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Nicaragua's bloody road to fake elections

The upcoming elections in Nicaragua are being called a sham. Daniel Ortega's predicted win will do little to end the country's political crisis

The political crisis that has afflicted Nicaragua since 2018 could have been resolved by holding free and fair elections at the end of President Daniel Ortega's third term in office. This coming November 7th, he could have either confirmed the support he swears by or realised that he can no longer rule over a people who, since 2018, have massively demonstrated their discontent towards him and his wife's Rosario Murillo ever increasing abuse of power.

The capture of power

In 2007, when Ortega returned to the presidency, thanks to several shadowy deals and concessions that led most of the Sandinista old guard to resign from the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), he quickly began to ensure he would control the state institutions to remain in power indefinitely. The Constitution was reformed, laws were rewritten and the rules that mandated the replacement of the army and police chief's every five years were changed to allow him to keep his most loyal subordinates at the head of these institutions.

By 2016, he and his wife had managed to have such a hold on power that he named her vice-president. In a curious agreement with the private sector of the economy, they traded favourable business terms with Nicaragua's capitalist tycoons in exchange for their conformity with the regime's political decisions. Self-satisfied and content with their absolute control over the country, Ortega and Murillo felt they were in a Panglossian best of all possible worlds. But it was not to last.

Violence against civilians

In April 2018, their heavy-handed suppression of a small student protest

against a reform of the Social Security Law imposing a 5 per cent tax on retirement pensions infuriated people. Cell phones recorded the students being sadistically attacked and beaten by groups of the so-called Sandinista Youth Organization.

When the students took refuge in university campuses and Managua's Catholic Cathedral, the regime responded with sharpshooters. Again, cell phones recorded the deaths of several youths shot in the neck and head. Among them was Alvaro Conrado, a 15-year-old boy, who died after he was refused admittance to a hospital that had been ordered to reject students wounded at the protests. The videos went viral. The rebellion spread to the entire country. It was crushed mercilessly with paramilitaries escorted by police forces, armed to the teeth and shooting to kill the unarmed rebels who had barricaded themselves. People resisted four months. At the end, the Inter-American Human Rights Commission reported 328 dead, 700 people imprisoned and more than 80,000 Nicaraguans on the run, seeking exile mostly in Costa Rica.

Crushed hope

Almost overnight, what had until then been a sort of benign dictatorship, mutated into a tyranny the likes of which had not been seen in Latin America for decades. The opposition refused to respond to violence with violence. Instead, it decided to participate in the scheduled November 7th election, and seek a peaceful change of government.

Several men and women expressed their will to run for the presidency. The political atmosphere was heating up for the elections when the regime, aware that they had lost support and scared that votes might defeat them, decided to cut their losses. Shockingly, it began to jail every single aspiring candidate, plus influential political figures, iconic Sandinista heroes opposed to Ortega's rule, journalists, entrepreneurs, former ambassadors, and student leaders. It accused them of false crimes that went from money laundering to 'treason.' They were called criminals, peons of the US's efforts to once again destroy Sandinismo. To topple it off, the Electoral Council, loyal to Ortega, banned the best-known opposition party by removing its legal standing.

It must be clear then, that on November 7th, Ortega and his wife will be running unopposed. The electoral exercise will be a sham devoid of any legitimacy. The actions of their administration are unprecedented and clearly show that the international community cannot accept the results of such a flawed exercise and must demand not only the freedom of the political prisoners but also new, supervised, free and fair elections.

Nicaraguans have paid too high a price for freedom only to lose it to the ambitions of a power-hungry couple.

Gioconda Belli
Managua

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