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NICARAGUA: DOUBLING DOWN ON DICTATORSHIP

Kai M. Thaler and Eric Mosinger

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At the start of 2021, Nicaragua's opposition was cautiously optimistic, believing that the November 6 elections presented a real chance to challenge President Daniel Ortega and Vice-President and First Lady Rosario Murillo's stranglehold on power. But on election day, the couple was "re-elected" in a vote in which the only ostensible competition was from puppet parties. Seven of the main opposition presidential contenders in this country of 6.6 million languished in prison alongside dozens of opposition activists and civil society leaders. International and domestic NGOs that criticized the regime saw their legal statuses revoked.

Although these events spurred a round of hand-wringing among commentators over the dire need to reverse democratic destruction in Nicaragua, the reality is that democracy had been killed off years before. Ortega's loyalists have dominated state institutions since the late 2000s, rewriting laws to attack critics, manipulate elections, and undermine freedoms of assembly, speech, and the press. The 2018 antiregime protests and the government's response proved to be a critical juncture for both the opposition and the regime. What started as demonstrations over a mismanaged government response to a severe forest fire and social-security cuts grew into a prodemocratic mass movement against the regime. Ortega and Murillo's popular support cratered. Rather than make concessions, the couple chose tyranny, brutality, and the protection of their family wealth. Critics have been fired or jailed, and security forces and government supporters have killed members of the opposition with impunity. Dictatorial control in Nicaragua has deepened as forms of political repression unseen in Latin America for decades have returned, culminating in the farcical 2021 elections.

Opposition parties and supporters of democracy worldwide can learn

from Ortega's ability to retain power despite his regime's plummeting popularity. While it is almost certainly too late to reverse what Ortega has wrought, the country's fate was not inevitable. For many years, moderate prodemocratic Nicaraguans have told themselves that they lived in an imperfect democracy. As long as the economy grew and there was little violent repression, elites made accommodations with the regime and underestimated Ortega's autocratizing drive. International actors were similarly quiescent, failing to impose sufficient penalties for undemocratic behavior, which might have stalled or at least slowed Nicaragua's descent into dictatorship. The opposition's inability to unite against Ortega before the 2018 protests facilitated his domination of state institutions and security forces. By the time opposition to his regime had coalesced, it was too late—he was already firmly entrenched in power. These failures of domestic and international actors to respond, despite many early warning signs, have left few clear prospects for a return to democracy in Nicaragua.

The Origins of a Dictator

Ortega speaks little about his past. He does not give interviews, and he seems unlikely to write a memoir. But it is easy in hindsight to spot the road to Nicaragua's dictatorship through Ortega's singular obsession with accumulating power at any expense. While a teenager, he joined Nicaragua's militant left-wing Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) in its fight against the long-ruling dictatorship of the Somoza family but spent much of the revolutionary struggle in prison. Released in 1974, Ortega co-founded the *Tercerista* or "Insurreccional" faction of the FSLN, which wrested leadership from rival factions by emphasizing moderate political and economic goals, cross-class cooperation, and urban insurrection.

When the FSLN seized power in 1979 at the vanguard of a mass uprising, Ortega was selected as a compromise candidate to lead Nicaragua's new *de facto* executive body, the nine-member FSLN National Directorate. While control of the National Directorate was collective, Ortega effectively became first among equals, as many Nicaraguans and international actors saw him as head of state. In 1984, he easily won the presidency in a vote boycotted by much of the opposition.

His loss to opposition candidate Violeta Chamorro in the free and fair 1990 presidential election came as a shock. But Ortega had no intention of accepting her victory or loosening his grip on the FSLN. He positioned himself as the FSLN's sole leader at the 1991 party congress, rallying hardliners by calling for the party to reject cooperation with Chamorro's government and to "rule from below" through disruptive demonstrations and labor actions. Becoming FSLN secretary-general in 1994, Ortega established personalistic control of the party, purging opponents of his leadership.

By 2000, the FSLN was firmly in Ortega's grip, enabling him to make alliances of convenience with the party's former enemies among the business, right-wing political, and religious elites. Ortega cut deals with corrupt president Arnoldo Alemán of the Constitutionalist Liberal Party, who agreed to share control of the electoral commission and courts and to lower the vote-share threshold needed to win presidential elections. This enabled Ortega to prevail in the 2007 race with minority support.¹

When Ortega returned to the presidency, some thought that his authoritarian propensities might be tempered by democratic checks and balances.² FSLN founder Tomás Borge counseled otherwise, advising Ortega that "we can pay whatever price [but] . . . the one thing we cannot do is lose power [again]."³ The FSLN's far-reaching fraud in the 2008 municipal elections made clear that Ortega was following Borge's counsel; he would tolerate a democratic system so long as he could continue to accumulate power. This fraud shifted Nicaragua from a fragile democracy to competitive authoritarianism.

Ortega led the FSLN's takeover of state institutions, including the courts and the National Assembly, in order to capture control of the electoral process. He colluded with Supreme Electoral Council head Roberto Rivas, who facilitated fraud and protected Ortega and the FSLN from electoral defeat; Ortega, in return, helped Rivas to amass wealth corruptly. The courts struck down the law barring presidential reelection in 2009 and then colluded with the legislature to remove constraints on executive power, allowing Ortega to make government appointments by decree and increasing his control over security forces ahead of his 2011 reelection. In January 2010, former FSLN military commander Hugo Torres argued that Ortega had already established an authoritarian regime: "The Constitution and laws have no value to *caudillos* such as Ortega. . . . They don't believe in the democratic system: they just use it to get into power."⁴

A month before the 2016 election, a group of Nicaraguan researchers presciently argued that Ortega and Murillo were creating "a new family dictatorship" similar to the Somoza regime.⁵ The Ortega-Murillo family had increasingly fused state and FSLN party apparatuses and laundered Venezuelan aid funds to create a media and business empire, enriching themselves and extending their domination throughout Nicaraguan society.⁶ Opposition parties had either been coopted, taken over by government loyalists, or stripped of their legal standing in the lead-up to the election. First Lady Murillo joined Ortega's ticket as the vice-presidential candidate. She had long been accumulating power in government—wielding influence through Ortega himself and through her semiofficial position of government spokesperson—and was widely seen as the power behind the throne or as a copresident. Ortega and Murillo's assured victory in the election confirmed their consolidation of a personalist authoritarian regime. Nicaraguans did not take to the

streets en masse to protest the electoral-manipulation tactics that the couple employed—a possible missed opportunity to check their tightening grip. The prodemocratic opposition remained fragmented and lacked a coherent plan to challenge the regime. Even worse for the opposition, the regime was broadly popular among Nicaraguans: Ortega had overtly cheated even though independent preelection polls suggested that “he could easily win a clean election.”⁷

Losing Legitimacy

While Ortega’s rise in the 1980s had been legitimized by revolution and ideology, he relied on economic growth and plenty of handouts to remain in power through the 2000s and 2010s. By allying with the business class, letting crony capitalism flourish, and redistributing rents from Venezuelan largesse, Ortega oversaw a rapidly growing economy with few losers. He employed revolutionary rhetoric in rare public appearances, but day-to-day governing legitimacy stemmed from using Venezuelan aid and loans to build new hospitals, highways, schools, and roofs, and to deliver potable water and electricity to underserved rural areas—in contrast to his underperforming predecessors.⁸

Yet by 2018, this *buen gobierno* began showing signs of strain. The subsidies from Venezuela disappeared after that country’s economic collapse, forcing Ortega to tighten government spending. As the regime’s performance appeared less assured, government officials increased low-grade repression and constraints on opposition speech. For example, riot police blocked the Managua route of a 2016 march against the proposed Interoceanic Canal, forcing protesters onto the capital city’s back streets where they were harassed by FSLN-supported mobs. In March 2018, Vice-President Murillo harangued online critics, threatening state censorship of Facebook. The government appeared increasingly unwilling to tolerate dissent.

But if Ortega and Murillo had hoped to use preemptive repression of public criticism to limit the threat posed by the regime’s failures, the strategy backfired dramatically in 2018. On April 3, the Indio Maíz nature reserve on the Caribbean coast caught fire. The government bungled the response, allowing the blaze to burn for days and rejecting help offered by the Costa Rican government. Incensed at watching Nicaragua’s natural beauty reduced to ashes, a small number of activists and students from Managua’s Central American University protested in the streets. Although no core government interests were at stake, progovernment paramilitaries attacked and scattered the students. Demonstrators described this as a wake-up call: The right to peaceful protest had disappeared.⁹

Two weeks later, the government announced cuts to public pensions. Elderly pensioners protested, and as with the Indio Maíz demonstrators,

they were met with paramilitary violence. Images of beaten and bloodied elders went viral on social media, and the next day, April 19, students returned to the streets in far greater numbers.¹⁰ The regime responded with lethal force, killing 59 in the first week of protests, including fifteen-year-old Álvaro Conrado and journalist Ángel Gahona.¹¹ From the protests a great revolt emerged. On April 23, civil society leaders convened mass marches with as many as a hundred-thousand participants. By the end of April, the government temporarily suspended its offensive. Its alliances with capital and clergy lay in tatters, and Ortega agreed to a National Dialogue. Ortega's once formidable popular support crumbled: While in 2017 fully 67 percent of Nicaraguans polled had expressed approval of his administration, in July 2018 that number had plummeted to 23 percent.¹² The regime appeared on the brink of collapse.

We have argued elsewhere that the 2018 protests expanded into a mass, nationwide prodemocracy movement not because of longstanding grievances against the Ortega regime, but because many ordinary Nicaraguans suddenly concluded that Ortega had established a dictatorship in the mold of the Somoza dynasty. Historical analogies to the Somoza dictatorship and the 1979 Sandinista Revolution proliferated in April and May 2018. Protesters revived antiregime slogans (such as "Free Homeland or Death"), tactics (such as barricades and homemade mortars), and the multiclass opposition alliance of students, capitalists, and clergy that had toppled the dictatorship.¹³

While killing protesters was a new low, some domestic and international observers had called out Ortega's authoritarian nature well before 2018.¹⁴ Nicaragua's regime did not change because of its response to the 2018 protests—its true face had simply been revealed. Civil society actors underscored this point: As student leader Lesther Alemán declared to a shocked Ortega and Murillo on the first day of the National Dialogue in May 2018, "This is not a table for dialogue, it is a table to negotiate your exit. . . . Surrender!" Alemán later told international media that "democracy has been taken hostage. . . . Nicaragua's youth are determined to get it back."¹⁵

Instead of surrendering, Ortega and Murillo used the National Dialogue as a delaying tactic, reinforcing the loyalty of the one remaining group whose support they could not afford to lose—the security forces. The northern city of Jinotega offers a particularly vivid example: Police who had refused orders to suppress protests in late April 2018 were replaced, and in May and June, Jinotega was the site of a vicious police crackdown on protestors. By mid-June, the government had launched a full-scale, nationwide offensive, which the media dubbed "Operación Limpieza" (Operation Clean-Up—in reference to a similar act by the Somoza dictatorship), in order to overpower opposition roadblocks and university-campus occupations. In Masaya, five-hundred police officers cut a bloody swath through the city to "liberate" a police headquarter-

ters besieged by protesters. The military officially stayed in their barracks, but many of their weapons were in police and paramilitary hands. The regime's counterinsurgency tactics worked, but at a terrible cost of 332 civilians and 23 police officers killed between April 2018 and July 2019, according to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. By late July 2018, large-scale protests had been crushed; prodemocracy activists had been harassed, jailed, or placed under house arrest; and tens of thousands had fled Nicaragua for exile or asylum. Ortega and Murillo's regime had survived, but there would be no more pretense of democracy.

Deepening Despotic Control

Ortega and Murillo's few remaining allies in Cuba, Iran, Russia, and Venezuela offered both support and examples of regime survival despite diminished domestic legitimacy and international isolation. Ortega and Murillo took few steps to rebuild their popularity, instead doubling down on strict control of public space and reinforcing the support of their core constituents through propaganda and patronage. Mass protests became nearly impossible after July 2018, as police and FSLN paramilitaries swarmed any unauthorized gathering. Waving the blue-and-white national flag or singing the national anthem—now considered opposition symbols—could result in attack or arrest. The police and military were rewarded for their loyalty, while judges and prosecutors reliably convicted government critics on flimsy charges and excused violence by progovernment forces.

Paramilitaries became more formalized, extending control and fear throughout the country by harassing, attacking, and secretly imprisoning opposition members. The paramilitaries became the ruling couple's personal shock forces; in a 2021 video of a training session, paramilitaries can be heard shouting: "We are Daniel, builders of peace! . . . We will continue defending our right to a revolution with Commander Daniel and comrade Rosario Murillo."¹⁶

Ortega and Murillo saturated state and progovernment media with claims that the 2018 mass protests had been a U.S.-organized right-wing coup attempt. Meanwhile, the couple shuttered or attacked remaining independent news outlets. Many government supporters who wavered in 2018 returned to the fold, convinced by propaganda and progovernment friends and family. Yet government backers remain a small portion of Nicaragua's population. In independent polls from July 2020 and September 2021, between 15 and 24 percent of respondents claimed to support Ortega and his government, respectively.¹⁷ Some supporters still believe Ortega and Murillo's claims that they are defending a continuation of the 1979 Revolution, while others, especially younger Nicaraguans, are grateful for economic benefits, jobs, and local power in FSLN

organizations.¹⁸ Some government employees remain devoted to the ruling couple; many others comply with demands to attend proregime rallies or photograph their votes for Ortega and Murillo out of fear of the economic hit and persecution that they would face if they dissented.

Despite a recession, the government remained afloat economically. Free-trade zones stayed open, exports kept flowing, international loans and aid continued, and remittances grew. But journalists have also uncovered mounting evidence of FSLN officials' and cronies' involvement in drug trafficking. Business elites remained split: Some continued criticizing Ortega and Murillo, while others returned to tolerating the regime's authoritarianism in the name of protecting their assets.¹⁹

When the covid-19 pandemic arrived, Ortega and Murillo seem to have bet that the economic costs of a national shutdown would be more destabilizing than a high death toll from the virus. They undertook an erratic, denialist approach to the pandemic, holding mass events, restricting case and death data, and attacking civil society groups that sought to mount public-health responses. With manufacturing and international trade continuing, the economy stumbled onward, and Ortega and Murillo's gamble appears to have paid off. Although thousands of Nicaraguans have died (per independent sources) and vaccinations lagged behind all Latin American countries until November 2021, mass protests did not break out.

Meanwhile, Ortega and Murillo turned to the legislative process to further entrench their rule and strangle dissent. After a new "antiterrorism" law was used to arrest protesters in 2018, the legislature in October 2020 rubber-stamped more legislation to help the couple to persecute critics. This includes a law that requires individuals working for international organizations or receiving financial support from abroad to register as "foreign agents." This legislation also restricts what news organizations receiving foreign funds can cover. The legislature also passed a "cybercrimes" law against posting or spreading "false or misleading information," criminalizing antigovernment social-media posts and news articles. In December 2020, legislators put in place a final tool to control the 2021 elections: a law barring anyone whom the government deemed a "traitor" from running for or holding public office.

The 2021 Elections

While Ortega deepened control over the security apparatus and a (diminished) core of loyalists, the opposition bickered among themselves. In the lead-up to 2021 elections, Ortega opponents, including student activists, civil society, and economic elites, split into two major groups, the broad National Coalition and the right-leaning Citizens' Alliance, and among multiple political parties. Seven opposition candidates, from the hard right to the left, challenged Ortega. By early 2021, however,

most opposition candidates had signed a pact to support the winner of a democratic primary process, and a compromise front-runner began to emerge in Cristiana Chamorro, daughter of former president Chamorro.²⁰ While conceding that the elections were unlikely to be free or fair, many Nicaraguans still hoped to repeat history, recalling Violeta Chamorro's 1990 victory over Ortega.

The regime was blind neither to the historical parallels nor to its own unpopularity. Chamorro's candidacy presented a vexing challenge. Her family has been at the forefront of every antidictatorial struggle since the 1950s. In 2021, eminent journalist Carlos Fernando (her brother) and presidential-primary candidate Juan Sebastián (her cousin) joined her in pressing for Ortega's departure. Having a clear unity candidate has been key to successful opposition challenges to authoritarian regimes in countries as far-flung as Serbia, Georgia, Zambia, and Honduras. But Ortega and Murillo had no intention of running against Chamorro or any other opposition candidate. Instead, the regime initiated a crackdown colloquially referred to as *la cacería* (the hunt).

In late May, Cristiana Chamorro was accused of money laundering and held under house arrest. While the Citizens' Alliance and civil society groups condemned the arrest, the streets remained quiet, and other candidates continued to campaign. In early June, the regime arrested six other opposition candidates and dozens of dissidents on treason charges. Their targets were a mix of political opponents including Juan Sebastián Chamorro; civic and economic leaders, including the heads of Nicaragua's main business organization and largest bank; prodemocracy activists such as Lester Alemán; *campesino* (peasant-farmer) activist Medardo Mairena; and Sandinista dissidents, namely Dora María Téllez, Victor Hugo Tinoco, and Hugo Torres. As of March 2022, none have been released. The Ortega-Murillo regime equaled the Somoza dictatorship on yet another measure: Until 2020, Nicaragua's regime had not jailed a member of the elite since dictator Anastasio Somoza García was assassinated in 1956.²¹

Why did Ortega and Murillo launch a blistering wave of repression months before the election, despite completely controlling the electoral apparatus? Doing so risked jeopardizing their command of the security forces, provoking new waves of mass protest, and incurring international sanctions. The regime calculated that these costs were outweighed by the benefits of fragmenting the opposition, sidelining its leadership, and denying it the opportunity to use the elections as a rallying point.²² While the crackdown further diminished the government's remaining international legitimacy, it may have helped to bolster domestic legitimacy among remaining Sandinista loyalists.²³ The regime also appeared motivated in part by a desire for vengeance. Dissident Sandinistas such as Téllez have been targeted for torture and solitary confinement, and in response to public criticisms, Ortega called his own brother, Hum-

berto—architect of Ortega’s rise to power in the 1980s—a “traitor and quisling” who “defends terrorists.”²⁴

In short, *la cacería* decimated opposition leadership and demonstrated security forces’ continued loyalty. As Carlos Fernando Chamorro wrote from exile in Costa Rica, “All Nicaraguans, in our helplessness, are hostages of the dictatorship.”²⁵ With the opposition now boycotting the vote, the only question on election day would be voter turnout. Heroic work by citizen election monitors Urnas Abiertas revealed an astonishing 80 percent abstention rate.²⁶ The opposition claimed a moral victory, but in practical terms, the Ortega-Murillo regime successfully used overt repression and blatant election fraud to stay in power without provoking another prodemocratic uprising.

International Implications

Nicaragua’s democracy was young and fragile before Ortega took office in 2007, with corruption, discontent over social services, and repeated failures to respect the rights of indigenous people and persons of African descent. Even so, Nicaragua’s democratic government was emblematic of Latin America’s post-Cold War turn toward democracy. Under Ortega’s rule, Nicaragua has provided a case study in the degrading of democracy, which if left unchecked can lead to unrestrained state violence and even totalitarianism. A renewed focus on how would-be autocrats attack elections and progressively dismantle barriers to authoritarian control will help democracy’s defenders worldwide to confront the current democratic recession.

In this way, the Nicaraguan case offers prodemocratic actors a clear lesson: To mount an effective challenge against authoritarian-minded candidates and elected officials, oppositions must unify quickly, creating a broad democratic-defense coalition before aspiring autocrats can close civic space and consolidate power. Former Sandinistas sounded the alarm about Ortega’s authoritarian tendencies for years, but right-leaning opposition members supported his newfound focus on economic growth and conservative social values. Nicaragua’s opposition failed to coalesce after the fraudulent 2008 municipal elections and to mount a united challenge to Ortega in the 2011 presidential race; by the time Ortega installed Murillo as vice-president in 2016, all institutional means to check the couple’s power were gone.

To unify, societal actors with divergent interests must be willing to make short-term sacrifices in the long-term interest of democracy. Economic elites in particular should make concessions to stand with other prodemocratic groups. During the 2018 protests and throughout the National Dialogue, the opposition remained divided as frontline student activists clashed with more conservative business leaders over whether to launch an extended general strike. Moreover, the uprising’s

horizontal, decentralized organization, while a strength for mobilizing protests, made it harder to unite the opposition later. Unity can require

Countering burgeoning authoritarians must begin before elections, or at the latest in the early days of any new government. Domestic actors must forcefully oppose antidemocratic rhetoric and behavior.

uncomfortable alliances—for instance, El Salvador’s two establishment parties, once at war with each other, might have to cooperate to counter authoritarian president Nayib Bukele. But these temporary accommodations can yield lasting dividends: Had Nicaragua’s opposition joined forces before authoritarian control was fully consolidated or at key moments of regime vulnerability, such as the 2018 protests, it might have had greater success in constraining Ortega or in forcing prodemocratic concessions. Ultimately, the some-

what-united front offered by Ortega’s adversaries during the 2021 election proved too little, too late.

The 2021 contest underscores another lesson from the Nicaraguan case: There are benefits for oppositions that choose to contest flawed elections in authoritarian settings, even if prodemocratic actors must abruptly change strategy if repression stifles all room for dissent. After much debate, Nicaraguan political parties and civil society groups opted not to boycott the 2021 election, ultimately deciding that it would provide a rare opportunity to speak out and mobilize supporters given that protests were no longer possible. Opposition actors used the campaign period to denounce Ortega and Murillo and to begin laying out political visions for a democratic Nicaragua. Despite efforts to unify the fractious opposition, the same divisions emerged as the Citizens’ Alliance refused to back a general unity candidate. Ortega’s decisions to further repress the opposition by arresting all its candidates and declaring its parties illegal were ultimately what united them, as oppositionists agreed to a collective boycott of the election. This radical shift in strategy was the only sensible option; the regime’s actions removed any pretensions of electoral competition. The opposition’s challenge proved a sharp enough threat to Ortega that he felt forced to crack down, spurring a more robust, albeit belated, international response to his autocratic rule.

International actors, too, must reexamine their tactics and act at the first signs that a leader is intent on dismantling democracy. The United States, the EU, and allied countries have issued targeted sanctions against members of the Ortega-Murillo regime, Nicaraguan government institutions, and associated businesses, but these belated measures have not brought the government to the negotiating table nor freed political prisoners. With governments both in Latin America and around the globe shuffling officials and assets and “isolation-proofing” their econ-

omies against sanctions through pressure on domestic capital, trade with other authoritarians, and illicit dealings, sanctions appear increasingly unable to stop would-be authoritarians or to pressure dictators in power to change course.²⁷ For instance in December 2021, Nicaragua abandoned relations with Taiwan and instead deepened ties with China to gain new sanctions-skirting trade, investment, and loan options, and to potentially forestall any UN Security Council action.

The United States and the EU have also discussed expelling Nicaragua from free-trade agreements or restricting International Monetary Fund (IMF) loans. While this might sway some business elites, it would threaten the livelihoods of poorer and middle-class Nicaraguans in an already weak economy. Ortega and Murillo, prioritizing regime survival above all, can look to Cuba and Venezuela for examples of withstanding long-term economic and diplomatic pressure while ignoring domestic protests. In such cases, international options remain limited beyond aiding the population and independent civil society.

Regional bodies have rebuked Ortega and Murillo but have been slow to impose any severe consequences. Serious discussions about invoking the Inter-American Democratic Charter to suspend Nicaragua's membership in the Organization of American States (OAS) only began in 2021—perhaps thirteen years too late. Nicaragua remained an OAS member “in good standing” even after the fraudulent 2016 elections and the crackdown on the 2018 protests. Now that the OAS has condemned the 2021 elections and there may be enough votes to suspend Nicaragua, Ortega and Murillo have decided to withdraw from the organization. The Central American Integration System (SICA) has been equally ineffectual. Secretary-General Vinicio Cerezo did not strongly denounce repression in Nicaragua in 2018, and has not done so since. Meanwhile, SICA's Central American Bank for Economic Integration has continued to make unrestricted loans to the Nicaraguan government.

Could any international efforts have stopped Ortega's consolidation of power or constrain would-be authoritarians such as Bukele? Perhaps, but only if they begin quickly and decisively. In contrast to the United States' foot-dragging in opposing Ortega, the Biden administration has forcefully registered its discontent with Bukele's authoritarian maneuvers. In 2021, it withdrew the U.S. embassy's *chargé d'affaires*, excluded Bukele from the Summit for Democracy, and sanctioned government officials for corruption and deals with gang leaders.²⁸ The United States could also block a badly needed US\$1.3 billion IMF loan to Bukele's government. Still, these efforts come after Bukele has had more than two years to firmly entrench himself in power. Moreover, international support for El Salvador's opposition parties, civil society organizations, and independent press—all of which are vital to preserving democracy—may now be undercut by the country's new “foreign-agents” law.

Countering burgeoning authoritarians must begin before elections,

or at the latest in the early days of any new government. Domestic actors must forcefully oppose antidemocratic rhetoric and behavior. For example, in France in 2002, centrists and leftists united behind moderate right-wing presidential candidate Jacques Chirac against far-right extremist Jean-Marie Le Pen—events mirrored in 2017 as mainstream parties unified behind centrist Emmanuel Macron against Le Pen’s daughter Marine Le Pen. Ahead of Chile’s 2021 presidential runoff, civil society groups sounded the alarm about far-right candidate José Antonio Kast’s authoritarian proposals and rhetoric, and he was defeated.²⁹ By contrast, Brazil’s centrists failed to unify with the left in 2018 against then-presidential candidate Jair Bolsonaro’s far-right, antidemocratic platform and planned militarization of government. The opposition can only hope that his misrule has been sufficiently egregious to unite broader support for ousting him in the 2022 race—assuming that he permits the contest to be free and fair.

Nicaraguan democracy will need to be reconstructed from the ground up after Ortega and Murillo’s dictatorial reign.³⁰ Nicaragua’s opposition looked to the 2021 elections as a chance to unify and to reinvigorate the struggle for democratization and accountability, but this opportunity proved illusory; the crackdown continues. In early 2022, the regime began to try political prisoners behind closed doors, issuing sentences of up to thirteen years, and canceled the legal status of several universities to undercut future student mobilizations. On February 12, former general Hugo Torres, who led a 1974 raid that liberated Ortega from prison, died in the hands of Ortega’s government after months as a political prisoner. Dozens of opposition members remain imprisoned despite international outcry.

Opposition actors have mobilized international diplomatic and financial pressure against the Ortega-Murillo regime. But now prodemocracy activists must determine how best to rebuild organization and momentum domestically, to rekindle what remains of the 2018 opposition mobilization, and to relaunch protests or leverage any erosion of Ortega and Murillo’s support within the state apparatus. This daunting but critical task must be undertaken to ensure that future opportunities to challenge authoritarian rule do not slip by.

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