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From revolutionary to tyrant

The writer and freedom fighter Gioconda Belli on the transformation of Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega

Read this interview in German.

In mid-March, over 100 people were arrested in Managua during anti-government protests. In the months prior to this, the situation seemed to have calmed down. How can the recent escalation in Nicaragua be explained?

On the weekend of 16 March, 104 people were arrested when they demanded the right to demonstrate freely in Managua, the country's capital. Daniel Ortega's regime had banned demonstrations since September. At the slightest sign of open protest, the regime sent armed forces to the streets. Despite the recent talks between the government and the opposition and the demand for the release of all political prisoners, the opposition coalition *Unidad Azul y Blanco* called for a demonstration and challenged the government. Hundreds of people followed the call and gathered in one of the busiest streets in the city.

As a result, the police began taking violent action against the demonstrators and arresting them as they fled to shopping malls and nearby stores, singing the national anthem and waving the flag of Nicaragua. Only the intervention of the Apostolic nuncio, sent by the Vatican to secure the release of the prisoners, made it possible for people to leave the buildings surrounded by the police without being attacked.

At the beginning of March, the government and opposition began a "peace dialogue". The intention is to find a way out of the current political crisis. However, the opposition insists on the resignation of Daniel Ortega, whom they categorically reject. Given these rigid positions, is any peaceful solution possible?

The talks seemed deadlocked until 19 March when, after the intervention of the Organisation of American States and the nuncio,

Daniel Ortega pledged to release all political prisoners within three months and to change Nicaraguan electoral law. In view of the untrustworthy style of Daniel Ortega and his negotiators, this announcement led to rather cautious optimism. However, the opposition's demand for early elections was rejected by the government: the regime's intention is to negotiate conditions that will allow Ortega to remain in office until the end of the parliamentary term in 2021.

The Nicaraguan Revolution is celebrating its 40th anniversary in 2019. In 1979, Daniel Ortega and other members of the FSLN, the Sandinista National Liberation Front, overthrew the dictatorship of the Somoza family. You yourself joined the FSLN in 1970 and today you are one of the most open critics of Daniel Ortega's government. How did the revolutionary project become an authoritarian regime?

2019 marks the 40th anniversary of the triumph of the Sandinista Revolution. Over the past forty years, there have been major changes worldwide. The mentality of those who carried out the revolution back then has also changed. While some of us believed that the left had to democratise and modernise, Daniel Ortega focused, as though obsessed, on returning to power. He resorted to a tactic he called "governing from below," which was based on the use of the party apparatus to obstruct the work of the respective governments by disturbing the peace and carrying out violent actions.

When this proved unsuccessful, he decided to pose as a purified, peaceful, and religious citizen. He dressed in white, reconciled with the church, and promised a ban on therapeutic abortions in the event that he won (and were to keep his promise). He also made a pact with the corrupt President Arnoldo Alemán: promising him release after his sentence on corruption charges, he pledged his support to Ortega in return for a constitutional amendment that would reduce the percentage of votes required to win a first-round electoral ballot from 45 per cent to 35 per cent.

True to the principle ″The end justifies the means", Ortega was again elected president with 38 percent of the vote in 2007. Since then he has concentrated power in his hands and his wife's. He has also packed the state apparatus, the police and the armed forces with his party members. He has allied himself with big business, corrupted the electoral system and changed the constitution so that unlimited re-election becomes possible. Against all this, on 18 April 2018 the people voiced their massive protest. But instead of listening, Ortega decided to pursue a violent crackdown. The result was 325 dead, 2,000 injured, 700 prisoners and 52,000 exiles in four months. That makes him a tyrant and a traitor to the revolution.

This interview was conducted by Claudia Detsch.



Gioconda Belli
Managua

Gioconda Belli is a Nicaraguan writer and poet, one of the most internationally known Latin American authors.

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