

## Washington Needs a Nicaragua Strategy

By Benjamin Gedan & Nicolás Saldías

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Last month finally brought a reason to celebrate in Nicaragua. The country's dictator, Daniel Ortega, [released](#) the last remaining political prisoners taken when his sharp crackdown on anti-government protests began in April 2018. It is right to celebrate the release of political prisoners. But the feel-good optics should not lead to a reduction in pressure or international recognition of the regime. Ortega retains his grip on power, and the human rights abuses and corruption that fueled the country's peaceful protests remain. The United States needs to maintain its pressure on the Ortega regime and finally develop a strategy for returning Nicaragua to democracy.

U.S. and Canadian [sanctions](#) on top regime officials, including Ortega's wife, Vice President Rosario Murillo, forced Ortega's hand. Having released the prisoners, Ortega will now expect some sort of reward from the international community. Without a broader strategy, the Trump administration may be tempted to declare an early victory and pack it in.

During the demonstrations against Ortega's government, his forces arrested more than 700 people, killed more than 300, injured more than 2,000, and forced more than 60,000 Nicaraguans into exile. Although Nicaragua's recent amnesty law set in motion the liberation of those who had been detained arbitrarily, Ortega has utilized it as another tool in his arsenal of tyranny. Specifically, the law [grants immunity](#) from prosecution to police officers and pro-government militias who clamped down brutally on protesters. It also prohibits former political prisoners from engaging in future protests, ensuring compliance by placing many under house arrest. Ortega is engaged in a brazen attempt to whitewash the reprehensible conditions Human Rights Watch [has documented](#) in Nicaragua's prisons – asphyxiation, rape, waterboarding, acid burning, and physical torture.

U.S. action to draw [international attention](#) to the evolving situation has pushed Ortega to comply with the demands of the Civic Alliance, the group of heterogeneous organizations and activists engaging the Nicaraguan regime in dialogue. Consider the impact of international attention as it relates to the timing of prisoner releases: Groups of 50 to 100 prisoners were released before a number of key events: critical hearings of the UN Human Rights Council; meetings of the Organization of American States' Permanent Council; the one-year anniversary of the protests, and a highly anticipated June hearing of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs.

The Trump administration must take advantage of this moment to sharpen its strategy. The [crucial questions](#) are how to achieve early elections, and how to partner with the Civic Alliance to do so. Sanctions alone do not constitute a [strategy](#), especially against a regime that retains a revolutionary patina and prides itself on thumbing its nose at U.S. pressure. Worryingly, as the situation in Nicaragua continues to fester and the United States staggers along without a deeper strategy,

outside powers are working to shore up Ortega's position. In a repeat of Russia's recent intervention in Venezuela's crisis, the Nicaraguan government has agreed to [host](#) a small contingent of Russian troops through the end of 2019.

Of course, the United States should expand targeted sanctions, asset freezes, and visa bans on top officials. Most obviously, it should refer to the Magnitsky Act to [sanction President Ortega](#) himself for gross human rights violations. Yet it is also time for the Trump Administration to attempt some heavier lifts.

While the United States and Canada have led the way on sanctions and visa bans, European officials have declined to take similar actions. During a time of schisms over the "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran, the Trump administration must make the case for seeing Nicaragua differently.

As Nicaragua's economy declines precipitously, a recent [study](#) showed that Albanisa, its state-owned oil company, has received between \$4 billion and \$6 billion in illicit funding over the last decade. The Albanisa case is just one example showing why the United States should appoint a Special Envoy to Nicaragua, as it has done in Venezuela. The envoy would seek to coordinate U.S. policy with the Civic Alliance and with the Superior Council for Private Enterprise, the country's powerful business group, as well as work to track down the remaining sources of Ortega's illicit finance. Choking off the illicit funding of Latin American dictators will be critical to restoring democracy throughout the region.

Above all, Washington should continue pushing for Nicaragua's expulsion from the OAS under the framework of the Inter-American Democratic Charter. At its recent General Assembly, the OAS continued to drag its feet by [voting](#) to allow Ortega 75 more days to address the crisis. However, with the machinery of authoritarianism still firmly in place, a return to clashes and repression is the most likely outcome of affording him more time to maneuver.

U.S. pressure and international attention have so far succeeded in forcing Ortega to empty his jails of political prisoners. However, without a substantive, long-term strategy to force the wily dictator to give up power, Ortega may leverage bad-faith negotiations and prisoner releases to curry favor with the international community and reduce his current diplomatic isolation.

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