

Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign

Nicaragua: where are the voices of the impoverished?

NSC statement on the situation in Nicaragua

NSC believes that what has happened in Nicaragua constitutes an attempted coup.

NSC supports:

- Justice for all victims and those who have lost friends and relatives in the violence
- Dialogue and reconciliation processes within the framework of the constitution
- Respect for Nicaragua's sovereignty

NSC rejects:

- All forms of violence from whatever source
- All attempts at regime change outside Nicaragua's constitutional framework
- All forms of outside interference in Nicaragua's internal affairs especially by the United States

NSC works in solidarity with grass roots organisations that form part of Sandinismo, in particular co-operatives of small scale farmers such as CECOCAFEN and SOPPEXCCA.

Introduction

As the pressure on the Nicaraguan government intensifies internationally, where - in all the rhetoric of the Trump administration, the UK government, the international media, and human rights organisations - are the views of the most impoverished?

Four months of violence and an attempted coup have left Nicaragua a profoundly polarised country. The economic, social and psychological toll has been enormous; the loss of life a tragedy.

However, since the 6,000 opposition road blocks were dismantled in mid-July, there have been very few further deaths, the general level of violence has diminished, schools have reopened, people are able to go about their daily lives, and tourists are very slowly returning. But, underlying, unresolved polarisation remains, greatly exacerbated by outside interests.

As always in such circumstances, it is those who are most impoverished who are suffering the most serious consequences. The largest group of people who have lost their lives are young, poor, unemployed men; among the 120,000 people who have lost their only means of livelihood, the majority are unemployed or manual labourers with little formal education and those making a precarious living by selling goods in the streets.

This is also the sector that has most benefited from the improvements in public services and social programmes of the Sandinista government. This includes free education and basic health care services, electrification

programmes even in the remotest rural areas, extensive road improvements, and support for those working in the social economy. These measures combined with a stable economy growing at 4-5 % per year resulted in a reduction in poverty from 48% in 2007 to 24.9% in 2016 according to the [World Bank](#).

According to Nicaraguan Fair trade producer Junieth Leiva: *'In Nicaragua, before April we had economic and social problems that were being overcome: we have highways and electricity, schools and health centres in rural areas ... we even have secondary education in the countryside, and many families have received support to improve their homes.'*

Fundamental differences

There are fundamental issues of contention between the Nicaraguan government and the opposition supported by the Trump administration, the Organisation of American States (OAS) and the European Union. The opposition claims that the government is responsible for serious human rights abuses, including excessive use of force against peaceful protesters, lack of press freedom, and criminalisation of peaceful protesters. They call for a resumption of the national dialogue - which broke down in May - with the Nicaragua Bishops Conference as mediators and witnesses. The international community echoes the opposition's denunciation of the Nicaraguan government, demands early elections, and in the case of the US, threatens further sanctions.

The Nicaraguan government argues that what has happened was not peaceful protest but a violent, well co-ordinated attempted coup with US support. They also argue that human rights enshrine not only civil and political rights but also the right to work, to food, clothing, and housing; to health care and education; and to freedom of movement. For the government, the Bishops Conference no longer has any credibility as a mediator of the National Dialogue because of the active participation by Catholic clergy in promoting and participating in opposition protests both in Nicaragua and internationally. They also argue that the US and the OAS have no right to interfere in the internal affairs of a sovereign state.

'It is not only state institutions that are obliged to respect human rights but also political parties, civil society organisations, the church, the media, companies and social movements'. Carlos Emilio Lopez, Vice President of the National Assembly Commission for women, children, youth and the family.

An attempted coup

It is important to recognise the depth of the simmering anger and frustration against government errors that resulted in people taking part in peaceful anti-government demonstrations in such large numbers. However, it is also clear that this anger quickly turned into violent protest demanding the immediate resignation of the government, coinciding with the stated aim of the Trump administration.

In June and July, opposition supporters constructed thousands of road blocks in towns, cities and on major highways to pressurise the government to stand down. As with the demonstrations, these started peacefully, but descended into violence and extortion. Four thousand lorries from across the region were stuck for days and in some cases weeks, severely disrupting commerce. Road blocks also severely impacted freedom of movement, stifling livelihoods by preventing people from going to work or school, selling their goods, and added to the climate of fear and insecurity.

'With the roadblocks [of the protesters], and having had our freedom of movement for work suspended, we were frightened, distressed, worried, because in Jinotega, the people who were on the barricades and the roadblocks, protesting against the government, could detain any citizen, assault them, strip them or beat them.' Junieth Leiva

Protesters partially or completely destroyed over 60 government and local government buildings, schools, hospitals, health centres, and government radio stations. The estimated cost of infrastructure damage is at least US\$112 million. This report from Masaya is further proof that the protests far from being peaceful were in fact part of an attempted coup.

‘The town hall and houses of government supporters were burnt down by protesters; shops were ransacked; most businesses and all banks and schools were closed. The main secondary school was burnt out twice. The police station was under siege for 55 days, so no police were on patrol. No cars or taxis could use the streets; passing the barricades on foot involved being checked by youths with weapons and on occasion threatened. Dissent was met with violence. Sandinista supporters were identified and threatened as ‘zapos’ (toads). At first protesters had homemade mortars, but later many acquired weapons such as AK-47s; paid troublemakers manned the barricades at night. A captured police official was tortured and killed, his body burnt at a barricade. Rebels referred to Masaya as “territorio libre” (‘free territory’) in anticipation that other cities would follow paving the way for regime change. ‘

‘I don't think they [the opposition] ever thought that by wanting to bring down the president or the government, they would be taking the bread out of the mouths of a lot of families, and the methods that they used, and continue to use, are damaging the economy - and that affects us all.’ Junieth Leiva

In mid-July, to fulfil their responsibility to protect freedom of movement of people, vehicles and goods, and to prevent further paralysation of the economy, the government cleared the road blocks.

Discrepancies in reports of deaths

The Government, the National Peace, Truth and Justice Commission (CJVP), the Inter American Human Rights Commission (CIDH), and three Nicaraguan human rights organisations have produced figures for numbers of people who have died. These figures vary from those of the government of 198, to 450 from the Nicaraguan Association of Human Rights (ANPDH), an anti-government organisation that receives its funding from the US.

The Archbishop of Managua, Cardinal Leopoldo Brenes called for a reconciliation of the figures, separating deaths as a result of the violence from those who died from other unrelated causes.

Responding to this call, the [CJVP](#) presented three reports on 25 August. Without apportioning blame, they give the number of deaths between 18 April and 15 August as 269. By far the largest number - 127 - died at road blocks as a result of clashes between police and those responsible for the barricades.

The CJVP also presented an analysis of figures in the interim CIDH report, covering the period 19 April - 19 June, and concluded that the figure of 212 deaths is inflated by 27% because of duplication of names, and the inclusion of deaths from natural causes, traffic accidents, gang warfare, and robberies. An analysis of ANPDH figures illustrated that 48% of the deaths they recorded had nothing to do with the conflict.

Furthermore, a myth has been created that it is mainly students who have died (one news report referred to ‘thousands’ of student deaths). The CJVP shows that only 11 of the deaths were of known students, a number far exceeded by the police deaths (22).

The media war

The complexity of the situation and the views of impoverished Nicaraguans are entirely lacking in an international media war that claims the Nicaraguan government is entirely responsible for all the violence. This has resulted in distorted and misleading coverage and omission of inconvenient facts that don't fit this narrative. So-called ‘independent’ journalists and commentators have resorted to overblown, simplistic rhetoric and images rather than fair, balanced reporting.

Opposition organisations in Nicaragua have received grants from such organisations as the US National Endowment for Democracy (NED), who supplied US\$4.1million between 2014 and 2017 for training on governance, private enterprise, human rights, and defending democracy. This also entailed building media platforms now churning out hostile anti-government messages that are replicated in the media nationally and globally. This plays a powerful role in fomenting hatred and instilling fear.

Jose Antonio Zepeda, General Secretary of the Nicaraguan teachers' union ANDEN, <https://www.thecanary.co/exclusive/2018/08/10/trade-union-leader-exposes-what-the-media-wont-about-the-latest-us-backed-coup-attempt-in-latin-america/> commented: *'The opposition created virtual realities, which didn't exist on the ground. And the national and international media - with their vested interests - reproduced these images. And it's not the first time. It's not just Nicaragua. Remember the non-existent WMDs that served as a pretext for the Iraq war!'*

Economic devastation

The impact on the Nicaraguan economy has been dramatic: predictions for 2018 economic growth have been revised from 5% to 1% and 120,000 jobs have been lost. International tourism has come to a halt and recovery will be a lengthy process; job losses in this sector are particularly high.

'The damage that Nicaragua has suffered has been very negative for us; we have unemployment, and my organisation is finding it difficult to obtain credit because we're seen as unstable and unsafe, and without funding, production is at risk. Another big problem is that investors are taking their money out of the country, leaving even more economic problems behind.' Junieth Leiva

In August the National Assembly announced cuts of US\$186 million to the national budget, with the major cuts falling on health, municipal and local council infrastructure expenditure.

Since clearing the road blocks, the government has focused on extensive repairs of streets, roads, council buildings, bridges and health clinics, damaged or destroyed by the protesters. They are also pressing ahead with major infrastructure projects, many of which have external funding, such as a water-supply, road and rural electrification programmes (95% of the population have electricity compared with 40% in 2007).

Who are the opposition and what are they demanding?

The opposition are portrayed internationally as a strong, unified, peaceful movement representing the Nicaraguan people. However, the reality is more complex: the opposition not only lacks a well-defined, coherent leadership but different sectors are constantly at odds with each other.

The main opposition group, the Civic Alliance (AC), is one of a bewildering array of groupings united only in their desire to bring about regime change. The opposition includes representatives of big business, NGOs, academics, students, leftists, a campesino organisation, feminist pro-choice organisations, and parts of the Catholic Church who are pro-life and homophobic.

'What I think has happened is that leaders high up have put discontent with the government into the heads of the poor people, but it's clear to see as well that they use the poor, and whip up passions so that we take to the streets...' Junieth Leiva

US aggression intensifies

It is also important to see developments in Nicaragua in the context of the Trump administration 'America First' agenda and US destabilisation internationally and regionally - including withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal, the Paris Climate Agreement and the UN Human Rights Council.

The US, with no track record of promoting stable democracies anywhere in the world, has under the Trump administration intensified interventionist policies against Venezuela, Cuba and now Nicaragua. On 7 May, US vice-president Mike Pence stated that working for 'freedom' in the three countries is a priority for the administration: 'We will stay by the side of those who long for freedom and we will confront their oppressors.' This statement is identical to those of Ronald Reagan during the contra war of the 1980s.

The political agenda of the far right dominates US policy on Latin America. They have set about using their clout to aggressively promote this agenda through international bodies such as the OAS, European Union and UN Security Council. This includes condemning the Nicaraguan government for all acts of violence, calling for President Ortega's removal from power, and threatening further sanctions, an action that would only serve to further destabilise and polarise the country. Right wing senator Marco Rubio has even spoken of the possibility of war in Nicaragua, and has tried to recast the crisis as a US national security issue.

Uneasy impasse and hopes for the future

As highlighted above, very few deaths have occurred since late July, and life has returned to some level of normalcy. Efforts are being made locally and nationally to encourage a climate of peace and reconciliation. Tourists are very slowly beginning to return and the flow of migrants – refugees and those seeking employment - to Costa Rica has gone down from 21,000 in June and July to 5,000 in August.

However, deep polarisation remains: protesters insist that those charged with criminal offences are political prisoners, and there is huge international pressure to reconvene the national dialogue and hold early elections. On 27 August, the Nicaragua foreign minister Denis Moncada met the UN general secretary António Guterres to discuss the possibility of the UN playing a mediation role in place of the discredited Bishops Conference.

Overwhelmingly peaceful demonstrations continue, with now much smaller numbers on the opposition side and, if anything, growing numbers in support of the government and demanding justice for those killed and tortured at the roadblocks.

The greatest challenge facing Nicaragua is ending all forms of violence from whatever source. This includes the violence of foreign intervention and the bias and distortions of the media and international institutions. This must include justice for all those who have lost friends and relatives, peace building and national reconciliation to restore trust, and to ensure social and economic justice for those who are most impoverished.

'We need to build mutual trust and peace, rescue our economy, our social relations and maintain a country with progress and prosperity, overcoming poverty.' Dr Paul Oquist, Minister for Public Policy. He went on to refer to the Contadora peace process that ended the contra war as an illustration of a precedent.

'We've lived through foreign intervention in the past. That's not the solution. The solution is for us to understand each other, communicate, and make peace – a lasting peace based on development and justice.' Jose Antonio Zepeda, General Secretary of teachers' union ANDEN.

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