

It's Time to Escalate Against Nicaragua's Ortega

[By Benjamin Gedan & Nicolás Saldías](#)

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While the United States and the Organization of American States drag their feet, dictator Daniel Ortega retains his stranglehold over Nicaragua. At its General Assembly in June, the OAS voted to create a Commission on Nicaragua tasked with engaging in “extraordinary diplomatic efforts” to resolve the country’s crisis, including urging Ortega to return to dialogue with the opposition. The OAS has struggled to remain relevant amid the political and security crises unfolding across the Western Hemisphere, and the organization took two months to announce the [composition](#) of the Commission. It is time for the United States to jumpstart the process. Washington must put pressure on Ortega to schedule early presidential elections, while also pushing for Nicaragua’s suspension from the Organization of American States.

The evidence of suspension-worthy crimes is already exhaustive, and Nicaraguans do not need another time-consuming OAS fact-finding mission. The [Nicaragua Working Group](#), the Commission’s predecessor, produced five reports on the crisis in Nicaragua. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has also produced a definitive [report](#), and so have a number of respected [non-governmental organizations](#). All have documented indiscriminate murders, arbitrary arrests, and the existence of torture centers.

Ortega’s regime has grown bolder in its repression. Nicaragua’s customs officials have [cut off](#) the import of 92 tons of newsprint, strangling famed outlets such as *La Prensa* that cover protests and human-rights abuses. [Paramilitary groups](#) continue to harass protestors and keep entire cities paralyzed. Public prosecutors have [fabricated cases](#) against demonstrators. Ortega’s military even [crossed into](#) Costa Rica in order to pursue and kill a Nicaraguan “person of interest.”

Meanwhile, the intervention of outside powers continues unabated in Nicaragua. In a repeat of Russia’s entanglement in Venezuela, Ortega has [accepted](#) a small contingent of Russian troops through the end of 2019. With Chinese funding, he has signaled his desire to [revive](#) plans for a long-shot interoceanic canal that would rival the one in Panama. Perhaps most concerning for the security of the opposition, 5,000 Cuban “tourists” [arrived](#) in Nicaragua during the first five months of 2019, a marked increase from the 566 who arrived in the country in all of 2018. No, these people do not prefer the landmarks of dusty Managua to the sun-kissed beaches of Havana. Their mission is to shore up the Ortega regime by neutralizing the opposition and spreading best practices in systematic repression.

With the composition of the Commission finally announced, Ortega finds himself at a crossroads. If he blocks the Commission’s ability to enter the country and engage in fact-finding and diplomatic efforts, as he did with the earlier Working Group, OAS member states will have a good reason to apply the suspension clause of the Inter-American Democratic Charter to Nicaragua. Faced with this possibility, Ortega may

opt to afford minimal access to the Commission, and then stonewall its efforts once it is there.

Ortega has time on his side. Any vote for suspension from the OAS would be an uphill battle through the Organization's bureaucratic hurdles. The Commission is required to inform the OAS Permanent Council of its results in 75 days. In order to suspend Nicaragua through the Organization's unwieldy process, a vote would be required to call an extraordinary General Assembly, at which a two-thirds majority would need to vote in favor of Nicaragua's suspension from the multilateral body. The United States is mistaken if it believes that the same countries that voted to establish the Commission -- already a razor-thin margin -- will also vote in favor of suspension.

While the Organization of American States is mired in its own bureaucratic labyrinth, Washington should take the chance to ramp up pressure on Ortega, using Venezuela as its blueprint. An enhanced pressure campaign should begin with the United States dramatically expanding its use of Magnitsky Sanctions on key regime officials, including [Ortega himself](#). The unanimous Congressional approval of the Nicaragua Investment Conditionality Act, which prevents additional loans from multilateral lenders like the Inter-American Development Bank until Nicaragua holds free, fair, and transparent elections, provides the United States another chokepoint for one of the critical lifelines to Ortega's struggling economy.

The Trump administration should also consider nominating a Special Envoy to Nicaragua. The envoy would be in charge of advising the opposition Civic Alliance, coordinating U.S. policy, encouraging greater involvement of allies like Canada and the European Union, and uncovering the sources of Ortega's illicit finance schemes.

The United States thus far has pinned its hopes on a diplomatic solution to Nicaragua's crisis. This is not without reason -- the Civic Alliance has proven to be a force capable of organizing significant and sustained protests against Ortega. But Washington is gravely misguided if it thinks establishing a second OAS Commission will resolve the crisis and bring relief to the suffering Nicaraguan people. For that, the United States needs to seize the initiative and finally escalate the pressure campaign against Ortega and his inner circle.

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