

# Nicaragua Is Teetering on the Edge of a Civil War

Frida Ghitis | Wednesday, June 13, 2018

At a time when the international order is being challenged and decades-old conflicts appear to be in flux, perhaps it isn't a surprise that anti-government protests in an impoverished Central American country have fallen under the radar. But the escalating unrest in Nicaragua, less than 1,000 miles from U.S. shores, could well morph into a catastrophe that grabs global attention, if the government there continues along its uncompromising path of repression.



*Anti-government demonstrators take cover behind a barricade after gunfire erupted during a march against Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega, Managua, Nicaragua, May 30, 2018 (AP photo by Esteban Felix).*

The toll of clashes between protesters and government forces has spiked (<http://www.laprensa.hn/mundo/1187043-410/nicaragua-deteriora-violencia-reanudacion-dialogo>) to at least 148 dead and well over 1,000 wounded in recent weeks, according to the Nicaraguan Center for Human Rights. As President Daniel Ortega's regime refuses to budge over calls for negotiations, resorting to tactics reminiscent of Latin America's darkest days, his opponents are becoming even more determined (<https://www.thedailybeast.com/facing-down-the-death-squads-of-nicaragua-33>) to push ahead. A key player in the protests, the National Alliance for Justice and Democracy, has called for a full national work stoppage (<https://www.afp.com/en/news/205/top-nicaragua-civic-group-calls-strike-anti-ortega-fury-grows-doc-15v9ag2>) on Thursday, a 24-hour "peaceful civil strike covering the entire country and all economic activities." The stakes are growing by the day.

The drama started unexpectedly two months ago, with pensioners protesting cuts to their meager retirement allowances. The government of Ortega and his wife, Vice President Rosario Murillo, had every reason to feel confident that the future was secure for their dynastic project. After all, the former Marxist rebel, who overthrew a despised, corrupt regime back in the late 1970s and fought a U.S.-backed militia in the 1980s, has rewritten the constitution to make it possible to remain in power, while packing the courts and election boards and securing control (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/20348/how-ortega-took-the-suspense-out-of-nicaragua-s-presidential-election>) of all the levers of power. All along, he enjoyed strong popular approval.

The power couple in Managua seemed perfectly safe. At least that's how it looked on the surface. But in a

matter of weeks, everything has changed.

The government's violent response to the protests has ignited a national movement that has been led by university students and drawn support from much of the population. Ortega revoked the pension reforms in late April, but by then the demonstrators were calling for Ortega and Murillo to step down. Ortega, 72, is now in his fourth presidential term, the past three of those consecutive, with Murillo being positioned to hold onto power after him.

The depth of the government's ongoing violence has shaken the country. Officials claim they are acting to protect businesses and maintain order, but the spiral of repression has taken on a life of its own. Shadowy paramilitary gangs loyal to Ortega have now joined state security forces in attacking protesters. The government denies its forces have killed demonstrators, but the evidence suggests otherwise. With Nicaraguans posting cellphone videos (<https://twitter.com/NeverForgetNI/status/1006613758196797443>) of plainclothes gangs shooting protesters in cold blood, human rights organizations accuse the government of murder.

Disillusioned Ortega allies say that former members of the army's special forces and of the Interior Ministry's security units are carrying out these attacks. Recently released prisoners and Ortega backers from the slums, who have received quick training, have apparently joined them.

There is also evidence of protesters killed by sharpshooters positioned far away from demonstrations. Doctors have reportedly identified injuries as consistent (<https://au.news.yahoo.com/paramilitaries-attacking-nicaraguas-protesters-143438332--spt.html>) with the impact of fire from Dragunov sniper rifles—Soviet-made firearms that filled Nicaraguan government arsenals at the height of the Cold War, when Ortega's Soviet-backed Sandinistas fought the U.S.-backed Contras. Sandinista fighters loyal to Ortega are said to have left the government when their leader temporarily lost power in 2006, but they remain fiercely loyal.

***Ortega may have lost the support of the people, but he still enjoys the support of death squads.***

On the day before a big anti-government march planned for May 30, which is Mothers' Day in Nicaragua, messages on social media exhorted retired soldiers to "exterminate the pests," a term for the protesters that Murillo has publicly used (<http://100noticias.com.ni/murillo-llama-plagas-y-pestes-las-protestas-contra-su-gobierno/>). The Mothers' Day march turned into a massacre, with at least 16 people killed.

One of the epicenters of what is starting to look and sound like the start of a civil war is the city of Masaya (<https://www.yahoo.com/news/nicaragua-violence-rages-prospect-crisis-talks-hangs-limbo-013642784.html>), already famous for

the Battle of Masaya in 1912, when Nicaragua was under American occupation. Today, Masaya, where most residents belong to indigenous communities, has become the scene of fierce street battles between anti-government protesters and pro-government forces. Many have been killed there, including a 15-year-old that locals say they saw executed by a uniformed policewoman.

By now, Ortega's once-high approval ratings have collapsed. He used to be one of the most popular leaders in Latin America. A poll (<https://www.elnuevodiario.com.ni/nacionales/464323-cid-gallup-ortega-pierde-apoyo/>) taken in May by CID Gallup showed two-thirds of Nicaraguans want Ortega and Murillo to resign. Most strikingly, a majority of people who call themselves Sandinistas also said they want the couple to step down. It seems that while some die-hard Sandinistas are willing to fight for their leader, the majority of those who had stood with Ortega over the decades have lost confidence in him after seeing the way he has handled the current protests.

For a country as poor as Nicaragua, this turmoil can mean hunger. The unrest has already taken a huge toll on the economy, all but paralyzing economic activity. The prospects for business investment in this atmosphere are close to nonexistent.

The business community, which over the years developed an understanding with the former Marxist leader that allowed them to work together, has withdrawn its support for Ortega. Nicaragua's wealthiest man, Carlos Pellas, broke his silence (<https://www.laprensa.com.ni/2018/05/30/politica/2427376-carlos-pellas-solucion-a-crisis-de-nicaragua-pasa-por-adelanto-de-elecciones>) late last month: "We must find an orderly way out of this." The billionaire said he agreed with the protesters' demands and that elections must be moved forward. The current calendar calls for new elections in 2021.

Ortega has lost the support of most Sandinistas, of the country's powerful church, of the middle class, and of the young and the old, who say he is no better than the dictator he overthrew back in 1979. Still, he enjoys the support of death squads and at least part of the official security forces.

The stage is set. Nicaraguans have seen the abyss before. Unless the country changes course soon, the crisis that has played out mostly on the margins could explode into something far, far worse.

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