having distributed the bulk of new houses given by the Ortega government to members of his own family in a hamlet.

When he dropped by my house, with the Sandinista mayor, to say goodbye on the morning of my departure, I very emotionally blasted him for it, and this in the presence of the mayor, also a Sandinista.

A few days later he wrote me a long email, arguing that I did not understand the rigor used by the Sandinista government in implementing its various social programs, and assuring me that all Nicaraguans were treated fairly, independently of political affiliation.

The email I wrote as a reply, one that I ended up never sending after consulting with friends, included the following paragraph:

“Would you argue that Sandinista rigor and revolutionary values prevailed - the people of Nicaragua, president! - when Laureano Ortega Murillo, son of Daniel Ortega, was seen, and this in a country as poor as Nicaragua, wearing a watch worth 43,200 dollars when he received, on July 5, 2014, the Chinese businessman Wang Jing, who is responsible for the interoceanic canal project?”

Nandaime, January 13, 2016

Fred and I had lunch in La Casona, one of the restaurants in Nandaime. We ordered the special of the day: fajitas de pollo and a beer for 120 cordobas. Excellent food: pieces of chicken, fried with tons of onions and some peppers, and French fries.

After lunch we walked a few minutes, and a taxi came along. We hopped in and asked him to bring us to the Cooperativa Bernardino Díaz Ochóa, located some six kilometers from Nandaime. The roads were worse than they were from 1995 to 2004 when we used to come here with North South Studies students for home stays.

Within a few minutes from our arrival in BDO we were sitting with the entire family, one of whose members had organized all our home stays and development projects in that community.

(Note added in 2018: This agricultural cooperative was founded during the Sandinista Revolution, and thanks to the agrarian reform of the Sandinista government headed by Jamie Wheelock. Members of this community, and in particular the family we were visiting, are staunch Sandinistas. Several fought in the war against the Somoza dictatorship, and again in the Contra War, defending their revolution.)

When I asked them what they thought of the Ortega government, this is what they said:

“The Ortega government is closer to businesses than to ordinary people. When the minimum salary is discussed, the private sector basically gets the last say. Presently the minimum salary is 5,000 cordobas (about 167 US) per month whereas the canasta básica (in other words, the basket of goods deemed necessary just to get by in life) is 12,500 cordobas (about 425 US). This makes little sense.”

“The bureaucrats who are the middlemen are the problem. They are corrupt. Ortega, on July 19 made a beautiful speech: I will eliminate poverty, he said. However, these are mere words. Farmers like us are not getting any financial help from the government. What is happening to Maduro in Venezuela and what

happened to Kirchner in Argentina might happen here in Nicaragua. People one day will have the last word. The police are not really protecting ordinary people. If there's a robbery, you have to pay for gas for the police to come. So those with money are protected and not the others."

Las Pozas, January 17, 2016

Yesterday a very busy day. We walked to El Granadillo to meet the water committee. North South Studies gave that project about \$8,000 US last year for the artesian well pump, piping, etc. Money required for completing the project, partly financed by the municipal government of Santo Tomas del Norte. The president of the water committee lives about one kilometer from the highway, right next to the small Catholic Church. He is a contractor.

Before we started discussing the water project as such, he spoke about the situation in Nicaragua. He was very passionate.

"What is positive about Nicaragua? It is the safest country of Central America. And according to statistics, the economy is moving ahead, and jobs are being created.

"And what is negative? It is very easy to manipulate statistics. Politicians excel in this. I know this because I've worked a long time in the municipality. If one hundred workers get a job constructing part of a road for one month, the government says it created one hundred jobs. This, even though they only worked for one month in that year.

"The other thing is that corruption has been growing in Nicaragua. When a municipality gets its budget, part of it has already been siphoned off. When \$5,000 US is granted for a road, the contractor who builds it

will only receive \$3,000; the rest goes into the pocket of the mayor or a counselor. To get contracts from the municipality, you have to pay bribes. If you don't you simply do not get it. That bribe can easily represent 20 or 30 percent of the project. It's that way with all politicians, whether of the right or the left.

"Furthermore, the police do not really protect us. They abuse of their powers. A few weeks ago, the police stopped me because I had two passengers with me on my motorcycle. The law says you can only have one. I immediately offered to pay the fine, but the police went much further than that: they actually confiscated my motorcycle for two months! Even though the law does not stipulate that the police can confiscate a motorcycle if its owner carries two passengers, that is what they did and there is nothing I can do to contest that. That's the way it is in Nicaragua."

Las Pozas, January 22, 2016, Visit of welding project in APRODESE

(Note added in 2018: In 2015, North South Studies financed, thanks to donations obtained from the International Roncalli Foundation and the Sisters of St. Joseph of London, Ontario, a six-month long welding course project, which included training in solar powered energy, for some 22 marginalized youth in the region of Cinco Pinos. The project took place in the APRODESE technical training center in El Espino. My colleague Fred Jones and I visited that project with our friend from León who managed it. The information below comes from conversations we had with him during that visit.)

Our friend from León has a meeting with top government officials Tuesday, January 26; he will then find out if he gets the contract to install, in partnership with two large American companies, 50,000 solar panels in one single place in

Extracts from my Nicaraguan Diary

Nicaragua. It could perhaps be as many as 200,000, he said. The construction would only take three months and would be finished before the forthcoming national elections.

Expert in alternative energy, our friend told us that Nicaragua now produces 55 percent of its electricity using alternative energy. Five years from now: the aim is 80 percent. Now 20 percent is wind energy; 10 thermo energy; no more than 2 percent solar energy; and 25 percent hydroelectric and powered by small dams. The rest, of course, is produced using oil-powered generators.

Given that just a few years ago 80 percent of all the electricity in Nicaragua was produced using oil-powered generators, this is quite an achievement.

Managua, January 24, 2016

At noon Fred and I took our two friends in Managua, who work for a Canadian NGO, out to a Peruvian restaurant. They spoke at length about the Nicaraguan government.

During our conversation, I checked whether my understanding of the article in the newspaper *La Estrella de Nicaragua* to which Santiago, whom we met in Hotel Sueño de Meme in León, had referred us during the long conversation that Fred and I had with him, actually said what I thought it did. They assured me that my understanding was correct.

La Estrella de Nicaragua, in October 2015, came out with a very shocking story. According to the article, Daniel Ortega would have sexually abused a 15-year-old girl starting in 2005.

During an event in some remote rural region, in which Daniel Ortega participated, he asked this young girl, whose beauty fascinated him, for her phone number. Eventually he moved her to Managua, in a sumptuous house of some half a million dollars. She gave birth to a child of his. They set it up so the

father appeared to be, not Daniel, but rather one of his close assistants.

When that girl's brother, a lawyer, decided to denounce what Ortega had been doing to his sister, he was simply thrown into prison. (Note added in 2018: This would seem to confirm that Ortega uses judges to his own end, and that there is virtually no independent judicial system in Nicaragua) After he told his story to some human rights NGO, he was moved to a high security prison. (See the article "[Mi niña fue violada por Daniel Ortega](#)" (My daughter was raped by Daniel Ortega) published by Judith Flores in Diario Las Americas on October 21, 2015. Also see [Acusan a Ortega de "conquistar" a jovencita de quince años de la Juventud Sandinista](#) (Ortega Accused of 'Conquering' a 15-Year-Old Teenager from the Sandinista Youth), posted on November 11, 2015 in La Estrella de Nicaragua)

Our two NGO guests are not impressed by the performance of the Ortega government. They related a terrible incident that occurred about two months ago.

Because of two consecutive years of severe draught, some regions of Nicaragua have been suffering hunger. Certain communities in Nicaragua, moved by this drama, mobilized and sent four big truckloads of food to these regions. However, the national police intercepted the trucks and seized the food.

To justify such police action, the government publicly announced that this had happened because all food distributed must first be checked to protect the safety of the recipients. The real reason, according to our NGO guests: the government simply wanted to hand out the food itself in order to get political capital therefrom.

Last night we had supper at Carlos Chamorro's home. He picked us up in his car at about 7:20 pm and within fifteen minutes we had arrived at his place. A very large and

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beautiful home located on the top of a mountain overlooking Managua, some fifteen car-minutes away. Carlos' wife, Desirée Elizondo, whom I had met about nine years ago when he had first invited me to his home for supper, welcomed us very warmly. She was in the kitchen preparing the entrée.

On our way to Carlos', I told him we were hearing several negative stories about the Ortega government. Both in the conferences that he had given to North South students a few years ago and in several of his articles, he had been extremely critical of the Ortega government, so I expected him to agree. However, he reacted in the following way.

"This government is handling the economy very well. It is improving, and they are making considerable improvements to the country's infrastructure. And Ortega is collaborating very well with the business sector."

Later in the evening, however, he told us that he had just interviewed the president of Costa Rica about the Cuban refugee problem. "There are some 5,500 Cubans in Costa Rica who are trying to reach the United States via Nicaragua. Ortega reacted by calling in the army and police; they used tear gas, etc. to push back the Cubans. These Cubans are not poor; they have plenty of money. With the present open-door policy of the U.S. relative to Cubans, it is not surprising that they are flocking to the United States. But what the Ortega government is doing is completely illogical. We have 500,000 Nicaraguans in Costa Rica and dozens of thousands in the U.S and other countries. Why prevent the Cubans from going through Nicaragua when it is obvious that they will not stay but simply move on to the U.S.? The only possible explanation is that Ortega wants to be in solidarity with Cuba, but that is a bit ridiculous."

Carlos also commented, just as had done our two NGO friends, on the truckloads of food intercepted by the Ortega

government. The trucks that were intercepted by the Ortega government, Carlos explained, came from the same region where peasants have been protesting against the interoceanic canal project and refusing that their land be expropriated.

Recently these peasants sent more truckloads of food to the regions suffering from hunger. However, this time there were such immense protests from the people suffering of hunger that the government finally decided to let the trucks through.”

Taxi to Managua International Airport, January 25, 2016

--How long have you been working as a taxi driver”, I asked the person driving us to the airport.

For seven years. Before I had a job for a big tobacco company. When they laid many of us off, I started driving this taxi that my friend owns. I like what I’m doing. I’m learning all kinds of things from the various foreigners who are my clients. Things I didn’t know before.

--You should perhaps write a book about all your experiences with clients in your taxi”, I commented.

Maybe that is a good idea.

--What do you think of the Ortega government”?

It is very clever. Ortega is doing everything he can to stay in power. Our constitution does not allow him to stay for more than two consecutive terms. So, what does he do? He has the constitution modified by a simple vote in the national assembly where the Sandinistas have the majority. And he purchases virtually all of the TV stations: he now owns eight of the ten that we have in Nicaragua. Only channel two and twelve are independent. He also owns several radio stations, although there are still several

independent radio stations. When he gives houses to the poor or distributes food, this appears on his media. On the latter media no criticism of the government ever appears. Government employees are obliged to go out and demonstrate in support of the government, whether they agree or not. My uncle works for a state bank; should he refuse to follow the orders to go and demonstrate, he could lose his job. Right now, people in Nicaragua live in fear. That is not right. This said, it is true that the Ortega government is doing some good things; several projects are indeed helping the poor.

Managua, Hostal Santa Maria (formerly Hotel Los Felipe), January 31, 2017

The taxi cab driver who took us to the Bufé Laprado today for our lunch was very interesting.

“I fought with the Sandinistas to overthrow Somoza. Why were we fighting? Because Somoza used fraud to win elections. Because he owned a considerable part of the land and many of the large businesses in Nicaragua. Because he controlled the National Guard and basically set himself above all laws. Because he used force to smash all opposition.

“And what do we have today? The very leader with whom we fought to liberate Nicaragua from the Somoza dictatorship – and it resulted in more than 40,000 deaths – is now doing the same thing as Somoza. He uses massive fraud to win elections. He owns many of the large businesses in Nicaragua, including most of the TV and radio stations, and newspapers. He controls the Supreme Court and the Supreme Electoral Council. He uses force to smash all opposition. If a friend of Daniel Ortega decides that he wants your house, you're in trouble. There is little

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one can do to prevent that from happening. It is not the rule of law in present day Nicaragua.

“I did not vote in the recent election. I would be willing to go to war once again to get rid of this dictatorship.”

Conclusion: Critical Comments

Portraying protestors as non-persons

When I read vice-president Rosario Murillo's speech of July 18, 2018, one that was made in the context of the final stage of a government clean-up operation -- more than 300 dead, 2,000 wounded, dozens tortured, some 500 prisoners, and a systematic manhunt throughout Nicaragua to find and detain the leaders of the demonstrations -- I was taken aback.

In past years I have often heard Rosario Murillo and Daniel Ortega praising the Salvador Allende government in Chile and denouncing the bloody coup that overthrew Allende on September 11, 1973. And I have often heard them inciting thousands of their followers in rallies to chant what the Popular Unity often chanted in Chile, "El pueblo unido, jamás será vencido!" (A united people will never be defeated!)

And now what am I witnessing? I am seeing Nicaraguan government leaders, who proclaim the FSLN party to be "socialist, Christian, and solidary", violently and systematically repressing those demonstrating against them in the last four months and portraying protestors -- there were hundreds of thousands of them, and this in a country whose total population is 6.1 million -- as "forces of evil," "coup plotters", and "dark, diabolical, terrorist, criminal forces." And publicly giving thanks to God for restoring security, peace and life throughout "our Blessed Nicaragua."

Asserts Rosario Murillo on July 18:

"Comrades, first of all our gratitude to God, to God, to God, for the restoration of Security, Peace and Life, throughout our Territory. (...)

“The Government of Reconciliation and National Unity, all the Institutions of the Nicaraguan State, and our Heroic People, Combative, Revolutionary, and Victorious, we have rejected with the Invincible Force of our History and our Revolutionary Present, Coup Plotting, Terrorism, crime, kidnapping, torture, rape, satanic rites, destruction, looting, pyromania against Families and Institutions. Our United People have rejected and continue to reject the extortion of those who kidnapped entire communities, believing that by so doing they would manage to conquer the Spirit of Nicaraguan families. Our United People reject and repudiate all those who disrupted Peace and are still calling for war, poisoned individuals who are now confronted by the advance of Love and Hope.”

I am taken aback because this kind of language reminds me of many of the declarations I heard in Chile following the coup d'état that overthrew Salvador Allende on September 11, 1973.

Augusto Pinochet, one of the four leaders of the coup who would later become Chile's 17 year-long dictator, referred to the coup as “The day the hand of God intervened in Chile” to rid the country of a “cancer” that was preaching hatred and class struggle, something totally foreign to Chile's Christian values, to the very Chilean soul, the so-called “chilenidad.” And many conservative bishops publicly rejoiced with Pinochet, referring to the coup as a great liberation.

When millions of Chileans, though representing a substantial part of the population, are portrayed as people who have lost their national soul; when they are portrayed as some kind of cancer that spreads hatred, violence, and class struggle, they virtually become non-citizens, even non-persons. Rounding them up like cattle, detaining, torturing, and killing them seems no big thing. Nor the fact that many are living in fear, hiding, and desperately trying to take refuge in an embassy.

Conclusion: Critical Comments

It is time to rejoice, celebrate peace and love, and thank almighty God for saving Chile from a calamity!

And when international world opinion mobilizes and denounces the kidnapping, the executions, the concentration camps where thousands are being tortured, the supporters of this wonderful liberation and return to peace and love react by calling this an international communist campaign against Chile. A campaign of lies and distortions.

And they come up with a story to make the coup and their massive repression look decent: Salvador Allende and his Popular Unity government were just about to carry out the so-called Plan Zeta,⁵⁰ they declare in their official media outlets. All the top generals of the Chilean Army were to be assassinated. The coup was not an attack, an assault but rather an act of self-defence!

On the day of the coup, September 11, 1973, Monsignor Francisco Valdés Subercaseaux, Bishop of Osorno, a southern province of Chile where the repression of the military was particularly brutal, wrote a prayer, published on September 30, 1973 in *El Mercurio*. Some extracts:

Chile: Lord, where were you?

The night was filled with darkness and I was plunged into a seemingly endless nightmare. It was more like hell than a copy of Paradise.

Today the new day has arrived.

God: I am always with you, people of little faith. Chile, I am with you! I am calling you every day to prayer and inviting you every Sunday to my banquet. (...)

You allowed yourself to be seduced by a paradise without God, fashionable among the children of darkness. And you learned to hate, to lie, to destroy and to kill. (...)

⁵⁰ See [Plan Zeta](#), Gonzalo Via Correa, consulted on November 6, 2016.

I was always watching over you. I would go out every afternoon to pray and to see if you were going to return. You know how much I love you, my Chile. I even gave you my Mother as a model of family affection. When you were still faithful She became Chilean: you declared her Queen – Maria del Carmen – of your Government, your People and your Army. I do not know if you remember. I cannot forget it...

Chile: You are right, Lord.

Breaking out of my lethargy on this radiant day of September – day of my liberation – I suddenly recognized the hand with which you are guiding me. I had trouble making out your face, but it was because of my own blindness. Today your smile fills me with joy. Now I know that your love can conquer all. And it is with an indescribable enthusiasm that my soul is celebrating. (...)

For Him and with Him we have succeeded in overcoming the greatest deceit of the century. We have listened to you, O Lord, and TRUTH HAS LIBERATED US. (...) Amen”

At the same time that the vice-president of Nicaragua Rosario Murillo was making her victorious declaration cited above, Human Rights Watch Director José Miguel Vivanco was making the following comment:

“In about 30 years of observing the human rights situation in different countries of the world I have never seen anything like what I have been seeing in Nicaragua. Nowhere have we witnessed joint actions of heavily armed policemen and thugs going all over the country, community by community, shooting, kidnapping, and then celebrating in the streets as if they had defeated an enemy in war ... It's shameless, it's brutal; this repression is ruthless.”⁵¹

⁵¹ Quoted in *Envío*'s August 2018 editorial [El mundo ya sabe lo que pasa en Nicaragua](#).

Economic performance of Ortega Government

The articles defending the anti-Ortega narrative practically never discuss the economic record of the Ortega regime in the last 11 years. A student protestor being interviewed by Carlos Chamorro on his TV program even asserted that it was necessary to get rid of the Ortega dictator to have economic growth, thus suggesting that during the Ortega regime there was little growth. That, I consider a weakness.

Having spent a few weeks in Nicaragua every year for the last 23 years, I was able to see with my own eyes the economic progress being made by Nicaragua during Ortega's reign.

In the realm of tourism, that progress was outstanding. On Ometepe Island, where North South students experienced their last one-week home stay with families, such was the advance of tourism that North South Studies considered not going there anymore. The reason? Ever more tourism money was coming into the island -- hotels, restaurants, guided tours, taxis, etc. And because there were ever more tourists, we were concerned that our students would be spending more time with them than with Nicaraguans.

In Granada and León, the expansion of both hotels and restaurants was impressive. Hotel Colonial in León, where North South Studies students used to stay for \$4 per night, was beautifully renovated. Rooms in that hotel now exceed \$100 per night. The quality and quantity of restaurants, coffee shops, etc. in these two major tourist cities increased, from year to year, significantly. Free Wi-Fi exists in most hotels and many restaurants and coffee shops.

In the Cinco Pinos region there were no telephones or Internet whatsoever when we started having home stays there in 2000. There were virtually no cars and trucks, and few motorcycles. Even bicycles were a rarity. Now, in 2018, virtually everyone has a cell phone, and a significant and growing number even have smart phones. There are more cars and trucks, and tons of motorcycles. In downtown Cinco Pinos and downtown Santo Tomas del Norte, the Ortega government installed a free Wi-Fi park, something it also did

in numerous towns and cities throughout Nicaragua. The regional high school of Santo Tomas del Norte and that of Cinco Pinos now have what is called an 'Aula Tic', a classroom equipped with dozens of computers, all connected to the Internet, and that serve to train Nicaraguan students in computer skills. The government plans to install such computer classrooms in all high schools of Nicaragua. In the regional high school of Paso Hondo, North South Studies donated 20 laptops for their computer classroom; the government, since about one year and a half, has been paying the salary of a well-trained teacher to teach in that classroom and has promised to soon pay for an Internet connection as well.

Roads and highways in Nicaragua improved significantly during the Ortega government. Now there is a beautiful highway that goes all the way to Santo Tomas del Norte, Cinco Pinos, San Pedro del Norte, and San Francisco del Norte. A new highway was recently built, and which allows people traveling from León to Cinco Pinos to save considerable time. Many of the roads on Ometepe Island were paved. Highways to and from Managua, Granada, León, San Juan del Sur, etc. were beautifully repaired and improved.

Though I was very critical of many aspects of the Nicaragua government during my visits there, I sometimes wondered whether Ortega was not a shrewd pragmatist. On the one hand, he worked closely with Venezuela, receiving from Chavez some \$500 million in oil aid per year, and adopting a leftist sounding discourse that suited that kind of cooperation. On the other hand, and even though some of his speeches smacked of traditional anti-Americanism and anti-imperialism, he nevertheless worked, quietly and ever more closely, with the Nicaraguan business sector, the IMF and other multilateral agencies. And he opened wide the doors of Nicaragua to international investment -- American, European, Canadian, etc. -- and, as the case of the interoceanic canal project illustrates, in particular to Chinese investment. One can find McDonald's all over Nicaragua. Many new restaurants are owned by Americans, Europeans, and Canadians.

This being said, considering as a weakness the fact that those

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defending an anti-Ortega government narrative generally do not mention the economic performance of Ortega may not be fair, given that the April 2018 protests were not triggered by economic issues, but rather by human rights issues. They were triggered by a regime where power -- parliament, Supreme Court, Supreme Electoral Council, the media, and even the police and army -- is increasingly concentrated in the hands of a couple and their family, a regime that indulges in corruption and electoral fraud, and that does not hesitate to use brutal violence to crush dissent, even using hooded paramilitaries acting with the complicity of the police. A violence that was used during the April pension reform protests, and whose brutality exploded into a massive and prolonged popular revolt.

A few of those defending the anti-Ortega government narrative do explicitly acknowledge the government's relative success in the economic realm. For example, the catholic bishops, in their May 21, 2014 document [Searching for new horizons for an improved Nicaragua](#), "recognize some positive aspects in the management of the state. Among them (...) solving Nicaragua's dramatic energy crisis; offering government technical support and accessible loans to small producers; providing free education and granting subsidies to parochial educational centers; making efforts to improve the health system; implementing housing projects favouring the poorest Nicaraguans; making notable improvements to Nicaragua's road infrastructure."

Carlos Chamorro, one of the most prominent and influential leaders of the anti-Ortega government narrative -- through his daily TV program *Esta Noche*, his very popular weekly TV program *Esta Semana*, and his online magazine *Confidencial* -- gives credit to the Ortega government for improving the economy. As previously noted, when my colleague Fred Jones and I had dinner in January 2016 at Carlos Chamorro's home, he did not hesitate to acknowledge that Ortega was improving the economy. In my diary I wrote:

"When Carlos was driving us to his place, I told him that we were hearing several negative stories about the Ortega government. In the

conferences that he had given North South students a few years ago and in several of his articles he had been extremely critical of the Ortega government, so I expected him to agree. However, he reacted in the following way. “This government is handling the economy very well. It is improving, and they are making considerable improvements to the country’s infrastructure. And Ortega is collaborating very well with the business sector.”

Pro-Ortega government paramilitaries

Even though one of the key demands of protestors, one which the Catholic bishops of Nicaragua echoed and made their own, was the dismantling of the armed paramilitaries acting on behalf of the Ortega government, Ortega simply denied, and this for several weeks, that such paramilitary groups existed. When interviewed by Bret Baier of Fox News and later by Patricia Villegas of Telesur, for example, he simply said that the only paramilitary groups operating in Nicaragua during the protests were being financed by and acting on behalf of the Nicaraguan right, whose headquarters were located in Miami, groups often linked to drug trafficking, and whose presence became ever more important following the election of the FSLN in 2006. These paramilitaries, he argued, are the ones attacking and killing police agents, peasants, and Sandinista families. They are the satanic and diabolic forces spreading terror and destruction throughout Nicaragua.

When interviewed by Max Blumenthal, however, Ortega, perhaps for the first time, acknowledges the presence of “a voluntary police force”, acting on behalf of the government, and sometimes doing so wearing a hood to avoid those wanting to seek revenge to be able to target them afterwards.

I am deeply troubled that Daniel Ortega would have gone on denying, and this for such a long time, the existence of government-sponsored paramilitaries. If that wasn’t lying, I don’t know what lying is. Incredibly enough, Daniel’s own brother, Humberto, who was head of the Nicaraguan Army during the Sandinista Revolution and even during the Violeta Chamorro government, publicly

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contradicted the President. Not only did he recognize the existence of these paramilitaries, but he even made their dismantling a fundamental element in resolving the Nicaraguan crisis!

And by arguing that the only existing armed paramilitaries during the April initiated protests were acting on behalf of the Nicaraguan right, and had been active in Nicaragua for years, resurging first after his election in 2006 -- killing Sandinista peasants, etc. -- and then reappearing in the pension reform protests, and going about killing police, Sandinistas, burning down buildings, etc., Ortega was again simply blatantly lying.

I have been following Nicaragua for years, spending weeks there every year for more than two decades, communicating with Nicaraguans by telephone and email on a near weekly basis to manage development projects, and teaching a course on Nicaragua to prepare students for their field trip. Never once did I ever hear of these armed paramilitaries that Ortega refers to.

After all, Nicaragua was, in recent years, one of the most stable and secure of all Central American countries. Where were these right-wing financed paramilitary groups hiding before April in this oasis of peace? Is it not strange that the intelligence service of the Nicaraguan national police would not have identified them before April 2018? And how in the world could these groups of right-wing vandals, were they to exist, rapidly manage to bring into the streets hundreds of thousands of peaceful and non-violent Nicaraguans protesting against the Ortega government?

Ortega seems to have simply pulled them out of his hat, to make a pretty horrible looking situation look decent. The thesis of armed right-wing paramilitaries pulling out pistols to overthrow a threateningly anti-capitalist progressive government comes in very handy to cover up the heart of the problem.

Comments Jeffrey L. Gould in [Making sense of Daniel Ortega's](#)

slow betrayal of the Nicaraguan revolution:⁵²

“To many of his supporters Ortega still has the charismatic aura of historical greatness about him. And yet (...) he has created grotesque images dripping with historical irony. His armed paramilitary supporters are dressed in blue shirts and called the same.

“Has Ortega forgotten “los Camisas Azules,” a pro-Somoza, pro-fascist group from the mid-1930s? Or that, in the late 1970s and 1980s, Salvadoran rightist death squads performed their terrorist acts with hoods covering their heads? Today, eerily similar hoods cover the heads of camisas azules as they shoot at protesters who fight back with homemade arms from behind makeshift cobblestone barricades, replicas of those constructed by Sandinista fighters in 1978 and 1979, in many of the same locations, such as the indigenous barrios of Monimbó and Sutiava, and the eastern barrios of Managua. Is there no shame? No sense of history? And how can the neighbouring FMLN (Farabundo Martí Liberation Front) in El Salvador continue to support Ortega, looking at these hooded men shooting protesters? Are they not sickened by the déjà vu?”

And the fact that on August 23, 2018 Ortega named as his National Police director the high-ranking officer, Francisco Díaz, to replace Aminta Granera, does not bode well. Díaz, to whom Ortega-Murillo are related through their children, is considered one of the, if not THE key player in the brutal repression of protestors and was sanctioned for this by the United States on July 5 under the Magnitsky Act.”⁵³

According to Elvira Cuadra, ex-police officer and sociologist and

⁵² NACLA, July 25, 2018, <https://nacla.org/news/2018/07/25/nicaragua-view-left>, consulted on August 18, 2018.

⁵³ [Nicaragua names police chief sanctioned by US over crackdown](#), Associated Press, *Washington Post*, August 23, 2018.

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researcher on security issues, the naming of Díaz, “together with the deputy general directors Adolfo Marengo and Ramón Avellán, confirms the repressive line of the regime that made a disproportionate use of force during recent protests”, and “strengthens the scheme of family political control exercised by the presidential couple over the police.”⁵⁴

Catholic Church suddenly becomes critical of Ortega government?

As noted previously, Ollantay Itzamná writes a scathing criticism of the Nicaraguan Catholic Church -- [¿Guerra santa en Nicaragua?](#), -- and asserts:

“Why is it that a mere three months ago the Catholic hierarchy perceived Daniel Ortega as an exemplary ruler, and that now he has suddenly turned into an enemy? Why do bishops and priests, using badges and sacred cassocks, preach hatred against Ortega and the toppling of his government? Why is there not a single pronouncement or communiqué from the Catholic Church against armed criminals who barricade themselves in Catholic churches, in order to murder from there those believers who are sympathizers of Daniel Ortega?”

At the beginning of this book I emphasized the danger of viewing a situation through the lenses of one’s ideas and convictions. “All too often our ideas and convictions, instead of fostering understanding, actually impede it, ideas and convictions becoming like a pair of tinted glasses that allow us to see only certain facts, and not many other, even fundamental ones,” I argued.

⁵⁴ [Ascensos policiales “evidencian brutalidad” del régimen orteguista](#), Maynor Salazar, *Confidencial*, August 23, 2018.

Ollantay Itzamná seems to have applied to the Nicaraguan situation a theoretical framework reflecting his ideas and convictions, and not historical facts.

Had he taken the time to investigate what was really happening in Nicaragua, instead of applying to the Ortega government a romanticized version of it originating from the accomplishments of the Sandinista Revolution, he would have discovered the ever-growing power and wealth of a man and his family, the ruthless and undemocratic way in which this man took over the FSLN Party, eventually transforming state institutions into strictly partisan tools. He would have read the Nicaraguan bishops May 21, 2014 document [Searching for new horizons for an improved Nicaragua](#) and noticed that it contained several very disturbing denunciations:

- a government that allows paramilitaries to violently assault peaceful demonstrators, this in the presence of its national police who are observing the assault, their arms crossed;
- a government that forces its public employees to attend FSLN rallies, for fear of losing their jobs, and that sometimes retains part of their pay as a contribution to the party;
- a government where priority is given, in the allocation of jobs, to affiliation to the FSLN and not to competency;
- a government, both at the national and municipal level, that corruptly stands by, arms crossed, while several of Nicaragua's nature reserves, including Indio Maíz, are being exploited in a predatory manner by businesses close to the FSLN, all state environmental laws being ignored;
- a government that allows virtual monopoly power to develop in the media (in other words, the Ortega

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family taking over most TV and radio stations), and which uses religious symbols to deify the FSLN and its leader Comandante Daniel Ortega (in other words, Rosario Murillo's daily noon addresses through the state's official media outlets);

- a government that has chosen to keep Somoza's El Chipote prison open (in that prison the dictator submitted prisoners to systematic torture), and in which "Nicaraguans as well as foreigners, have been submitted to cruel, degrading, and inhuman treatment";
- a government in which the Supreme Electoral Council blatantly practices electoral fraud.

And had he taken the time to read the bishops 2014 document, he would have noticed that already then, the bishops were making two concrete proposals to Daniel Ortega. The first one: hold a National Dialogue (the reader will notice that it is similar in fundamental respects to the one that took place in June 2018 in the middle of the massive popular revolt). The second one: implement a profound political reform, promise that there will be absolutely no electoral fraud in the 2016 national elections, and allow the presence of international observers to assure their credibility.

In [Searching for new horizons for an improved Nicaragua](#), the bishops assert:

"Given the current political and institutional situation of Nicaragua, we wish to submit to you two concrete proposals, that we are sure our people will welcome with hope and joy. The first is the carrying out of a National Dialogue in which all sectors of the country would participate, (...) the government, opposition parties, and civil society. (...) This in the hope of arriving at (...) an authentic democratic consensus and a new social pact that ensures political, legal, social

and economic stability to the country and that addresses the great problems of the population.

“The second proposal that we, as an Episcopal Conference, submit to the government (...) is that of undertaking a profound political reform of the entire electoral system of the country. We ask, with all respect, that you give us your word of honour that the 2016 Nicaraguan elections will be absolutely transparent and honest, that the new and honourable members of the Supreme Electoral Council will integrally respect the popular will, (...) and that the electoral process will be unrestrictedly open to scrutiny by national and international organizations”

Indeed, had Ollantay Itzamná taken the time to study the facts instead of relying spontaneously on his romanticized picture of “revolutionary Daniel Ortega” and on his unfounded assumption that before the April 2018 popular revolt the “Catholic hierarchy perceived Daniel Ortega as an exemplary ruler”, he would have understood the roots of the Nicaraguan crisis of 2018.

And he would have also understood why “there is not a single pronouncement or communiqué from the Catholic Church against” the hundreds of thousands of Nicaraguan protestors.

And he would have hesitated to depict protestors as “armed criminals who barricade themselves in Catholic churches, in order to murder from there those believers who are sympathizers of Daniel Ortega.”

And, finally, instead of perceiving the many declarations and homilies of priests and bishops as “preaching hatred against Ortega and the toppling of his government”, he would have seen in these church leaders true prophets, somewhat like the soon to be declared saint, Bishop [Oscar Romero](#), assassinated on March 24, 1980 in El Salvador because he was openly denouncing the brutal repression being systematically imposed on Salvadorans.

Landslide victory of Daniel Ortega in 2016?

Many of those -- for example Benjamin Forcano in [Nicaragua: Una mirada nueva](#) -- defending the pro-Ortega government narrative refer to Ortega's electoral victory in 2016, a victory in which he obtained 72 percent of the vote.

One small, but very telling detail is left out of this picture: abstention rates of 70 percent!

Asserts Pedro Joaquín Chamorro Barrios:

“Abstention rates of more than 70 percent showed that Nicaraguans were rejecting the electoral farce and the installation of a new dynasty with the election of Ortega's wife as vice president.”⁵⁵

“It is difficult to ascertain, notes Jeffrey L. Gould, how much support Ortega still has. In the highly questioned [2016 elections](#), he obtained over 70% of the vote—with abstention rates reported at anywhere from 30%, according to the Supreme Electoral Council, to 70%, according to the main opposition groups.”⁵⁶

“The opposition described the election as the most rigged contest in the four decades since the Sandinista leader first came to power, comments Jonathan Watts. Daniel Ortega's victory – alongside [his wife, Rosario Murillo, who was standing as vice-president for the first time](#) – extends the influence of the first couple, whose children and in-laws also control many key posts in government and business. (...)

According to Benjamin Waddell, Yadira Leets Marín, Ortega's daughter-in-law,

⁵⁵ El desmontaje de la democracia, *Confidencial*, August 17, 2018, <https://Confidencial.com.ni/la-caida-del-disfraz/>, consulted on August 19, 2018.

⁵⁶ NACLA, July 25, 2018, <https://nacla.org/news/2018/07/25/nicaragua-view-left>, consulted on August 18, 2018.

manages DNP, Nicaragua's national oil distributor, and Ortega's son, Rafael Ortega, manages Albanisa, the Venezuelan-Nicaraguan private joint-venture.⁵⁷

“Opposition leaders said the election was flawed because Ortega used his power over the courts to bypass constitutional term limits and prevent his most popular rivals from standing. Several candidates resigned in protest at the skewed number of polling station monitors.

“In July, Nicaragua's Supreme Electoral Council in effect decimated the opposition by ousting Eduardo Montealegre as leader of the main opposition party, the Independent Liberation party (PLI) – and then suspending almost all its members for refusing to recognize a new party leader named as head of the opposition by the supreme court.

“Other parties in the coalition had already been stripped of their legal status by judges and electoral officials allegedly controlled by Ortega's government.”⁵⁸

Ortega government a threat to US interests and multinationals?

While I can agree with Camilo Mejía in [Open Letter to Amnesty International by a Former Amnesty International Prisoner of Conscience](#) when he boasts of several of the

⁵⁷ Benjamin Waddell, “[Venezuelan oil fueled the rise and fall of Nicaragua's Ortega regime](#),” *The Conversation*, August 21, 2018, <https://theconversation.com/venezuelan-oil-fueled-the-rise-and-fall-of-nicaraguas-ortega-regime-100507>, consulted on August 23, 2018.

⁵⁸ “Nicaragua president re-elected in landslide amid claims of rigged vote,” *The Guardian*, November 7, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/07/nicaragua-president-daniel-ortega-reelected-landslide-vote-rigging>, consulted August 19, 2018.

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economic achievements of the Ortega government, I find troubling his main conclusion, namely that the key element in the April protest movement is US intervention to get rid of a model that contradicts the neoliberal model. Mejía asserts:

“The audacity of success, of giving its poorest citizens a life with dignity, of being an example of sovereignty to wealthier, more powerful nations, all in direct contradiction to the neoliberal model and its emphasis on privatization and austerity, has once again placed Nicaragua in the crosshairs of U.S. intervention. (...) The United States will never tolerate such a dangerous example.”

Though Ortega did implement certain measures to rid Nicaragua of neoliberal characteristics such as school fees, even at the primary school level, and also expanded free public health care services; though he did use about 40 percent of the generous Venezuelan aid to finance social programs targeting the rural poor, and women in particular, his basic economic model differs little from neoliberalism.

As pointed out by the anonymous protestor Juanónimo I cited earlier: “What would Sandino say, he who waged a battle against mining companies installed in Nicaragua, were he to discover that the government that today usurps his name has sold most of the subsoil of the country to large extractive multinationals? Not to mention the sale of the concession for the construction of the interoceanic canal to a dubious Chinese company, and arbitrarily seizing land from peasants without even consulting them or at least trying to negotiate with them and obtaining their consent.”

Free trade zones have been thriving under the Ortega government and as the peasants of the BDO agricultural cooperative, staunch historical Sandinistas, told my colleague Fred Jones and me on January 13, 2016:

“The Ortega government is closer to businesses than

to ordinary people. When the minimum salary is discussed, the private sector basically gets the last say. Presently the minimum salary is 5,000 cordobas (about \$167 US) per month whereas the canasta básica (in other words, the basket of goods deemed necessary just to get by in life) is 12,500 cordobas (about \$425 US). This makes little sense.”

And the peasants of the BDO cooperative ominously warned:

“Ortega, on July 19 made a beautiful speech: I will eliminate poverty, he said. However, these are mere words. Farmers like us are not getting any financial help from the government. What is happening to Maduro in Venezuela and what happened to Kirchner in Argentina might happen here in Nicaragua. People one day will have the last word.”

The Ortega government is open for business. It makes life easy for both national firms and multinationals, and this in typical neoliberal fashion. It is hard to imagine that the latter would want to overthrow, with the support of the US government and other powerful countries, such a welcoming government, and one whose pact with COSEP, chief representative of the business sector in Nicaragua, excludes transparency and democracy.

What is so anti-neoliberal about concentrating ever more power and wealth into one’s own hands, and using about 60 percent of the basically privatized Venezuelan aid package (it goes directly to the FSLN, controlled by Ortega, not to the Nicaraguan government as such) to enrich one’s own family and friends? Daniel is president, Rosario vice-president and they control considerable wealth and numerous businesses, including most of the media. And their children and in-laws also control many key posts in government and business.

What is so anti-neoliberal about allowing businesses close to the Ortega government to exploit several of Nicaragua’s

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nature reserves, including the Indio Maíz Reserve, and this in a predatory manner and totally ignoring Nicaragua's existing environmental laws and, as denounced by the Nicaraguan bishops in their May 21, 2014 document, "under the corrupt protection of municipal and national authorities"?

What is so anti-neoliberal about promising, in one's January 2007 inaugural address as president of Nicaragua -- see my diary extracts above -- "I will eliminate the mega salaries of politicians and top government bureaucrats," and then doing the exact contrary, namely allowing salaries of members of parliament to skyrocket, "moving from \$1, 400 per month to nearly \$5,000 per month," as noted by Dora María Téllez in her 2013 article "The Sandinista Front has collapsed, now it is the political instrument of a family", and this with many perks that did not exist before?

By calling into question the Ortega government, and requesting early and fair elections, are the hundreds of thousands of Nicaraguan protestors actually coup plotting? Are they, as stated by Rosario Murillo in her August 17, 2018 address to the nation, assaulting the government of the poor, and thus assaulting the poor themselves, and thus not only committing a sin, but even a MORTAL sin?

Nicaragua now returning to normalcy?

Now that the Ortega government has violently repressed protestors and eliminated all barricades and roadblocks throughout Nicaragua, it has been arguing in the last weeks that things are returning to normalcy. This is the message that is constantly being repeated on the government's website El19digital.com.

It may be true that schools and universities are reopening, that cars and trucks can now circulate on roads and streets, that commercial activities have resumed, etc.

However, is Nicaragua returning to normalcy or is the Ortega government and its numerous media outlets clinging to that image, in the hope that the hundreds of thousands of Nicaraguans who were protesting a few weeks ago and asking for early elections without the Ortega-Murillo couple and demanding the democratization of state institutions will get tired and abandon their struggle?

On August 25, 2018 the government website El19digital.com posted an article titled [Nicaragua protagoniza inmensa caminata pidiendo Justicia para las víctimas del terrorismo golpista](#) (Huge demonstration of Nicaraguans calling for justice for victims of coup-plotting terrorism). The article emphasizes some of the achievements of the Sandinista Revolution of the 1980s, namely the UN award winning literacy crusade, and the 39th anniversary of the Sandinista Youth July 19.

It quotes Camilo Sánchez:

“We will not tire of asking for justice for all of our dead, we support our Commander Daniel Ortega and compañera Rosario Murillo in these new paths of peace.”

Is it normal that “in these new paths of peace”, while some 135 of the 400 imprisoned protestors are being charged with terrorism, organized crime, kidnapping, and murder, not one single member of the pro-Ortega government paramilitaries and not one single policeman have been charged? Is this what is considered the normal and fair administration of law and order? When asked by Patricia Villegas on Telesur on July 24, 2018, “And if it were found that some of your government officials were involved in some acts of violence, do you guarantee that same justice?”, Ortega immediately replied: “Justice has to be applied to everyone in the same manner. Of course, it would be justice for all!”

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Is it normal that doctors, nurses, and orderlies are being fired in hospitals for taking care of wounded protestors? That teachers in schools and universities are being fired for supporting the protestors and their demands? That public employees in the various state institutions are being fired for the same reasons?

Is this the justice for all that Rosario Murillo, in her August 17, 2018 address to the nation said that Nicaraguans were calling for?

After having accepted, under the pressure of protestors during the June 2018 National Dialogue, the presence in Nicaragua of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights of the OAS (IACHR), the Ortega government is now at war with that commission. It called the executive director of the IACHR Paulo Abrao a “liar” (Daniel Ortega during the interview he granted CNN) and says its report “lacks all scientific rigor”, provides “partial and politicized information”, and “in conjunction with the United States government and other countries, promotes interventionist political maneuvers, attempting to destabilize and isolate Nicaragua internationally with the aim of overthrowing its constitutional government. (...) The IACHR manipulates information, converting an attempted coup into an alleged peaceful protest, deliberately omitting that the murdered persons are mostly police officers, State officials, Sandinista militants and civilians not involved in the conflict.”⁵⁹

The “crime” committed by the IACHR, notes Carlos Chamorro in [Los “falsos positivos” de la matanza de Ortega](#),⁶⁰ is that of “documenting the worst massacre perpetrated by the State in a Latin American country in which

⁵⁹ Gobierno de Ortega ataca a la CIDH, Yader Luna, *Confidencial*, August 19, 2018, <https://Confidencial.com.ni/gobierno-de-ortega-ataca-a-la-cidh/>, consulted on August 21, 2018.

⁶⁰ *Confidencial*, August 20, 2018, <https://Confidencial.com.ni/los-falsos-positivos-de-la-matanza-de-ortega/>, Consulted on the same day.

there is no civil war, no armed conflict” and the “worst massacre in the history of peacetime Nicaragua.” Instead of acknowledging the 322 documented deaths reported by the IACHR and corroborated by national institutions such as the Nicaraguan Center for Human Rights (CENIDH) and the Permanent Commission on Human Rights (CPDH), the Ortega government says that there were only 198 deaths, arguing that the other 122 were not at all related to the civic protest and simply resulted from common crimes.

“The Ortega-Murillo dictatorship, pursues Chamorro, has concocted an even more perverse version of fabricated news than the notorious one of the Alvaro Uribe administration in Colombia. The abuses of the Colombian army and the security forces -- they were murdering innocent civilians -- were passed off as if they were guerrillas killed in combat, in the framework of the fight against irregular armed groups.

“In Nicaragua, the Ortega government is trying to cover up the murders and extrajudicial executions of more than a hundred civilians who participated in the civic protest, by presenting these deaths as mere homicides caused by common crime and traffic accidents. And the most despicable thing is that by so doing, they are, for all intents and purposes, trying to kill the victims of repression yet again, this time by denying them the right to an identity and reducing them to a statistic.”

Is it normal that the Ortega government, four months after the April massacre began, is still refusing “to present a list of the victims: the dead, wounded, political prisoners, and disappeared?”

“The only dead whose identities it has publicly revealed are 21 policemen”, says Chamorro. Why the silence and secrecy regarding the other 301 deaths?

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And why would the Ortega government, on the one hand refuse to cooperate with the IACHR, not providing them with their list of deaths so that a comparison can be made between the government list and that of the IACHR, and, on the other hand, accuse the IACHR of producing a biased report, which conflates the deaths related to the civic protest with those resulting from common crimes?

“Despite paramilitary repression, rigged trials against political prisoners, land seizures, the firing of state employees, threats, and the persecution of protesters, Nicaraguans are continuing to protest in streets, demanding early elections and the end of the Ortega-Murillo dictatorship. In this struggle for democracy and justice, it is only national civic pressure and international condemnation, both intense and simultaneous, that will make possible a political exit through elections, with Ortega out of power,” concludes Chamorro.

On August 25, 2019 the IACHR reasserted that according to its observations the Ortega government’s numbers were “inconsistent.” “The vast majority of victims died as a result of state action or police forces at the service of the State”, it insisted. Reports *Confidencial*:

“The IACHR questioned the figures of deceased persons provided by the government, which it described as “inconsistent.” In its report, the Commission explained that the government “through notes that it sent to the IACHR between June and July 2018, reported 37 deceased persons, mostly State agents or persons related to the government. Subsequently, in response to repeated requests for updated information, the Nicaraguan government, by means of a note dated August 7, reported a consolidated figure of 450 people who died between

April 19 and July 25. In the breakdown of this figure, the government reported that 197 people died as "victims of coup-plotting terrorism"; and 253 people died from "common criminal activity, traffic accidents and other causes, which were manipulated by the coup leaders and related organizations to discredit, defame and damage the image of the Government of Nicaragua." (...)

"The Commission reiterates to the government of Nicaragua the urgent need to guarantee access to detailed information on all deceased persons, in order that the IACHR can check and verify the figures with those offered by the Nicaraguan authorities."⁶¹

National Dialogue or mere repression of protestors?

I explained at the beginning of this book the profound pain I am experiencing as the result of the present crisis in Nicaragua. Pain because of all the deaths, the wounded, the imprisoned, the tortured, the disappeared, and the thousands now fleeing to other countries. Pain because of the massive destruction, not only to buildings and infrastructure, but also to an economy that is now tanking. And pain because of the deep emotional bonds that I have developed over the years with Nicaraguans, and this on both sides of the present political divide.

In some respects, I said, I feel that I am in the same predicament as a child whose parents are not only separated but suddenly engaged in a massive quarrel, one that turns into violence and ends with one dominating the other through sheer brutal force.

⁶¹ [CIDH: "Cifras de fallecidos aportadas por el Estado son inconsistentes."](#)

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I also recalled that during my long experience in coordinating student field trips to Nicaragua and managing small development projects there, I had learned the crucial importance, not only for the success of a field trip, but also for that of development projects, of crisis mediation skills.

Undoubtedly it is with considerable naiveté that I contemplated writing this book on Nicaragua in yet another attempt to bring what has become this second family of mine to a negotiating table where both sides of the conflict could openly express their thoughts and feelings, accept blame where it is warranted, and pool their energies and resources, not in fighting and name calling, but rather in moving ahead for the greater good of all Nicaraguans.

And undoubtedly it is with considerable naiveté that I also contemplated writing this book while remaining a neutral arbitrator, and systematically refraining from taking sides. Presenting both narratives, pro-Ortega government and anti-Ortega government, as objectively as possible, and leaving the reader arrive at his or her own evaluation of the situation in Nicaragua.

I remember telling my students at Dawson College that I would do my best in teaching in an objective manner, always trying to present both sides of the picture and to foster tolerance and broadmindedness, but that there was something profoundly unethical about simply refusing to be subjective and to take sides.

And I would give them the following example, one directly linked to my very taxing experience in Chile when I witnessed the brutal coup d'état that ousted Salvador Allende in September 1973, one after which more than 28,000

Chileans were tortured in some 1,200 enclosures under military or police control.⁶²

Imagine that a woman is being tortured, and that she starts screaming at her torturer, calling him names, and very emotionally accusing him of atrocities. And imagine the torturer, telling the woman being tortured, “You are being subjective, emotional, and judgmental. Try to see things from my perspective! Try to be more open minded and objective!”

After investigating for nearly four months what has been happening in Nicaragua, I have concluded that I simply cannot bring myself to support the pro-Ortega narrative, one to which many of my Nicaraguan friends adhere.

That there are many Sandinistas among my friends who support the present Ortega-Murillo couple and agree with the way the present FSLN party is being managed, I can understand. It is perfectly true that Nicaragua has experienced, during Ortega’s eleven years in power, considerable economic growth, that the road infrastructure has been significantly improved, and that Nicaragua had become the safest country in Central America, one where tourism was rapidly growing. And it is perfectly true that the

⁶² Shortly after the publication of the first report of the Valech Commission was released in November 2004, a group of Chilean historians published a manifesto – [Manifiesto de historiadores contra los que torturan a nombre de la Patria](#) (Manifesto of historians against those who torture in the name of the nation). It states:

“Chileans have been profoundly moved by the publication of the first part of the Report of the National Commission on Political Imprisonment and Torture (This was the official name of the Valech Commission). Much more than the Rettig Report or the results of the [Mesa de Diálogo](#) (Human Rights Dialogue) this new and painful eruption of social memory, arising from more than 28,000 testimonies of people tortured in almost 1,200 enclosures under military or police control, has forcefully reminded us of our pending debt in matters of truth and justice, and has also shown, once again, that one can simply not force people “to forget” by decree.”

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Ortega government carried out several impressive social programs targeting the poor, and in particular women.

Even the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund acknowledged the economic achievements of the Ortega government. On April 16, 2018, only a couple of days before the violent assault of pro-Ortega paramilitaries against peaceful student demonstrators that sparked the massive popular street protests, the [World Bank wrote in an overview](#) : “Despite global economic turbulence, Nicaragua has stood out for maintaining growth levels above the average for Latin America and the Caribbean.” And it praised the government's “disciplined macroeconomic policies and pioneering strategies to fight poverty.”⁶³

My Nicaraguan friend, who gave our students a fascinating conference in León in 2009, explained that when Daniel Ortega visited the APRODESE center in El Espino, he was fascinated by the fact that, thanks to APRODESE, children in that region were receiving a free school lunch, that peasants were working on computers connected to high speed Internet, that hundreds of youth were being trained in welding, carpentry, sewing, alternative energy, etc., that most families in four hamlets were now receiving piped potable water. As a matter of fact, Daniel Ortega was so fascinated by this project which seemed to incarnate and pursue the very best values of the Sandinista Revolution of the 1980s, that he vowed to spread that model to all of Nicaragua. From there would have originated, according to our speaker, the FSLN project to provide all primary school children in poor rural areas of Nicaragua with a free school lunch; the FSLN project to create, in all high schools of Nicaragua, a computer classroom known as “aula tic”, and to create in several towns and cities throughout Nicaragua a free Wi-Fi park.

⁶³ David Adams and Wilfredo Miranda Aburto, “[Daniel Inc: How Nicaragua's Ortega financed a political dynasty](#),” *Univision*, May 5, 2018.

Both students and teachers were impressed by his conference, and we were able to see with our own eyes many of the benefits accruing to the poor in the form of houses, sheets of metal for roofs, etc.⁶⁴

However, to argue that the massive popular revolt of April 2018 simply originated from Nicaraguan traitors who, financed by US money, were attempting to stage a coup in order to overthrow an elected constitutional government, is something I find totally ridiculous. And which makes me relive what I experienced in Chile after the September 11, 1973 coup when those perpetrating the coup suddenly came up with the story of [Plan Zeta](#), a plan according to which Salvador Allende would have been preparing to assassinate most of the top generals of his army.

Just as the Chilean military came up with a story to make a pretty horrible situation seem decent, and a mere act of self-defense, Daniel Ortega and his wife Rosario Murillo came up with a story to make their pretty horrible situation seem decent, and brutal armed repression a mere act of self-defense.

As pointed out by many observers, the Ortega-Murillo couple presently has two choices: that of violently repressing protestors, however massive and broad protests may have been, to carry out a systematic manhunt to find, lock up and bring to court the leaders of the ‘treason’ and clean up all public sector jobs of traitors, which is the path they seem to have chosen; or, that of accepting to return to the National Dialogue table that it abandoned at the end of June, one where both government and protestors were meeting in the

⁶⁴ See, for example, Katherine Hoyt, “[Report From a Fact-Finding Trip to Nicaragua: Anti-Poverty Programs Make a Difference](#),” *NACLA*, December 12, 2009, <https://nacla.org/node/6313>, consulted on August 23, 2018.

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hope of arriving, through the mediation of the Catholic Church, at a solution to the crisis.

On Wednesday August 22, 2018 Daniel Ortega met with his flag waving supporters in the “Rotonda Hugo Chávez” in Managua to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the occupation of the National Palace, one of the most difficult operations of the revolution leading to the overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship. He presented himself as the great leader of the Sandinista Revolution, recalling Sandino, the occupation of the national palace, and the national literacy crusade of 1980, and portrayed protestors as people who had fallen into error, people whose minds had been poisoned, people who were guilty of state treason and had been ‘torturing’ the people of Nicaragua. Below, his words:

“We have to find ways of reconnecting to those fellow Nicaraguan who were misled but who have now realized their mistake. Long live the people of Nicaragua! Long live the 40th anniversary of the occupation of the National Palace! May Nicaragua, a free country, always remain free! Today we are one with the people of Nicolás Maduro, with the people of Chávez, with the people of Evo, and with the people of Nicaragua.

“Our recent budget modifications, with cuts in education and health, originate from the bad guys. Before we had more money but because of the bad guys we had to make cuts. Because of the bad guys many fellow Nicaraguans have lost their jobs. (...)

“They are upset that things in municipalities are returning to normal, they want to see Nicaragua destroyed because they believe that they will gain power in this way. However, they do not realize that people have discovered how poison can lead human beings to confront their fellow citizens. And that's

why, despite the provocations and crimes they are still committing, we have to be vigilant. They should not believe that even though we are promoting peace, we will allow them to continue torturing us.

“Ever since we came to power in 2007 those who want power began to cause trouble. When sanctions are applied to Nicaragua it is the people who suffer. Sandino would call them traitors, puppets, the Judas and the traitors, begging the empire on their knees to punish Nicaragua, thinking that will make Nicaraguans surrender, or sell themselves.

“The month of August is a heroic date, (...) that great feat against illiteracy: the great national literacy crusade.”⁶⁵

I do not believe that much good will come from President Ortega’s way of presenting the situation in Nicaragua. It will lead, I am afraid, to Nicaragua’s isolation internationally, and, instead of resolving the national crisis and allowing Nicaragua’s tanking economy to recover, it will do the exact opposite.

Contrary to Venezuela, Nicaragua cannot sell oil on the international market to obtain government funds. And Venezuelan oil aid to Nicaragua, that used to average more than 500 million dollars per year and accounted for 34 percent of state revenues and 23 percent of export earnings, is now down to a trickle -- less than 35 million.⁶⁶ Venezuela has

⁶⁵ “[Discurso de Daniel Ortega en el acto del 40 aniversario de la toma del Palacio Nacional](#),” *El Nuevo Diario*, August 22, 2018.

⁶⁶ See David Adams and Wilfredo Miranda Aburto, “[Daniel Inc: How Nicaragua's Ortega financed a political dynasty](#),” *Univision News*, May 5, 2018. “In 2008, Rodrigo Obregón was rewarded for his dedication to Nicaragua’s left-wing Sandinista Front by being appointed deputy manager of ‘Albanisa’, a multi-billion dollar cooperation agreement with oil-rich Venezuela. (...) But, a decade later, as Nicaragua is plunging into another round of turmoil, he fears that the alliance with Venezuela has

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been obliged to cut this aid as its own economy has contracted by more than a third since 2013, and the country is not only experiencing shortages of food and medicine, a massive exodus of its citizens to neighbouring countries, but also inflation that could reach a million percent in 2018.⁶⁷

had the opposite effect. With an outstanding debt of more than \$3 billion, Obregón and others warn that Albanisa was little more than a giant financial scheme to keep Sandinista President Daniel Ortega in power by rewarding his allies, including his wife and children, while leaving the country mortgaged to the hilt.

“Albanisa is the apple of Ortega’s eye,” said Obregón, who left the company in 2014 in disagreement with its management over concerns he says he raised about the political manipulation of its finances and lack of transparency.

“Ortega used Albanisa to buy everybody off in a way never seen before in the history of Nicaragua,” he said in an interview at his office in Managua. “They did not allow anyone to put their hands on it, not even the country’s treasury officials.” (...)

“Under the deal, Venezuela’s state oil company, PdVSA agreed to supply its counterpart in Nicaragua, PetroNic, with all its oil needs. But only 50% of the payment was due up front, with the other half spread over 25 years, with only 2% interest. To handle the arrangement, a joint venture was created - Albanisa – with 51% controlled by PdVSA and 49% by PetroNic. At the same time, Venezuela’s state oil company, PdVSA, agreed to loan 50% of the value of the oil to a private Nicaraguan cooperative, CARUNA (Caja Rural Nacional), controlled by Ortega’s Sandinista Front. Ortega appointed the party’s treasurer, Francisco Lopez, as vice-president of Albanisa.

Albanisa subsidiaries were created: from a forestry unit (Alba Forestal), a wind energy project (Alba Generación), and a bank. There was also an oil refinery, an airline, a cellphone company, a hotel, a string of gas stations, luxury apartment buildings, a tilapia fish farm, a cotton and rice business, a pig farm and even a silk worm business.

The company grew to employ about 1,500 says Obregón spread across a network of offices. Two of Ortega’s sons, Rafael and Laureano, were put in charge of some of the companies. “They walked around the office hallways like peacocks,” said Obregón.”

⁶⁷ [Nicolás Maduro tries to rescue Venezuela’s economy](#), *The Economist*, August 23, 2018.

In such taxing circumstances, I find it very worrying that Nicaragua would be playing with fire by carrying on in such a way that it is basically providing, and this on a silver platter, good reasons for foreign governments and multilateral institutions to cut or diminish funding.

On January 23, 2010 the taxicab driver Pedro Zelaya, as mentioned in my diary extracts above, told me that Nicaragua, because of its blatantly fraudulent elections, had just lost much of the foreign aid “it was receiving from the [United States](#), the European Union and the United Nations Millennium Goal.” Though Pedro complained that because of those cuts his son lost the job he had in the United Nations Millennium Goal, I know that for Ortega himself and his government this loss was no big deal. So immense was the oil aid then coming to Nicaragua from Venezuela that Ortega “barely blinked an eye.”⁶⁸

Today, however, Nicaragua finds itself in an altogether different situation. One that could soon oblige Ortega to blink an eye.

Confronting the IACHR, accusing it of having produced a biased report but at the same time systematically refusing to provide it with government information that could presumably remove this bias; not accepting the presence in Nicaragua of the group set up by the OAS, a group whose creation was supported by more than 20 -- except for two or three -- countries members of the OAS and whose mission is to help Nicaragua find a peaceful solution to its present crisis; confronting and repressing protestors, and making them appear as satanical forces, traitors, coup plotters, people with empoisoned minds, torturers and troublemakers out to destroy their own country; presenting the leaders who offered support to the massive protests as people trying to grab power in

⁶⁸ David Adams and Wilfredo Miranda, “[Daniel Inc: How Nicaragua's Ortega financed a political dynasty](#),” *Univision News*, May 5, 2018.

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Nicaragua, and kneeling before the US empire and begging it to impose sanctions on the people of Nicaragua to facilitate this power grab; all this, in my opinion, is extremely troubling.

And that President Daniel Ortega would angrily reject the report released on August 29, 2018 by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights [Human rights violations and abuses in the context of protests in Nicaragua - 18 April to 18 August 2018](#); argue that this report is nothing but “an instrument of the powerful who impose their death policy,” produced by “the same ones who reduced to slavery peoples of entire continents ... who transported them from Africa to work, (...) the same colonialists who have invaded and continue to invade and destroy entire countries”; that “the United Nations in this case, is nothing more than an instrument of the politics of death, terror, lies, and infamy,”; that the United Nations “are infamous and that it is a good thing that Nicaraguans are finally starting to discover it”: all that, I also find deeply troubling.⁶⁹

What deeply impressed me in the research I carried out in writing this book was the report, [Searching for new horizons for an improved Nicaragua](#), submitted by the Catholic bishops of Nicaragua to Daniel Ortega on May 21, 2014. I found it flabbergasting to see that the bishops, already then, had put their finger on the roots of the popular revolt that erupted in April 2018. And not only had they put their finger on the roots; they had also basically proposed to Daniel Ortega that he accept to do exactly what the hundreds of thousands of Nicaraguans demonstrating throughout Nicaragua have been asking him to do in recent weeks:

- Reform state institutions so that they are not partisan and reflect transparency and democracy.

⁶⁹ Maynor Salazar, “[Informe de la masacre va al Consejo de Seguridad de la ONU](#)”, *Confidencial*, August 30, 2018.

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- Assure that elections are fair and not fraudulent.
- Stop allowing pro-government paramilitaries to violently assault peaceful demonstrators, while the national police are there, arms crossed.
- Stop using religion to deify the FSLN and its leader Daniel Ortega.
- Stop demanding that people who have government jobs, at the national or municipal level, participate in FSLN rallies in order to keep their jobs.
- Stop hiding information from the public, information like the massive Venezuelan aid that goes into the private pockets of FSLN leaders, in particular the Ortega family itself.
- Stop giving government jobs primarily to members of the FSLN.
- Stop allowing rich people close to the FSLN from exploiting in a predatory manner the nature reserves of Nicaragua while totally ignoring all environmental laws.⁷⁰

No. Daniel Ortega said no to the bishops in 2014, and he is saying no to the hundreds of thousands of Nicaraguans who suddenly became enraged when they saw what the paramilitaries were doing to student demonstrators in April.

Enraged, and no longer afraid. No longer willing to continue repressing their inner feelings, so that they could hold on to a job. So that their son or daughter could have a scholarship. So that their small business would get government contracts.

⁷⁰ They made two specific proposals: organizing a national dialogue, and promising that the forthcoming election would not be fraudulent. However, the complaints they addressed to Ortega in their document included all the points I just listed,

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In my diary extracts, there is one that conveys my gut feeling right now, and that also vividly reflects a major problem highlighted by Dora María Téllez in her January 2013 *Envío* article on the collapse of the FSLN, “[El Frente Sandinista colapsó, ahora es la maquinaria política de una familia.](#)” parts of which I reproduced above:

“Nicaraguan society is sick and tired of the deep sectarianism that has flooded the country: sectarianism of a family caste, of family castes; the sectarianism in municipalities of the political secretary and his family discriminating against the rest of the people. Today how many Nicaraguans believe that state institutions are fair and serve all of us? None. Nobody believes that anymore.”

The diary extract that I am referring to is the one in which I relate how I one day literally lost my temper, and nearly screamed at a young municipal Sandinista leader who, on the day of my departure, had dropped by my host home, with the Sandinista mayor of the municipality, to say goodbye.

Why, I suddenly and unexpectedly burst out at him, did you allocate most of the new houses, donated by the government, to members of your own family? Why did that woman and her children, living in the house down the street, a house with only a roof and plastic walls, a woman who has been asking North South Studies for a new house for years, why did that woman not get a new house from the Nicaraguan government while your family, which is much better off, got most of them? Why? When I met with her, she told me that she did not get a house because she was not in favour of the FSLN.

And in the letter that I wrote to him once I returned to Montreal, a letter replying to his in which he assured me that the Sandinista government, contrary to what I believed, always allocated government handouts with rigor and very fairly, I wrote:

“Would you argue that Sandinista rigor and revolutionary values prevailed - the people of Nicaragua, president! - when Laureano Ortega Murillo, son of Daniel Ortega, was seen, and this in a country as poor as Nicaragua, wearing a watch worth 43,200 dollars when he received, on July 5, 2014, the Chinese businessman Wang Jing, who is responsible for the interoceanic canal project?”

This young Sandinista leader that I suddenly blasted was then project director of his municipality, and his Sandinista younger brother was the political secretary, or ‘político’, of that same municipality. He comes from a wonderful family. A family that is very warm and welcoming, and that has hosted and profoundly bonded with several North South Studies students. A family that I love and in which I have many fond memories: I still remember sitting in their house, between the North South Studies student that they had hosted and the host father, during the farewell party they had organized at the end of our home stay. Such was the affection between the host student and the father that tears were running down their face.

And with this young Sandinista leader, whom I consider a friend, I have successfully carried out several community projects that are beneficial to the entire community. He has done many good things.

Today, even though I am deeply revolted by what has been happening recently in Nicaragua, and even though I am extremely critical of the repression exercised by the Ortega-Murillo couple, I know that this government accomplished many good things for the people of Nicaragua.

However, I understand, I believe, the profound roots of the massive popular revolt that just occurred. A relatively good economic performance does not do away with such roots, which are similar to those that led to the toppling of the Somoza dictatorship in 1979.

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The taxi cab driver who drove my colleague Fred Jones and me to the Bufé Laprado in Managua on January 31, 2017 expressed things very clearly.

“I fought with the Sandinistas to overthrow Somoza. Why were we fighting? Because Somoza used fraud to win elections. Because he owned a considerable part of the land and many of the large businesses in Nicaragua. Because he controlled the National Guard and basically set himself above all laws. Because he used force to smash all opposition.

“And what do we have today? The very leader with whom we fought to liberate Nicaragua from the Somoza dictatorship – and it resulted in more than 40,000 deaths – is now doing the same thing as Somoza. He uses massive fraud to win elections. He owns many of the large businesses in Nicaragua, including most of the TV and radio stations, and newspapers. He controls the Supreme Court and the Supreme Electoral Council. He uses force to smash all opposition. If a friend of Daniel Ortega decides that he wants your house, you're in trouble. There is little one can do to prevent that from happening. It is not the rule of law in present-day Nicaragua.

“I did not vote in the recent election. I would be willing to go to war once again to get rid of this dictatorship.”

As I said in beginning of this book, my hope is that Nicaraguans in the coming weeks and months will be able to draw from the most fundamental ethical and revolutionary values of the Sandinista revolution of the 1980s; that they will be able to overcome the present crisis through transparent and honest dialogue, accepting to listen to each other's narratives in a spirit of respect and compromise, to

achieve justice and peace, the cornerstone of all integral individual and societal development.

That is my hope.

However, I think that Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo, who, with their children and in-laws, are not only enjoying considerable power but also considerable wealth, will find it very hard to return to the National Dialogue table, in an effort to arrive at a peaceful solution. Negotiating with satanical forces, with traitors, coup plotters, torturers, people whose mind is empoisoned, people who are willing to subordinate the now FREE population of Nicaragua to US imperialism... that is a very hard thing to do.

I wonder if Pepe Mujica, president of Uruguay from 2010 to 2015, who has now returned to live in the same humble house he had in the mountains before he became president, would have trouble returning to a similar National Dialogue table...

Just as I was writing the above sentences and about to publish this book, I received the following email from a friend in Nicaragua:

“There are at least ten persons from this region, which is commonly called the “four saints” -- the municipalities of Santo Tomas del Norte, San Francisco del Norte, San Juan de Cinco Pinos and San Pedro del Norte -- who joined the Ortega regime’s paramilitary groups. All of these people are at least in their 50s. Hundreds of others in the region have been approached, mostly former members of the Sandinista Army of the 1980s, or members of the Sandinista militia. They are also quite old -- in their early 50s or older. Most have refused, but of course many of these people do not have the physical fitness or health to do this type of activity.

“Many also refused because they simply do not agree.

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“Moreover, in the region of the four saints, just like almost everywhere in the country, most of the people active in the opposition are Sandinistas. Each municipality has a small committee, organized and linked to the National Civic Alliance, which is part of the National Dialogue table. As a matter of fact, in one of the four municipalities mentioned above, the local coordinator of the National Civic Alliance is a former Sandinista mayor!

Ovide Bastien
Entrelacs, August 31, 2018