A Massacre, Not a Coup: A Response to Misinformation on Nicaragua

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For the past 3 months, progressive websites and journals have run articles that paint a picture of the crisis in Nicaragua that is dangerously misleading. Many of these articles have been circulated among people on the left who were in solidarity with Nicaragua and the FSLN during the 1970s and 1980s but haven't kept up with what has happened over the last 30 years—particularly since 2007, when Daniel Ortega returned to the Presidency and has been there since. I'd like to take a moment to correct some misconceptions about the current crisis in Nicaragua.

I will first say that I consider myself a Sandinista, as do many of my friends and colleagues who are currently resisting the Ortega/Murillo regime, and I have spent most of my life working for peace and social justice in Nicaragua.

I went to Nicaragua in 1979 and lived there for 20 years after the Sandinista victory. I participated in the Literacy Crusade in Native Languages. During the war, I worked for the Nicaraguan Ministry of Health on the Caribbean Coast. I have been involved with the women's movement in Nicaragua for almost 30 years, and launched research on domestic violence that was used to pass the first domestic violence law in 1996. I have been an outspoken critic of US intervention in Central America, and other unjust policies, both abroad and at home.

Since moving back to the US, I travel to Nicaragua several times a year and recently carried out a two-year study on domestic violence, interviewing 1,500 community women, women's rights activists, and dozens of government officials, including police, judges and health providers.

Many articles on the current crisis that have been published on leftist websites such as popularresistance.org or Grayzone Project reproduce the talking points of the Ortega/Murillo government: they insist that the opposition is almost already defeated; they are all "coup mongers" (golpistas) made up of US-funded oligarchs and have no popular backing; the majority of the violence is carried out by opposition protesters; and the dozens of young men were killed by snipers who were either mysterious "third party provocateurs," or "neighborhood self-defense groups" – with no ties to the police or the army. They have referred to the current crisis as an "upside down class war."

In fact, what is happening in Nicaragua is a massacre.

The first claim, that the opposition has been defeated and consists of exclusively right-wing oligarchs is patently false. This photo shows gigantic peaceful demonstrations in Managua, which make the FSLN demonstration two days prior (which state employees were required to attend) look like Trump's inauguration crowd compared to Obama's. The next day Managua was emptied out in support of the national strike called by the opposition**.** This hardly looks like the work of a tiny group of bloodsucking parasites, as Rosario Murillo has called them. Indeed, it would take much more than $700,000, which, Grayzone states is the amount the NED has channeled into Nicaraguan non-governmental organizations to mobilize hundreds of thousands of protesters onto the streets, and get them to stop their economic activities and stay home the next day. There is no other plausible motive other than their belief that Ortega and Murillo are behind the repression and must go.

The next idea floated by the government, that masked men and snipers appearing all over the country, and by all accounts, responsible for a huge proportion of the murders, are a mysterious third party, is ridiculous. It might have been plausible, if Nicaraguans didn't all have cell phones, weren't filming everything and posting it onto social media (the government insists the photos are fake).

Last week, social media has filmed huge caravans with dozens of state and police-owned trucks with masked men, including police, waving guns and shooting into the air. Jacinto Suarez, the External Relations Secretary of the FSLN acknowledged that many of these men are retired Sandinista combatants that were recruited to help repress the demonstration. Even Daniel Ortega, after countless denials of the existence of para-police forces, recently admitted that they were "voluntary police."

The Popular Resistance Article links to a video clip that supposedly shows a weapon cache found in a

church. In fact, it is actually part of a Univision news story showing the masked thugs beating the Cardinal and Bishops of Managua, including the Papal Nuncio in the Basilica of Diriamba, outside of Managua. Since this could potentially result in an international incident, they also stole many of the cameras of journalists filming. Fortunately, several still got through.

The police were outside the church and hundreds more masked men were crowding around the outside: although no weapons were found, the church was desecrated and first aid materials and church benches were burned.

At the insistence of Nicaraguan civil society, the government allowed the Inter-American Human Rights Commission (IACHR) to investigate the situation in Nicaragua. The report was presented at the OAS Assembly on June 30. It's worth pausing for a moment on the IACHR Report because it is a truly extraordinary document. The Commission interviewed over 1000 individuals, including family members of those killed, released prisoners, government officials, and other witnesses, and it reviewed hundreds of hours of video recordings, and documents, as well as forensic reports. The report found:

"The repression on the part of the Government of Nicaragua in response to the protests has resulted in a serious human rights crisis. In particular, the IACHR finds excessive use of force by the police, para-police forces, and groups of armed third persons. This is reflected in more than 212 persons losing their lives as of June 20, as well as in the number of persons wounded and detained arbitrarily, which as of June 6 came to 1,337 and 507 persons respectively, according to the records of the IACHR. Despite the Commission's call for an immediate cessation of the state repression, it has not stopped. To the contrary, the repressive response has worsened in recent weeks, further accentuating the crisis."

The Ortega government's accusation that investigors did not interview pro-government forces,is simply false. The government was given a draft of the report before it was presented, and all of their comments and denials were incorporated. It details all of the government's accusations of violence towards state actors:

"It has come to the attention of the IACHR that private individuals and groups of civilians have attacked the public security forces, strike groups and individuals and media outlets sympathetic to the government. According to figures provided by the State, from April 18 to June 6, 2018, at least 5 police officers have lost their lives and 65 have been injured in the context of the protests."

It also acknowledged the government's report of 100 acts of violence by non-state actors, including 40 burning incidents or damages to property; 29 kidnappings; 33 robberies of government property (mostly vehicles); 17 violent deaths of individuals linked to the government and the FSLN; and 13 attacks on public officials.

The problem is that these claims by the government, which tries to present itself as a victim, pale next to the hundreds of complaints lodged and investigated by the IACHR that involved excessive use of force by the police and paramilitary forces. During the first four days of the demonstrations, 49 young men were killed by gun-shot wounds. Of these, 32 were shot in the eyes, heads, neck and chest, all lethal spots indicating an intention to kill. The downward trajectory of the bullet wounds indicated the use of snipers. During the same period 9 young men were wounded by rubber bullets shot directly into their eyes. During the same period 2 policemen died as a result of attacks using firearms.

There was also ample evidence of refusal to provide medical attention, by police stationed inside the hospitals either preventing the wounded from entering or threatening doctors who tried to treat the

wounded. The first documented instance of this was a 15-year-old boy named Álvaro Manuel Conrado Dávila, who was shot in the neck while carrying water to help the students. He was denied medical care at the Cruz Azul (public) hospital and was taken to a second hospital where he subsequently died. In the hospital of Leon, medical students who tried to treat wounded demonstrators were evicted from the hospital; they set up makeshift field hospitals in private homes. Therefore the actual number of wounded is likely much higher; the figures in the report were compiled by hospital records and do not include those who were denied care, or who were afraid to go to the hospital.

One of the more nefarious acts that has not received much attention is that family members of the victims were required to sign a document waving their right to file a complaint to be able to withdraw the corpse or obtain a death certificate. Some of the documents were actually drafted at Police Stations and specifically state that the relatives release the police from any responsibility in the death. No autopsy was performed in most cases, and death certificates were signed based on documents without a personal inspection by the Institute of Forensic Medicine. In other complaints the medical certificates were falsified, noting causes of death such as suicide, heart attacks or traffic accidents, even in the case of gunshot wounds. These false documents have been subsequently used by the government to accuse the IACHR of inflating their numbers by including deaths that had nothing to do with the conflict.

While they haven't been given full access to many sites, including the jails, much of the violence has happened while the Commission, and the OAS-sponsored Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts (GIEI), were in Nicaragua, witnessing it first-hand.

GIEI members are distinguished human rights experts, including Claudia Paz y Paz, the Guatemalan Attorney General who prosecuted Efraín Rios Montt, and who can hardly be considered an imperialist tool.

At the OAS special sessions held last week to present the second report of the IACHR, Executive Secretary Paulo Abrao noted that the violence has escalated in the month since the first report was presented in June, and there are now close to 300 verified deaths, most of whom are civilians killed in state-sponsored violence by the police or paramilitary forces. Nicaraguan Chancellor Denis Moncada denounced the report's findings and although he admitted that "it is hard to say how many deaths there have been," he pointed out that many of civilians killed were Sandinistas – including Angel Gahona, the journalist shot by a sniper in Bluefields while reporting on the protests. This may be true, but it doesn't mean they were killed by the opposition. A huge number of the protesters are people who historically identified with the FSLN and who were horrified by the government's brutal response. Although two young men have been arrested for the murder, Gahona's family is convinced he was killed by the police. It even appears that some police among the dead were having second thoughts about participating in the repression. The mother of policeman Faber Lopez, said that her son had tried to leave the police and was told that if he did, the whole family would be killed. One week later he was killed during an attack on protesters.

The government has attempted to blame some of the most horrendous crimes on the protesters, such as an entire family that was burned alive in Managua. Multiple witnesses and the only surviving family members say that armed masked men connected to the police tried to get onto the roof of the three-story building to set up a sniper's nest. When the family refused to let them in, they set the house ablaze.

The economic and social progress in the last years by the Ortega regime is being lauded, but again, it needs to be clarified. Although poverty was reduced overall, a study showed that income inequality actually increased from 2009 to 2014, indicating that the wealthy oligarchs are the ones who most benefited from the government's economic policies. Most of the funds for social programs (the part that did not go into funding FSLN electoral campaigns, and wasn't funneled into party members' bank accounts) was funded through more than 3.5 billion dollars in soft loans from Venezuela with petroleum money. Although the loans were made to a mixed business venture called Albanisa and never accounted for in the national budget, the economic crisis in Venezuela has meant the end of subsidies to the social programs in Nicaragua.

These articles also imply that the U.S. is a major funder of the women's movement, which is false. In fact, the Global Gag Rule prohibits US funding to any international organizations that promote safe abortions. And, while the Sandinista-led Parliament abolished therapeutic abortions in 2006, even in the case of rape or a risk to the mother's life, the women's movement has continued to demand that safe procedures be restored.

Nicaragua has the largest, most diverse women's movement in the world. Although it was started by Sandinista women, it has not been linked to any political party since the 1990s, particularly after Daniel Ortega's stepdaughter, Zoilamerica Narvaez, disclosed that he had been raping her since she was a child. Her case was ignored in the country because as an ex-president and member of Parliament, Ortega had immunity from prosecution—although it was looked into by the Inter-American Human RightsCommission in 2000 (the case was eventually closed in 2002, when the Nicaraguan government accepted the IACHR's recommendation to reach an amicable agreementwith Narvaez). She had a very credible claim, which was an open secret among high-level Sandinistas, who swept the accusations under the carpet in order to regain power. No wonder Ortega doesn't like the IACHR. Many experts consider that a combination of impunity for sexual offenders (starting with Ortega),and the abortion ban has contributed to Nicaragua's soaring rates of adolescent pregnancy, among the highest in Latin America.

Increasing women's access to justice and services for gender-based violence has long been a key goal for the women's movement in Nicaragua. I carried out a prevalence study of domestic violence in Nicaragua in 1995, which was used as the basis for the first domestic violence law in 1996. We found that 50% of women had been beaten or raped by their partner, one of the highest figures in

Latin America, despite the apparently progressive discourse of the Sandinista revolution. During the 90s and the beginning of the 2000s, the women's movement achieved enormous progress in raising awareness around domestic violence, and improving laws and services for survivors of violence. Once Ortega and Murillo took over the government, programs such as the specialized police stations for women and children were systematically dismantled. Rosario Murillo has explicitly promoted "family values" over women's rights and put new processes in place that make it more difficult for survivors to report violence or obtain justice. The recent follow-up study we just completed in Nicaragua shows that, although there was a decline in levels of domestic violence over a twenty-year period, there is almost nothing left of the original programs that were set up through the efforts of the women's movement. As a result, women human rights defenders were already concerned that domestic violence and femicides were on the rise again, even before the current crisis.

This brings us to the issue of U.S. support for the opposition. The only evidence of US support to opposition groups was reported by the Grayzone project, estimating that $700,000 in 2017 had been granted through the National Endowment for Democracy to a handful of Nicaragua NGOs, totaling $4.4 million over 4 years. Since this relatively paltry sum does not fit the Ortega propaganda machine's narrative of massive US funding for a right-wing coup, the amount was adjusted upwards to $500 million dollars, with absolutely no evidence to back it up.

It is true that the opposition is extremely diverse, which reflects many different agendas—including the business community. But this is not unique in Nicaraguan history. When the FSLN overthrew Somoza in 1979, they benefited from a broad-based coalition that included business interests and oligarchs in the Reconstruction Government, a strategy that validated Ortega's *Tercerista* branch of the party**.** The fact that today's opposition is so diverse and includes social movements from all political ideologies should tell us about Ortega's and Murillo's lack of support: a recent Cid Gallup poll found that nearly 70% of the Nicaragua people thinks Ortega and Murillo should go. After the repression of the last three months, the current regime has zero credibility.

On July 13th, police and paramilitary forces attacked UNAN, the national public university, which students have occupied for the last few months. When some left the university to find refuge in a nearby church, government forces surrounded it and shot at them in a 15-hour siege. The police closed all the roads to UNAN and refused to let ambulances evacuate the wounded. During this time, the students were sending messages via Facebook, begging for help and saying goodbye to their parents. Hundreds of people came by foot and cars in the middle of the night to hold a peaceful vigil for the students in front of the police roadblocks. Coincidentally, Joshua Partlow, a *Washington Post* reporter, was trapped in the church with the wounded students and wrote a harrowing account of the experience.

As a result of the UNAN attacks and multiple brutal "clean up" operationscarried out by the police and paramilitaries to clear the roadblocks in time for the 39th anniversary of Liberation Day, the Ortega regime is becoming increasingly isolated internationally. Currently 49 countries, including the European Union and the Organization of American States, have condemned the state-sponsored violence in Nicaragua. Rupert Colville, spokesperson for the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), criticised the new anti-terrorism law approved by the Parliament on July 9, for using "a very broad definition of terrorism, which raises concerns that it could be used against people taking part in protests." In fact, this is exactly what is happening now, as the crisis enters a new phase where protesters are being tracked down and arrested under the charge of terrorism.

Significantly, some of Ortega's closest allies, such as Jose Mujica, the former President of Uruguay, have also finally turned their backs on him. Only three weeks ago, on July 5 Mujica called for international leftists to stand with Ortega against right wing forces. One week later, he admitted he had been wrong, and that it was now time for Ortega to leave. Similarly, Noam Chomsky, who had been silent until recently, has also advised Ortega to call for early elections.

Ortega's claims to have vanquished the opposition notwithstanding, this crisis is far from over. Ultimately, Ortega's insistence on retaining power, even if elections were moved up to next year (which he refuses to do), means more bloodshed for Nicaraguans. This is why progressives need to show solidarity with the authentic resistance movement, which includes the women's movement, most student groups, environmentalists, and the anti-canal farmers movement**.**

It is monstrous and heartbreaking to think that Ortega and Murillo could be murdering their own people just to stay in power. Having worked for the Ministry of Health during the 80s, I would never have believed a few months ago that protesters could die because the public hospitals refused to admit them, or that doctors could be dismissed or jailed for treating them. But that is exactly the point.

What is happening right now is monstrous.

Ortega and Murillo could end the massacre immediately by disarming the paramilitary forces, bringing those guilty of crimes against humanity to justice, and engaging in good faith national dialogue. Those of us on the left should be able to be to adapt to changed realities: none of us wants a return to a right-wing government in Nicaragua, and we should continue to oppose U.S. intervention. But that doesn't mean we must accept the status quo or the ruthless abuse of power.

Our solidarity should be with the Nicaraguan people, who are being killed, not with a political party. Otherwise, this bloodbath can only get worse.

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