

Nicaragua: one year after protests erupt, Ortega clings to power

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Opposition calls for a return to the streets as talks between government and civil society leaders stall.

Juana Lesarge's three sons had packed their bags and borrowed \$300 for their escape when police and hooded gunmen surrounded their grandmother's home in the region of Carazo on Nicaragua's Pacific coast.

"They were preparing to flee the country," said Lesarge, 48. "At that time everyone was trying to get out. We knew our children were in danger. The dictator had ordered his forces to kill."

The crackdown in Carazo was part of a nationwide operation geared towards crushing the protest movement that engulfed Nicaragua a year ago. Demonstrations broke out on 18 April, sparked by fiscal reforms slashing social security. Fuelled by a [lethal police response](#), they spread across the country, flaring up into a nationwide civil uprising demanding the resignation of the president, Daniel Ortega.

Lesarge's sons, all musicians, wrote songs praising the revolt. As protests intensified, they helped establish roadblocks on the highway cutting through Carazo, built to pressure the government into making concessions.

But Ortega, a wily political operator who has [dismantled Nicaragua's democracy](#) since returning to power in 2007, was determined to stay - whatever the cost.

With protests too widespread for police to control, and the army officially neutral, he assembled [gangs of gunmen](#) drawn from the ranks of [party loyalists](#). Working with police, they swept towns and cities, spreading terror with an [arsenal of military-grade weapons](#).

On 8 July, they turned their attention to Carazo. It would prove to be the bloodiest day in the whole crisis.

"They came dressed in black with hoods over their faces and guns in their hands," Lesarge recalls. "People ran to hide in their houses and peered through the windows, scared to be seen but desperate to know what was happening to their children and grandchildren."

The assault left [35 dead](#), including two police officers. Lesarge's sons survived and took refuge in their grandmother's house. But they were tracked by state forces, who smashed the front door, beat them to the floor, put guns to their heads, and dragged them off to prison.

Now, a year since protests began, [Comandante Daniel](#) retains a firm grip on power. But he presides over a country sliding towards social and economic meltdown.

Between [325](#) and [535](#) people were killed as government forces crushed the protests. [80,000](#) Nicaraguans fled into exile. [Hundreds](#) of [doctors](#) were dismissed for disobeying orders to discriminate against protesters, debilitating the country's health system.

A growing tourism industry which [contributed](#) 6% of GDP in 2017 has [atrophied](#). Lesarge's sons are among more than 600 protesters languishing in jail, where ex-inmates report widespread use of [torture](#).

"As punishment, they tied our hands and feet behind our backs and cut our circulation until our arms and legs were inflamed," says Levis Artola, a student activist who was released in March. [Others](#) have described acid baths, electric shocks and asphyxiation with plastic bags.

Nicaragua's economy contracted 4% last year, its worst performance since the civil war of the 80s. This year is predicted to be severer still, with [economists forecasting a downswing](#) of between 7% and 11% - [unparalleled](#) anywhere in Latin America save Venezuela.

"This deterioration creates serious problems for Ortega, as there are economic interests within the Sandinista support base, as well as the army, who expect their privileges to be protected," said the economist Mario Arana.

Ortega is increasingly isolated internationally. The US has already sanctioned senior officials, including the vice-president - and Ortega's wife - [Rosario Murillo](#). The Organisation of American States has begun proceedings to [invoke the democratic charter](#), which would restrict the government's access to regional funds. The European parliament has [called](#) for sanctions on "individuals responsible for human rights abuses".

"The threat of sanctions has great potential to influence the government, because it is in essence an oligarchy concerned with its personal interests," said Azahalea Solís, a lawyer. "If Ortega doesn't want to end like Maduro, governing over ashes, he must meaningfully engage to resolve this crisis."

In February the government agreed to meet civil society leaders, who insisted on the release of political prisoners as a condition for talks. Many protesters were [sentenced](#) to decades in prison in trials dismissed as "completely biased" by Claudia Paz y Paz, Central America director at the Centre for Justice and International Law.

"Nicaragua's judicial system has been deployed as another piece in the government's repressive strategy," she said.

In March, the government committed to free them within 90 days. But only a trickle have since been released. Charismatic figures such as student leader [Edwin Carcache](#) and firebrand market trader [Irlanda Jerez](#) remain securely locked away.

The negotiations broke down altogether at the start of April, foundering on the government's refusal to bring forward elections. Solís and Arana - both members of the opposition negotiating team - insist doing so represents "the only way out" of the crisis.

With no sign of further talks, the opposition has [called](#) for a return to the streets. This is where Ortega - whose permanence in power is [based](#) on an iron control over the security forces, electoral council and three branches of government - was made to appear most vulnerable.

"I don't believe in the goodwill of the government," said Jesús Tefel, from the opposition Blue and White National Unity coalition. "Any concessions will only be made because we've left them with no better option."

The group is coordinating “flash mob”-style protests, where protesters dispersed around the city block traffic, demonstrate and then disappear before police arrive. They can then upload videos to social media, creating a collage of protest from small actions that are much more difficult to suppress.

“By building up people’s confidence, we can take the streets again – just like we did last April,” said Teffel.

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