Nicaraguan Authorities Criticized for Press Crackdown

Benjamin Witte-Lebhar
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by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar
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Rights groups are sounding the alarm about a pair of apparent press-freedom violations, both involving news photographers who—on separate occasions last month, just days apart—were prevented from completing their respective assignments after being pushed around up by Nicaraguan security personnel.

On May 24, photographer Manuel Esquivel was forcibly removed from Managua’s Complejo Judicial (central courthouse) while attempting to cover an event involving Zoilamérica Narváez Murillo, the estranged stepdaughter of Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega. Security guards ordered Esquivel’s colleague, reporter Martha Vásquez, out of the building as well. Both work for La Prensa, an opposition daily with a clear anti-Ortega editorial line.

The judiciary’s press chief Roberto Larios blamed the La Prensa team for "provoking" the incident, claiming they violated "security norms" and acted "maliciously" in their interaction with security personnel. They were also "egged on" by Sandinista dissidents, according to Larios.

Vásquez, in an interview with her own newspaper, offered a different version of events. The La Prensa reporter admitted that she and Esquivel failed to follow proper procedure when signing in for the press event but claimed the misunderstanding could have been easily resolved. There was absolutely no need, Vásquez explained, for the security guards to resort to violence (Esquivel was reportedly roughed up) and ultimately block the pair from completing their assignment. "Roberto [Larios] cannot justify this as a security violation because an administrative rule isn’t the same thing as a security norm," she said.

Government critics suspect the real reason Esquivel and Vásquez were booted from the Complejo Judicial was because of La Prensa’s political leanings and because the subject of that day’s coverage—Narváez Murillo—is a particularly sensitive one for the Ortega administration.

La Prensa often describes Ortega as the country’s "unconstitutional" president, referring to the Constitution’s ban on heads of state serving consecutive terms. The document also limits the total number of terms a president can serve at two. Ortega, who used his influence on the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) to exempt himself from the term-limit laws (NotiCen, Nov. 19, 2009), is serving his second consecutive term and third overall. Prior to his first official period in office, Ortega served as head of the country’s post-revolutionary governing junta.

Narváez Murillo, daughter of first lady Rosario Murillo, is another nagging thorn in Ortega’s side. In 1998, Narváez Murillo publicly accused her stepfather of abuse, claiming Ortega sexually molested her during the course of 20 years, beginning when she was just 11 (NotiCen, March 19, 1998). More recently she denounced the Ortega government for targeting her financially. Narváez Murillo accuses the president and his allies of using their political influence to block funding to the Fundación Centro de Estudios Internacionales de Nicaragua (CEI), a nongovernmental organization (NGO) she runs.
"A picture of repression"

Journalist organizations, human rights groups, church leaders, and some judiciary representatives have come out in defense of the La Prensa team. The president of the Tribunal de Apelaciones de Managua Gerardo Rodríguez acknowledged that the Complejo Judicial security guards acted overzealously in handling the situation—particularly in their treatment of Manel Esquivel—and promised to investigate the matter.

Bishop René Sándigo, who heads the Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua (CEN), also lamented the episode, saying it reflects poorly on the country’s institutions. "The images [of guards dragging Esquivel out of the Complejo Judicial] say a lot," said Sándigo. "They paint a picture of repression and of the violation of press freedom. This is something we ought to reflect on."

The incident is all the more alarming, say observers, given that it took place less than two weeks after another news photographer was deported—after being held incommunicado during a four-day stint in the Dirección de Auxilio Judicial (DAJ) prison in Managua. The DAJ, better known El Chipote, is normally reserved for prisoners deemed to be highly dangerous.

The photographer in question, Héctor Retamal of Chile, was in Nicaragua on assignment for the international newswire Agence France-Presse (AFP) when, on the evening of May 7, he was seized by security personnel while trying to cover a meeting between President Ortega and Palestine Foreign Minister Riad al Malki. Authorities refused to provide any public information about the case until May 12, when police escorted Retamal to the Managua airport and put him on a plane to San José, Costa Rica.

Policía Nacional spokesperson Fernando Borge later accused Retamal of violating President Ortega’s "security perimeter." At no point, however, was the Chilean photographer ever officially charged with any crime. Nor, according to news reports, did Nicaraguan authorities go through any official deportation procedures.

Retamal’s employer was outraged. "On behalf of AFP, I must strongly protest against his detention for four days, the conditions of his detention—four days without the ability to communicate with the outside world or any legal assistance—and his subsequent expulsion, without any official explanation," the company’s Latin America director Juliette Hollier-Larousse explained in a terse letter.

Nicaragua’s Centro Nicaragüense de Derechos Humanos (CENDIH), a leading human rights group, was equally dismayed. CENDIH head Vilma Núñez described the case as a "clear violation of human rights." Police essentially "kidnapped" the photographer, she said. "This is another step in the authoritarianism which is taking root in this country," Núñez said in a late May press conference.

Politics and the police

A troubling sign of the times as far as press freedom is concerned, the two incidents also raise questions about the role politics might be playing within Nicaragua’s police and judiciary. In his quest for a constitutionally questionable third term in office, Ortega already demonstrated just how much power he wields within both the CSJ and Consejo Supremo Electoral (CSE), the country’s
supposedly independent election council. Critics say there is now reason to believe the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) holds sway over the Policía Nacional as well.

In its most recent annual report, issued last month, the influential human rights group Amnesty International (AI) mentioned an episode in which police arrested and "ill-treated" supporters of the opposition Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC). The incident took place shortly after last year’s municipal elections (NotiCen, Nov. 15, 2012). "Detainees reported being beaten, and female detainees said that they were forced to remove their clothes in front of male officers, who humiliated them and threatened them with sexual violence," the AI report reads.

The once-powerful PLC failed to win a single mayoralty in the elections. The FSLN won 134 (of a national total of 153). The Sandinistas also have a more than two-thirds majority in Nicaragua’s unicameral parliament, the Asamblea Legislativa (AL).

CENDIH published its own annual report in late May, highlighting several other cases in which police appear to have targeted political opponents of the FSLN. In January 2012, for example, police and prosecutors in Ciudad Darío responded in a "partial and arbitrary manner" to a skirmish between Sandinista supporters and affiliates of the PLI, Nicaragua’s leading opposition group, the report claims. Police formally accused 10 people of inciting the riot, all of them PLI supporters.

"When Daniel Ortega’s government began in 2007, the Policía Nacional played the role of spectator in cases where the government’s shock forces [pro-government mobs] acted to repress civil society groups or opposition parties," Vilma Núñez told reporters during a mid-May press conference. "Nowadays, [the police] are the ones carrying out the repression. That worries us even more."

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