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‘A decade’s worth of frustration’ in Nicaragua

In Nicaragua, resistance is raging against the authoritarian system of the one-time freedom fighters

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A wave of demonstrations have swept the Central American country of Nicaragua, in protest at the government’s slow response to a huge forest fire and unpopular plans (since retracted) to overhaul the social security system. At least 26 people have been killed in the protests and dozens injured. Michael Broening spoke to the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung’s Hajo Lanz about the political frustrations that have brought ordinary Nicaraguans out onto the streets.

After several days of protests Nicaragua looks like it’s on the brink of civil war. What are the protesters demanding?

The first protests started a fortnight ago, after 5,000 hectares of Nicaragua’s tropical forest – the Indio Maíz Biological Reserve – went up in flames. The government was slow to react, rejecting an offer of assistance from neighbouring Costa Rica out of sheer pride. Nicaragua is used to demonstrations, and this one didn’t really threaten the government’s position.

Then, on 16 April, the government announced dramatic changes to the social security system, including lower pensions, reduced benefits and higher taxes. Thousands more demonstrators piled on the streets to join the original protestors.

It’s like all the frustration that’s been building up over the past decade is suddenly spilling out onto Nicaragua’s streets. People are bitterly disappointed at the legacy of president Daniel Ortega and his FSLN party, likening them to a dictatorship. The FSLN started life as a liberation movement that worked with the poor, disenfranchised population in the 80s to overthrow the Samoza dynasty – an actual dictatorship.

Ortega, who's been president since 2007 thanks to a string of dubious victories, and his wife, the current vice-president Rosario Murillo, claim to preside over a democracy based on the principles of 'Christianity, solidarity and socialism'. But in reality, they've created an authoritarian and clientelist dynasty aimed at entrenching their power and enriching their cronies.

Who's leading the protests?

The protests started out with a few pensioners and trade unionists. They were soon joined by young people, particularly students, as well as church and business representatives and farmers.

On 21 April, four days after protests began, 25 young people were already dead and many more injured.

The ruling powers felt threatened and released their attack dogs: the police, the army and gangs of bikers who tore through the crowd with steel pipes and clubs, assaulting everyone in their path. The government has used similar tactics in the past to disperse protestors, be they women's rights campaigners, farmers or environmental activists.

The protests have been fairly disorganised and chaotic, with new information released over social media. The government's responded by pulling independent news channels off air. Journalists report being beaten. Some have been killed.

However much the ruling junta may deny it, these protests are being driven not by isolated radicals, but ordinary people blocking government trucks from passing through their streets. There's been some looting, though who's behind it is hotly contested.

Will President Ortega's promise to start a 'dialogue' between the protestors and the government ease tensions?

On 21 April, four days after protests began, 25 young people were already dead and many more injured. A further 43 people had disappeared. President Ortega didn't bother to mention this when he called for dialogue that same evening.

He believes he can just sit down with his social partners and renegotiate his planned social security reforms. He's lost touch with reality. With its announcement, the government's shown it has neither the willingness nor the insight to engage with the true causes of the current situation.

Ortega and his wife share the mistaken conviction that they are only doing the best for this country and its people.

Parts of Nicaragua have caught fire, and the presidential couple are standing with a lit match in their hands. Even if the reforms have now been scrapped, there's no undoing the events of the last few days.

Ortega claims the protests are being controlled from abroad. Is there any evidence of this, and what has the international response been so far?

Whenever anyone criticises the power of Ortega amd Murillos, they wheel out the claim that malicious foreign forces are involved.

In this case, they're also reminding people of the USA's unjust support for the right-wing Contras during the 80s in their fight against the left-wing Sandinistas, a history with which all Nicaraguan citizens are familiar.

The Nicaraguan leadership has distanced itself so much from democratic values that it sees the free press, freedom of expression and assembly, transparent and fair elections or independent courts are seen as an attack on the country. So it's hardly surprising Ortega takes the attitude he does.

In the same way, demands from US and European diplomats for an end to the uncontrolled violence and killing will have been interpreted as a personal attack from overseas.

Ortega and his wife share the mistaken conviction that they are only doing the best for this country and its people. Opposition, wherever it may come from, will itself be vehemently opposed and severely punished as long as the hordes can be mobilised to do so.



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