

The Protest Movement in Nicaragua: Manipulated and Manufactured Evidence

Open Letter to Amnesty International, by a Former Amnesty International Prisoner of Conscience

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Through this letter I express my unequivocal condemnation of Amnesty International with regards to the destabilizing role it has played in Nicaragua, my country of birth.

I open this letter quoting [Donatella Rovera](#), who at the time this quote was made had been one of Amnesty International's field investigators for more than 20 years:

"Conflict situations create highly politicized and polarized environments (...). Players and interested parties go to extraordinary lengths to manipulate or manufacture "evidence" for both internal and external consumption. A recent, though by no means the only, example is provided by the Syrian conflict in what is often referred to as the "YouTube war," with a myriad techniques employed to manipulate video footage of incidents which occurred at other times in other places - including in other countries - and present them as "proof" of atrocities committed by one or the other parties to the conflict in Syria."

Ms. Rovera's remarks, made in 2014, properly describe the situation of Nicaragua today, where even the preamble of the crisis was manipulated to generate rejection of the Nicaraguan government. Amnesty International's maliciously titled report, *Shoot to Kill: Nicaragua's Strategy to Repress Protest*, could be dismantled point by point, but doing so requires precious time that the Nicaraguan people don't have, therefore I will concentrate on two main points:

- The report completely lacks neutrality and;
- Amnesty International's role is contributing to the chaos in which the nation finds itself.

The operating narrative, agreed-upon by the local opposition and the corporate western media, is as follows: That president Ortega sought to cut 5 percent from retirees' monthly retirement checks, and that he was going to increase contributions, made by employees and employers, into the social security system. The reforms sparked protests, the response to which was a government-ordered genocide of peaceful protestors, more than 60, mostly students. A day or two after that, the Nicaraguan government would wait until nightfall to send its police force out in order to decimate the Nicaraguan population, night after night, city by city, in the process destroying its own public buildings and killing its own police force, to then culminate its murderous rampage with a Mothers' Day massacre, and so on.

While the above narrative is not uniformly expressed by all anti-government actors, the unifying elements are that the government is committing genocide, and that the president and vice-president must go.

Amnesty International's assertions are mostly based on either testimony by anti-government witnesses and victims, or the uncorroborated and highly manipulated information emitted by U.S.-financed anti-government media outlets, and non-profit organizations, collectively known as "civil society."

The three main media organizations cited by the report: Confidencial, 100% Noticias, and La Prensa, are sworn enemies of the Ortega government; most of these opposition news media organizations, along with some, if not all, of the main non-profits cited by the report, are funded by the United States, through organizations like the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), which has been characterized by retired U.S. Congressman, Ron Paul, as:

"... an organization that uses US tax money to actually subvert democracy, by showering funding on favored political parties or movements overseas. It underwrites color-coded 'people's revolutions' overseas that look more like pages out of Lenin's writings on stealing power than genuine indigenous democratic movements."

Amnesty's report heavily relies on *100% Noticias*, an anti-government news outlet that has aired manipulated and inflammatory material to generate hatred against the Nicaraguan government, including footage of *peaceful* protesters, unaware of the fact that the protesters were carrying pistols, rifles, and were shooting at police officers during incidents reported by the network as acts of police repression of opposition marches. On Mothers' Day, 100% Noticias reported the purported shooting of unarmed protesters by police shooters, including an incident in which a young man's brains were spilling out of his skull. The network followed the report with a photograph that Ms. Rovera would refer to as an incident "...which occurred at other times in other places." The picture included in the report was quickly met on social media by links to past online articles depicting the same image.

One of the sources (footnote #77) cited to corroborate the alleged denial of medical care at state hospitals to patients injured at opposition events -one of the main accusations repeated and reaffirmed by Amnesty International- is a press conference published by *La Prensa*, in which the Chief of Surgery denies claims that he had been fired, or that hospital officials had denied care to protesters at the beginning of the conflict.

"I repeat," he is heard saying, "as the chief of surgery, I repeat [the] order: to take care of, I will be clear, to take care of the entire population that comes here, without investigating anything at all."

In other words, one of Amnesty International's own sources contradicts one of its report's main claims.

The above-mentioned examples of manipulated and manufactured evidence, to borrow the words of Amnesty's own investigator, are just a small sample, but they capture the essence of this modality of U.S.-sponsored regime change. The report feeds on claims from those on one side of the conflict, and relies on deeply corrupted evidence; it ultimately helps create

the mirage of a genocidal state, in turn generating more antigovernment sentiment locally and abroad, and paving the way for ever more aggressive foreign intervention.

A different narrative

The original reforms to social security were not proposed by the Sandinista government, but by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and they were supported by an influential business group, known as COSEP. They included raising the retirement age from 60 to 65 and doubling the number of quotas necessary to get full social security from 750 to 1500. Among the impacted retirees, approximately 53,000, are the families of combatants who died in the armed conflict of the 1980s, from both the Sandinista army and the “Contras,” the mercenary army financed by the United States government in the 1980s, around the same time the NED was created, in part, to stop the spread of Sandinismo in Latin America.

The Nicaraguan government countered the IMF’s reforms by rejecting the cutting out of any retirees, with a proposed 5% cut to all retirement checks, an increase in all contributions to the social security system, and with fiscal reform that removed a tax-ceiling that protected Nicaragua’s biggest salaries from higher taxation. The business sector was furious, and together with nongovernmental organizations organized the first marches, using the pretext of the reforms in the same manipulative way Amnesty International’s report explains them:

“... the reform increased social security contributions by both employers and employees and imposed an additional 5% contribution on pensioners.”

The continuing narrative, repeated and validated by Amnesty International, is that the protesters are peaceful and the genocidal government is irrationally bent on committing atrocities in plain sight. Meanwhile, the number of dead among Sandinista supporters and police officers continues to rise. The report states that ballistic investigations suggest that those shooting at protesters are likely trained snipers, pointing to government involvement, but fails to mention that many of the victims are Sandinistas, regular citizens, and police officers. It also does not mention that the “peaceful protesters” have burned down and destroyed more than 60 public buildings, among them many City Halls, Sandinista houses, markets, artisan shops, radio stations, and more; nor does it mention that the protesters have established “tranques,” or roadblocks, in order to debilitate the economy as a tactic to oust the government. Such “tranques” have become extremely dangerous scenes where murder, robbery, kidnapping, and the rape of at least one child have taken place; a young pregnant woman whose ambulance wasn’t let through also died on May 17th. All of these crimes occur daily and are highly documented, but aren’t included in Amnesty International’s report.

While the organization is right to criticize the government’s belittling response to the initial protests, such response was not entirely untrue. According to the report, Vice-President Murillo said, among other things, that

“...they [the protesters] had made up the reports of fatalities (...) as part of an anti-government strategy.”

What Amnesty leaves out is that several of the reported dead students did turn up alive, one of them all the way in Spain, while others had not been killed at rallies, nor were they

students or activists, including one who died from a scattered bullet, and another who died from a heart attack in his bed.

Amnesty's report also leaves out that many of the students have deserted the movement, alleging that there are criminals entrenched at universities as well as at the various "tranques," who are only interested in destabilizing the nation. Those criminals have created a state of sustained fear among the population, imposing "taxes" on those who want passage, persecuting those who refuse to be detained, kidnapping them, beating them, torturing them, and setting their cars on fire. In a common practice, they undress their victims, paint their naked bodies in public with the blue and white of the Nicaraguan flag, and then set them free, prompting them to run right before shooting them with homemade mortar weapons. All of this information, which did not make the report, is available in numerous videos and other sources.

Why Nicaragua?

The most basic review of the history between Nicaragua and the United States will show a clear rivalry. Beginning in the mid-1800s, Nicaragua has been resisting U.S. intervention into the country's affairs, a resistance that continued through the 20th century, first with General August C. Sandino's fight in the 1920s and 30s, and then with the Sandinistas, organized as the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), which overthrew the U.S.-supported, 40-year Somoza family dictatorship in 1979. The FSLN, despite having gained power through armed struggle, called for elections shortly after its triumph in 1984, and eventually lost to yet another U.S.-supported coalition of right-wing political parties in 1990. The FSLN once again managed, aided by pacts made with the church and the opposition, to win the election of 2006, and has remained in power since.

In addition to Nicaragua's close ties with Venezuela, Cuba, Russia, and especially China, with whom the country signed a contract to build a canal, the other main reason the United States is after the Sandinistas, is Nicaragua's highly successful economic model, which represents an existential threat to the neoliberal economic order imposed by the U.S. and its allies.

Despite always being among the poorest nations in the American continent and the world, Nicaragua has managed, since Ortega returned to power in 2007, to cut poverty by three quarters. Prior to the protests in April, the country's economy sustained a steady annual economic growth of about 5% for several years, and the country had the third fastest-growing economy in Latin America, and was one of the safest nations in the region.

The government's infrastructural upgrades have facilitated trade among Nicaragua's poorest citizens; they have created universal access to education: primary, secondary, and university; there are programs on land, housing, nutrition, and more; the healthcare system, while modest, is not only excellent, but accessible to everyone. Approximately 90% of the food consumed by Nicaraguans is produced in Nicaragua, and about 70% of jobs come from the grassroots economy –rather than from transnational corporations- including from small investors from the United States and Europe, who have moved to the country and are a driving force behind the tourism industry.

The audacity of success, of giving its poorest citizens a life with dignity, of being an example of sovereignty to wealthier, more powerful nations, all in direct contradiction to the neoliberal model and its emphasis on privatization and austerity, has once again placed

Nicaragua in the crosshairs of U.S. intervention. Imagine the example to other nations -their economies already strangled by neoliberal policies- becoming aware of one of the poorest countries on earth being able to feed its people and grow its economy without throwing its poorest citizens under the iron boot of capitalism. The United States will never tolerate such a dangerous example.

In closing

The Nicaraguan government has deficiencies and contradictions to work on, like all governments, and as a Sandinista myself I would like to see the party transformed in various important ways, both internally and externally. I have refrained from writing of those deficiencies and contradictions, however, because the violent protests and ensuing chaos we have seen are not the result of the Nicaraguan government's shortcomings, but rather, of its many successes; that inconvenient truth is the reason the United States and its allies, including Amnesty International, have chosen to "...create highly politicized and polarized environments (...). [And to] go to extraordinary lengths to manipulate or manufacture "evidence" for both internal and external consumption."

At a time when even the Organization of American States, the United Nations, and the Vatican have called for peaceful and constitutional reforms as the only way out of the conflict, Amnesty International has continued to beseech the international community to not "abandon the Nicaraguan people." Such biased stance, obscenely bloated on highly manipulated, distorted, and one-sided information, has made the terrible situation in Nicaragua even worse. The loss of Nicaraguan lives, including the blood of those ignored by Amnesty International, has been used to manufacture the "evidence" used in the organization's report, which makes the organization complicit in what future foreign intervention might fall upon the Nicaraguan people. It is now up to the organization to correct that wrong, and to do so in a way that reflects a firm commitment first and foremost to the truth, wherever it might fall, and to neutrality, peace, democracy, and always, to the sovereignty of every nation on earth.

Sincerely,

Camilo E. Mejia,

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Amnesty International prisoner of conscience (June 2004)

Born in Nicaragua, citizen of the world

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