



With Russian Support, Nicaragua Smothers Dissent

Description

Nicaragua's crackdown on the political opposition, free press, and civil society is intensifying. On Feb. 15, the government of Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega stripped 94 prominent Nicaraguans of their citizenship. Among those targeted were high-profile journalists, human rights advocates, the auxiliary bishop of the capital city Managua, and even celebrated authors Giocanda Belli and Sergio Rodriguez. Their offense? The same blanket claim that Latin America's longest-serving strongman and his public prosecutor slap on anyone with an opinion: "treason."

Indeed, Ortega and his party, the Sandinista National Liberation Front, have been on a roll. Between 2007 and 2022, the Sandinista-controlled parliament [shut down](#) more than 3,100 non-government organizations (NGOs), close to half of all the country's nonprofits involved in providing health, education, and community assistance. The initial targets were organizations led by prominent opposition figures who were accused of having a "foreign interest," but many subsequent ones were not, and they include groups advocating for issues such as clean drinking water or women's rights. Supporters of the crackdown claim these NGOs operate as fronts for anti-Sandinista political activities. But a recent investigation suggests the mass closure of NGOs has affected at least half a million Nicaraguans who benefited from millions of dollars' worth of social programs—losses could exceed \$200 million, according to the investigation.

Last month, Nicaragua also expelled 222 political prisoners, including political and business leaders, journalists, civil society representatives, and students—all of them now [in exile](#) in the United States. The Managua Appeals Court ruled that they were part of a cabal to undermine Nicaragua's independence and sovereignty. The Ortega-controlled parliament agreed, recommending they be stripped of their citizenship. The United Nations [described](#) the measures as in contravention of international and regional human rights law, and more than 50 countries roundly [condemned](#) the action.

Nicaragua's crackdown on the political opposition, free press, and civil society is intensifying. On Feb. 15, the government of Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega stripped 94 prominent Nicaraguans of their citizenship. Among those targeted were high-profile journalists, human rights advocates, the auxiliary bishop of the capital city Managua, and even celebrated authors Giocanda Belli and Sergio Rodriguez.

Their offense? The same blanket claim that Latin America's longest-serving strongman and his public prosecutor slap on anyone with an opinion: "treason."

Indeed, Ortega and his party, the Sandinista National Liberation Front, have been on a roll. Between 2007 and 2022, the Sandinista-controlled parliament [shut down](#) more than 3,100 non-government organizations (NGOs), close to half of all the country's nonprofits involved in providing health, education, and community assistance. The initial targets were organizations led by prominent opposition figures who were [accused](#) of having a "foreign interest," but many subsequent ones were not, and they include groups advocating for issues such as clean drinking water or women's rights. Supporters of the crackdown [claim](#) these NGOs operate as fronts for anti-Sandinista political activities. But a recent investigation [suggests](#) the mass closure of NGOs has affected at least half a million Nicaraguans who benefited from millions of dollars' worth of social programs—losses could exceed \$200 million, according to the investigation.

Last month, Nicaragua also expelled 222 political prisoners, including political and business leaders, journalists, civil society representatives, and students—all of them now [in exile](#) in the United States. The Managua Appeals Court ruled that they were part of a cabal to undermine Nicaragua's independence and sovereignty. The Ortega-controlled parliament agreed, [recommending](#) they be stripped of their citizenship. The United Nations [described](#) the measures as in contravention of international and regional human rights law, and more than 50 countries roundly [condemned](#) the action.

The assault on Nicaraguan civil society reaches far beyond political opponents, journalists, aid workers, and community leaders. It is buttressed by a systematic crackdown that includes the key tool of the 21st century autocrat: Restrictions and surveillance of digital communications. With [roughly half](#) of Nicaraguans having access to the internet and [91 smartphone connections](#) per 100 people, government-led efforts are underway to curb access, limit content, and restrict sharing of critical information across the entire digital ecosystem. All this helps explain why Freedom House [describes](#) the country as "not free" and dropped Nicaragua's score this year from 30 to 23 (out of 100). In the Western Hemisphere, only Cuba and Venezuela rank worse.

Under Ortega, who has been president since 2007, there has been a [crackdown on internet use](#) including manipulation of information, removal of content, and legislation punishing any users accused of disseminating false content. Since 2018, following mass anti-government protests, state-led repression has led to the deaths of [more than 325 people](#). Extrajudicial detentions, disappearances, and [allegations](#) of surveillance have skyrocketed.

As authoritarianism deepens in Nicaragua, the elephant—or bear—in the room is Moscow's [creeping influence](#) in Central America. Russia has [supported Ortega](#) as its relationship with the United States has soured. Since 2016, Russia has supplied Nicaragua with military equipment and satellite monitoring infrastructure. The two countries also have a [decade-long agreement](#) for Russian forces to train in Nicaragua. Last year, a [Nicaraguan presidential decree](#) granted Russian troops, military aircraft, and naval vessels temporary access to Nicaragua. The United States is thus [worried](#) that Russia, in conjunction with military operatives from Cuba, Bolivia, and Venezuela, is expanding surveillance in the region.

Nicaragua's alignment with Russia coincides with the [restoration](#) of diplomatic relations between Managua and Beijing after a 20-year hiatus. In late 2021, Nicaragua [affirmed](#) the One China principle and cut official relations with Taiwan, swiftly [replacing](#) Taiwanese investment in Nicaragua with funds

from China's Belt and Road Initiative and new [Global Development Initiative](#). Observers [speculate](#) that this new closeness may revive construction of the long-delayed Nicaraguan Canal across the Central American isthmus—a possible Panama Canal rival proposed by Ortega in 2013. In 2013, the Nicaraguan government awarded a Chinese firm a 100-year concession to build the controversial project. As China expands its reach in Central America, its media described Nicaragua's rejection of Taiwan a “powerful rebuff to the U.S. administration's chess game with China.”

China's growing influence in Nicaragua is not just political and economic; it is also digital. Although the backbone of the country's internet is still dominated by U.S.-based Cisco, there is a growing presence of Huawei routers in the country. As in many countries, internet-connected surveillance cameras in Nicaragua are overwhelmingly supplied by Chinese vendors, notably Hikvision and Dahua. Hikvision is a subsidiary of state-owned China Electronics Technology Group Corporation, founded with the express purpose of leveraging civilian electronics to advance the interests of the Chinese People's Liberation Army. In 2022, Hikvision was sanctioned by Washington, London, and other Western governments for complicity in AI-driven surveillance of Uyghurs in China's Xinjiang region. (To be fair, that complaint has also been levied against Cisco and several other prominent U.S. firms.)

As the Ortega administration shores up support from Russia and China, it has hastened Nicaragua's decoupling from the West. Nicaraguan authorities have long railed against the “divisive, controlling, abusive, and authoritarian policies” of the United States. Nicaragua formally withdrew from the Organization of American States in 2022, concluding a process that had begun a few years earlier. Nicaraguan authorities also refused to accredit the incoming U.S. ambassador, ejected the head of the European Union delegation, cut ties with the Netherlands, and stymied the registration of foreign NGOs, including six organizations from Denmark, Spain, Sweden, and the United States.

Ortega's measures to restrict the online space really started picking up steam in 2020. That year, the Nicaraguan government approved a special cybercrimes law mandating sentences of two to four years for people using online platforms to spread misinformation and disinformation. Known locally as the “gag law,” it allows the government to define what constitutes false or misleading information and increase the sentence to up to five years if it decides the information incites hatred, threatens economic stability, or undermines law and order. These expansive categories give the state a very broad scope to restrict information.

In an effort to squeeze out outside support, a related law requires any individual or institution receiving financing from abroad to register as a foreign agent—virtually a carbon copy of a Russian law that successfully quashed the work of independent media and NGOs. (A similar draft law introduced by the Georgian government just led to the largest protests since the 2003 Rose Revolution.) The United States, [European Union](#), Organization of American States, U.N. High Commission for Human Rights, and others have roundly criticized Nicaragua's new laws on the grounds that they aim to control and censor information on the internet.

The cybercrimes law, especially, has teeth. For one, it gives TELCOR, the national telecommunications regulator, and other government agencies broad authority to block networks, websites, mobile apps, and other digital communication services. Nicaragua [shut down](#) at least 17 media and radio outlets in 2022 on the grounds that they “did not meet the technical requirements to be on the air.” The [departure](#) of respected independent news organizations is felt especially acutely in rural communities that are highly reliant on outside information. As a result, Nicaragua has been

described as an “information black hole.” In early 2021, TELCOR also published regulatory guidelines requiring telecommunication companies to collect and preserve user data necessary to trace communications, including user’s name, access time, and place. Data must be stored for up to a year and shared with police or prosecutors.

Many countries already do this, of course, but it’s especially ominous in an increasingly authoritarian environment, where the government has a record of spreading misinformation, defaming critics, and suppressing opposition. New regulations also require companies to notify the authorities of appointments for key positions—including information technology heads, financial managers, regulatory managers, and security directors. The extent to which the government has the capacity to block sites, apps, or users is less clear. Even so, the United States and EU sanctioned TELCOR officials, among others, for “serious human rights violations that include the repression of civil society.”

Even before the government’s imposition of cyber restrictions, most Nicaraguan journalists, academics, and citizens tended to practice self-censorship on social media and in their email exchanges. And not without reason: A recently passed amendment to the Nicaraguan constitution allows life imprisonment for hate crimes, which critics fear will be used indiscriminately by the government to punish opposition. The cybercrime law sends a message that digital platforms will be closely monitored, and the law on regulating foreign agents will almost certainly expand government scrutiny of online communications.

One of the deliberate effects of high levels of surveillance is greater self-censorship, even as large numbers of users are flocking to encrypted messaging platforms such as Signal, Telegram, and WhatsApp. For now, SIM-card registration is not required in Nicaragua, a loophole that gives citizens an additional option to escape the state’s prying eyes.

A [recent report](#) highlights a surveillance system deployed in Nicaragua with support from Russian intelligence and secret police. According to Institute for National Strategic Studies researchers, the Russian-supported system is used to monitor telephones, the internet, credit card transactions, and Wi-Fi networks. Access Now, a digital rights group, has documented three versions of the so-called System for Operative Investigative Activities (SORM) currently in use: one to monitor telephone traffic, another to surveil online traffic, and a third to track all forms of communication for up to three years.

As if all these assaults on liberty and civil rights were not worrying enough, international analysts now fear that Nicaragua’s regime could be playing the useful idiot to Moscow for cyber-espionage purposes. Allegations from diplomats and journalists have emerged of Russian intelligence using Nicaraguan satellite and communications assets as part of a wider campaign to spy on U.S. and other embassies, as well as on civil society organizations, especially those receiving foreign funding. Russia has denied these accusations, insisting a donated satellite station was not for spying.

Between July and December 2022, the Ortega regime permitted the entry of Russian military ships, aircraft, and personnel onto Nicaraguan territory—on the grounds that Russian troops needed to participate in humanitarian aid and military exercises. A presidential decree authorized 80 Russian military personnel access on a rotating basis, in addition to 100 troops and other service members to support efforts to confront organized crime, including narcotics trafficking.

Few international observers, however, buy the line that the Russians were there to catch drug traffickers. Russia has virtually no experience fighting organized crime in Latin America. Rather, Moscow appears to be extending its reach to gather intelligence across the region, including in

Nicaragua. Russia has funded military training centers in Nicaragua for years. And in 2016, Moscow started delivering tanks, anti-aircraft defense systems, helicopters, and armored vehicles ordered by Ortega. In 2013, Nicaragua ordered Russian patrol boats worth an estimated \$45 million.

The United States has strongly opposed these deals and made little secret of its intention to ramp up diplomatic and economic pressure—akin to measures against Cuba and Venezuela—should Washington find that hemispheric security is breached. In addition to issuing sanctions on key Nicaraguan authorities, the U.S. government is also keeping an eye on Bolivian, Cuban, Mexican, and Venezuelan forces already stationed in Nicaragua. But it's by no means just the United States that's alarmed—the issue also makes neighboring countries such as Costa Rica nervous. Perhaps not since the Cuban missile crisis during the Cold War has a neglected patch of the tropics been so fraught with geopolitical portent. However the contest plays out this time, the fallout promises to be global—on land, at sea, in the air, and in cyberspace.

by Robert Muggah,

Category

1. Army-Wars-Conflict Zones-Military Tech.
2. Main
3. Politics-Geopolitics-Gov.-Events

Date Created

03/13/2023