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FEATURED Q&A

Will Crackdowns Spark New Protests in Nicaragua?



Hugo Torres (pictured), who helped to free Daniel Ortega from prison in the 1970s and later broke with Ortega, was among dozens of opponents jailed by Ortega's government last year. Torres died, still in custody, on Feb. 11 at age 73. // File Photo: Facebook Page of Hugo Torres.

Q Nicaragua in early February began the trials of political figures arrested prior to President Daniel Ortega's November 2021 election, which has been widely criticized as illegitimate. Several people have been convicted and sentenced in the trials. The country's National Assembly, which Ortega's party controls, also recently outlawed several universities and aid organizations. What are the implications of the opposition figures' trials and university closures? How likely are social uprisings to happen again soon in Nicaragua? How will the National Assembly's decision to outlaw aid groups affect social programs and aid in Nicaragua?

A Moisés Martínez Mayorga, investigative journalist at the digital portal of Confidential newspaper in Nicaragua: "The political trials undertaken by the regime of Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo are simply a strategy of political revenge against the leaders involved in the citizen insurrection of April 2018, mainly those who dared to step forward and challenge the caudillo during general elections. The former leftist guerrilla used the crudest possible strategy: he imprisoned all these candidates, unleashed a wave of repression that produced more than 60 new political prisoners, and, to complete his revenge, he tried them privately in a maximum-security prison and gave them sentences ranging from eight to 13 years in prison, based on ridiculous evidence, including publications on social networks and comments to the media. In this way, the regime is betting on establishing a climate of fear and political submission that prevents the emergence of new leadership and eliminates any possibility of a new social outburst.

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TODAY'S NEWS

POLITICAL

Colombia's High Court Expands Access to Abortion

Colombia's Constitutional Court on Monday decriminalized abortion up to the 24th week of pregnancy. Pro-choice activists had sought complete decriminalization but still saw the decision as a victory.

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ECONOMIC

Russia, Cuba to Strengthen Ties Following Visit

Russia and Cuba will strengthen ties and explore new collaboration, Cuba's Foreign Ministry said Friday following a visit by Russia's deputy prime minister.

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POLITICAL

Former Peruvian President Humala, Wife Go on Trial

Trial began Monday in the case of former Peruvian President Ollanta Humala and his wife, Nadine Heredia. The two are accused of illegally accepting money from Brazilian construction giant Odebrecht.

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Humala // File Photo: TV Perú.

POLITICAL NEWS

Colombia's High Court Expands Access to Abortion

Colombia's Constitutional Court on Monday decriminalized abortion up to the 24th week of pregnancy, the Associated Press reported. The 5-4 ruling fell short of complete decriminalization, which pro-choice groups had sought, but activists still saw the decision as a victory. Previously, Colombia allowed abortions when a woman's life was in danger, in cases of rape or when a fetus was malformed, the AP reported. The Constitutional Court's ruling will now allow women to have the procedure without restrictions until the 24th week of pregnancy. After that point, they would face restrictions. "We were trying to get the complete decriminalization of abortion ... but this is still a historic step," said Cristina Rosero, an attorney at the New York-based Center for Reproductive Rights, which was among five organizations that filed a lawsuit in 2020 in an effort to get the Constitutional Court to review the country's laws on abortion, the AP reported. However, advocates for keeping restrictions in place decried the ruling. Natalia Bernal, an attorney who supports restrictions on abortion called the court's decision "a fatal decision for Colombia," The Wall Street Journal reported. "It's one of the cruelest court decisions against children's rights. It's not just against women but against the unborn. There are long-term consequences," Bernal told the newspaper. In Latin America, Argentina, Chile and Uruguay allow abortions without restrictions until various stages of pregnancy, the AP reported. Last September, Mexico's Supreme Court ruled that women cannot be put on trial for terminating a pregnancy. In a poll last year in Colombia, 25 percent of respondents said they considered abortion a crime, while 42 percent said they did not. Women who get abortions illegally can face three years in prison. Health authorities estimate that some 400,000 women terminate pregnancies annually in Colombia, most of them illegally, The Wall Street Journal reported.

ECONOMIC NEWS

Russia, Cuba to Deepen Ties, Explore New Collaboration

Russia and Cuba will strengthen their ties and explore new avenues for collaboration in areas including energy, transportation, industry and banking, Cuba's Foreign Ministry said Friday following a visit to the Caribbean nation by Russian Deputy Prime Minister Yuri Borisov, Reuters reported. Cuba's government also expressed support for Russia as fears by Western nations mount over a potential Russian invasion of Ukraine. In its statement, Cuba accused the United States and its allies of targeting Russia with what it called "a propaganda war." Cuba also said that it "reiterates its position against the unilateral and unjust sanctions imposed by the West on the Eurasian country and against the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization towards the Russian borders," the wire service reported. Earlier in the week, Borisov visited Venezuela and Nicaragua, saying that Moscow would deepen ties also with those allies. Last month, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Rybakov refused to rule out the possibility of Russia sending military actors to Latin America. In a Q&A published Feb. 1 in the Advisor, Fabiana Perera, adjunct professor at Georgetown University, said that possibility should be taken seriously. "Russia's relationship with Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela is strong enough for the threat of the deployment of 'military actors' to be credible," said Perera. "This is a consequence of Russia's investment in the region over the past decade, a time that has seen the United States focus most of its efforts elsewhere, to its own detriment." Last week, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro met in Moscow with Russian President Vladimir Putin, a trip that the White House criticized on Friday. "I think Brazil may be on the other side of where the global community stands," said White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki, Reuters reported. During his trip, Bolsonaro expressed "solidarity" with Russia, though he did not elaborate.

NEWS BRIEFS

Trial Begins in Bribery Trial of Former Peruvian President Humala, Wife

Former Peruvian President Ollanta Humala went on trial Monday in connection with a bribery scandal involving Brazilian construction giant Odebrecht, Agence France-Presse reported. He and his wife, Nadine Heredia, are accused of illegally accepting \$3 million from Odebrecht while Humala was campaigning for president. Prosecutors are seeking 20 years in prison for the ex-president, and 26 years for his wife, according to AFP. Both have denied wrongdoing.

Chilean Banks See Positive Momentum in 2021, But Trend May Slow: Fitch

Chilean banks saw "positive momentum" in their results last year, though that trend could be slowing in the first half of this year. FitchRatings said Friday in a report. Chile's economic recovery and a low comparative base aided results in 2021 as net income grew to last year to \$4.42 billion, a 208 percent increase as compared to 2020, Fitch said. Chile's banking system also a decrease in loan-loss provisions last year, the ratings agency added.

Pan-American Life Announces Merger of Unit

Pan-America Life Insurance Group, which offers life, accident and health coverage in several countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, on Monday announced the merger of its Mutual Trust Life Insurance Company subsidiary into its Pan-American Life Insurance Company unit. The merger will result in Mutual Trust becoming a fully integrated division that will be called Mutual Trust Life Solutions, the parent company said in a statement. Mutual Trust will continue its operations with no resulting changes to its product portfolio or distribution channels, the statement added.

BUSINESS NEWS

Brazil's Cielo Agrees to Sell Stake in Merchant e-Solutions

Brazil-based payment processor Cielo announced Friday that it has agreed to sell its stake in U.S.-based Merchant e-Solutions for as much as \$290 million, Brazilian newspaper Valor Econômico reported. Cielo said it is selling the stake in the payment services provider to a unit of Integrum Holdings. The buyer's Sam Acquisition Corp. will pay \$140 million for the stake at the closing of the transaction and as much as \$150 million in connection with an earn-out component that will depend on various conditions, Reuters reported. "The transaction is part of Cielo's strategy to increase focus on its core business in Brazil, in line with other divestments concluded during 2021," Cielo said in a securities filing. The announcement sent Cielo's shares to their highest levels since last August, making them the top gainers that day on Brazil's Bovespa stock index. Cielo said its board of directors had approved the terms and conditions of the sale and that its conclusion is subject to various conditions that are typical for this type of transaction, Valor Econômico reported. Cielo bought the stake in Merchant e-Solutions in a transactions worth \$670 million. Despite Cielo's sale of the stake for less than the company paid for it a decade ago, analysts at Citi said the sale was a good move. "Merchant-e generated less than \$2 million in net income in 2021 after years of heavy losses," said Citi analysts, Valor Econômico reported. On Feb. 2, Cielo reported fourth-quarter net profit of 336.9 million reais (\$64.03 million), a 13 percent increase as compared to the same quarter a year earlier, Reuters reported. The company also reported operational net revenue of 3.1 billion reais, a 3.9 percent increase year-on-year for the fourth quarter. Last August, Cielo denied a local newspaper report that its board of directors was considering a move to take the company private, Yahoo Finance reported at the time.

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To complete this strategy and continue with its political revenge, 'orteguismo' impounded universities that were the core of the student protest movements in 2018 and closed NGOs that were dedicated to promoting democratic knowledge and critical thinking. This is a strategy that, supported by the surveillance and espionage operations of the army and the police, guarantees the regime the improbability that the scenario of the 2018 protests will be repeated."

A **Emily Mendrala, deputy assistant secretary for Western Hemisphere affairs at the U.S. Department of State:** "The ongoing trials and actions against universities, journalists and NGOs represent the latest chapter in the Ortega-Murillo government's effort to spread fear and close the remaining democratic spaces in Nicaragua. The government's takeover of private universities and canceling of NGOs demonstrate its pursuit of ever greater political and social control. These actions deprive Nicaraguans, and young people in particular, of opportunities vital to their future and the future of the country. The charges against the detainees were always political in nature and meant to exclude the legitimate opposition from last year's electoral process. The unjust treatment of the detainees denies the prisoners access to family members, legal counsel and adequate food. Credible accounts reveal other abuses: excessive confinement, continuous interrogations, and sleep deprivation. These abuses are particularly egregious and unconscionable for the many older or ill detainees, such as retired General Hugo Torres, who died in custody during his unjust, inhumane and abusive imprisonment. The detainees have never been given a fair process, and the trials are being conducted without transparency. Respected Nicaraguan lawyers have highlighted numerous irregularities. Reliable public polling suggests that even many ruling party sympathizers are appalled by these repressive government actions. The

United States government urges Nicaragua to immediately and unconditionally release these individuals whose only crime was to pursue peaceful political change."

A **Cynthia Arnson, director of the Latin American Program at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars:** "The horrific sequence of show trials underway in Nicaragua, coupled with the attacks on universities and NGOs, manifest the Ortega-Murillo regime's quest for total control of the country's political and civic life. It should not have taken the death in prison of former Sandinista commander Hugo Torres to re-awaken the international community to the gravity of Nicaragua's human rights crisis. Since last year's arrests of opposition leaders last

“It has been clear that Daniel Ortega will stop at nothing to assure his grip on power.”

— Cynthia Arnson

year in advance of the November presidential election, it has been clear that Daniel Ortega will stop at nothing to assure his grip on power. The university closures are an extension of that effort, given the leading role that students and young people played in the massive anti-government protests of 2018, during which government troops and allied paramilitaries murdered hundreds in cold blood. Similarly, the crackdown on aid groups aims to ensure that no entity independent of the government acquires legitimacy in the eyes of the Nicaraguan people. All of these measures will have a chilling effect on future activism. The economic and individual sanctions imposed by the Biden administration signal a repudiation of the government's tactics. But they are unlikely to produce a change in regime behavior—especially Ortega's, who four decades ago

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survived the U.S.-sponsored contra war. Given Ortega's past courtship of the Catholic Church, Pope Francis should play a proactive role in freeing political prisoners held in deplorable conditions and whose lives are at risk."

A **Ryan C. Berg, senior fellow of the Americas Program at the Center for Strategic & International Studies:** "The Ortega-Murillo regime has embarked on a scorched-earth campaign to cement itself in power, propped up by Iran, Russia and now China. Hundreds of political prisoners languish in the regime's dungeons, while others have received lengthy prison sentences—in some cases, for nothing more than a purportedly offensive tweet. At the cost of severe international isolation, the regime's goal is to wrest control of all possible centers of resistance and opposition. It will not stop until it have decimated civil society, academia and even areas of the private sector that oppose its attempt to consolidate a dynastic dictatorship. Nicaragua is a full-blown police state, making it unlikely that we will see mass mobilizations in the country again soon. However, Nicaraguans are extremely resilient, and it is nearly impossible for the Ortega-Murillo regime to extinguish the embers that still burn for freedom and a return to democracy. The Nicaraguan diaspora—growing, given the outmigration due to the level of repression in the country—is

organizing itself abroad and will continue to push the issue of Nicaragua in international forums. It is unlikely that significant space for opposition mobilization in Nicaragua will appear until the United States, in conjunction with its partners—Canada, the United King-

“**Nicaragua is a full-blown police state, making it unlikely that we will see mass mobilizations in the country again soon.**”

— Ryan C. Berg

dom, the European Union and willing Latin American countries—bring enough pressure to bear on the Ortega-Murillo regime that schisms within the ruling coalition appear, or—less likely—the regime decides to walk back its current path and negotiate a way out.”

[Editor's note: The Advisor requested commentaries for this issue from Nicaragua's ambassador to the United States and its ambassador to the Organization of American States but received no response from either of them.]

The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta at gkuleta@thedialogue.org.

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Erik Brand

Publisher
ebrand@thedialogue.org

Gene Kuleta

Editor
gkuleta@thedialogue.org

Leticia Chacón

Reporter
lchacon@thedialogue.org

Mark Kennedy

Reporter
mkenedy@thedialogue.org



Michael Shifter, President

Rebecca Bill Chavez, Nonresident Senior Fellow

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Subscription inquiries are welcomed at ebrand@thedialogue.org

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