

Update from Nicaragua

One Year after the Insurrection

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A year has passed since the uprising that threatened the government of Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua—a largely left uprising against a nominally socialist government. Today, as the US government seeks to promote a civil war in Venezuela in order to expand its sphere of political and economic interests, the questions raised by the Nicaraguan insurrection are more pressing than ever. What should people do who oppose both Maduro’s authoritarian version of socialism and Guaidó’s authoritarian version of democracy? Does “anti-imperialism” just mean supporting governments connected to rival empires like Russia and China? What about the Sandinistas, feminists, indigenous peoples, environmentalists, students, and campesino movements who oppose Ortega? What about the Venezuelan socialists and anarchists who oppose Maduro?

And, at the same time, what does it mean when both neoliberal US politicians and the EZLN support a protest movement in Nicaragua? What does it mean when anarchists, communists, and the US military all support the experiment in Rojava—but with completely different agendas? How do we support movements like the ones that oppose the Ortega government in Nicaragua without simply providing cover for capitalists to manipulate social movements into opening up new markets? How do we ensure that anti-authoritarian movements are not exploited as a way to install new authorities? How do we strategize to resist reactionary forces inside of popular movements without sabotaging the movements themselves?

For years, we have corresponded with anarchists and grassroots organizers in Venezuela, Nicaragua, and elsewhere who have described situations that sound a lot like the ones that poor people and people of color face in more explicitly capitalist countries, despite the supposed socialist agendas of the presiding governments. While some of the participants in resistance to the Maduro and Ortega regimes are clearly motivated by the desire to profit on the introduction of even more oppressive economic policies, others are driven by legitimate grievances and a real desire for equality and self-determination—just like those who rose up against the Brazilian government under Dilma Rousseff in 2013 or the people who rose up in Ferguson in 2014 under Obama’s administration. If international revolutionary movements do not offer the poor and desperate opportunities to fight for liberation from *all* forms of state oppression, some of them will end up naïvely enlisting in uprisings orchestrated by neoliberals.

We have to build powerful movements that do not legitimize any form of capitalism or state power. Otherwise, we will be forever forced to choose between the lesser of two evils—and geopolitics will suffer from the same foreclosure of possibility as the two-party system in the US. Both neoliberal capitalist governments and authoritarian socialist regimes cynically make use of each other’s in order to promote themselves as the only possible alternative. This has been going on for almost a century; it’s up to us to create a *real* alternative.

It’s striking how readily many leftists in the global North have supported the yellow vest movement despite the participation of outright fascists, but have ignored the uprising in Nicaragua or stigmatized it as reactionary. We have a lot of work to do.

The following report was supplied by Miranda de las Calles and Mark Alexander.

One Year Since the Nicaraguan Insurrection

It's been a long year since the popular uprising in Nicaragua. To recap: starting in April of 2018, following years of corruption, authoritarianism, nepotism, economic violence, and environmental destruction perpetuated by the Daniel Ortega government, people took the streets in a way not seen in Nicaragua since 1979. The uprising was led by students, workers, feminists, campesinos, and indigenous people from a variety of economic, social, and political backgrounds. The main demands were for Ortega to resign; to allow new democratic possibilities including educational autonomy, participatory democracy, and a radically new judicial system; and to offer reparations for all the violence perpetrated by the state, the police, and paramilitary forces.

A year later, the government continues to utilize violence against the Nicaraguan people, independent media outlets have been forced into exile, human rights organizations have stopped operating, and all dialogue and mediation has failed. In the following report, we go over some of the historical context for the Nicaraguan uprising and present an update on the situation as it stands today.

The Past

In part because of the history of conflict between the state and the people in the Caribbean, there is a longstanding tradition of autonomous activism in the Caribbean region. Community activists have had to work outside of the structures of the state to combat issues such as state-sanctioned sexual violence against young girls and women and various forms of economic colonization. A brief history of the region can show the roots of the tendency towards self-organized community activism and direct action on the Caribbean side.

The Spanish empire colonized the pacific region of Nicaragua, while the Caribbean was set up as a “protectorate” of the British empire, which colonized it in a different way. There are multiple ethnic and cultural differences between the two regions as well: 96% of the people of the Pacific are relatively homogenous (mestizo) and speak Spanish. The Caribbean is populated by multiple ethnic groups—Miskitos, Afro-Caribbean, Garifunas, Sumu, Rama, and others—speaking multiple languages.

In 1894, with the assistance of the United States, José Santos Zelaya (president of Nicaragua from 1893–1909) annexed the Caribbean coast. The state branded the annexation as a “reincorporation”;—however, people on the coast still refer to it as the “overthrow.” This is the origin of a longstanding struggle pitting indigenous and black people of the Caribbean against the Nicaraguan state to reaffirm their rights to their ancestral lands.

Here are a few notable examples of autonomous activism in the Caribbean coast:

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In 2009, in opposition to the Nicaraguan government, nearly 1000 people organized by community activists in Bluefields to occupy over 860 acres of communal land on which to grow their own food and build dignified housing. This was the birth of the “Back to the Land Movement.”

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In April 2009, indigenous people from the Caribbean declared independence from the state due to racism, poverty, hunger, and land colonization. They have asserted that they have “enough will and ability to govern themselves for the well-being of their own community.”

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Mestizo land colonization is the biggest crisis facing Black and indigenous communities in the Caribbean. Some people have armed themselves and resorted to insurrectionary direct action to protect themselves from this threat.

The Ortega Government and the Caribbean Coast

The Ortega government's response to the spontaneous rebellion in Nicaragua has been similar to the strategy that they have been utilizing against the indigenous and Black people of the Caribbean coast for decades. The strategy includes the arbitrary use of state violence against anyone the state considers to be a threat, mass surveillance, increased police and military presence, and the criminalization of community activity.

For the people of the Caribbean, the experience of militarization has continued steadily for many decades without much change. As capitalists have used the police and military to secure their interests in the Caribbean region, the state has used the war on drugs to justify and legitimize the militarization. In spite of Ortega's anti-imperialist rhetoric, his government has worked closely with the DEA (Drug Enforcement Agency) to advance the racist "war on drugs." Ortega also works with ICE (US Immigration and Customs Enforcement) to implement US anti-immigration policies.

In 1987, Nicaragua signed a law establishing two autonomous regions on the Caribbean coast: the RACNN (North Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region) and RACCS (Southern Caribbean Autonomous Region). However, the autonomy law has had little effect in practice: today, Black and Indigenous communities have been under attack by settlers that have taken over communal lands. The *colonos* (mostly mestizo ranchers) have been attacking and kidnapping people. Many people on the coast believe that the Ortega government is offering the *colonos* lucrative loans, assisting them in illegally purchasing the land, in order to establish control of the region.

Large plots of indigenous communal lands are being occupied and used to raise cattle. This is inflicting a devastating impact on the people and the environment. The most blatant illustration of the Ortega government's contempt for the people of the Caribbean is his proposal to build an environmentally devastating canal that would displace thousands of Black and indigenous people.

The state has determined that struggles for communal land rights and indigenous and Black self-determination are contrary to the security goals of the (mestizo) Nicaraguan state. Consequently, Black and indigenous people are stigmatized as criminal drug dealers. At the same time, those who rebelled or demonstrated any form of solidarity with the April 18th rebellion are stigmatized with the label of terrorists and *golpistas* (coup d'état plotters).

Ortega's war on drugs has been propelling the county towards mass incarceration. During his tenure, the Nicaraguan prison population has seen one of the sharpest increases in the world: from 2007 to 2018, the prison population more than doubled, increasing from 119 to 276 prisoners per 100,000 of the national population. Black people are disproportionately represented among the prison population. In Bluefields, for example, over half of the prison population is Black, although Black people represent only a quarter of the total population. Most of Nicaragua's

prisons are operating at more than double the capacity, and Ortega's solution to the issue of overcrowded prisons has been to build more prisons using funds seized from the drug war.

The Present

Here, we'll briefly review some of the developments in the year since the uprising was suppressed.

62,000 Nicaraguans in Exile

The United Nations Refugees Agency claims that since April 2018, 62,000 Nicaraguans have sought refuge in Costa Rica, living in precarious conditions and facing local xenophobia. Nicaraguans in Costa Rica have been creating solidarity and support infrastructures to the best of their ability.

In response, the *Orteguista* government has created a new program offering safe return to refugees, but nobody trusts this program. One student returning from exile was immediately arrested in Managua.

An Increasingly Isolated Regime

In December of 2018, the GIEI, a Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts, produced a 400+ page report based on evidence and testimony on the ground in Nicaragua concluding that the Ortega government committed crimes against humanity. This claim is supported by the Organization of American States, the UN, and the European Union. This report further isolated Ortega from the rest of the world; in Latin America, Ortega is only supported by the governments of Cuba and Venezuela. Ortega has virtually no allies in Europe, and many European organizations have cut ties with Nicaragua. This report has legitimized the demands of protest movements on an international scale and has isolated the *Orteguista* government.

The Nica Act

With Ileana Ros-Lehtinen leading the charge, the United States government passed the Nica Act in December 2018 with bipartisan support. This act completely changes the relationship between Nicaragua and the United States. The United States has applied direct sanctions to government officials and to the Ortega family. Slowly, the diplomatic relations with Nicaragua will rupture, leading to more economic instability and sanctions.

Unfortunately, many Nicaraguan people depended on foreign aid, which funded hospitals and clinics. They will now face economic uncertainty. This has been compared to an embargo, which also affects Nicaragua's diplomatic and economic relationship with other countries. The Nicaraguan bourgeoisie will also be affected by the Nica Act.

Zapatista Solidarity

In a communiqué from the *Consejo Indígena de Gobierno* (Council of Indigenous Government), the Zapatistas extended their solidarity and support to the people of Nicaragua. In a meeting at the Second General Assembly with Campesina leader Francisca Ramirez from Nicaragua, the Zapatistas stated that Ortega had betrayed the ideals of the Sandinista revolution.

The Civic Alliance

A new attempt at dialogue between the government and the so-called “Civic Alliance” started in February 2019. This was the first time the government had been willing to negotiate since June 2018. This new attempt has generated growing frustration over the lack of accountability and response by the government but also for the “soft” approach of the Civic Alliance. The Civic Alliance is largely tied to the capitalist class. Also, not a single woman was seen on either side of the negotiating table. These negotiations have slowed down, as the government has not met the many deadlines that have been established. The first agreement is to release all political prisoners and then to open a process of democratization. The Civic Alliance is focusing on electoral reform and speeding up the 2021 elections. Their macro strategy is framed as pragmatism: the idea is that first Ortega will step down, then we figure out what kind of country we want to live in.

The Return of Liberation Theology

Nicaragua is a predominantly Catholic country that observes many religious celebrations. The current crisis and situation has turned processions, religious celebrations, and Sunday services into political spaces in which people denounce the violence of the government. People have been gathering and protesting inside of churches. The bishops, who have been neutral for the last 20 years, are now sending messages of social justice and political change.

Monsignor Baez, the most outspoken bishop in Nicaragua, has been compared to Monsignor Romero in his demands for justice in Nicaragua. Pope Francis has suggested Baez seek refuge in Rome for a while, a decision that most Nicaraguans lament, as they now lose a public powerful critic against the Orteguista government. The pope claims that peace can be achieved through dialogue.

Political Prisoners

In February 2019, the state freed about a hundred political prisoners, giving hope that more liberations were on the way. The state has been holding political prisoners hostage as currency for the negotiations. Over five hundred political prisoners remain in custody. Two months ago, the government stated that it would release all political prisoners within a 90-day period. As of yet, there has been no sign of this happening. Some prisoners are refusing to leave prison until everyone is released at the same time. Despite the government’s claim that it will release prisoners, it continues to detain people who participate in spontaneous protests.

Several political prisoners have organized protests inside the prisons by escaping to the roofs of the prison buildings, dancing, chanting, and constructing barricades inside of the prisons. Police have used tears gas and rubber bullets to suppress these protests.

In addition, the head producer of the news outlet *100% Noticias* and the journalist Lucía Pineda were arrested in December and have been held in solitary confinement since January.

Self-Organization, Direct Action, and Mutual Aid in Nicaragua

The traditional principles of anarchism—self-organization, mutual aid, and direct action—have gained traction in the Pacific region of Nicaragua since the April 18th rebellion. For example, activists put up roadblocks throughout much of the country that almost managed to topple the Nicaraguan government. The city of Masaya, a traditional Sandinista stronghold, declared that it would no longer recognize the government of Daniel Ortega and formed a commission to self-govern. Not surprisingly, this provoked violent retaliation from the state.

Right now, the most common form of direct action is the *piquet* or “sting.” It involves a call for decentralized small-scale manifestations all around a city, in which affinity groups of any size can rapidly protest and then disappear. Some examples of these *piquetes* involve rapidly taking the streets, disrupting food courts in malls, calling out chants in public buses, doing banner drops, intentionally causing traffic congestion with your car, dropping gallons of white and blue paint in the street, setting up impromptu memorial graves, protesting inside a church, tying balloons to street poles and trees, and more. The goal of these *piquetes* is to overwhelm the police and create panic in their ranks, since they try to rapidly locate and disrupt such actions.

The Future

What are the next steps for anarchists in Nicaragua?

The Nicaraguan people still face uncertainty. It’s important to strengthen social movements now, in order that they will have more power later. In Nicaragua, this means supporting the campesino movement, the feminist movement, and the Afro-Descendant and Indigenous movements from the Caribbean coast, all of which promote strong critiques of capitalism and the state. These movements have started to establish and articulate what the differences are that distinguish them from pro-neoliberal and pro-state movements. The most progressive of the student movements is the *Coordinadora Universitaria por la Democracia y Justicia* (CUDJ). There is a lot of support and affinity for anarchist thought in this student organization.

You can check out Hora Cero, an online self-run news and critique program born from CUDJ.

Anarchist solidarity networks are slowly emerging in Central America and worldwide. Writing and sharing information are speeding this process, but it is taking place out of necessity. On social media, anarchists are taking advantage of widespread discontent against the state, bourgeois interests, and authoritarian violence, and have thus far succeeded in resisting right-wing and neoliberal attempts to co-opt the struggle.

On the ground in Nicaragua, it is very hard to organize meetings or public events, but several people have formed study groups to share, debate, and develop ideas. *Piquetes* continue to happen spontaneously.

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