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Western Hemisphere, Transnational Crime, Civilian Security,
Democracy, Human Rights, and Global Women's Issues Subcommittee
Nicaragua's Political Crisis: Ortega's Assault on Democracy**

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Introduction

As U.S. engagement in Venezuela and Cuba increases, U.S. adversaries will seek to exploit the shift in U.S. attention by intensifying malign activities elsewhere in the Western Hemisphere like in Nicaragua, which is likely to increase its destabilizing and disruptive activities aiming to undermine U.S. national security interests and further threaten regional stability.

Nicaragua should matter to the United States because of its strategic geography, economic ties, and increasingly close relationships with U.S. adversaries. Located in Central America and only a few hundred miles from U.S. territory, Nicaragua occupies a strategically important position along key regional transportation and trade routes.

The Ortega-Murillo regime has deepened its relationships with Russia and China. Russia is a major arms supplier, operates a police training center in Managua, and maintains a satellite ground station in Nicaragua, while China has expanded its diplomatic, trade, and infrastructure ties since Managua switched diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to Beijing in 2021. Finally, Nicaragua's population has extensive cultural, familial, and economic connections to the United States, and many Nicaraguans are overwhelmingly pro-U.S.

Due to the persistence of this threat and its centrality to U.S. interests, Nicaragua deserves more attention in American foreign policy circles. The country has become one of Latin America's most vicious rights abusers, the region's most prominent persecutor of people of faith, a haven for America's foreign adversaries, a jumping off point for illegal migration via land and air, and a persistent source of regional instability.

The Descent into Extreme Authoritarianism

Nicaragua's descent into an increasingly extreme and brazen form of authoritarian rule has prompted some commentators to refer to the country as "Latin America's North Korea."

For example, in 2018, the Ortega regime responded to nationwide anti-government protests with extreme violence, killing more than 350 people, injuring more than 2,000 others, and arbitrarily detaining more than 2,000 individuals.¹ United Nations experts believe these events likely constitute crimes against humanity, yet no perpetrators have ever been held accountable.²

¹https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/jsForm/?File=%2Fen%2Fiachr%2Fmedia_center%2Fpreleases%2F2024%2F075.asp

² <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/03/nicaragua-crimes-against-humanity-being-committed-against-civilians>

Driven by paranoia and fear, the Ortega regime eliminated the separation of powers within the country's institutions, systematically undermined the rule of law, and outlawed all forms of political dissent. In the lead-up to the 2021 elections, the regime detained dozens of opposition political figures, including presidential candidates, and unjustly prosecuted many in sham trials held behind closed doors and threw them in prison.

In 2024, Ortega moved to consolidate political power within his own family, amending the constitution to appoint his wife, Rosario Murillo, as “co-president”, with the authority to assume control of the country in the event of his death. Ortega later announced in 2026 that Nicaragua would never again hold elections.³ This month, the Ortega-controlled legislature advanced constitutional changes that would ban opposition parties, extend presidential terms from six to seven years, and delay the next general election until 2029. The reforms require a second vote, beginning January 2027, before taking effect.

Eliminating Independent Voices and Unleashing Mass Rights Violations

To further consolidate its power, the Ortega–Murillo regime has targeted independent media, NGOs, and indigenous communities with extreme repression and widespread human rights abuses.⁴

Over the past eight years, the regime has shuttered nearly 5,700 NGOs—nearly 80 percent of all registered groups—and closed more than 60 media outlets, eliminating all independent newsrooms countrywide.⁵ The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has documented dozens of murders, forced disappearances, and armed attacks against indigenous community members.⁶

Those singled out for repression—including activists, opposition figures, and religious leaders—are routinely imprisoned in facilities, such as El Chipote, where human rights abuses are perpetrated with great frequency. One human rights group informed the State Department in 2023 that a quarter of all women detainees at the country's largest prison had been raped in detention.⁷ Other groups reported that prisoners are intentionally underfed or fed spoiled food, beaten, subjected to long periods of darkness and extreme heat, and forbidden to speak.⁸

The UN's Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua issued a report on September 21, 2026 that verified 161 cases of enforced disappearance and documented eight cases of individuals detained on political grounds who died in the Ortega regime's custody after enduring inadequate medical care, unsanitary conditions and, or torture.⁹

Ortega has also made unprecedented use of denationalization as a tool to punish his opponents. As of early 2025, the regime has stripped more than 450 Nicaraguans of their citizenship, rendering many stateless in violation of international law and permanently barring them from returning to Nicaragua.¹⁰

³ <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/ortega-says-nicaragua-will-no-longer-hold-elections-2026-07-20/>

⁴ <https://www.miamiherald.com/opinion/op-ed/article260960262.html>

⁵ <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/nicaragua>

⁶ https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/reports/pdfs/2025/informe_afro_%20ind%C3%ADgenas_nicaragua_eng.pdf

⁷ <https://www.state.gov/reports/2024-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/nicaragua>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session63/a-hrc-63-crp-3-en.pdf>

¹⁰ https://www.oas.org/en/IACHR/jsForm/?File=/en/iachr/media_center/PReleases/2025/137.asp

Religious Persecution

Religious figures have been among the most prominent targets of the regime's crackdown. As of early 2026, the regime had banned more than 27,000 religious processions or acts of worship and had forced more than 300 religious figures into exile, including several bishops.¹¹ Many of these exiled figures have endured unjust prosecution and imprisonment in inhumane facilities before being stripped of their citizenship and deported. In 2022, the regime expelled the Vatican's permanent diplomatic representative Archbishop Waldemar Stanislaw Sommertag.

Nicaraguan authorities have shuttered a vast number of religious institutions across the country. They banned and confiscated the property of Catholic orders such as the Jesuits, Missionaries of Charity, Franciscans, and Carmelites.¹² Protestant organizations have received similar treatment too. In 2023, the regime arrested nine pastors of the Texas-based Mountain Gateway missionary organization on fabricated charges, sentenced its American founder in absentia, and confiscated the group's property.¹³ Closures and seizures have even targeted Christian universities like Central American University and aid groups like Caritas Nicaragua and the Fabretto Foundation, which assists orphaned children.

Foreign Authoritarian Influence in the Western Hemisphere

The brutal regime in Managua has strengthened relationships with some of America's foremost authoritarian adversaries to solidify its power. Nicaragua's strong ties with Russia and China across military and intelligence spheres, run counter to U.S. national security objectives in the Hemisphere.

China has expanded its economic influence in Nicaragua. Since the countries reestablished relations in 2021, Nicaragua has joined the Belt and Road Initiative and received billions of dollars in financing from Chinese firms.¹⁴ This partnership is helping Nicaragua build a new Huawei 4G network that will give China significant leverage over the country's critical telecommunications infrastructure.¹⁵ Mining concessions granted by the regime have also handed over nearly 5,900 square miles, nearly 13 percent of Nicaragua's territory, to Chinese mining firms, providing vast supplies of critical minerals.¹⁶ The regime has also transferred gold to Chinese firms to help finance the regime's repression.¹⁷

The country has welcomed Russian intelligence and military activity. In 2022, Ortega formally enacted legislation authorizing the presence of Russian troops, warships, planes, and other military hardware across the country.¹⁸ Crucially, the Russian military has installed advanced surveillance equipment in Nicaragua in recent years.¹⁹ National security analysts have also expressed concerns that Russian satellite positioning systems in Nicaragua could be used to surveil the United States.²⁰

¹¹ <https://www.uscirtf.gov/sites/default/files/2026%20Nicaragua%20Country%20Update.pdf>

¹² <https://www.catholicregister.org/item/710-nicaragua-extinguishes-legal-status-for-religious-orders-evangelical-congregations>

¹³ <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/nicaragua/>

¹⁴ <https://confidencial.digital/en/nation/the-trap-of-chinese-solidarity-nicaragua-will-pay-2-billion-usd-for-costly-loans/>

¹⁵ <https://confidencial.digital/economia/empresa-china-construira-nueva-red-de-telefonía-celular-en-nicaragua/>

¹⁶ Fundación del Río, *Boletín de Monitoreo: Invasión Minera China en Nicaragua*, March 2026.

¹⁷ <https://thediplomat.com/2025/06/dig-deep-enough-in-nicaragua-and-youll-find-china/>

¹⁸ <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/nicaragua-welcomes-kremlin-not-catholic-church-206399>

¹⁹ <https://confidencial.digital/english/russian-espionage-center-operates-at-mokoron-military-base-in-managua/>

²⁰ https://chrissmith.house.gov/uploadedfiles/eddy_acevedo_lantos_commission_nicaragua_hearing_written_testimony.pdf

Regional Instability

Nicaragua has become a persistent source of regional instability. Over the past eight years, its authoritarian leaders have promoted illegal migration to the U.S. Hundreds of thousands of migrants from other countries, including from Latin America, Africa, Asia, and throughout the Middle East have used Nicaragua as a launching point for travel to the United States. The regime drove this surge by opening its borders to migrants from around the world, dramatically increasing charter flights to Managua, and facilitating onward travel to the United States. These actions allowed the regime to profit from increased migration while placing significant pressure on the United States.²¹ In 2025, the State Department stated in a press release that the Nicaraguan dictatorship had adopted “permissive-by-design migration policies that destabilize the region and push illegal immigration to the United States.”²² The U.S. government has further accused the regime of profiting from vulnerable migrants and, in response, imposed visa restrictions on executives of charter transportation companies facilitating illegal migration through Nicaragua.

Lastly, the Ortega-Murillo regime plays an active role in undermining U.S. efforts to counter drug trafficking in the region, as evidenced by the Administration’s recent designation of Nicaragua as a major drug transit or major illicit drug producing country.²³

Transnational Repression

Regime attacks on Nicaraguan opposition and activists in exile in neighboring countries have also emerged as a threat to regional security.

As of early 2026, the UN had confirmed more than a dozen occasions of assassinations or attempted assassinations of Nicaraguans living in exile in countries like Costa Rica and Honduras.²⁴ One NED-supported human rights organization notes that the killings in neighboring Honduras have yet to be investigated. The UN further reports that transnational repression including surveillance, threats, physical violence, and retaliation against relatives in Nicaragua has upended the lives of hundreds of Nicaraguans living in exile in recent years.²⁵

Just days ago, on September 14, 2026, armed assailants attempted to assassinate an opposition figure living in exile in San José, Costa Rica. The victim survived after being shot three times, but the attack is the latest in a longstanding pattern of violence that has cast a chilling shadow over Nicaraguan civil society in exile.

Last year, an individual disguised as a delivery driver shot and killed Roberto Samcam at his home in San José, Costa Rica. Samcam's killing represents an attempt to silence Nicaraguan voices and threaten exiles who dare to advance freedom and democracy in Nicaragua.

²¹ <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/dictators-weaponizing-refugees-should-be-held-accountable-211998>

²² <https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2025/11/visa-restrictions-on-individuals-in-nicaragua-facilitating-illegal-immigration-to-the-united-states>

²³ <https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesman/2026/09/presidential-determination-on-major-drug-transit-or-major-illicit-drug-producing-countries-for-fiscal-year-2027/>

²⁴ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2026/03/nicaragua-un-experts-uncover-corrupt-financing-repression-and-spy-network>

²⁵ <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/61/56>

NED Partners Are Making a Difference

Despite heavy repression and great personal risk, NED partners are working in Nicaragua and from exile to help Nicaraguans suffering under a brutally repressive regime build a freer future that provides dignity, security, and prosperity for the country.

NED is helping exiled independent media provide uncensored news to Nicaraguans and international audiences. NED partners are also playing a key role in documenting human rights abuses, protecting victims, and paving the way for future accountability efforts. Groups working inside Nicaragua are compiling detailed reports on attacks on religious communities that are regularly shared with policymakers and U.S. government entities like the U.S. Committee on International Religious Freedom.

In addition, NED is supporting civic actors, democratic actors, vulnerable communities, and indigenous leaders to hold the Ortega–Murillo regime accountable, contribute to a future democratic transition, and promote freedom.

Conclusion

Nicaraguan civic leaders continue to resist authoritarian rule at enormous personal risk and with increasingly limited international support. Supporting their work will help preserve the possibility of democratic change while advancing U.S. security and influence in the Western Hemisphere.

The United States should work with democratic partners across the hemisphere to sustain support for Nicaragua's pro-democracy movement, expose the regime's abuses, hold its operators accountable, and mobilize a stronger international response. Continued support for NED allows the United States to advance its interests and values by investing directly in Nicaraguans working peacefully for freedom, accountability, and democratic change.

The regime has deepened ties with Russia and China through military and intelligence cooperation, critical infrastructure projects, and trade in critical natural resources. It has encouraged migration to the United States and undermined the sovereignty of its neighbors by carrying out attacks in their territory.

The U.S. government has made it clear that Nicaragua's authoritarian consolidation has posed a growing threat to American interests and values. Attacks on freedom of religion, press, speech, and assembly violate principles that have long shaped the United States' engagement throughout the Western Hemisphere.