



RETURN OF THE DICTATORSHIP THE EXAMPLE OF NICARAGUA IN 2024

Recap of the facts

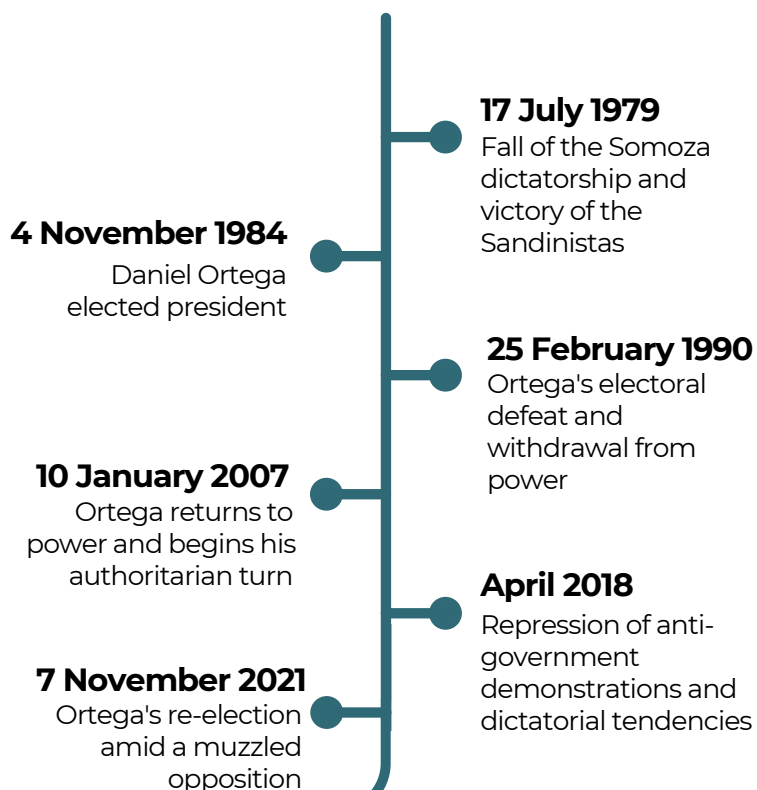
In 1979, the revolution led by the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) put an end to the Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua. Daniel Ortega became president in 1985, then lost the 1990 elections. He returned to power in 2007, this time through the ballot box, but gradually began to concentrate power in an authoritarian manner, amending the Constitution and placing his allies at the head of key institutions.

From 2018, a wave of protests against pension reform was violently repressed, resulting in hundreds of deaths. Since then, the Ortega regime has become more rigid: mass arrests of opponents, control of the media, rigged elections. Nicaragua is now considered a dictatorship, dominated by the Ortega-Murillo couple, with no freedom of expression or real political opposition.



Nicaragua Base Map, Creative Commons Attribution 4.0

CHRONOLOGY OF A STRUGGLE



THE FAILURE (SO FAR) OF THE STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY

This failure can be explained by a combination of internal and external factors, including violent repression, institutional control, social fatigue and international disengagement. This deadlock can be explained by the following factors:

1. IMPLACABLE AND SYSTEMATIC REPRESSION

The Ortega-Murillo regime has gradually dismantled all checks and balances and uses:

- The police, the army and militias to suppress any demonstrations.
- Anti-terrorism laws to criminalise any criticism.
- Expedient trials to convict journalists, students and activists.
- The revocation of nationality for dozens of opponents, creating a two-tier citizenship system.

The result: the personal and family cost of resistance became too high for many.

2. TOTAL CONTROL OF THE INSTITUTIONS

The judiciary, the electoral commission, the state media, and the National Assembly are all under the regime's control. Despite constitutional provisions, the courts granted Daniel Ortega the right to run in the 2011 presidential elections. This authorization was retroactively enshrined in the amended Constitution in 2014.

- Elections have become sham elections with no real opposition. In 2021, Ortega was re-elected with 75.9% of the vote, after arresting or blocking the other candidates from running.
- The civic space has been eradicated: more than 3,000 NGOs banned since 2018.

It is an authoritarian in its structure, locked into the model of Venezuela or Belarus.

3. A FRAGMENTED OPPOSITION IN EXILE

- The political opposition has been decapitated: its main leaders are in prison or in exile.
- Coalitions (such as the Unión Nacional Azul y Blanco, or the Civic Alliance) often lack strategic coherence.
- Civil society, even when mobilised abroad, is struggling to stay connected to the population that has remained in Nicaragua.

Resistance without a lasting territorial foothold will eventually run out of steam.

4. AN EXHAUSTED AND RESIGNED POPULATION

- Many have adopted a survival strategy: flee, keep quiet or adapt.
- There is a form of internalised fear, but also weariness, even disillusionment with the political elites.

The democratic hope of 2018 has turned into a deep collective disappointment.

5. GROWING DISINTEREST FROM THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

- The European Union, the OAS (Organisation of American States) and the United States have condemned the regime, but without a concerted strategy.
- The targeted sanctions (asset freezes, travel bans) imposed by the US and the EU against Rosario Murillo and other regime officials have had little effect.
- Nicaragua has left the OAS, strengthened its ties with Russia, China and Iran, and repositioned itself in the “global authoritarian axis”.

The absence of strong and coordinated pressure allows the regime to avoid international isolation.

6. A STRATEGY OF ‘AUTHORITARIAN STABILITY’

- Daniel Ortega capitalizes on a minimal social order (at the expense of public freedoms) and an economy kept afloat artificially. China, in particular, has invested in infrastructure (roads, energy, technology), while informal flows, mainly remittances from the diaspora, account for around 15% of the GDP.
- He is playing the lesser evil card in the face of the chaos (real or perceived) that a sudden change would bring about.
- It retains the support of some of the economic elites and more conservative religious sectors.

This mix of authoritarianism, pragmatic alliances, and clientelism stifles any emergence of credible political or social alternatives.



The President of Nicaragua, Daniel Ortega, and his wife at a meeting in Managua, 5 September 2018

HOW TO ACT ON THESE FACTORS TO WEAKEN AUTHORITARIANISM?

To weaken authoritarianism in Nicaragua, it is not enough to denounce it: strategic and multisectoral action is needed. Each factor that feeds authoritarianism should become a lever of pressure and resistance, provided that internal mobilisation, external support and a long-term vision are combined.

1. CIRCUMVENT AND EXPOSE REPRESSION

Concrete actions:

- Documenting violations via NGOs and secure digital platforms (e.g. SOS Nicaragua, Confidencial, La Prensa en exilio).
- Training activists in cybersecurity and citizen journalism to circumvent censorship.
- Amplifying exiled voices through international media outlets, podcasts, forums, etc.
- Creating a digital archive of repression: a record for future justice.

Objective: to prevent silence from setting in. Shadows protect power, light weakens it.

2. STRENGTHEN THE DEMOCRATIC OPPOSITION, EVEN IN EXILE

Concrete actions:

- Helping to structure a unified and credible opposition: common platform, shared strategy, pluralist leadership.
- Supporting political education efforts in the diaspora.
- Creating a government in exile (as the Burmese NUG) to embody an alternative.

Objective: To provide a counter-narrative. Weak opposition feeds the illusion that ‘there is no alternative’.

3. WORKING WITH THE POPULATION IN THE INTERIOR OF THE COUNTRY

Concrete actions:

- Discreetly support community networks (religious associations, cooperatives, women's movements, etc.).
- Launch civil disobedience campaigns, initially symbolic but highly visible.
- Encouraging artistic forms of resistance (music, poetry, graffiti, etc.).
- Offer economic alternatives to state clientelism (microcredit, support from abroad, etc.).

Objective: Maintain a spark of local organisation, without endangering citizens.



A demonstrator holding a placard that reads: 'They can take our lives away, but never our freedom'. April 2018. Photo Rodrigo ARANGUA /AFP.

4. ACTIVATING INTERNATIONAL LEVERS STRATEGICALLY

Concrete actions:

- Targeted and intelligent sanctions, in order to avoid penalising the population (freezing of assets, travel bans).
- Active support for civil society and independent media (funding, training, secure hosting).
- Formal recognition of exiled opponents, refugee status, platforms in international institutions.
- Make international investments and agreements conditional on political gestures (release of prisoners, supervised elections, etc.).

Objective: To help the opposition regain credible external support, and to ensure that the cost of repression outweighs its benefits.

5. FIGHTING ON THE SYMBOLIC AND NARRATIVE TERRAIN

Concrete actions:

- Demystifying the regime's discourse by offering simple, powerful, emotional counter-narratives.
- Creating online viral campaigns that mobilise young people and thwart propaganda.
- Giving a human face to the resistance: videos, portraits, testimonies.
- Educating about democracy through accessible formats: comics, TikTok videos, community theatre, etc.

Objective: To make democracy exist in people's minds before rebuilding it in practice.

6. PREPARE FOR POST-ORTEGA NOW

Concrete actions:

- Training future democratic leaders in the diaspora.
- Thinking about transitional justice: memory, reconciliation, trials?
- Planning institutional reconstruction: constitution, justice, media, army.
- Building bridges with moderate economic and religious elites who could be swayed.

Objective: To be ready to rebuild quickly if a breach opens.



Wall in Managua, May 2018.

CONCLUSION: WEAKENING AUTHORITARIANISM MEANS...

To weaken an authoritarian regime in the long term, it is essential to act on several fronts simultaneously. In the face of repression, documenting violations, cyberactivism and relaying information through international bodies make it possible to break the silence and mobilise external support. The fragmentation of the opposition, often exploited by regimes, can be overcome by unity around a common strategy, particularly via platforms for action in exile. To counter fear and fatigue, it is essential to strengthen discreet but effective forms of resistance, grounded in grassroots solidarity and the preservation of social ties.

Control of the institutions can be challenged by external pressure and the establishment of parallel alternatives, while the authoritarian narrative must be deconstructed by a counter-narrative relayed through popular education and unifying symbols of resistance. Finally, targeted sanctions, political recognition of the opposition and active citizen diplomacy play a major role in breaking the international isolation of oppressed peoples. These levers combined strengthen a society's capacity for resistance in the face of authoritarianism.

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