

Nicaragua and the Normalization of Authoritarianism from the Left

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The political experience of Nicaragua demonstrates the shifts of the left toward authoritarianism in Latin America. Since 2007, with the return of Sandinismo led by Daniel Ortega, it was thought that it would be a transitional government in response to the dictatorships that Nicaragua had already experienced and that Sandinismo had so strongly fought against, but it was only characterized by the centralization of power, the co-optation of the media and the armed forces, the elimination of the system of checks and balances, and the restriction of freedoms. Ortega relies on an anti-imperialist discourse and on the defence of national stability, when in reality he only co-opts state institutions and confronts the people when they oppose the regime. This only demonstrates how the normalization of authoritarian practices can trap a country and its people, setting democracy aside and welcoming autocracy.

A History Marked by Dictatorships

Nicaragua, since its beginnings, has been subject to a recurring pattern of authoritarian governance, which became evident with Anastasio Somoza García, who remained in power for more than 22 years, not counting the governments of his sons, Luis and Anastasio Somoza Debayle. Somocismo (1936–1979) was a dark period for Nicaragua, with peasants and workers murdered, a clear political exclusion, and a strong influence of the United States based on interests, generating social instability for marginalized sectors while consolidating privileges among the ruling elite. At one moment in history, there was hope, with the Army in Defence of National Sovereignty commanded by Augusto C. Sandino, which miraculously fought and defeated the United States army, and it was this air of revolution and freedom that elevated the hope of all Nicaragua, only for him to later be executed by the National Guard of General Anastasio Somoza.

Although it was Sandino's life end, his legacy did not die with him; justice was served to his ideas years later, with the establishment of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) (González, 2020). History continues to show us, even today, that the Somocista period was one of the bloodiest dictatorships in Latin America, and that the good part of the story at the time were Sandino's ideas, but was it truly the hope that Nicaragua needed? If we seek an answer to this

question during the Somocista era, we can say yes, since this Sandinista movement helped those whom the dictatorship threatened, tortured, and murdered, at that time the entire population shared the same concern, which was to escape those authoritarian practices, up to this point the central argument and the reason that led them to fight against Somocismo is understood.

The Other Side of Sandinismo

When Daniel Ortega came to power in 2007, as leader of the FSLN, he showed strong authoritarian traits, something ironic, since it was this movement that criticized and opposed dictatorships, but Ortega consolidated his grip on power indefinitely. When he assumed office as president of Nicaragua, he began to centralize power, thus giving himself greater influence, he placed strategic individuals with aligned interests in key positions of the main checks and balances to have no restraint, he created the paramilitary forces known as "Turbas" so that together with the National Guard they would protect him, if people were aligned with the ideas represented by the FSLN, they did well and obtained favors from the regime. Ortega undermined Sandino's ideas that he had so strongly defended years before, and even FSLN militants themselves labelled him a traitor for abandoning the revolutionary ideal and becoming a full-fledged dictator.

In order to remain in power, he required an unconditionally loyal ally. To this end, he designated his own wife, Rosario Murillo, as co-ruler and implemented a constitutional reform that designated Ortega and Murillo as co-presidents, extending presidential terms in their favour (Democratic Erosion Consortium, 2025). If we are speaking of left-wing authoritarianism, we will find a clear violation of human rights, such as the right to life, which through excessive use of force altered the integrity of protesters and politicians, the right to nationality, as the regime has arbitrarily stripped hundreds of citizens of their nationality, and the right to due process and a fair trial, with Nicaraguans facing politicized trials and without any judicial guarantees. International organizations have documented a pattern of oppression, torture, and forced exile of the inhabitants of Nicaragua, "According to the information gathered by Amnesty International, excessive use of force has been exercised by police forces, on many occasions in coordi-

nation with parapolic groups, who have been responsible for thousands of arbitrary detentions at different moments over the past five years” (Amnistia Internacional, 2023).

An Ideology Contrasted with the Facts

The dictatorship of Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo has combined a leftist discourse with authoritarian and repressive practices, such as the massive prohibition of 1,500 NGOs and religious organizations (Reuters, 2024). The regime, through an anti-imperialist discourse typical of authoritarian leftism, uses the excuse that NGOs are a measure of “foreign interventionism” and “U.S. imperialism”. In addition to banning these institutions within the country, they confiscate their assets since they believe they are a threat to the regime, and it is their way of “protecting themselves”. The international system is now structured not only by states, but by institutions and international organizations that also influence within the system. The Nicaraguan dictatorship knows that NGOs are independent institutions and would change the dynamic of concentrating power in the state, affecting its power as a dictatorship. Therefore, it does not benefit from having this type of actor in the country. This only demonstrates how radical left-wing ideology is used as an argument to eliminate pluralism, freedom of association, and citizen participation.

In addition to ending pluralism, other threats from the regime toward its citizens are the creation and legalization of paramilitarism (Miranda, 2025). More than 76,800-armed civilians serving as paramilitaries subordinate to presidential power, officially presented with a radical discourse as the “defenders of the Sandinista revolution”, reviving the logic of popular militias typical of revolutionary socialism. The paramilitary group “*Voluntary Police*” serves as an instrument of political power, repression, and social terror, in which ultimately the victims are the citizens, since when they exercise their right to protest, the regime silences and detains them. This paramilitary group has been responsible for threats, persecution, and mass surveillance that restrict any type of freedom for Nicaraguans. This only reflects how the regime militarizes the population to maintain a leftist ideological structure, copying models from other communist dictatorships.

In the same line historically shared by dictatorships are constitutional reforms or national constituent assemblies, since this mechanism helps them establish a stronger foundation for their authoritarian mandate, bypassing the system of checks and balances, and thus obtaining total control of the state in their favour without anyone being able to question the actions of the executive. And of course, the case of Nicaragua would not be the exception to strengthen its regime. During the period 2024–2025, Ortega promoted a constitutional reform

that paved the way for establishing a “co-presidency” to govern alongside his wife, Rosario Murillo (Janetsky, 2024).

This was the breaking point for Nicaragua’s political system, as the balance of powers was eliminated and a personalist and family-based regime was consolidated. Here we can see the fracture of what Sandinismo truly defended in the past and how it is now used. In the past, Sandinismo defended popular power and respect for freedoms when someone exercised authority, but today this reform creates a kind of socialist political monarchy, where the state, the party, and the ruling family merge, and this consolidation serves a clear authoritarian purpose: governing alongside an unconditionally loyal ally allows the regime to eliminate internal dissent and reinforce its stability. This reminds us of hyper-personalist models, such as the case of North Korea or Cuba, which use this authoritarian socialist system. Another proof that authoritarian leftism can degenerate into political dynasties, destroying democracies in the name of the “revolution”.

According to Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt in *How Democracies Die?* “Democracies do not die only through military coups, but through the gradual weakening of institutions, especially through censorship, the capture of media, and the persecution of independent press” (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). If we follow this same line, we can see that in the case of Nicaragua, it fits very well with the observations made by Levitsky and Ziblatt, since the regime closes media outlets, persecutes journalists, expels communicators, and imposes direct censorship. This has caused a systematic destruction of independent journalism, creating something that could be called an “informational genocide”, as referred to by Infobae, which, through a report, proved the destruction of 85 % of the independent media ecosystem, the closure of more than 60 media outlets, and the forced exile of nearly 300 journalists (Calvo, 2025). The regime has always claimed that independent media are part of the “media war of imperialism”, thus justifying its actions, a typical argument of radical leftist regimes. Dictatorships always create a narrative that portrays everyone as enemies so that, through discourse and actions, they delegitimize, in this case, journalists and communicators who seek to document the reality of the country.

After reviewing all these cases, so serious for a nation historically plagued by dictatorships, something immediately raises alarms: the absence of opposition. In any established democracy, there must be opposition to demonstrate ideological freedom and allow the expression of political ideals without fear of co-optation. In Nicaragua, a massive expulsion of 135 political prisoners and withdrawal of nationality during the period 2024–2025 is already evident (Vigna, 2024). Opponents who fought against the regime were imprisoned, only to be later deported to Guatemala after negotiations with the United

States, but at what cost? They lost their nationality and their political power in Nicaragua, which corresponds to the concept of the “internal enemy”, typical of left-wing authoritarian regimes. If one does not agree with the “revolution”, one does not deserve to be a citizen. This only demonstrates the totalitarian dimension of current Sandinista politics, where the state decides who may or may not belong to the nation.

In summary, the Nicaraguan dictatorship demonstrates how a left-wing ideological discourse, based on anti-imperialism and revolutionary rhetoric, can be transformed into an authoritarian machinery that destroys freedoms, nullifies democracy, and subjugates society under a model of total state control. Supporting oneself with a narrative of years of struggle only to later become what they most criticized and fought against constitutes the most paradoxical and self-delegitimizing mode of consolidating political power. Ortega represents a paradigmatic case illustrating that a discourse grounded in “revolution” only leads to chaos, to millions of people suffering under a government that they believed would save them, but it was quite the opposite. Augusto C. Sandino had a clear purpose, which was to end the Somocista dictatorships in Nicaragua, but his ideology was diverted by his followers years later, rendering the entire struggle in vain, since, despite the passage of time, everything remains the same or even worse. No form of government that represses, persecutes, tortures, and murders people for not aligning with the regime deserves a place in the world, since everyone should enjoy freedoms, rights, and participation without limitations imposed by a third party. The Nicaraguan dictatorship demonstrates that when the left renounces democracy, it does not liberate people; it subjugates them.

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