

3-16-2017

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Recommended Citation

Witte-Lebhar, Benjamin. "European Parliament Gives Nicaragua's Anti-Canal Movement a Major Boost." (2017).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/10416>

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European Parliament Gives Nicaragua's Anti-Canal Movement a Major Boost

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

Category/Department: Nicaragua

Published: 2017-03-16

A series of power plays that culminated in another sweeping election victory for President Daniel Ortega and the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (Sandinista National Liberation Front, FSLN) in November cost Nicaragua's already reeling opposition its remaining legislative seats and established what for all intents and purposes is a one-party state ([NotiCen, Nov. 17, 2016](#)).

Technically speaking, there is still a small minority of non-FSLN deputies in the Asamblea Nacional (AN), Nicaragua's unicameral legislature ([NotiCen, Jan. 19, 2017](#)). But those lawmakers are opposition in name only, observers say, people who offer the Ortega regime a veneer of political plurality but are expected to support the Sandinistas when it counts. The result is that Ortega and Rosario Murillo, his wife and now vice president, can govern essentially unopposed—at least in the realm of formal politics.

And yet, as the controversial caudillo settles into his third consecutive five-year-term—and fourth overall, not including his tenure as head of Nicaragua's post-revolutionary junta government (1979-1985)—he does face a mounting challenge from outside the political sphere, one that is emanating, of all places, from the backwater municipality of Nueva Guinea, in eastern Nicaragua's Región Autónoma de la Costa Caribe Sur (South Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region, RACCS).

Nueva Guinea, approximately 280 km southeast of Managua, the capital, is home to Francisca Ramírez, a middle-aged farmer who is determined to save her land and that of thousands of other Nicaraguans from being swallowed up by Ortega's "Great Canal" project, a US\$50 billion plan to crisscross the country with an ocean-to-ocean shipping channel. Ramírez, a mother of five, leads a civil society movement called the Consejo Nacional en Defensa de Nuestra Tierra, Lago, y Soberanía (Council for the Defense of Our Land, Lake, and Sovereignty) that has organized dozens of protests in recent years against the behemoth canal project ([NotiCen, Oct. 23, 2014](#)).

The movement's biggest grievance is Ley 840, a generous, AN-approved concession deal that Ortega extended to an untested Hong Kong-based firm called HKND Group. The concession could last up to a century and gives HKND—run by a Chinese telecom tycoon named Wang Jing—exclusive rights to "design, develop, engineer, finance, construct, possess, operate, maintain, and administer" the proposed canal ([NotiCen, Aug. 15, 2013](#)). The company also has carte blanche to expropriate any land—occupied or otherwise—it deems necessary for the 278-km mega-project.

People like Ramírez, who stands to lose her farm, would be compensated, but at prices established by HKND and the Ortega government. "They told us over the radio that they were going to build a canal, and I thought that it was a very important thing, because they said that we were no longer going to be poor," the farmer-turned-activist recalled in a recent interview with the Inter Press Service (IPS) news agency. "We thought that at last progress was coming, but when overbearing soldiers and police officers started to show up, guarding the Chinese, the whole community refused to let them in their homes, and we started to protest."

Punishing the protestors

Ramírez and the Consejo had been earning attention and accolades even before the events of last year, when decisions by the pro-Ortega Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ), the nation's top court, and Consejo Supremo Electoral (CSE), the electoral authority, forced the leading opposition bloc to drop out of the presidential race and relinquish its seats in the AN ([NotiCen, July 7, 2016](#), and [Aug. 25, 2016](#)). They're even more important now that the opposition's final toehold in government has been severed, as critics of the Ortega regime scramble to find a platform and a champion they can really around.

The group's stature, particularly on an international level, rose another notch in mid-February, when the European Parliament (EP), the legislative body of the European Union, issued a resolution slamming the Nicaraguan government's democratic shortcomings, human rights record, and treatment, in particular, of Ramírez.

The resolution, dated Feb. 16, lamented Nicaragua's "steadily deteriorating human rights situation" and criticized the Ortega regime for "acts of harassment to which human rights organizations and their members and independent journalists have been subjected by individuals, political forces, and bodies linked to the state." More specifically, it urged the government "to refrain from harassing and using acts of reprisal against Francisca Ramírez and other human rights defenders for carrying out their legitimate work."

The EP admonition followed reports that, in late November, police intervened to block protestors from leaving Nueva Guinea and other rural areas to participate in pro-democracy marches in Managua. Activists complained that security forces went so far as to partially destroy a pair of bridges—one in Nueva Guinea, the other near Santo Domingo, in the department of Chontales—to impede the would-be demonstrators.

Among those affected by the crackdown was Ramírez, who planned to participate in the Managua activities and meet with Luis Almagro, the secretary general of the Organization of American States (OAS). She ultimately managed to make the trip—and speak with Almagro—but only after sneaking past police checkpoints and making a dangerous river crossing on foot, IPS reported. Once she was in Managua, on Dec. 1, she was informed by telephone that authorities in Nueva Guinea had seized two of her vehicles, seriously damaging one of them.

Police eventually returned the vehicles, on which Ramírez relies for work, but only after a week and a half, and without offering any compensation for the damage done or income lost, according to Front Line Defenders, an Ireland-based rights group. "As a farmer, Francisca Ramírez depends on her vehicles to transport her produce to the market and sell it. By seizing her vehicles, Nicaraguan authorities compromised her means of subsistence and ability to perform her human rights work," the organization pointed out.

Media control and misinformation

The EP document has helped raise Ramírez's profile, bringing her a sudden burst of media attention, with some outlets comparing her to Berta Cáceres, a Honduran environmental activist and 2015 Goldman Environmental Prize winner who was assassinated last year in her home in La Esperanza, Honduras ([NotiCen, April 7, 2016](#)). The two reportedly met in late 2015 at a forum

in Nicaragua. In an interview the following March, just days after the Honduran activist's death, Ramírez said she was inspired by Cáceres.

"I thought about all the suffering we had to go through in the struggle for our rights against the transnational companies and powerful economic groups that always try to run over the rights of the poor and those of limited resources in the country," she told the independent news magazine and website Confidential.

But the authors of the EP resolution didn't limit themselves to just talking about Ramírez and her fellow anti-canal activists. They also faulted the Ortega government for what they see as a breakdown of democracy and the rule of law in Nicaragua. The resolution drew particular attention to the "severe exclusion of opposition candidates" during the 2016 elections and called on the government to "fully respect democratic values, including separation of powers, and to restore the position of all political opposition parties by allowing critical voices within the political system and society in general."

Ortega's democratic credentials were also questioned recently by the US Department of State, which argued in its latest Country Reports on Human Rights Practices—the first since President Donald Trump took office—that although Nicaragua is a "multiparty constitutional republic," developments have "resulted in a de facto concentration of power in a single party, with an authoritarian executive branch exercising significant control over the legislative, judicial, and electoral functions." The report used the words "deeply flawed" to describe the 2016 elections and suggested that civilian authorities do not always "maintain effective control over the security forces."

The Ortega regime and its defenders accuse the powers that be in the US and Europe of working in cahoots with biased rights groups and media outlets to spread "misinformation" about the situation in Nicaragua. For example, Adolfo Jarquín, a pro-government human rights prosecutor, said that last month's EP resolution was based on falsehoods propagated by activists and government opponents. "[Human rights] are improving in Nicaragua," he told the Associated Press.

The "misinformation" card, however, cuts both ways, with critics accusing the Ortega regime of trying to silence dissenting voices and secure a monopoly over public information by gradually expanding control of the country's major media outlets. Confidential noted in a recent article that nearly all of Nicaragua's television stations are controlled either by Ángel González, a Mexican businessman, or the Ortega-Murillo family. Through their children, the governing couple manages channels 4, 8 and 13, plus numerous radio stations, the article explained. They also control channel 6, a state-run station managed by the leader of the Sandinista party's youth arm.

"For a long time, the government has been dedicated to misinforming people," Francisca Ramírez said in an interview late last year with Luciana Téllez Chávez, a training and research fellow with Front Line Defenders. "People are unaware of their rights," the activist leader added. "They think we are infringing on the government's rights every time we march!"

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