

United States Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere

Hearing on Nicaragua's Political Crisis: Ortega's Assault on Democracy

Chairman John Curtis (R-UT) Opening Statement

September 30, 2026

On July 19th, while celebrating the 47th anniversary of the Sandinista Revolution, Daniel Ortega declared that Nicaragua would no longer hold elections that could allow the opposition to take power.

Weeks later, Nicaragua's National Assembly took another step toward making that declaration a reality, advancing a constitutional amendment package that would bar those designated as "traitors to the homeland" from running for office and further entrench the regime's hold on power.

This is the culmination of two decades spent dismantling the very democratic institutions that allowed Ortega to return to the presidency following the 2006 election.

Even authoritarian governments like Russia and Iran preserve the appearance of fake elections as a source of legitimacy.

Ortega is now moving toward dispensing with even that facade. And that should deeply concern us—not only for the future of Nicaragua, but for the future of democracy in our hemisphere.

Alongside his wife and co-president, Rosario Murillo [Mu-ri-yo], Ortega has spent years transforming Nicaragua from an imperfect democracy into an authoritarian state in the heart of the Western Hemisphere.

Rewriting Nicaragua's constitution, eliminating presidential term limits, consolidating control over the country's institutions, and eliminating meaningful political opposition have become hallmarks of the Ortega-Murillo regime.

The consequences for the Nicaraguan people have been devastating.

Since violently suppressing nationwide protests in 2018, when more than 300 people were killed, the Ortega regime has intensified its repression—imprisoning and exiling political opponents, stripping hundreds of their citizenship, shuttering independent media and civil society organizations, and targeting religious institutions.

Journalists, human rights defenders, political leaders, members of the clergy, and ordinary Nicaraguans have faced persecution for challenging—or even being suspected of challenging—the regime. Basic freedoms have increasingly been treated as threats to the state.

But what happens in Nicaragua does not stay in Nicaragua.

The regime has increasingly extended its repression beyond Nicaragua's borders, using surveillance, intimidation, and threats against Nicaraguans who have fled the country, while family members who remain behind can face retaliation.

The message is chilling: leaving Nicaragua does not necessarily put you beyond the regime's reach.

And as Ortega has closed Nicaragua to democratic opposition, he has increasingly opened the country to U.S. adversaries and strategic competitors.

The regime maintains longstanding relationships with Cuba and Iran and has continued to deepen its ties with Russia. Moscow has supplied military equipment, supported Nicaraguan security forces, and established a Russian Interior Ministry training center in Managua [muh-nah-gwa].

China, too, has rapidly expanded its economic and diplomatic foothold since Ortega severed Nicaragua's longstanding relationship with Taiwan.

Governments seeking to challenge U.S. interests are finding a willing partner in Nicaragua—and an opportunity to expand their influence in our own hemisphere.

Meanwhile, political repression and economic hardship have driven hundreds of thousands of Nicaraguans from their homes, placing additional pressure on neighboring countries and contributing to irregular migration.

Taken together, these developments should concern every member of this committee.

The United States has a clear interest in a Western Hemisphere composed of free, stable, prosperous, and democratic nations.

A Nicaragua where political opponents are imprisoned or exiled, religious freedom is suppressed, independent voices are silenced, and our adversaries are welcomed with open arms runs directly contrary to that interest.

For too long, the Ortega-Murillo regime has escaped the scrutiny its conduct deserves—not for lack of effort by members of this committee, including our distinguished Ranking Member.

It is time to put Nicaragua back in the spotlight—for the Nicaraguan people and their right to determine their own future.

The United States must stand with Nicaraguans defending fundamental freedoms, demanding accountability, and working toward the restoration of democratic government.

Today's hearing is an opportunity to examine the Ortega-Murillo regime's repression, its relationships with our adversaries, and the consequences for our country and our hemisphere.

And it is an opportunity to send a clear message to those fighting for a free and democratic Nicaragua: the United States is paying attention.

With that, I would like to recognize the Ranking Member, Senator Kaine, for his comments.