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‘Nicaragua has become a terrorist state’

Journalists Wendy Quintero Chávez and Lucía Pineda Ubau on systematic torture, rigged elections and the fight for press freedom

The United Nations are alarmed. Only recently, they criticised the human rights situation in Nicaragua and also the constitutional reform that gives President Daniel Ortega almost unlimited power. What is the current situation in the country?

Wendy Quintero Chávez: The situation in Nicaragua is extremely concerning. Since 2018, the country has been submerged in a sociopolitical crisis that has reached new depths following the recent constitutional reform. This reform does not only undermine the spirit of the constitution but also reinforces the serious ongoing human rights violations. Ortega, who has been in power since 2007 and has rigged elections to remain in office, has a horrific record: more than 350 dead, the closure of 3 500 civil society organisations, the banning of 56 media outlets and more than 900 people who have sought exile since 2018. There are severe restrictions on freedom of speech, freedom of religion and freedom of the press.

The reforms are cementing Ortega’s impunity and ensuring that both he and his wife Rosario Murillo, who now shares power in a co-presidency, can remain at the helm indefinitely. The division of power into judiciary, executive and legislative has been effectively abolished, resulting in the country’s transformation into a complete dictatorship. The UN panel of experts and further international organisations have documented these alarming developments extensively. We are seeing systematic violations of the rights of the population. The last vestiges of democracy, rule of law and human rights have definitely now been destroyed.

Lucía Pineda Ubau: Nicaragua has become a terrorist state. Ortega and Murillo are not only ignoring the criticism levelled at them by human rights organisations but are continuing to systematically persecute the population. Human rights agreements signed previously

by Nicaragua are being completely disregarded. Ortega and Murillo are shirking all responsibilities and reject the accountability demanded by the United Nations. The constitutional reform also legitimises the deployment of paramilitaries as a 'voluntary police force', granting them the same rights as the regular police force and the army. As a result, the regime can draw on three armed forces — the army, the police and the paramilitaries, that combine to guarantee the Ortega family's supremacy.

In view of the repression being directed at the press — is independent reporting even still possible?

Wendy Quintero Chávez: It is extremely difficult, but not impossible. Since 2017, the government has been systematically pursuing a plan to 'cleanse' the media environment, as Murillo put it. Independent media are being wiped out and journalists silenced. The government is currently planning to place almost all radio and television frequencies in the hands of the state, leaving barely any room for freedom of speech. Many journalists are in hiding, fearing persecution or threats to their families. They are scared of exercising their profession and are therefore writing anonymously. Some are in prison, while others have disappeared. Yet the truth cannot be entirely suppressed and, despite the challenging circumstances, we continue to find ways of reporting. In exile, we have initiated 20 new media projects, although some of them have had to close for financial reasons. Survival in exile is extremely challenging — and even there, journalists are not excluded from threats and violence. But we are not giving up — we will continue to fight for truth and the right to report freely.

How has your experience as a political prisoner changed your view on journalism and your work with *Periodistas y Comunicadores Independientes de Nicaragua* (PCIN)?

Lucía Pineda Ubau: My time as a political prisoner has had a lasting effect on me. I was isolated and subjected to psychological torture. I was expected to ask Ortega for forgiveness. For me, however, one thing is clear: Ortega needs to apologise to the Nicaraguan people, not vice-versa. In my work as a journalist prior to 2018, I wanted to compile a report on prisons, notably El Chipote in Managua that had been a torture prison during the Somoza dictatorship. At the time, I was refused the access required to compile my report. When I was then a prisoner there myself, I experienced the inhuman conditions at first hand: old, dark, stinking dungeons, in which life is barely possible. Persecution and imprisonment created an immense psychological burden but my belief helped me to overcome it. Despite isolation and torture, I retained my inner resolve and determination

to continue my work following my release.

This experience and my release after six months only served to strengthen my commitment to freedom of the press. At PCIN we assist persecuted journalists with psychosocial support to help them process these experiences and continue their work and the fight for freedom of the press. Life in exile is, however, tough, particularly with the economic challenges — Costa Rica is much more expensive than Nicaragua. Yet despite all adversity and repression, independent journalism has stood its ground — the regime has been unable to silence us.

Wendy Quintero Chávez: PCIN was founded in 2018 to help journalists in their battle against mounting repression. We offer support in areas such as security, training and legal advice, so as to strengthen independent journalism. Our organisation does not only bring together media professionals but also ensures that information continues to flow — despite the closure of numerous media. A variety of voices is essential for democracy. Since 2018, more than 20 new digital media have seen the light of day and further strengthened independent journalism. Even traditional media such as Lucía's *100% Noticias* have been digitalised and use platforms such as Facebook and YouTube to provide information. In Nicaragua, there are barely any print media left though — in 2023 alone, 56 were closed down.

Our digital presence allows us to provide the population with news and was decisive for our new beginning in Costa Rica. Even though the regime is vilifying us as the opposition, our goal remains the same: we report objectively on events in the country. Despite the challenges of life in exile, we continue to fight undeterred for freedom of the press — supported by the solidarity of organisations and our audience.

Freedom of the press is under pressure throughout the world. Does PCIN also collaborate with journalists from other countries?

Lucía Pineda Ubau: Yes, we work closely with journalists from Venezuela, Cuba, other Latin-American countries and Spain. Together, we share our experiences and fight authoritarian tendencies that pose a threat to freedom of the press. Unfortunately, the world is currently in a phase in which authoritarian regimes and radicalism are increasingly restricting democratic rights such as freedom of speech and freedom of the press, as well as the access to independent media. PCIN therefore also cooperates with human rights organisations to uncover abuses and emphasise the importance of free media for democratic societies. Initiatives such as the Central American forum *ForoCAP* in Guatemala create platforms to demonstrate how

independent media can survive, even in challenging circumstances. Our networks and contacts provide crucial support for journalists in countries also affected by authoritarian trends. Collaboration is essential to withstand Nicaragua's repressive regime. We hope that our voices will be heard throughout the world, as we are convinced we are on the right side of history.

This interview was conducted by Lea Groß.



Wendy Quintero Chávez

Wendy Quintero Chávez is a member of the board of the *Periodistas y Comunicadores Independientes de Nicaragua* (PCIN) network, which received the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's Human Rights Award in 2024.



Lucía Pineda Ubau

Lucía Pineda Ubau is a member of the board of the *Periodistas y Comunicadores Independientes de Nicaragua* (PCIN) network, which received the Friedrich Ebert Foundation's Human Rights Award in 2024. She is also the director of *100% Noticias*, a digital Nicaraguan media outlet.