IPS

INTERVIEWS 02.07.2021

'Nicaragua is moving towards autocracy'

President Daniel Ortega has launched a crackdown on the opposition. German Minister of State Niels Annen on Nicaragua's slide towards autocracy

Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega has arrested almost the entire leadership of the opposition in the country, as well as representatives of civil society and even former supporters. Is the former revolutionary leader now becoming an authoritarian despot?

I am very concerned about the latest developments in Nicaragua. I have also made this clear to the Nicaraguan government. In the last few weeks, numerous members of the opposition, but also representatives of the business community, have been arrested: among them were five presidential pre-candidates who have organised themselves primarily in the two opposition alliances of the National Coalition (*Coalición Nacional*) and the Civic Alliance (*Alianza Ciudadana*). If the opposition, which has been partially divided so far, had been able to reach an agreement, it could have become dangerous for President Ortega in an election. This applies mainly to the daughter of former President Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, Cristiana Chamorro, who wanted to run as a unity candidate.

The government justifies the arrests with a law passed shortly before Christmas last year (*Ley de Soberanía*), according to which people can also be prosecuted retroactively as “traitors to the fatherland” if, for example, they have campaigned for sanctions abroad.

In doing so, the government adheres to the narrative of a US-funded coup d'état attempt and accuses recognised foundations of money laundering and attempts at destabilising interference in internal affairs. These include the Violeta Barrios de Chamorro Foundation and FUNIDES, an internationally renowned economically liberal think tank with which we have long worked together. The bottom line is that I unfortunately cannot disagree: Nicaragua, under former freedom fighter Daniel Ortega, is moving further and further away from democracy towards autocracy.

In the process, the numerous achievements of Sandinism, for example in the health and education sectors as well as in the fight against poverty, are in danger of being forgotten in the face of the latest terrible news.

The revolution under Daniel Ortega in 1979 had a high symbolic significance for many European leftists. You yourself spent some time in Nicaragua as a young adult. What does the country's slide into authoritarianism mean to you personally?

I have been involved in foreign policy for many years. But for me personally, the development in Nicaragua is not just another crisis among unfortunately far too many others. My home city of Hamburg has had a close and active partnership with Nicaragua's second largest city, León, since 1989. Last but not least, cooperation at the level of schools and youth work is an important element of our city partnership, for example in the form of exchanges.

In the summer of 1992, I myself took part in a youth exchange in León. That was indeed one of the most formative experiences for my international engagement. At that time, like many others, I associated Nicaragua with the hope of a more just model of society. In recent years, I have returned to León several times and know some of the local actors. Therefore, the current situation is very close to me, both personally and politically.

Latin America's Left finds it difficult to condemn the abuse of power. How do you see that?

To begin with: of course, there is generally more restraint in public criticism against one's own political friends. This is true everywhere and not only for Latin America's Left. However, I can report from my own experience that there is also passionate debate and criticism within the Latin American Left. Another question is whether the criticism must always be presented publicly or even polemically. We also have open and critical, but confidential discussions with government representatives close to us. That is very important to me: where democracy and human rights are in danger, we must defend them.

Ortega does not seem to be particularly impressed by international protest. Apart from rhetorical appeals, what can Germany and Europe do concretely to counter the further undermining of democracy in Nicaragua?

Unfortunately, you are right. So far, President Ortega has not reacted very constructively to international protest. However, our possibilities

to influence other states are limited. There has been an EU legal framework since October 2019 on the basis of which individual sanctions are possible against people who have participated in serious human rights violations and repression. On this basis, several Nicaraguan government representatives were listed in May 2020. At the moment, the situation seems to be completely deadlocked.

It is important that we continue to talk despite all that is happening. We have had long-standing and particularly close bilateral relations with Nicaragua since the time of the solidarity movements. There are still over 20 active city partnerships, including the one between Hamburg and León. I therefore very much hope that there will be a political and democratic solution in the interest of all Nicaraguans. To this end, I am still willing to get personally involved. We should positively accompany and support serious signs of willingness to engage in dialogue.

This interview was conducted by Claudia Detsch.



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