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New Cases of Police Violence Put Pressure on Nicaragua’s Leadership

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Opponents of Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega are rallying around a pair of violent episodes, both involving the Policía Nacional (PN), to poke holes in the powerful and long-serving leader's seemingly impenetrable political armor.

The first incident took place July 8 during a demonstration in front of the offices of the Consejo Suprema Electoral (CSE) in Managua, where police clashed with protestors, roughed up several journalists, and arrested a number of people, including Eduardo Montealegre, leader of the center-right Partido Liberal Independiente (PLI). Montealegre, a former presidential candidate (NotiCen, Feb. 23, 2006), holds a deputy seat in the unicameral Asamblea Nacional (AN). Several other PLI deputies were also arrested and briefly detained during the clampdown.

The demonstration was the 13th in a series of weekly protests, always on Wednesdays, that the PLI, the leading opposition group, has organized to demand fair and transparent elections. Participants in the miércoles de protesta (Wednesday protests) campaign are seeking changes to Nicaragua’s election laws and want the CSE, the country’s electoral authority, to be staffed with new magistrates. They accuse the CSE of being overtly and consistently partial to Ortega and his Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) and insist that the municipal elections in 2008 and 2012 and the presidential and parliamentary votes in 2011 were marred by electoral fraud (NotiCen, Nov. 13, 2008, Nov. 17, 2011, and Nov. 15, 2012). Nicaragua’s next national elections take place in November 2016.

Protestors and other witnesses say the police actions, which included the use of tear gas and batons, were unprovoked and constitute a clear violation of the right to free and peaceful assembly. "The repression against Wednesday’s peaceful demonstration, the injuries to civilians, the illegal arrest of 10 deputies from this bloc, and the unwillingness of the police to assume any responsibility evidence a pattern of human rights violations by the Daniel Ortega regime in its vain attempt to quiet the just social and political demands of the Nicaraguan people," Montealegre said afterward in a PLI press release.

The PN’s heavy-handed treatment of the demonstration also drew rebuke from opposition news outlets, Catholic Church representatives, the country’s leading business leaders association, and the Unión de Periodistas de Nicaragua (UPN), a normally pro-Sandinista journalists union, which lamented that "journalists and photographers suffered violence at the hands of the Policía Nacional while carrying out their duty to inform, which is a constitutional right."

Since then, the PN has refrained from engaging miércoles de protesta participants directly. During a July 22 protest at the CSE offices, riot police even let a group of young demonstrators tape flowers to their plastic shields. Authorities have continued, nevertheless, to meet the weekly marches with massive shows of force, blocking access to the demonstration area, halting busses of would-be protestors heading to the capital from outlying areas, and inadvertently creating massive traffic jams that have the effect of magnifying the impact of what, in reality, are only modest turnouts (200 to 300 people) by the PLI and its allies.
Deadly ambush

Three days after the July 8 crackdown, members of the PN were involved in an even more controversial incident: the shooting deaths of two children, aged 11 and 12, and their aunt. Two other children were seriously wounded in the attack, which has been described by many as a "massacre" and by others, namely the police themselves, as an accident—a case of mistaken identity.

The tragedy occurred when police officers, lying in wait along a road in Las Jagüitas, outside Managua, spotted a vehicle they suspected of transporting drugs and ordered it to halt. News reports suggest that the driver, assuming the police were criminals attempting a holdup, ignored the order and kept going. The police squad then opened fire, shooting nearly 50 bullets into the vehicle, which belonged, it turned out, not to drug traffickers but to a family returning home following an evangelical religious event.

"They shot bullets at us and killed my children and my sister," Leyka Ramírez Delgadillo, the wife of the driver, said in an interview with local television. "They popped the first tire and my husband thought they were robbers, so he accelerated. But they didn’t stop. They just keep shooting bullets."

PN chief Aminta Granera, a former nun who left the church in the 1970s to join the Sandinista struggle against dictator Anastasio Somoza DeBayle, went to the scene of the crime and promised a thorough investigation. "I’m shaken up. I’m in shock," she told reporters. Later she attended the funeral for the victims and even shed tears.

Granera initially told reporters that 22 agents were involved in the deadly operation. Several days later, she announced that 14 officers had been arrested and would soon face charges. A week after that, authorities made it official they were charging only nine of the implicated police, four with involuntary manslaughter (a charge normally associated with things like traffic accidents) and the other five with lesser offenses. On July 29, the judge overseeing the case put a quick end to the matter, punishing the officers with sentences that range from two to 11 years.

Pattern of violence

Family members of the victims openly criticized the legal system’s swift handling of the affair. During an earlier hearing, Zacarías Salgado, the police captain in charge of the botched ambush, asked the family and Nicaraguan society for forgiveness. "We didn’t want this to happen. It was an accident. I’m responsible. I admit what happened," he said.

Ramírez Delgadillo, with a series of powerful statements that continue to resonate in the Nicaragua press, refused to accept the apology. "This isn’t justice," she said. "I feel disappointed. They’re going to roast in hell’s biggest pot. Don’t ask for forgiveness because forgiveness won’t bring my children or my sister back."

The case has also drawn complaints from rights groups such as the Centro Nicaragüense de Derechos Humanos (CENIDH), which see it as part of a recurrent pattern of police violence. "The tragedy that the Reyes Ramírez family is suffering today is a direct consequence of the institutional regression that the Policía Nacional has undergone in recent years," the CENIDH argued in a July 13 press release. "By distancing itself from the mission conferred upon it by the Constitution, [the PN] has become a repressive instrument."
Other examples include the events of July 8; a crackdown last December on people demonstrating against the Ortega regime’s massive canal project (NotiCen, Feb. 5, 2015); the bloody 2013 bust-up of activists occupying the Instituto Nicaragüense de Seguridad Social (INSS) in Managua to protest the state’s system of pension benefits (NotiCen, July 11, 2013); and a violent police intervention earlier that year in the central Nicaraguan town of Santo Domingo, where artisan miners were involved in a standoff with the Canadian mining company B2Gold (NotiCen, March 28, 2013).

"A remarkable situation"
Critics say that, together, the cases reflect growing pro-Sandinista partisanship by the PN, which became even more beholden to Ortega last year when the FSLN-dominated legislature passed a law giving the president direct command of the police (NotiCen, July 24, 2014). The PN had previously answered to the Ministerio de Gobernación.

The legislature also approved a number of made-to-order constitutional changes early last year that, among other things, allows Ortega to seek re-election indefinitely (NotiCen, Feb. 27, 2014). The president, 69, is serving his second consecutive term and third overall, not counting his years as head of Nicaragua’s post-revolutionary junta (1979-1985).

Opposition forces are hoping that fallout from the July 8 police crackdown and July 11 massacre will provide some desperately needed momentum as they look toward next year’s presidential and legislative elections, when Ortega is expected to run again. They’ll need that and more if they hope to unseat the veteran FSLN leader, who won the 2011 presidential contest in a landslide and has a current popularity rating of 74%, according to a recent Gallup poll.

"This is quite a remarkable situation. I don’t think there’s anything quite like it in the region today," Michael Shifter of the nonpartisan think tank Inter-American Dialogue (IAD) said during a recent symposium in Washington, DC. "There are concerns about democratic erosion, but if one looks at sheer political astuteness in a context in which the economy is growing, it’s striking. The question is, how long can this be sustained?"

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