U.S. Lawmakers Again Threaten Sanctions against Nicaragua

Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.
U.S. Lawmakers Again Threaten Sanctions against Nicaragua

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

Category/Department: Nicaragua

Published: 2017-04-27

With last year’s lopsided and highly controversial presidential and parliamentary elections, Nicaraguan leader Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo, his wife and vice president, tightened their already firm grip over what is now, for all intents and purposes, a one-party state (NotiCen, Nov. 17, 2016).

Opponents have good reason to question the pair’s democratic credentials and sense of political fair play. But they proved powerless to stop the regime as it dismantled, one by one, the various checks and balances that might have kept Ortega from earning his third consecutive five-year term as president and fourth overall, not including his period as head of the country’s post-revolutionary junta government (1979-1985).

Outside the country, however, criticism of the regime continues to mount. In mid-February, it got a dressing down from the European Parliament (EP), the legislative body of the European Union, which issued a resolution lamenting Nicaragua’s “steadily deteriorating human rights situation” (NotiCen, March 16, 2017). The general secretary of the Organization of American States (OAS), Luis Almagro, has been acting as something of a mediator. The Ortega administration has engaged in a closed-doors dialogue with Almagro since late last year, after lawmakers in the US introduced a bill to condition loans to Nicaragua from international lending institutions (NotiCen, Oct. 20, 2016).

Shortly after the EP resolution went public, Ortega and the OAS signed a so-called memorandum of understanding to “strengthen the country’s institutions” over the next three years. As part of the accord, the Ortega administration has agreed, reportedly, to accept OAS oversight of the country’s nationwide municipal elections, set to take place in November. What else the Nicaraguan leader will do to improve his tarnished democratic credentials remains unclear.

Many Ortega opponents are skeptical of the OAS approach, which they see as overly accommodating. By negotiating with the Nicaraguan government, they say, Almagro legitimizes the regime and normalizes the periodic power plays that, among other things, Ortega used to institute a tailor-made rewrite of the Constitution (NotiCen, Feb. 27, 2014), block the one viable opposition party from participating in last year’s elections, and shortly afterwards, remove numerous opposition lawmakers from the Asamblea Nacional (AN), Nicaragua’s unicameral legislature (NotiCen, July 7, 2016, and Aug. 25, 2016).

“After [US President Donald] Trump won, Ortega was desperate to buy himself more time with the gringos [US authorities]. And Almagro is giving him that time, rather than selling it to him in exchange for any real concessions,” Eliseo Núñez, one of the opposition legislators ousted from the AN last August, told Tim Rogers, a Nicaragua expert and senior editor with the Florida-based broadcaster Fusion.
Harsh words from Washington

The lawmakers behind last year’s NICA bill (Nicaragua Investment Conditionality Act)—which gained full approval in the US House of Representatives before being lost in the kerfuffle of Washington’s recent leadership transition—appear to agree, and on April 5, co-sponsors Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, a Republican from Florida, and Albio Sires, a Democrat from New Jersey, resubmitted the initiative.

Like its predecessor, the updated version—NICA 2017—calls on the US to oppose non-humanitarian loans to Nicaragua unless the Nicaraguan government takes “effective steps to hold free, fair, and transparent elections, and for other purposes.” This time around, though, Ros-Lehtinen, Sires and the other 23 legislators backing the bill, are also demanding that the Ortega regime combat corruption and protect human rights defenders and activists.

“Daniel Ortega and his family continue to amass a great amount of wealth while Nicaragua remains the second poorest country in the Western Hemisphere,” Rep. Sires said in a statement. He has spent years repressing the political opposition and has created a de facto monarchy by having his wife take on the role of vice president. The US will not stand by and watch Ortega target human rights defenders and stifle democracy while lining his pockets with cash at the expense of the Nicaraguan people.”

Sires’ assurances aside, there is no guarantee that NICA 2017 will clear the House, as the 2016 version did, let alone win support from the Senate and the White House. There’s a strong possibility, in other words, that the threat to veto loans to Nicaragua from multilateral institutions such as the Inter-American Development Bank, World Bank, and International Monetary Fund will never amount to more than just that: a threat.

Either way, the revived bill caused plenty of tongues to wag in Nicaragua, where even committed opponents of the Ortega regime dismissed NICA 2017 as misguided. “There’s no possible political justification for an attempt to close off the country’s access to international loans for development projects,” journalist Carlos F. Chamorro, an outspoken critic of Ortega, wrote in Confidencial, a magazine and news site he directs. “Not only because access to the multilateral loan organizations is a sovereign right, but also because suspending them would hurt the population more than the dictatorship it claims to punish, depriving them of infrastructure for production or social needs.”

Playing the blame game

The OAS took issue with the move as well, saying in an April 5 press release that NICA 2017 “is not a productive contribution.” The international body also called on the bill’s US sponsors to “reconsider” their position.

The Ortega regime, not surprisingly, had its own choice words for NICA 2017, dismissing it as “just another threat” and a prime example of the US government’s “imperialist mentality.” Murillo, in a statement read out to government media, also called NICA 2017 an “infringement” on the right of Nicaragua’s people and government to continue developing its special system of “Christianity, socialism, and solidarity.”

Allies of the ruling couple took their criticisms a step further, directing their frustration not just at the bill’s US sponsors, but also at Nicaraguan human rights advocates, whom they accuse of meeting
with US lawmakers and urging them to take action. In statements aired by Radio 800 in Managua, Edén Pastora, the Ortega regime’s point man in the contested Río San Juan border zone with Costa Rica, said Nicaraguan human rights defenders are trying to do “enormous damage” to the country and are directly responsible for the debacle.

“I’m tired [of these people]. We’re tired,” he said. “And we’re going to go around marking their doors with black paint so that everyone knows who the servants [of the US government] are.” Pastora, also known as “Comandante Cero,” is a revolutionary war hero who later fought the Sandinistas as a member of the Contra forces before returning to the fold, years later, as a staunch Ortega backer.

Another regime ally, Víctor Boitano, a former Sandinista Army colonel—who like Pastora opposed Ortega at one point, made an even more explicit call to violence by calling the rights advocates “traitors” and saying that in the days of famed Nicaraguan revolutionary Augusto Sandino (1895-1934) “they would have been shot.”

‘Diatribes, insults, and offensive practices’

Rights groups like the Asociación Nicaragüense pro Derechos Humanos (Nicaraguan Association for Human Rights, ANPDH) and the Comisión Permanente de Derechos Humanos (Permanent Human Rights Association, CPDH), deny that they are in any way responsible for NICA 2017, and say that if anyone is to blame, it’s Ortega himself. They also worry that statements like those from Pastora and Boitano will encourage violence and make Nicaragua’s already complicated human rights situation even worse.

“We condemn this action, because when [Pastora] says that he’s going to form groups of patriots to go around marking the houses of people who’ve dared call out the violations and abuses of this dictatorial government, this is clearly an act of intimidation,” CPDH head Marcos Carmona told reporters.

The war of words comes at a particularly delicate moment for relations between the Ortega government and the country’s leading rights activists, many of whom once had common cause with the Sandinistas but now feel betrayed by the regime’s undemocratic power grabs and obvious efforts to squash dissent. Such is the case of Vilma Núñez, president and founder of the Centro Nicaragüense de Derechos Humanos (Nicaraguan Human Rights Center, CENIDH), who was appointed by the Sandinistas decades ago to serve as a high court judge but is now an outspoken critic of the government.

Núñez, 78, made headlines last month when US Ambassador Laura Dogu nominated her for an International Woman of Courage Award. The gesture may have gone mostly unnoticed but for a letter sent to the US Embassy that same day—which was International Women’s Day—by Murillo and signed by a group of government ministers and deputy ministers, all of them women. In it, the female Cabinet members accused Núñez of constantly goading the Nicaraguan people and government with her “diatribes, insults, and offensive practices.” They described her award nomination, furthermore, as “an act of hostility toward our people and government.”

Outside rights groups like Amnesty International and the Ireland-based Front Line Defenders, quickly jumped to the CENIDH founder’s defense, as did the noted Nicaraguan writer Gioconda Belli, who penned her own letter on the subject. “How can they say that about a person like [Núñez],
especially given her background? Old colleagues, even if they’ve since taken different paths, should know that this woman has always been on the side of justice,” the letter reads. It was signed by more than 700 people.

-- End --