



demonstrating. Since then, human rights groups say more than 130 people were killed amid a violent police crackdown on protests. Over 160 people have been injured by gunfire, with protesters accusing police of spraying crowds of demonstrators with live ammunition.

Nicaragua's Turn to Face The Empire

At the dawn of the last century, Nicaragua was a key battlefield in the so-called Banana Wars, when the United States sought to assert dominance over its neighbors through a series of military interventions in countries like **Panama, Haiti, Cuba** and the **Dominican Republic**. Nicaragua itself effectively became a U.S. protectorate in 1916, and remained subject for **17 years** to a U.S. military occupation until 1933. The U.S. withdrew when it could leave the country's security in the hands of their close collaborator, National Guard head **Anastasio Somoza**.

Over the next three years, Somoza used terror, political assassinations and election rigging to establish himself as the country's undisputed dictator. The Somoza dynasty ruled the country for **36 more years** like a family fiefdom until 1979, when the Marxist-inspired **Sandinista** revolutionaries seized power.

The victory, however, was short lived, and throughout the 1980s the **U.S.-backed Contra terrorists waged an insurgency against the Sandinistas that left over 30,000 dead**. The US went on to commit its own war crimes, such as an illegal blockade, with the Reagan administration violated a directive of Congress not to interfere by raising money outside the Congress by instituting the crack-cocaine epidemic that devastated Los Angeles black neighborhoods.

In 1990, the war-weary Nicaraguan electorate delivered a surprise blow to the Sandinistas, voting out incumbent president Daniel Ortega. However, that wasn't the last of Ortega, who won the 2006 presidential elections with 38 percent of the vote. Despite the middling victory, Ortega would go on to remain in office until today.

Last year, the US House of Representatives voted **unanimously** in favor of the **Nicaraguan Investment Conditionality Act** of 2017 (**NICA**) which would cut that already-poor country off from loans offered by international financial institutions. But meanwhile, the **NICA** Act was getting no apparent movement in the US Senate and appeared to be a dead letter. And so, right on cue, we witness violent protests in Nicaragua which closely resemble the violent *guarimbas* which have plagued Venezuela on and off since Nicolas Maduro was elected in 2013. These demonstrations will surely be used as a pretext to revive the **NICA** in the US Senate.

Moreover, it must be pointed out that the proposed social security cuts which provided the impetus for the protests were themselves necessitated in no small part by the House passage of the NICA Act which, as Telesur noted, "has already put a chill on foreign direct investment into the Nicaraguan economy, having a knock-on effect on local lending activity and private investments." Of course, this is all according to plan.

Citing the Alliance for Global Justice, Telesur reported at the time that "[t]he Nicaraguan government uses foreign assistance from the international financial institutions to support social spending on health and education which have become an ever larger proportion of the national budget." Telesur explained that the NICA Act therefore "poses a serious danger to the Central American nation's economy and could result in a humanitarian crisis and waves of economic refugees that would flee toward the U.S. border, joining waves of migrants from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador."

Currently, Nicaragua is the **only country** victimized by the US-backed Central American Wars which is not also a source of immigrants to the US. This is in no small part due to the Sandinistas' effective social programs.

As for the Sandinistas' social programs, even the New York Times acknowledged that "[m]any poor people who receive housing and other government benefits support" Sandinista President, Daniel Ortega.

Not surprisingly, the Cold War-era **National Endowment for Democracy (NED)** has recently been giving substantial funding to groups in Nicaragua seemingly to stoke the very types of anti-government actions taking place right now. For example, the **NED**, in 2017, gave \$72,440 to the **Comision Permanente de Derechos Humanos de Nicaragua (CPDHN)** for "human rights" monitoring. **Curiously**, the **CPDHN** is a key source the Western press has been relying upon for the lop-sided information about the current protests and the government's response to them.

The NED has also been giving substantial monies to youth and student groups in Nicaragua – such groups now serving as the main source of the current unrest. In addition, the **NED** has given support to "independent" (i.e., anti-government) media outlets and to other civil society groups for the purpose of "raising awareness" about how the Nicaraguan government is allegedly repressing them. **All told, the NED last year alone gave well over a \$1 million in aid to civil society groups for the purpose of ginning up social strife in Nicaragua.**

Ortega built his administration on two pillars of support. On one hand, welfare programs funded by regional ally Venezuela maintained Ortega's revolutionary credentials. At the height of the Chavez-era, Venezuelan aid made up roughly a third of the Nicaraguan government's annual budget.

On the other hand, the new Sandinismo was more than willing to compromise with their old enemies: Nicaragua's business elite. Ortega even formed an alliance with **COSEP**, an influential council of business leaders. The deal was simple: The Council of Business Leaders would provide political support for the Ortega administration, so long as the president consulted them on economic matters.

This uneasy alliance worked – at least on paper. Poverty rates were nudged downwards, and Ortega even dusted off those old plans to build a Nicaraguan canal. To the outside world it looked as though Nicaragua was finally at peace. At the beginning of the year, polls indicated Ortega remained one of the most popular heads of state in the region. **Then came the USA.**

The Council of Business Leaders, **COSEP**, and the Ortega government have been negotiating reforms to Nicaragua's social security system, the INSS. **In 2017, the International Monetary Fund, the dreaded IMF, warned the INSS's financial situation was becoming untenable, and urged Ortega to slash welfare benefits by 20-30 percent. The IMF also called for increasing the retirement age to anywhere from 63 to 65.**

Though **COSEP** has agreed reforms are needed, but in April withdrew from talks with the government after Ortega rejected the IMF line. The government proposed increasing employer and employee contributions to the INSS by 3.5 and 0.75 percent respectively, along with a 5 percent cut to pensions. **COSEP responded by accusing Ortega of failing to consult them and called for protests.**

The call was immediately met by university students, who took to the streets by the thousands. This is a curious phenomenon explained as a response to the "social security overhaul" announced by the government. However it was largely these NED financed student, along with other youth who have been

The Nicaraguan government has vowed to investigate allegations of police misconduct. "We will start a formal and responsible investigation into the loss of life of students, national police and civilians," Public Prosecutor Ines Miranda stated. The government has also announced a truth and reconciliation commission, along with agreeing to participate in national dialogue with opposition groups. The INSS reforms have likewise been suspended

There are a number of ways in which the violent demonstrations in Nicaragua look like those organized by the right-wing in Venezuela. These include (1) the demonstrators' use of "artisanal weapons," such as **mortars and rockets**, designed to obscure "the line between peaceful protest and the tactics of subversion and urban warfare," and thus to provoke a government response which could be labeled "a violation of human rights"; (2) attempts to **falsely blame the government for chemical weapons use** (a tried and true way to provoke foreign intervention); (3) **the inflation of the number of those killed in clashes**, combined with the downplaying of the deaths of state security forces; (4) **looting of private and public property**, including memorials to left-wing revolutionary leaders such as Hugo Chavez; (5) **the use of snipers**; and (6) **the support of the Catholic Church** and various NGOs for the anti-government activities.

The Nicaraguan left-wing media collective Tortilla con Sal believes that Ortega is the victim of a misinformation campaign from the right-wing. "In Nicaragua, the trigger for the initial protests was extreme misrepresentation of proposed social security reforms," they noted in a recent article for the Venezuela-based teleSUR network.

"Right-wing news outlets and social media networks demonized and distorted the government's proposal for modest, fairly distributed increases in social security contributions, plus better health care coverage for pensioners. **But they systematically omitted the business sector's savage, IMF-inspired neoliberal proposals to cut benefits,**" they argued.

Until very recently, such unrest in Nicaragua would have seemed unthinkable. With neighbors like the crime-ridden Honduras and El Salvador, for over a decade Nicaragua has quietly been garnering a reputation as an oasis of peace and security in an oft-troubled region. It's the kind of place travel aficionados drool over for its idyllic slow pace of life, stunning tropical landscape and welcoming culture. So much so, that in 2010 Nicaragua proudly announced it had hit a milestone of bringing in over a million tourists annually – a major achievement for a country of barely six million inhabitants. According to figures cited by the World Bank, between 2014 and 2016 the overall poverty rate in Nicaragua fell from 29.6 to 24.9 percent, while extreme poverty fell from 8.3 to 6.9 percent

As Noam Chomsky has opined numerous times, the US shall never forgive the Nicaraguan people for overthrowing the US-backed Somoza dictatorship in 1979, for militarily defeating the Contras and for then voting back in the Sandinistas in 2007. With a Trump administration and a Republican Congress it is certainly time for pay-back for such crimes.

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