

Nicaragua: Washington's Other Hemispheric Nemesis

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The Trump administration continues to tighten the screws on Venezuela's left-wing regime, imposing new economic sanctions and recognizing Juan Guido's claim to be the country's new interim president over current ruler Nicolás Maduro. Trump has openly lobbied the Venezuelan military to break with Maduro, and has stated ominously that "all options"—including apparently a U.S. military intervention—remain on the table. There is little doubt that the administration is pursuing regime change in Caracas.

While most of the attention is focused on the volatile situation in Venezuela, however, another crisis is brewing nearby in Nicaragua. As in Venezuela, rising domestic discontent with a socialist government has led to large-scale demonstrations demanding change. And as in Venezuela, the beleaguered regime has responded with harsh, authoritarian measures.

Nicaragua's incumbent president is Washington's old nemesis from the 1980s, Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega. The Reagan administration expended considerable effort, including training and arming a cadre of anti-communist rebels, the so-called Contras, in an unsuccessful effort to oust the Sandinistas. Ultimately, Ortega agreed to hold free elections in 1990, and when opposition factions won, to the surprise of most U.S. officials, he relinquished power peacefully. Ortega returned to office following elections in 2007.

During his second stint in office, the government adopted increasingly authoritarian measures, and by 2018, opposition demonstrations were large and vocal. Protests surged in April 2018, and by early August, even the Ortega government reluctantly acknowledged that 195 people had died in the mounting violence. The Organization of American States (OAS) put the figure at 317, and a leading NGO, the Nicaraguan Pro-Human Rights Association, documented 448 killings. It also contended that government security forces and allied, armed civilian groups were responsible for most of those deaths.

The government did not take kindly to such criticism. Shortly after issuing its most recent report, the Nicaraguan Pro-Human Rights Association announced that it was closing its offices because of "threats and harassment" against staff members. Ortega defended the violent actions that police and pro-regime paramilitary units had taken. He exhibited no receptivity whatsoever to opposition calls for a referendum on holding early national elections in place of the balloting scheduled for late 2020. Given that the last elections in 2016 were afflicted with widespread fraud, critics of the regime see little benefit in being patient.

Washington moved to adopt punitive sanctions in response to the regime's crackdown on last summer's demonstrations. In November, the Trump administration imposed travel restrictions and targeted the assets of several high-level officials. Washington's justifications echoed those used to justify even harsher measures taken against the Venezuelan government. The text of the

Treasury Department order stated that the action was a counter to the Nicaraguan government's corruption, its "violent response" to protests, and its "systematic dismantling and undermining of democratic institutions and the rule of law."

Vice President Rosario Murillo and her political operators "have systematically sought to dismantle democratic institutions and loot the wealth of Nicaragua to consolidate their grip on power," Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said in a statement. "Treasury is intent on ensuring that Ortega regime insiders are not able to access the U.S. financial system to profit at the expense of the Nicaraguan people." Murillo was an especially prominent target, since she is not only the country's vice president, but Ortega's wife, and is generally considered to be an even more hardline socialist than her spouse.

Not only is the U.S. stance towards Nicaragua hardening, but Trump administration statements increasingly link together policy regarding Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua. Officials seem to regard those governments as a triumvirate of hemispheric troublemakers. Given Trump's rollback of much of the Obama administration's rapprochement with Cuba, and his open flirtation with the military option against Venezuela, Nicaraguan leaders have to be more than a little uneasy.

After a relatively calm period in early 2019, tensions appear to be flaring again. Government security forces arrested more than a hundred people following demonstrations in mid-March, and hundreds more remain in jail from last year's protests. The Ortega regime also has intensified an already worrisome campaign to smother the country's independent press. All of this is eerily reminiscent of Venezuela's gradual transition from a somewhat illiberal democracy to a barely disguised dictatorship facing an increasingly angry and determined political opposition.

Thus far, the U.S. response has been milder and less intrusive than its campaign against Maduro. Washington has not yet declared Nicaragua to be a national security threat to the United States, as President Barack Obama did with respect to Venezuela in 2015. But it isn't certain how long that more cautious approach will last. Indeed, it is likely that the relatively restrained posture is only because the Trump administration doesn't relish taking on two hemispheric regime change campaigns simultaneously.

No one should find the governments of Venezuela and Nicaragua worthy of praise. The former destroyed a once flourishing economy by imposing disastrous socialist economic policies and then responded to peaceful political opposition with brutally repressive measures. It is an ugly, corrupt dictatorship that deserves to end up on the ash heap of history. Ortega's regime is not much better, and one hopes the Nicaraguan people can bring to power a better, more democratic successor.

Nevertheless, it is not the proper role of the United States to interfere in the internal affairs of either country. Even the imposition of economic sanctions would be inappropriate, much less launching a military intervention. At the same time, opponents of U.S. meddling should stop whitewashing the odious record of the Venezuelan and Nicaraguan leftist regimes. There is no need to excuse, much less lionize, socialist autocrats while opposing Washington's fondness for forcible regime change. Those are separate issues and should remain so.

The Venezuelan and Nicaraguan governments have brought their populations widespread misery. Such arrogant socialist regimes deserve whatever fate they suffer at the hands of their

abused people. But constructive political change or even outright revolution is the responsibility of the Venezuelans and Nicaraguans, not the United States.

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