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NICARAGUA

Populist Performance and Authoritarian Practice During COVID-19

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While the COVID-19 pandemic ravaged Latin America as a whole, nowhere in Central America was the response to it more puzzling than in Nicaragua, the region's poorest country. Home to some 6.7 million people, Nicaragua confirmed its first positive COVID-19 case on March 18, 2020, and witnessed the rapid acceleration of infections thereafter, peaking at over 300 reported cases per day by June (Observatorio Ciudadano 2021). By some counts, at the height of Nicaragua's first COVID-19 wave in mid-2020, the country's excess mortality rate was a staggering 59%, the third highest in the world (Harlow et al. 2020).

It would be easy to blame underdevelopment, weak public health infrastructure, and the lack of healthcare access for the COVID-19 crisis' devastating toll on Nicaragua. Yet this overlooks the disastrous government response, which researchers in the medical journal *The Lancet* deemed among "the most erratic of any country in the world" (Mather et al. 2020).

How did the Nicaraguan government respond to the COVID-19 crisis? And what explains its approach? We argue that the regime of President Daniel Ortega and influential Vice President Rosario Murillo, also Ortega's wife, adopted a strategy premised on three pillars: the denial of the pandemic's severity, the distortion of COVID-related information, and the criminalization of medical community and citizen-led response efforts. In so doing, the Ortega-Murillo regime not only demonstrated its highly authoritarian character, but also the key features of populist crisis performance: (1) the invocation of "the people" as a means of criminalizing opposition and rejecting a stronger pandemic response as economically disastrous for the masses, and (2) the perpetuation of the crisis to further consolidate regime power. Downplaying the severity of the pandemic and resisting preventive measures was driven by economic considerations; however, increased repression amid waning support reflects regime attempts to eliminate

any alternative sources of popular legitimacy and preserve the ruling family's grip on power and wealth.

Authoritarianism and populism under the Ortega-Murillo regime

For observers of Nicaraguan politics, the erratic nature of the government's pandemic response was no surprise. Ortega and Murillo have a long and tumultuous history, characterized by increasing corruption, authoritarian governance, and, since 2018, violent repression.

Ortega and the ruling Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) party originated in the guerrilla struggle of the 1960s and 1970s, taking power through a successful revolution in 1979. The revolutionary government's leftist character led to strong US opposition under the Reagan administration, which sponsored the Contra rebel forces during the 1980s. The FSLN, under Ortega as president beginning in 1984, was successful militarily against the Contras, but the war's economic and human toll and unrelenting US pressure led to a negotiated settlement and democratic elections in 1990.

The FSLN and Ortega unexpectedly lost the 1990 elections, initiating a series of center-right and right-wing governments that rolled back revolutionary social programs and implemented neoliberal reforms. Ortega centralized control of the FSLN, but he and the party were unable to regain power until 2007—after Ortega made a pact with right-wing ex-President Arnoldo Alemán to create a party duopoly and reduce the vote threshold needed for a first-round presidential victory (Jarquín 2016; Martí i Puig and Serra 2020; Thaler 2017).

Ortega and the FSLN gradually dismantled democratic institutions and electoral freedom after regaining power, using the National Assembly and Supreme Electoral Council (CSE) to delegitimize opposition parties and actors. These dynamics escalated in 2016, when Ortega ran with First Lady Rosario Murillo as his vice presidential candidate and barred top opposition candidates from running, leading to high levels of abstention. Ortega and Murillo's government then removed two opposition parties' deputies from the National Assembly, ensuring that beyond the FSLN, only weak and puppet parties retained seats (Martí i Puig and Serra 2020; Thaler 2017).

Since 2007, Ortega's repression of opponents had primarily been through political and legal maneuvers, but this relative restraint was abandoned in 2018. In April 2018, pro-government mobs and police beat protesters demonstrating against proposed social security benefit cuts, sparking new backlash mobilization. Amid police killings of students, protests spread nationwide, expanding to a broad anti-Ortega-Murillo movement to end repression and restore genuine democracy. Despite initial dialogue, the Ortega-Murillo regime reverted to even more brutal repression. Over 300 people were killed and thousands more were wounded, imprisoned, or forced into exile (Cabralés Domínguez 2020; Mosinger et al. 2022).

By the time the COVID-19 pandemic hit Latin America in early 2020, the Nicaraguan government had outlawed protest, further suppressed independent media and civil society, alienated international actors, and passed new laws to prosecute opponents for treason or spurious accusations of being “foreign agents.”

The Ortega–Murillo regime belies any easy ideological categorization and is motivated primarily by maintaining the ruling family’s grip on power and wealth. Yet, it also evinces many key characteristics of populist governance—in rhetoric, if not in substance—with parallels to the Bolivarian regimes that have ruled in Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia. Though far from a political outsider during the 2006 campaign, Ortega attacked neoliberal economic policies (McKinley 2006), only to work with business leaders and constrain unions’ bargaining power once in office (Spalding 2017; Walters 2019). He railed against US imperialism, but worked with the US on free trade, anti-narcotics operations, and migration. With massive Venezuelan economic assistance until 2016, Ortega and Murillo were able to offer popular, pro-poor social welfare programs and infrastructure improvements—though the ruling family and top FSLN officials used the aid to enrich themselves, too (Jarquín 2016; Martí i Puig and Serra 2020; Thaler 2017). Cultivating support among Catholic and Evangelical leaders, the FSLN worked with conservatives to ban abortion and co-opted and restricted the LGBTQ community, mixing right-wing populist gender politics with left-wing economic rhetoric (Kampwirth 2008; McGee and Kampwirth 2015; Steigenga, Coleman, and Marenco 2017).

It is difficult, however, to say that the Ortega–Murillo regime has a “thin-centered ideology” (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017) of populism. Rather, it has adopted the rhetoric and performance of populism (Bonikowski and Gidron 2016; Ostiguy, Panizza, and Moffitt 2020) to delegitimize opponents and to present itself as shepherding Nicaragua’s people. There is no universal battle against a corrupt elite, but instead an appeal to the FSLN’s revolutionary heritage among older supporters and the promise of “mediatized recognition, righteousness, and power” for younger supporters in exchange for submitting to the government’s authoritarian control (Chamorro 2020; Chamorro and Yang 2018). Leveraging the discourse of its revolutionary past, the Ortega–Murillo regime has fused its dated populist tropes with a highly centralized and repressive governance style.

Nicaragua’s COVID-19 response

The Nicaraguan government’s COVID-19 response contrasts with those undertaken by its Central American neighbors. While other regional governments mandated preventive measures like physical distancing, lockdowns, mask-wearing, and bans on travel from COVID-affected countries, the Ortega–Murillo regime instead adopted an approach premised on the denial of the crisis, the distortion of information on its severity, and the criminalization of medical community and grassroots responses.

The rest of Central America had declared states of emergency by April 2020, but the Ortega-Murillo regime resisted similar action, instead declaring a “national alert.” Moreover, the government refused to shutter businesses and schools, while Nicaragua’s sports leagues continued uninterrupted—moves meant to feign normalcy and signal government competence amid the crisis.

Beyond foregoing preventive action, FSLN officials encouraged large regime-organized gatherings. One notable instance was a national march known as “Love in the Time of Covid” on March 14, 2020, organized by Vice President Murillo to show solidarity with COVID-19 victims abroad. Between Nicaragua’s first confirmed COVID-19 case on March 18 and the beginning of August 2020, there were a reported 919 mass gatherings overseen by public institutions, most unrelated to public health campaigns (FUNIDES 2020, 46).

Denialism was accompanied by government claims that Nicaragua’s health system was prepared for the pandemic, despite evidence to the contrary. Experts have long noted the weakness of the Nicaraguan health system, but in the face of growing infections, the government repeatedly touted public health sector strengthening since Ortega’s return to power. For example, the government’s official COVID-19 strategy (known as the “white book” [*libro blanco*]) indicated that the regime had increased public health expenditures fourfold and trained some 14,000 additional health workers and 3,500 doctors since 2006 (Government of Nicaragua 2020, 4). It declared that in late January 2020, the Ministry of Health (MINSA) had created an interinstitutional commission to direct the pandemic response, designated 19 hospitals for treating COVID, and acquired sufficient personal protective equipment (PPE), claiming preparedness for the pandemic (Government of Nicaragua 2020, 5). MINSA also promoted the so-called “Swedish model,” premised on “providing information to the population about the preventive measures that they should exercise without establishing concrete lockdown measures so as not to affect economic dynamism” (FUNIDES 2020, 43).

By the summer of 2020, and as citizen-driven efforts to distribute PPE and close spaces like private schools accelerated, there were some shifts in the government’s posture toward COVID-19 prevention. For example, the annual celebration commemorating the 1979 Sandinista Revolution (July 19), normally a huge gathering in Managua’s old city center, was more subdued as the government opted for constructing a new monument and holding a virtual concert (Associated Press 2020a). Around the same time, in one of his few public appearances during the early months of the pandemic, Ortega finally acknowledged the severity of the crisis, recognizing that COVID-19 is a “war” that “no one escapes” and that some healthcare personnel had died due to the pandemic (Munguía 2020b). The government also introduced strict COVID-19 testing requirements for flight crews, effectively restricting international air travel (Olivares 2020).

Yet these muted acknowledgments came amid a systematic campaign to suppress information related to COVID-19 and its human toll in Nicaragua. By undercounting and misrepresenting fatalities, strictly controlling information

around diagnostic testing (and in 2021, vaccinations), and silencing the voices of doctors and health experts, the government extended into the public health realm its longstanding practices of spreading misinformation and silencing critics—even as COVID-19 decimated the FSLN’s own local and national leadership (Confidencial 2020b).

In the year after Nicaragua’s first confirmed case, MINSA recorded 6,582 COVID-19 infections nationally and 176 deaths. Meanwhile, the independent Citizen’s Observatory on COVID-19, an anonymous group of 90 doctors, epidemiologists, and other public health volunteers, estimated that the national case count was actually 13,304, with a death toll of 3,010—roughly 17 times that of state-reported figures (Observatorio Ciudadano 2021). In mid-August, the Citizen’s Observatory estimated that MINSA covered up between 64% and 98% of positive cases each week (Observatorio Ciudadano 2020), while there were often extended gaps between its release of reports. Meanwhile, a leak of MINSA information by the hacking group Anonymous revealed that the government hid over 6,000 positive tests between March 18 and July 24; during this time, the Ministry conducted over 17,000 tests, which yielded a 56% positivity rate (Confidencial 2020a).

Alongside underreporting practices, MINSA attributed COVID deaths to “atypical pneumonia” to keep them out of official pandemic fatality counts, resulting in some of the world’s worst COVID-19 death undercounting (Karlinsky and Kobak 2021). It also relied on so-called “express burials,” the rapid nighttime interment of bodies to avoid family and media scrutiny (Bermúdez and Robles 2020).

Diagnostic testing was highly centralized, further abetting the regime’s strategy of manipulating information. Only public health facilities, which are strictly controlled by MINSA, had access to COVID-19 tests. Meanwhile, Nicaragua’s private hospitals and clinics could not access tests themselves, even after a major Central American Development Bank donation in May 2020 (Navas 2020). Nicaragua in the summer of 2021 was the only Central American country not to provide data on COVID-19 variants (Confidencial 2021b), and the government also remained tight-lipped about the extent of its (slow) vaccination progress (Torrez 2021).

Beyond limiting access to critical testing supplies, the Ortega-Murillo regime utilized another longstanding practice: silencing and criminalizing critical voices, this time from the medical community. Even as cases and fatalities escalated, dozens of doctors, deemed “coup plotters in white coats,” were fired for speaking out against government negligence. In one case, a doctor in Estelí was reportedly terminated for distributing masks in her hospital (Córdoba 2020). The onslaught against the medical community was unrelenting throughout the pandemic, with the regime using legal avenues to abolish 24 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)—15 of which were medical associations—in the summer of 2021 (Confidencial 2021c). Unsurprisingly, this scorn for expertise extended to the international community, too. The government refused to allow officials

from organizations like the Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO) to enter Nicaragua, despite their pleas.

Amid this three-pronged response of denial, distortion, and criminalization, the Ortega–Murillo regime displayed the two key elements of populist crisis performance: (1) invoking “the people” as pitted against those allegedly responsible for creating a crisis and (2) perpetuating a crisis to serve other political ends. Official government pronouncements wielded the figure of “the people” to reify the divide between the FSLN and the political opposition—a practice characteristic of Sandinista governance more generally and which escalated after 2018’s crackdown.

This rhetoric is clearly articulated in the government’s official COVID-19 response strategy in the *libro blanco*. For example, the document describes the decision to forego a lockdown as “not the only time Nicaragua has adopted unique policies in accordance with the interests of the people of Nicaragua, in contrast with the majority of the world,” which opted for “draconian” pandemic measures (Government of Nicaragua 2020, 12). The document further claims that criticisms of the regime’s COVID-19 response were driven by *golpistas* (“coup plotters”), code for the political opposition, “who want to see in the pandemic an opportunity to weaken the government and the national economy” (Government of Nicaragua 2020, 43). The regime further tied this group to a supposed global smear campaign meant to deceive “the people,” tapping into the FSLN’s anti-imperialist heritage:

Disinformation terrorism [*el terrorismo desinformativo*] developed in the United States and which the media in many countries [...] follow to the letter is brutal, criminal, and xenophobic [...] the coup-plotting opposition of Nicaragua and their sponsors in the United States have mounted a massive disinformation campaign with the same practice of lying on a daily basis to the Nicaraguan people.

(Government of Nicaragua 2020, 44)

The government also used the pandemic as a pretext to tighten its grip on power, particularly as the general elections scheduled for November 2021 approached. For instance, the COVID-19 crisis provided cover for numerous irregularities in criminal proceedings against protesters and opposition figures imprisoned in the aftermath of the 2018 anti-government protests (Munguía 2020a). Further, in July 2020, the Supreme Court, filled with Ortega cronies, changed the electoral law to allow more time for individuals to register their candidacies for political office. While the regime claimed this allowed for greater political participation amid the obstacles posed by the pandemic, critics argued it was designed to give the FSLN more time to co-opt opposition candidates—a key regime strategy since Ortega’s 2007 return to power (Associated Press 2020b).

Meanwhile, the state’s repressive apparatus was unleashed on anyone contradicting the regime’s denialist COVID-19 strategy. The Nicaraguan police

criminalized citizen-led solidarity groups distributing masks, hand sanitizer, and educational materials (Luna 2020). FSLN propaganda campaigns warned citizens not to accept masks from these groups on the street because they were infected. And in one notable instance, MINSA prohibited the bishop of the northern department of Matagalpa from creating a project to raise COVID-19 awareness and build telehealth infrastructure (Romero 2020). Such actions underscore the regime-promoted divide between the authentic Nicaraguan “people” and anyone who contradicts the government’s policy approach, even at the expense of actual popular welfare.

Explaining Nicaragua’s COVID-19 response

A combination of economic and political factors helps explain the Ortega-Murillo regime’s pandemic strategy of denial, distortion, and criminalization. Economically, a preventive shutdown was perceived as further threatening Nicaragua’s already contracting economy. The 2018 protests and crackdown came amid a cutoff of Venezuelan assistance and the global downturn in primary commodities demand, though these macro-level factors had not yet fully impacted everyday life, beyond raising fuel prices. The broad anti-government protests, however, led to significant economic disruptions, including damaging Nicaragua’s burgeoning tourism industry. While the economy did not fully collapse as many had feared, economic contraction continued, eroding the gains from years of consistent, if unequally distributed, growth.

Between reestablishing control of the streets in mid-2018 and confirming the first positive COVID-19 case in mid-March 2020, the Ortega-Murillo regime ensured that opposition organizations and opportunities for protest remained suppressed. They also won back wavering supporters and convinced many key business leaders that they were better off keeping quiet and continuing to profit rather than challenging the government again. Implementing economically harmful COVID-19 prevention measures, however, might have undone all of this, undermining Ortega and Murillo’s self-aggrandizing claims to being the only guarantors of stability and prosperity in Nicaragua.

Moreover, Nicaragua’s large informal sector increased the risks of any potential shutdown. Many lower-income Nicaraguans have little economic safety net and depend on informal trade; it would be impossible for them to “work from home.” This dilemma, faced by many lower-income countries (e.g., Mahmud and Riley 2021), rendered a hard lockdown impractical and potentially devastating without government aid. In the short term, it may have been possible to enact a lockdown *and* provide social welfare payments, following the model adopted in El Salvador. But the ruling family and FSLN elites were unwilling to tap into their ill-gotten riches to aid the population; so, keeping the economy open was presented as the only choice (Thaler 2021). Ortega and Murillo’s ironclad control of the government ensured there was no debate or questioning of this path.

Relatedly, Nicaragua's denialist response also stemmed from the country's political conditions and the regime's political strategy. Ortega and Murillo's ability to weather the unanticipated 2018 protests only emboldened their populist rhetoric and violent crackdown on dissent—principles applied to the COVID-19 response. With general elections on the horizon, it is possible that, at least initially, the decision to forego a shutdown was driven by concerns that further economic decline would affect electoral support. By August 2021, however, the government had brazenly taken out its political rivals, arresting seven opposition presidential contenders and dozens of civil society leaders on treason and financial crimes charges. These acts illustrate that the Ortega-Murillo regime's electoral calculus extended beyond avoiding a shutdown-induced economic crisis. Having survived its greatest political challenge in 2018 through brutal repression, it remained willing to wield the state's security apparatus to eliminate competition entirely.

The politicization of the relatively weak healthcare system further hobbled pandemic response capacities, with the government purging healthcare workers who had treated protesters in 2018 (others fled into exile) and then firing those speaking out about COVID-19 in 2020 (Córdoba 2020). The government retained a strong capacity to mobilize its core supporters and government employees through coercion, so it could have tapped into the legacy of the Revolutionary era public health brigades and popular vaccination campaigns to catalyze the COVID-19 response; yet, its denialist stance and popular distrust of the Ortega-Murillo regime meant that this opportunity fell by the wayside.

It was therefore left to civil society to organize a popular public health response to COVID-19 and provide social support as the pandemic hit Nicaragua (Thaler 2021). With its own popularity diminished after the violence of 2018 and elections looming, however, Ortega and Murillo did not want any chance for opposition actors—who now include the Catholic Church and most civil society organizations—to gain further popular legitimacy, and therefore blocked grassroots response efforts.

Conclusion

With the spread of the Delta variant, Nicaragua experienced a second wave of COVID-19 in late summer and early fall 2021 after the virus's rapid and devastating spread in mid-2020; however, this did little to change the regime's approach of denial, distortion, and criminalization. Ortega and Murillo's gamble to prioritize short-term economic and political interests over public health appeared to have paid off, in that Nicaragua's economy did not crash and there was no resurgence of protest, despite the pandemic's toll on thousands of Nicaraguans, including government supporters. Unsurprisingly, Nicaragua had the lowest vaccination level in Latin America, making the population even more vulnerable amid spreading variants.

Failing to take action against COVID-19 in 2020 further damaged the Ortega-Murillo regime's international reputation and increased Nicaragua's isolation, but

the ruling couple remained largely unfazed by international condemnation and targeted sanctions. Ortega and Murillo demonstrated that they need not be accountable to the Nicaraguan people nor to international actors to maintain control. While the November 2021 elections were always unlikely to be free and fair, with the detentions of the top prospective presidential candidates and widespread abstention, the regime secured a fourth consecutive term in office. Ortega and Murillo retained strong enough command over state security forces and pro-government paramilitaries to continue exercising despotic power and enforcing their will on the country.

This clampdown also took a toll on the already limited civil society efforts to mount a grassroots pandemic response. By June 2021, Nicaragua's most reliable and independent source of COVID-19 data, the Citizen's Observatory, experienced a swift decline in reporting due to increasing fears that "expressing any opinion contrary to official [government] information will bring with it accusations with unknown consequences" (Confidencial 2021a). Medical organizations and healthcare workers, battered by the pandemic and government persecution, struggled to continue responding to COVID-19 (Divergentes 2021).

The 2018 anti-regime protests were unexpected, and the COVID-19 pandemic also emerged as an exogenous shock to Nicaragua, along with the rest of the world. It would take further unexpected events to shake Ortega and Murillo's hold on power, which remains firm and endangers popular welfare amid Latin America's persistent COVID-19 threat. For now, the "will of the people" in Nicaragua remains whatever Ortega and Murillo think will keep them in charge and their financial interests protected.

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