



Nicaragua's opposition must prepare for a succession crisis

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July 3 (UPI) -- On June 30, I took part in a meeting of Nicaraguan democratic opposition leaders hosted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C.

The struggles of the Nicaraguan people are personal to me. I was expelled from Nicaragua in 2016 by the Ortega-Murillo dictatorship while on a research trip in the country. I have also worked with Venezuela's democratic opposition in its struggle against Chavista rule. That experience leaves me skeptical about the short-term prospects for restoring democracy in either country.

A record of repression and strategic risk

The opposition's case is both morally and strategically compelling. The United Nations, the Organization of American States and human rights groups have documented the Ortega-Murillo regime's violations of Nicaraguans' human rights and their democratic right to self-determination.

These include the killing, jailing and torture of hundreds of people following the 2018 protests, the hijacking of the 2021 elections, the criminalization of opposition parties and

The regime has also harbored leaders of Colombia's Revolutionary Armed Forces and given asylum to leftist officials accused of corruption, including former Salvadoran presidents Mauricio Funes and Salvador Sanchez Ceren.

Strategically, Nicaragua has become one of the region's principal hosts for U.S. adversaries. It has hosted Russian troops repeatedly since Ortega's return to power in 2007, along with Russian nuclear-capable bombers and space-communications and police-training facilities.

Chinese firms have pursued opaque construction and mining projects, including at the Port of Corinto and the Punta Huete airport, sites that could serve the Chinese military in wartime. Nicaragua's 2010 occupation of disputed territory along the San Juan River and its hosting of Russian forces have repeatedly been flagged as threats by neighbors, including Costa Rica.

These risks track closely with the priorities the Trump administration has set out in its new National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy, which place Nicaragua within the "Greater North America" approach championed by Secretary of War Pete Hegseth.

The regime's alleged ties to organized crime and its past hosting of terrorist leaders make it relevant to the administration's focus on narcoterrorism. So does its role facilitating the transit of more than 700,000 migrants toward the United States, including revenue it collected from Haitian migrant flights.

Why the moment isn't ripe

Despite these dangers, conditions in Nicaragua, as in Venezuela, are not yet suited to a democratic transition. Virtually all organized opposition, from the Catholic Church to civil society to political leaders, has been criminalized, tortured, expelled or forced into exile.

The security forces and the army, along with surviving business elites, are themselves implicated in the regime's corruption and rights abuses. For many regime insiders, a

A narrow opening

The most interesting possibility for change is the generational transition underway from Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo to their children, particularly Laureano Ortega, as the health of both aging leaders declines.

Some Nicaraguan opposition figures argue that Sandinistas sidelined by this succession could produce a split within Sandinismo, one the opposition could exploit if it builds unity and cultivates ties with disaffected regime insiders.

Doing so, they argue, would require agreeing on a limited democratic transition program, engaging discreetly with disaffected Sandinistas and other regime figures, and offering assurances that officials who support a peaceful transfer of power will not face the same treatment as those responsible for serious human rights abuses.

Why outside pressure may not be enough

Decisive outside support remains unlikely in the near term. Europe has offered statements and sanctions but is not positioned to act decisively if a political opening follows the 2027 election.

In Washington, other priorities, including Venezuela, the Middle East and Cuba, may delay sustained attention to Nicaragua, even though it fits squarely within the administration's stated strategic concerns. The United States could expand existing sanctions, potentially targeting Ortega personally, or move to expel Nicaragua from the Central American Free Trade Agreement.

One well-placed observer suggested, speaking off the record, that Washington might instead try to co-opt Laureano Ortega, tolerating his consolidation of power and enrichment in exchange for cooperation and business access, a course that would parallel the U.S. approach to Delcy Rodriguez in Venezuela.

More decisive U.S. action is unlikely before Washington resolves more pressing challenges in Iran, Venezuela and Cuba. November's midterm elections add further uncertainty: a more sympathetic Congress and the administration's appetite for a hemispheric policy win could raise Nicaragua's profile, while reluctance to open a new front before an election could just as easily push it down the agenda.

The suffering of the Nicaraguan people is immediate. The threat posed by the Ortega-Murillo regime to its neighbors and U.S. strategic interests is real.

But for now, the opposition's best course is to build unity with current and future Sandinista defectors, deepen international coalitions and public awareness, and prepare for the moment when domestic and international conditions align for decisive, united action to restore Nicaraguan democracy and end the country's role as a foothold for America's rivals in the hemisphere.

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