



HUMAN
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WATCH

Critics Under Attack

Harassment and Detention of Opponents, Rights Defenders,
and Journalists ahead of Elections in Nicaragua



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and Journalists Ahead of Elections in Nicaragua**

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Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-1-62313-915-5

Cover design by Rafael Jimenez

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Summary

As Nicaragua prepares for presidential elections scheduled for November 7, 2021, the administration of President Daniel Ortega has launched a campaign of arbitrary detention and harassment of government critics, including human rights defenders, journalists, and members of the political opposition. At the same time, the government has used its majority in the National Assembly to enact far-reaching restrictions on civil and political rights and an electoral “reform” that in fact makes it easier to remove potential political rivals.

The government has also entrenched its control of the Supreme Electoral Council (Consejo Supremo Electoral, CSE), Nicaragua’s electoral oversight body. Soon after the National Assembly appointed new, pro-government members to the CSE, the electoral body banned an opposition party that had functioned as the electoral vehicle of one of the two main opposition coalitions.

Starting in late May 2021, as this report was being finalized, over a period of one week Nicaraguan authorities detained and launched seemingly politically motivated criminal investigations against four prominent opposition candidates who were running for president:

- Cristiana Chamorro is under investigation for alleged money laundering and “forgery of official documents,” among other charges. The Interior Ministry accused her of using international funds funneled through a foundation that works to protect free speech in order to commit “terrorist acts and destabilization.” The Attorney General’s Office requested Chamorro’s disqualification because she was under investigation; Chamorro’s house was raided and she was placed under house arrest.
- Arturo Cruz Sequeira was detained by police after he got off a plane from the United States, for allegedly “conspiring against Nicaraguan society.” Since his arrest, Cruz has been held incommunicado at the Direction of Judicial Assistance prison (also known as the El Chipote prison), a detention center where detainees have repeatedly been subject to abuse. At the time of writing, Cruz had virtually no access to his lawyer or family.

- Félix Maradiaga is being investigated for allegedly “asking for military interventions,” “organizing terrorist and destabilizing acts with funding from foreign powers,” “requesting, exalting, and applauding the imposition of sanctions against Nicaragua and its citizens,” and “inciting foreign interference in Nicaragua’s affairs.” He was allegedly being held incommunicado at El Chipote prison at time of writing.
- Juan Sebastián Chamorro was detained on the same day as Maradiaga and accused of the same offenses. He was also allegedly being held at El Chipote at time of writing.

Authorities carried out a cascade of additional arrests in the following days, detaining nine other government critics as of June 14. Additionally, on June 20, authorities detained Miguel Mora Barberena, a journalist and opposition presidential candidate. As with Maradiaga and Chamorro, the 10 others were under investigation on grounds such as allegedly “asking for military interventions,” “organizing terrorist and destabilizing acts with funding from foreign powers,” “requesting, exalting, and applauding the imposition of sanctions against Nicaragua and its citizens,” and “inciting foreign interference in Nicaragua’s affairs.”

These high-profile arrests and the other serious human rights violations Human Rights Watch identified when carrying out research for this report appear to be part of a broader strategy to suppress dissent, instill fear, and restrict political participation. Under current conditions, Nicaraguans face daunting—and likely insurmountable—obstacles to their rights to freedom of expression, assembly, and association and their rights to vote and run for public office in free and fair elections.

Between February and June 2021, Human Rights Watch interviewed 53 people in Nicaragua by telephone, including 46 activists, lawyers, journalists, human rights defenders, and political opponents who were victims of harassment and/or had been subjected to arbitrary detention. We also reviewed photos and videos taken during arrests, as well as media reports and publications by local and international human rights groups. On May 14, Human Rights Watch requested information from Nicaraguan authorities on the status of investigations into these types of cases, but it had not received a response at the time of writing.

The government often deploys security forces—including the military, anti-riot police, and police in plainclothes—and pro-government supporters outside of critics' homes. We have documented cases in which officers have barred critics, and at times their family members, from leaving their homes, and photographed or asked for the IDs of anyone who enters or leaves the residences. Some of those targeted by the government's tactics have reported that this surveillance intimidates and discourages their neighbors from participating in demonstrations or activities related to opposition groups. The police have also placed specific restrictions on the movement of opposition leaders, such as forbidding them from traveling outside the cities they live to go to political party events, which effectively prevent them from engaging in their parties' activities.

Victims described police standing outside their homes—sometimes coming and going, in other instances for periods of a few hours, and in some instances for days or months. In some cases, police appear outside their homes at night, waking people up with their patrol car sirens. Many victims said they feel isolated and are unable to visit friends and family, attend meetings, go to work, or participate in protests. In two cases documented in this report, police actions harmed children. In one case, police prevented two children from attending school for three days; in another, police delayed a child's access to health care.

To buy food, go to work, or visit family members, some victims resorted to disguises or left their homes only when police were absent. Even then, police followed them in some cases, often on motorcycles. In two cases we documented, police and members of armed pro-government groups beat and arrested people who had left their homes. Media and rights organizations have reported police forcing other critics to delete videos or photos of anti-government protests from their cellphones, as well as harassing and beating those covering protests or opposition events.

Some of those harassed were repeatedly subjected to arbitrary detention, usually for periods ranging from several hours to several days. Police arrested government critics at checkpoints, on the street, or in their homes, in most cases without showing a warrant. In the majority of cases, the police did not tell people why they were being arrested nor presented arrest orders to justify their detention. Human Rights Watch documented three cases of women who suffered sexual harassment and assault during their time in detention.

Police accused some of being “coup plotters,” “working for the United States,” or being “government haters.” Our interviews show that those who had been previously arrested during the brutal crackdown on anti-government protests in 2018 and subjected to abusive prosecution have suffered from regular police harassment and surveillance since being released. In several cases, authorities interrogated them about their political activism. And in at least seven cases, security forces re-arrested critics, albeit on allegations that are apparently unrelated to their 2018 prosecutions.

Often, police officers threatened people when releasing them, telling them they could be killed or arrested again. Several people described abusive treatment in detention which, in at least two cases documented by Human Rights Watch, likely amounts to torture. This includes brutal beatings, forcing women to squat naked for no obvious purpose other than to humiliate and intimidate them. In one instance, officials repeatedly forced a woman’s head underwater.

Nicaraguan human rights groups and media have reported over 400 cases that follow a pattern similar to the one documented by Human Rights Watch. These abuses take on an added importance in the current electoral context, as they appear intended to restrict political participation by government critics and opponents.

Given the Ortega administration’s flagrant attempts to undermine basic democratic institutions and the rights of Nicaraguans, it is essential that key international actors do more. Human Rights Watch calls on the international community to redouble its pressure on Nicaraguan authorities to end the ongoing repression, hold perpetrators accountable, and ensure that Nicaraguans can exercise their political rights in free and fair elections.

Recommendations

To ensure accountability for, and to deter the repetition of, the serious human rights abuses documented in this report, as well as to ensure that Nicaraguans can exercise their political rights, it is critically important to intensify international pressure on the Nicaraguan government. Specifically:

Members of the United Nations Human Rights Council should:

- Call on the Nicaraguan government to comply, and monitor the extent of its compliance, with the Council’s resolution A/HRC/46/L.8 of March 12, 2021, which urges the government to “repeal or amend legislation that may unduly restrict the rights to the freedoms of expression and association, to privacy and to take part in the conduct of public affairs,” and to “adopt...electoral and institutional reforms to ensure free, fair, transparent, representative and credible elections in accordance with international standards, that include the presence of independent national and international electoral observers;”¹ and
- Carefully consider and engage with updates and reports by the OHCHR and ensure continued consideration of the human rights situation in Nicaragua, including by calling on the Nicaraguan government to allow the OHCHR team to return to Nicaragua to monitor and document grave human rights violations perpetrated in the country since April 2018.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres should:

- Continue to monitor the situation in Nicaragua and speak out publicly to voice his concerns about the deteriorating human rights situation in the country;
- In line with his Call to Action on Human Rights and under Article 99 of the United Nations Charter, bring the crisis to the attention of the Security Council and urge its members to hold an open session on developments in Nicaragua;

¹ UN Human Rights Council, “Promotion and Protection of Human Rights in Nicaragua,” Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the High Commissioner and the Secretary-General, A/HRC/46/L.8, March 12, 2021, <http://www.oacnudh.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/HRC48-L8-HR-in-Nicaragua.pdf> (accessed March 12, 2021).

- Urge the UN Security Council to support the efforts of the OHCHR and the HRC on Nicaragua;
- Publicly voice support for international efforts to hold those responsible for grave human rights violations in Nicaragua accountable for their crimes.

Members of the UN Security Council should:

- Invite both the secretary-general and the high commissioner for human rights to brief council members on the situation in Nicaragua in a formal or informal public session;
- Add Nicaragua to the Security Council’s agenda and consider implementing targeted sanctions against those responsible for grave human rights abuses.

Relevant UN Special Procedures should:

- Monitor and report to the Human Rights Council on human rights violations within their mandates, including on freedom of peaceful assembly and association, on freedom of opinion and expression, on the situation of human rights defenders, on violence against women, and on torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment, particularly regarding Nicaraguan authorities’ abusive practices against government critics.

The United States, Canada, the European Union, EU member states, Latin American governments and other concerned governments should:

- Press the Ortega administration to authorize international human rights bodies that were expelled in 2018— the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)—to re-enter Nicaragua to monitor human rights conditions in the country.
- Impose (or maintain if already implemented) targeted sanctions, including travel bans and asset freezes, on senior government officials who bear responsibility for the human rights violations documented in this report, including:
 - President Daniel Ortega, who is the supreme chief of the Nicaraguan National Police and has sweeping powers, including to “command” the

police at his will. Members of the National Police engaged in serious human rights abuses during the 2018 protests, including disproportionate use of force that sometimes resulted in extrajudicial killings; enforced disappearances; widespread arbitrary or illegal detentions; and prevalent ill-treatment, including instances of sexual violence in detention centers. Additionally, the administration of President Ortega has targeted human rights defenders through death threats, physical attacks, arbitrary detention, abusive searches, forced closures of human rights groups, and media outlets, as well as with abusive legislation that restricts freedom of expression, assembly, and association;

- Vice President Rosario María Murillo de Ortega, who is widely perceived as sharing presidential powers. The US Department of the Treasury has described her as the “de facto co-president” of Nicaragua, noting she has “access and influence” over the country’s police. Additionally, the Interdisciplinary OAS Group of Independent Experts on Nicaragua has noted that Murillo’s speeches “endorsed” and helped “increase” the 2018 crackdown.² Murillo has also publicly supported abusive law reforms, including the “hate crimes” constitutional amendment described in this report;
- Lawmaker Gustavo Eduardo Porras Cortes, president of the National Assembly and a close government ally. Under Porras’ leadership, the National Assembly has enacted laws that undermine democratic institutions and processes, including the Special Law on Cybercrimes; the Law for the Regulation of Foreign Agents; the Law for the Defense of People’s Rights to Independence, Sovereignty, and Self-determination for Peace; and an Amnesty Law passed in June 2019 for crimes committed in the context of the 2018 protests that helps shield government officials from prosecution for extrajudicial killings and other violations;
- Lawmaker Edwin Castro, the speaker of the government’s party, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (Frente Sandinista de Liberación

² Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts (GIEI), IACHR, “Report About the Acts of Violence that Occurred Between April 18 and May 30, 2018” (“Informe sobre los hechos de violencia ocurridos entre el 18 de abril y el 30 de mayo de 2018”), December 2018, https://gieinicaragua.org/giei-content/uploads/2018/12/GIEI_INFORME_DIGITAL.pdf (accessed May 20, 2021).

Nacional, FSLN), which has a majority in the National Assembly. Under his leadership, lawmakers of the FSLN have passed several reforms that severely restrict freedom of expression and association, including the Cyber Crimes Law and the Hate Crimes constitutional amendment, as well as the Amnesty Law;

- Attorney General Ana Julia Guido Ochoa, who was appointed in 2014 and remains in office, was head of the Attorney General’s Office during the politically motivated prosecution of opponents during the 2018 protests, and she continued to hold that position during the investigations and prosecutions documented in this report. Under her leadership, the Attorney General’s Office prompted arbitrary criminal investigations against opposition candidates and critics;
 - National Police Commissioner Francisco Javier Díaz, who is believed to have exercised significant control over the force, first as deputy director and later as director general during the anti-government protests that began in April 2018. As chief of the police, Díaz is responsible for actions taken by officers under his command, given that he knew or should have known about their repressive actions, including the forms of selective repression that continue to take place today.
- Call on the government to create an independent investigative unit with international experts to oversee credible, impartial, and exhaustive investigations by the Attorney General’s Office into the alleged responsibility of top police officials in grave human rights violations committed in the context of the 2018 crackdown and beyond;
 - Through their representatives and embassies in Nicaragua, closely monitor the situation on the ground, including through trial monitoring if possible and visiting critics and opposition leaders in prison or under house arrest if allowed, and openly condemn abuses against independent media and human rights defenders, and support their work;
 - Call on the government to end human rights violations against critics such as those documented in the report, including sexual violence and other ill-treatment—in some cases amounting to torture—in detention.

The Organization of American States (OAS) political bodies should:

- Press the Ortega government to authorize an in-country visit by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the re-entry of its Special Monitoring Mechanism for Nicaragua (MESENI);
- Continue to closely monitor and report on the human rights situation in Nicaragua, including in connection with the 2021 presidential elections, as part of their ongoing analysis of Nicaragua's obligations under the Inter-American Democratic Charter.

The Signatory Countries to the 1984 Convention against Torture and the Inter-American Convention to Prevent and Punish Torture should:

- Exercise criminal jurisdiction, to the extent permitted under domestic law, over any Nicaraguan officials responsible for torture, in accordance with article 5 of the UN Convention Against Torture.

I. Repressive Legislation and Electoral Reform in Nicaragua

President Daniel Ortega has been in power since 2007. In 2009, the Supreme Court of Justice issued a resolution allowing Ortega to circumvent a constitutional prohibition on reelection and run for a second term.³ A constitutional amendment approved by his party, which controlled—and still controls—the National Assembly, abolished term limits in 2014, allowing him to run for a third term in 2016.⁴ His administration exerts full control over every branch of government, including the judiciary and the Supreme Electoral Council.⁵ Ortega will seek a fourth consecutive term on November 7, 2021.⁶

A series of election-related changes and new legislation and reforms have, in combination, drastically restricted opportunities for government opponents and others to express criticism of government policies. These far-reaching measures are incompatible with the rights to freedom of expression, assembly, and association and the rights to vote and run for public office in free and fair elections, meaning that Nicaragua is in breach of its obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the American Convention on Human Rights.⁷ In addition, the Inter-American Democratic Charter calls on member states of the Organization of American States to “promote and defend”

³ “The Supreme Court of Nicaragua gives free rein to the reelection of Ortega” (“El Tribunal Supremo de Nicaragua da vía libre a la reelección de Ortega”), *El País*, October 21, 2009, https://elpais.com/diario/2009/10/21/internacional/1256076010_850215.html (accessed June 17, 2021).

⁴ Partial Reform to the Political Constitution of the Republic of Nicaragua Law (Ley de Reforma Parcial a la Constitución Política de la República de Nicaragua), *National Assembly*, Law No. 854, January 29, 2014, [http://legislacion.asamblea.gob.ni/SILEG/Iniciativas.nsf/0/9e79461787f2f8of06257c1600609eao/\\$FILE/29-01-2014%20Ley%20No.%20854%20Reformas%20Constitucionales.pdf](http://legislacion.asamblea.gob.ni/SILEG/Iniciativas.nsf/0/9e79461787f2f8of06257c1600609eao/$FILE/29-01-2014%20Ley%20No.%20854%20Reformas%20Constitucionales.pdf); “President Daniel Ortega gets indefinite reelection” (“El presidente Daniel Ortega consigue la reelección indefinida”), *El País*, January 29, 2014, https://elpais.com/internacional/2014/01/29/actualidad/1390955328_152316.html (accessed May 1, 2021).

⁵ Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2021 Nicaragua Chapter*, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/nicaragua>.

⁶ Yubelka Mendoza and Anatoly Kurmanaev, “In Nicaragua the Crackdown Intensifies and Democracy is at risk” (“En Nicaragua se profundiza la represión y la democracia peligra”), *The New York Times*, June 7, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/es/2021/06/07/espanol/nicaragua-daniel-ortega-democracia.html> (accessed June 17, 2021).

⁷ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), adopted December 16, 1966, G.A. Res. 2200A (XXI), 21 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 16) at 52, U.N. Doc. A/6316 (1966), 999 U.N.T.S. 171, entered into force March 23, 1976, ratified by Nicaragua in 1980; American Convention on Human Rights (“Pact of San José, Costa Rica”), adopted November 22, 1969, O.A.S. Treaty Series No. 36, 1144 U.N.T.S. 123, entered into force July 18, 1978, reprinted in Basic Documents Pertaining to Human Rights in the Inter-American System, OEA/Ser.L.V/II.82 doc.6 rev.1 at 25 (1992), ratified by Nicaragua on September 25, 1979.

democracy, including by respecting human rights and eliminating barriers to participation in political organizations and public life.⁸

Bogus Electoral Reform

In October 2020, the Organization of American States (OAS) adopted a resolution calling on Ortega’s government to implement electoral reforms, including “independent, credible, and accredited international electoral observation,” and “restructuring of the Supreme Electoral Council (CSE) to ensure it operates in a fully independent, transparent and accountable fashion.”⁹

Instead, on May 4, 2021, the National Assembly approved an electoral reform that consolidates the government’s control over the electoral process and seems designed to further distort the playing field to favor President Ortega.¹⁰ Specifically, the reform:

- Codifies troubling new grounds for excluding candidates. It bans so-called “traitors” and “people who receive funding from abroad”—broad and ill-defined terms that invite selective application against political foes to prevent them from running for elections or holding public office.¹¹
- Does not require independent domestic or international electoral observation, which the OAS and the United Nations Human Rights Council deemed essential to ensure credible scrutiny of the elections.¹²
- Regulates the power of the National Police to authorize demonstrations in public spaces, including public campaign events. Given the police’s direct participation in

⁸ Inter-American Democratic Charter, Organization of American States, adopted September 11, 2001, http://www.oas.org/OASpage/eng/Documents/Democractic_Charter.htm, art. 1.

⁹ Organization of American States, “Resolution Restoring Democratic Institutions and Respect for Human Rights in Nicaragua Through Free and Fair Elections,” adopted October 21, 2020, AG/doc.5710/20 rev. 1, https://www.oas.org/en/media_center/press_release.asp?sCodigo=S-019/20 (accessed May 2, 2021).

¹⁰ Reform and Addition Law to Law N^o. 331, Electoral Law (Ley de Reforma y Adición a la Ley N^o. 331, Ley Electoral), *National Assembly*, Law No. 1070, May 4, 2021, <http://legislacion.asamblea.gob.ni/Normaweb.nsf/9e314815a08d4a6206257265005d21f9/4fca1b711015f9af062586ce00762351?OpenDocument>; “Statement from the General Secretariat on the Election of CSE Magistrates and Electoral Reform in Nicaragua,” OAS press release, May 6, 2021, https://www.oas.org/en/media_center/press_release.asp?sCodigo=E-047/21 (accessed May 31, 2020).

¹¹ Reform and Addition Law to Law N^o. 331, Electoral Law, arts. 81 and 180.

¹² Organization of American States, “Resolution Restoring Democratic Institutions and Respect for Human Rights in Nicaragua Through Free and Fair Elections,” adopted October 21, 2020, AG/doc.5710/20 rev. 1, https://www.oas.org/en/media_center/press_release.asp?sCodigo=S-019/20 (accessed June 15, 2021); UN Human Rights Council, “Promotion and protection of human rights in Nicaragua,” A/HRC/46/L.8, March 12, 2021, <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/46/L.8> (accessed June 15, 2021).

the crackdown against political opponents, and the lack of judicial independence to act as a check on their powers, it is extremely unlikely that the police would implement these regulations in a way that favors the political participation of all.¹³

On May 4, Ortega retained a tight grip on the electoral oversight body, the Supreme Electoral Council (CSE), when the National Assembly—controlled by the ruling party, the FSLN—appointed new members loyal to his party. Under Nicaraguan law, the National Assembly has the power to appoint CSE members “in consultation with relevant civil society organizations.”¹⁴ There was no consultation with civil society, however, and not a single appointed member was proposed by the opposition.¹⁵ The current CSE is composed of seven members and three substitutes, the majority of whom are members of the government’s party or former government officials.¹⁶ Six were proposed by the FSLN, and the rest by parties allied with Ortega.¹⁷

On May 18, the Supreme Electoral Council adopted a resolution stripping the Democratic Restoration Party (Partido de Restauración Democrática, PRD)—the party representing the civic and political movements that form the opposition National Coalition—of its legal registration, saying that the PRD had violated the “values that underpinned the foundation and constitution of the party.”¹⁸ The PRD is now prohibited from participating in the upcoming presidential elections.

¹³ Reform and Addition Law to Law N^o. 331, Electoral Law, art. 89.

¹⁴ Nicaraguan Constitution, *National Assembly*, November 11, 1986, <https://observatoriop10.cepal.org/es/instrumentos/constitucion-politica-la-republica-nicaragua>, art. 138.

¹⁵ “The FSLN Retains Control over the Electoral Council and Establishes Reforms against the Opposition” (“El FSLN retiene el control del Consejo Electoral e impone reformas contra la oposición”), *Expediente Público*, May 5, 2021, <https://expedientepublico.org/el-fsln-retiene-el-control-del-consejo-electoral-e-impone-reformas-contra-la-oposicion/> (accessed June 7, 2021).

¹⁶ They are Brenda Rocha Chacón, Alma Nubia Baltodano Marcenaro, Devoney McDavis Alvarez, Mayra Salinas Uriarte, Lumberto Campbell Hooker, Cairo Melvin Amador, Leonzo Knight Julian, Adriana Marina Molina Fajardo, Maura Lizeth Alvarez Ortiz, and Alberto Julián Blandón Baldizón. Karen Díaz López and Roy Moncada, “Profiles: These are the New Supreme Electoral Council Magistrates” (“Perfiles. Estos son los nuevos magistrados del Consejo Supremo Electoral”), *La Prensa*, May 4, 2021, <https://www.laprensa.com.ni/2021/05/04/politica/2818606-perfiles-estos-son-los-nuevos-magistrados-del-consejo-supremo-electoral> (accessed May 4, 2021).

¹⁷ Moisés Martínez, “Congress Opens the Door to a New Electoral Fraud by FSLN” (“Parlamento abre las puertas a un nuevo fraude electoral del FSLN”), *El Confidencial*, May 4, 2021, <https://www.confidencial.com.ni/politica/reformas-electorales-y-magistrados-a-la-medida-del-fsln-abren-puertas-a-nuevo-fraude/> (accessed May 4, 2021).

¹⁸ Resolution, *Supreme Electoral Council*, May 18, 2021, https://www.cse.gob.ni/sites/default/files/documentos/cancelacion_prd.pdf (accessed May 18, 2021).

On June 3, the CSE issued a statement barring presidential candidates who are “not in compliance” with Nicaraguan laws, including the sweeping and easily abused new foreign agents and “traitors” laws, described below, from running for office.¹⁹

Repressive Legislation

The electoral reform follows the adoption of other laws and other reforms by the pro-government National Assembly in recent months that severely undermine basic rights and the rule of law and contribute to a context in which free and fair elections are not possible. These laws violate due process under international human rights law and could be used to deter critical speech, restrict freedom of assembly, give a legal veneer to arbitrary detention, inhibit opposition participation in elections, and keep critics in prison without bringing formal charges to prevent or limit their political participation.

The Law for the Defense of People’s Rights to Independence, Sovereignty, and Self-determination for Peace (Law N° 1055) of December 2020 prohibits so-called “traitors” from running for or holding public office. It defines “traitors” in sweeping terms; to include, for example, people who “undermine independence, sovereignty and self-determination” or “damage the supreme interests of the nation.” The law is silent on how such a determination would be made, or by whom.²⁰

The Law for the Regulation of Foreign Agents of October 2020 requires entities and people who receive funding from abroad to register as “foreign agents” with the Interior Ministry.²¹ In turn, “foreign agents” are barred from intervening in “issues, activities or matters of internal or external politics,” and face undetermined criminal penalties if they do so. Those

¹⁹ Copy of statement on file at Human Rights Watch.

²⁰ Law for the Defense of People’s Rights to Independence, Sovereignty, and Self-determination for Peace (Ley de Defensa de los Derechos del Pueblo a la Independencia, la Soberanía y Autodeterminación para la paz), *National Assembly*, Law No. 1055, December 21, 2020, <http://legislacion.asamblea.gob.ni/SILEG/Iniciativas.nsf/C4084E2665A5610F06258642007E9C3F/%24File/Ley%20N%C2%Bo%201055%2C%20Ley%20Defensa%20de%20los%20Derechos%20del%20Pueblo.pdf?Open>; “Nicaragua: Law Threatens Free, Fair Elections,” Human Rights Watch news release, December 22, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/12/22/nicaragua-law-threatens-free-fair-elections>.

²¹ Foreign Agents Law (Ley de Regulación de Agentes Extranjeros), *National Assembly*, Law No. 1040, October 15, 2020, <http://legislacion.asamblea.gob.ni/normaweb.nsf/9e314815a08d4a6206257265005d21f9/3306286cd4e82c5f06258607005fdf6b?OpenDocument>.

failing to register within a 60-day period could face fines, revocation of legal recognition, and confiscation of property.²²

The Special Law on Cybercrimes, also passed in October 2020, establishes criminal sentences of up to four years in prison for anyone who uses communications technology to “publish” or “disseminate” “false or distorted information, likely to spread anxiety, anguish or fear.” It also punishes with up to five years in prison anyone who publishes “false or distorted information” that “promotes hate and violence, [or] endangers economic stability, public order or health, or national security,” terms that are not defined under the law.²³

A constitutional amendment adopted in January 2021 allows lifetime imprisonment for “grave crimes...when there are hate, cruel, degrading, humiliating, or inhumane circumstances that, due to their impact, provoke commotion, rejection, outrage, and disgust in society.”²⁴ The amendment could open the door to further abuses, since the government often baselessly accuses critics and political opponents of “hate crimes.”²⁵

A reform of the Code of Criminal Procedure of February 2021 enables prosecutors to hold detainees for long periods without charge.²⁶ While prosecutors used to have to charge or release detainees after 48 hours, the reform now allows judges to extend the deadline for as long as 90 days. In analyzing a request for extension, a judge must consider a range of factors, including the “seriousness of the offence,” “the complexity of the investigation,”

²² Foreign Agents Law (Ley de Regulación de Agentes Extranjeros), *National Assembly*, Law No. 1040, October 15, 2020, <http://legislacion.asamblea.gob.ni/normaweb.nsf/9e314815a08d4a6206257265005d21f9/3306286cd4e82c5f06258607005fdf6b?OpenDocument>.

²³ Special Law on Cybercrimes (Ley Especial de Ciberdelitos), *National Assembly*, Law No. 1042, October 27, 2020, [http://legislacion.asamblea.gob.ni/normaweb.nsf/\(\\$All\)/803E7C7FBCF44D7706258611007C6D87?OpenDocument](http://legislacion.asamblea.gob.ni/normaweb.nsf/($All)/803E7C7FBCF44D7706258611007C6D87?OpenDocument).

²⁴ Reform of Article 37 of Nicaragua’s Constitution (Ley de Reforma al artículo 37 de la Constitución Política de la República de Nicaragua), January 18, 2021, <http://legislacion.asamblea.gob.ni/normaweb.nsf/9e314815a08d4a6206257265005d21f9/259e2fcbcc244949106258662007a06e6?OpenDocument>.

²⁵ During a speech on Nicaragua’s Independence Day, September 15, 2020, President Daniel Ortega justified the proposed hate crimes legislation by saying that opposition activists “are not Nicaraguans; they are the children of demons, of the devil, and they are full of hate, loaded with hate.” “Daniel Ortega threatens life imprisonment for the Blue and White majority” (“Daniel Ortega amenaza con cadena perpetua a la mayoría Azul y Blanco”), video clip, Youtube, September 16, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=peXRBCkjp10> (accessed June 1, 2021).

²⁶ Reform and Addition to Law No. 406, Code of Criminal Procedure (Ley de Reforma y Adición a la Ley Nº. 406, Código Procesal Penal De La República De Nicaragua), *National Assembly*, Law No. 1060, February 2, 2021, [http://legislacion.asamblea.gob.ni/Normaweb.nsf/\(\\$All\)/49C912ED7DDE58CE062586760053C890?OpenDocument](http://legislacion.asamblea.gob.ni/Normaweb.nsf/($All)/49C912ED7DDE58CE062586760053C890?OpenDocument).

and “whether the crimes have social relevance and national significance.” Nicaraguan law, however, provides no definition of crimes of “social relevance” or “national significance.”

II. Arbitrary Detention and Targeted Harassment

A brutal crackdown on protesters by Nicaragua's National Police and armed pro-government groups in 2018 left over 300 people dead and 2,000 injured. The crackdown resulted in hundreds of arbitrary arrests and prosecutions.²⁷ Over 100 people detained during the protests were released under a broad Amnesty Law adopted in June 2019.²⁸ Due in part to the Amnesty Law, no investigations or criminal proceedings were underway at time of writing to identify and convict those responsible for human rights violations related to the 2018 crackdown. In 2019, President Ortega promoted top officials implicated in the abuses.²⁹

In March 2021, the UN Human Rights Council issued a resolution on the situation in Nicaragua, saying police and pro-government groups continue to commit abuses, including “violent attacks and repeated acts of intimidation and harassment.”³⁰ Our research shows that, since the approval of the Amnesty Law, Ortega's government has employed selective repression, including surveillance, harassment, threats, torture, and arbitrary detention, against civil society and the political opposition. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has reached similar conclusions.³¹

²⁷ Human Rights Watch, *Crackdown in Nicaragua: Torture, Ill-Treatment, and Prosecutions of Protesters and Opponents*, June 19, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/06/19/crackdown-nicaragua/torture-ill-treatment-and-prosecutions-protesters-and>.

²⁸ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, “Persons Deprived of Liberty in Nicaragua in connection with the Human Rights Crisis that Began on April 18, 2018,” October 5, 2020, <http://www.oas.org/en/iachr/reports/pdfs/Nicaragua-PPL-en.pdf> (accessed March 30, 2021), p. 25.

²⁹ Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2021*, Nicaragua Chapter, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/nicaragua>.

³⁰ UN Human Rights Council, “Promotion and Protection of Human Rights in Nicaragua,” Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the High Commissioner and the Secretary-General, A/HRC/46/L.8, March 12, 2021, <https://undocs.org/es/A/HRC/46/L.8> (accessed March 12, 2021), p.2.

³¹ For example, “Two Years after Visit to Nicaragua, IACHR Condemns Lack of Compliance with its Recommendations and Calls on the State to Urgently Implement Them,” Inter-American Commission on Human Rights press release, May 16, 2020, http://www.oas.org/en/iachr/media_center/PReleases/2020/113.asp (accessed May 28, 2021); Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, “The IACHR expands precautionary measures in favor of relatives of human rights defenders in Nicaragua” (“La CIDH amplía medidas cautelares a favor de familiares de defensoras y defensores de derechos humanos en Nicaragua”), Inter-American Commission on Human Rights press release, May 21, 2021, <https://www.oas.org/en/IACHR/jsForm/?File=/es/cidh/prensa/comunicados/2021/132.asp> (accessed May 28, 2021); “House Arrest: the Conviction Against Ortega's Former Political Prisoners” (“Prisión en casa: la otra condena contra los ex prisioneros políticos de Ortega”), *Expediente Público*, January 21, 2021, <https://expedientepublico.org/prision-en-casa-la-otra-condena-contra-los-ex-prisioneros-politicos-de-ortega/> (accessed February 7, 2021).

The Mechanism for the Recognition of Political Prisoners (Mecanismo de Reconocimiento de Presos Políticos), a Nicaraguan human rights group, reported that 402 people were arbitrarily arrested in 2020, based on complaints they received and press reports. Sixty-five of the 402 faced criminal prosecutions and 45 were convicted; the majority did not face charges and were released after several hours or days.³²

Nicaraguan rights groups report that an additional 124 people perceived as critics by the authorities remain arbitrarily detained as of June 2021.³³ Many have been in detention for over a year.

For this report, Human Rights Watch documented 46 cases of harassment of critics, including the arbitrary arrest and prosecution of four prominent opposition presidential candidates. In 15 of the 44 cases security officers barred critics from leaving their homes for days, or even weeks, in circumstances that amount to arbitrary arrest and detention. Several were threatened with prosecutions or remain under investigation.

Detailed accounts of cases of abuses against 20 opposition leaders and critics are described below.

Targeting Opposition Leaders

Cristiana Chamorro

Cristiana Chamorro, 67, is a journalist and a potential presidential candidate in the 2021 elections. On May 20, Chamorro received two notifications from the Interior Ministry and the Attorney General's Office.³⁴ Both ordered her to go to their offices. The Interior Ministry notified her of a criminal investigation against her for alleged “money laundering” through the Violeta Barrios de Chamorro Foundation (Fundación Violeta Barrios de Chamorro), a press freedom organization.³⁵ Chamorro led the foundation until she announced the

³² Documentation on file at Human Rights Watch.

³³ Mechanism for the Recognition of Political Prisoners, “Preliminary List: Political Prisoners in Nicaragua” (“Lista- Informe Preliminar Personas Presas Políticas en Nicaragua”), June 14, 2021, <https://presasypresospoliticosnicaragua.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/LISTA-JUNIO.pdf> (accessed June 16, 2021).

³⁴ Human Rights Watch phone interview with Cristiana Chamorro's legal defense team, May 28 and June 4, 2021. Copies of both notifications on file at Human Rights Watch. Unless noted otherwise, this case is based on both interviews.

³⁵ Interior Ministry press release, May 20, 2021 (copy on file at Human Rights Watch); Tweet by Cristiana Chamorro, May 20, 2021, <https://twitter.com/chamorrocris/status/1395549743820967938?s=20> (accessed May 20, 2021).

suspension of its activities on February 5, 2021, after the adoption of the Law for the Regulation of Foreign Agents, which, as described in the previous chapter, aimed to take control of organizations that operate in Nicaragua and receive foreign funding.³⁶

On the same day the notifications were sent, the police raided the offices of the Violeta Barrios Chamorro Foundation as well as those of *El Confidencial*, an independent news outlet run by Cristiana Chamorro's brother, Carlos Fernando Chamorro. During the raid, authorities seized equipment and temporarily detained a camera operator and a journalist.

In response to the Interior Ministry notification, on May 20, Chamorro visited its office, where officials interrogated her about the sources of funding for the foundation. She was held for three hours and was not allowed to enter with her lawyer.³⁷

On May 21, Chamorro complied with the Attorney General's Office's notification. Initially, Chamorro was told her lawyer could not be present at the interrogation. After she refused to be interrogated without her lawyer, authorities allowed the lawyer to sit in. When her defense team demanded to know what she was being charged with, authorities referred to the Interior Ministry notification, but failed to outline specific actions that would constitute the crimes she was being accused of.³⁸

Officials at the Attorney General's Office told Chamorro she was being accused of having used international funds funneled through the foundation to commit "terrorist acts and destabilization" since 2018, according to her defense team. The investigation is based on the Law Against Money Laundering, Terrorist Financing and Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction, adopted in July 2018.³⁹

³⁶ "Nicaragua foundation announces suspension in face of new law," *Associated Press*, February 5, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/violeta-chamorro-philanthropy-nicaragua-latin-america-laws-f9bcca83a428801f4f565acbefbc213a> (accessed May 31, 2021).

³⁷ "Cristiana Chamorro before the Attorney's General Office for alleged money laundering" ("Cristiana Chamorro ante la Fiscalía por supuesto lavado"), *Los Angeles Times*, May 21, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/espanol/internacional/articulo/2021-05-22/cristiana-chamorro-ante-la-fiscalia-por-supuesto-lavado> (accessed May 31, 2021).

³⁸ "Petition for Writ of Protection for Threat Of Unlawful Detention" ("Recurso De Amparo Por Amenaza De Detencion Ilegal"), 00051 o-ORM4-2021 (Criminal Court, Court of Appeals, Managua, May 25, 2021)-CN (copy on file at Human Rights Watch).

³⁹ UNHCR Spokesperson Marta Hurtado, "Press briefing notes on Nicaragua," May 28, 2021, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=27124&LangID=E> (accessed May 28, 2021).

On June 1, Chamorro’s defense team found an accusation against her in the judiciary’s online system. Prosecutors did not send notice of these charges to her or her lawyers. On the same day, the Attorney General’s Office issued a public statement saying Chamorro was being investigated for “the crimes of money laundering, forgery of official documents , and abusive management,” and requested her disqualification from running for public office because, as someone under investigation for a crime, she was not “in full enjoyment of her civil and political rights”.⁴⁰ Under Nicaraguan law, political disqualification is a sanction that can only be adopted by the Supreme Electoral Council (CSE) after an investigation concludes.⁴¹ Chamorro was detained the day after she publicly announced her intention to seek the presidency by participating in the primary elections of the Citizen Alliance (Alianza Ciudadana), an opposition coalition that groups the Citizens for Freedom and Alliance for Justice and Democracy.⁴²

The Attorney General’s Office froze Chamorro’s assets, lifted bank secrecy, banned Chamorro from leaving the country and from attending certain meetings and places, and prohibited her from communicating with people connected to the matters under investigation.⁴³ Nicaraguan law permits these measures if needed for a criminal investigation.⁴⁴

Police, including anti-riot officers and people dressed as civilians, arrived at Chamorro’s home in motorcycles on June 2, raided her home without showing a warrant, and placed her under house arrest, according to her defense team. The police ordered the woman who

⁴⁰ “Statement 004, 2021” (“Comunicado 004, 2021”), Attorney General’s Office press release, June 1, 2021 (copy on file at Human Rights Watch).

⁴¹ The Supreme Electoral Council is the only body with the power to disqualify political candidates. Reform and Addition Law to Law N^o. 331, Electoral Law (Ley de Reforma y Adición a la Ley N^o. 331, Ley Electoral), *National Assembly*, Law No. 1070, May 4, 2021, <http://legislacion.asamblea.gob.ni/Normaweb.nsf/9e314815a08d4a6206257265005d21f9/4fca1b711015f9af062586ce00762351?OpenDocument>, arts. 176 and 177.

⁴² Tweet by Cristiana Chamorro, June 1, 2021, <https://twitter.com/chamorrocris/status/1399806186308968449?s=20> (accessed June 2, 2021); “Ortega-Murillo bar Cristiana Chamorro’s Candidacy” (“Los Ortega-Murillo inhiben la candidatura de Cristiana Chamorro”), *Divergentes*, June 1, 2021, <https://www.divergentes.com/los-ortega-murillo-inhiben-la-candidatura-de-cristiana-chamorro/> (accessed June 2, 2021).

⁴³ “Statement 004, 2021” (“Comunicado 004, 2021”), Attorney General’s Office press release, June 1, 2021 (copy on file at Human Rights Watch).

⁴⁴ Nicaragua’s Code of Criminal Procedure (Código Procesal Penal de la República de Nicaragua), *National Assembly*, November 13, 2001, <http://legislacion.asamblea.gob.ni/Normaweb.nsf/%28%24All%29/5EB5F629016016CE062571A1004F7C62>, arts. 166 and 167.

worked at Chamorro's house to leave. Chamorro's lawyer was not allowed to see her or talk to her, and police attacked journalists covering the raid.⁴⁵ Chamorro was being held virtually incommunicado inside her home at time of writing.

In a press release posted online on June 2, the Attorney General's Office stated that a judge had given advance authorization for the raid and Chamorro's detention. This claim is not supported by the documents available in the judicial online system, which, according to her lawyer, only shows the document in which the judge "validated" the police actions on June 3.⁴⁶

Under Nicaraguan law, the police can carry out a raid without a warrant in very specific urgent cases, including when a crime is being committed or when someone asks for help, and such a raid must be validated by a court within 24 hours.⁴⁷ Because the validation process is intended to obtain after-the-fact judicial authorization for police raids in cases in which a warrant cannot be obtained in advance, its use in Chamorro's case strongly suggests that the Attorney General's Office and the police were not acting on the basis of advance judicial authorization. That conclusion is supported by the fact that police did not show a warrant prior to entering Chamorro's home. Moreover, there are serious questions about the propriety of the raid on Chamorro's house and its subsequent validation: as far as Human Rights Watch was able to determine, none of the conditions for a raid without warrant were met.

As of June 16, Chamorro's defense team did not have access to the judicial file in her case, other than the limited information in the online system.

A member of Chamorro's defense team was intimidated by police officers and accompanying civilians as she was leaving the court on May 27, after filing a document in Chamorro's case. The officers and civilians intercepted the lawyer, a journalist testifying in

⁴⁵ "[They] Are Not Going to Make Us Kneel" ("No nos van a arrodillar: La resiliencia del periodismo que incomoda a Daniel Ortega"), *Confidencial*, June 6, 2021, <https://www.confidencial.com.ni/nacion/no-nos-van-a-arrodillar-la-resiliencia-del-periodismo-que-incomoda-a-daniel-ortega/> (accessed June 7, 2021).

⁴⁶ "Police Authorization" ("Orden de Convalidación Policial"), signed by Judge Karen Vanessa Chavarría Morales, June 3, 2021 (copy on file at Human Rights Watch).

⁴⁷ Nicaragua's Code of Criminal Procedure (Código Procesal Penal de la República de Nicaragua), *National Assembly*, November 13, 2001, <http://legislacion.asamblea.gob.ni/Normaweb.nsf/%28%24All%29/5EB5F629016016CE062571A1004F7C62>, arts. 241 and 246.

connection to Chamorro’s case, and the journalist’s lawyer on the street, asked for their IDs, separated them for interrogation, and later told Chamorro’s lawyer to go to her car. They took photographs of the car and asked, “are [you] not afraid that someone could take your car?”⁴⁸ They then let her go without further explanation. A photo showing the three of them stopped by police officers corroborates this account.⁴⁹

Marco Fletes and Walter Gómez, the former accountant and financial manager of the foundation, respectively, are being investigated in the same case for alleged “money laundering.” On the night of May 28, Fletes was arrested by people dressed as civilians and Gómez was detained by police officers, both in Managua, according to press reports.⁵⁰ Gómez’s lawyer told Human Rights Watch that both have been held *incommunicado*, preventing their families and lawyers from communicating with them since they were arrested. They were reportedly being held at El Chipote prison, although there is no official information confirming their whereabouts, and were under investigation at time of writing.⁵¹

In connection with Chamorro’s case, the Attorney General’s Office asked Guillermo Medrano and Lourdes Arróliga, two staff members of the foundation, as well as María Lilly Delgado, a journalist who had worked as a consultant for the foundation, to testify on May 25.⁵² When they asked that their lawyers accompany them, prosecutors said they “would go from being witnesses to being under criminal investigation” if they requested lawyers.⁵³ The three of them refrained from testifying, according to a person who has legal knowledge about the case, and they do not know what crimes they are being accused of. On June 1, the Attorney’s General Office banned them from leaving the country and from attending

⁴⁸ Human Rights Watch phone interview with someone with legal knowledge of the case, May 28, 2021.

⁴⁹ Photograph on file at Human Rights Watch.

⁵⁰ “Two Former Violeta Barrios Chamorro Foundation Staff have been kidnapped” (“Secuestran a dos extrabajadores de la Fundación Violeta Barrios Chamorro”), *100% Noticias*, May 28, 2021, <https://100noticias.com.ni/nacionales/107631-secuestro-marcos-fletes-contador-fiscalia-fsln/?mobile> (accessed May 29, 2021).

⁵¹ Human rights watch phone interview with someone with legal knowledge of the case, June 1, 2021; “Cristiana Chamorro will be Meeting with CxL this Tuesday (“Cristiana Chamorro se reunirá con CxL este martes”), *Despacho 505*, May 31, 2021, <https://www.despacho505.com/policia-orteguista-mantiene-aislados-a-walter-gomez-y-marcos-fletes-exfuncionarios-de-la-fvbch/> (accessed June 1, 2021).

⁵² Wilfredo Miranda, “[They] Enter as Witnesses and Leave Charged; The Ortega-Murillo Attorney’s General Office criminalizes journalists” (“Entran como testigos y salen imputados. Fiscalía Ortega-Murillo criminaliza a periodistas”), *Divergentes*, May 25, 2021, <https://www.divergentes.com/entran-como-testigos-y-salen-imputadas-fiscalia-ortega-murillo-criminaliza-a-periodistas/> (accessed May 29, 2021). Copies of the notifications issued to Medrano and Alórriga on file at Human Rights Watch.

⁵³ Human Rights Watch phone interview with someone with legal knowledge of the case, May 28, 2021.

certain meetings and visiting certain places, and prohibited them from communicating with people linked to the facts under investigation.⁵⁴

Arturo Cruz Sequeira

Arturo Cruz Sequeira, 67, is a former ambassador to the United States and a potential candidate for president of Nicaragua from the opposition coalition, Citizen Alliance. Police arrested him on June 5, when he arrived at the Managua airport on a flight from the United States.⁵⁵ Cruz was held incommunicado at El Chipote prison, without access to his lawyer or family, for several days.

On June 5, the Attorney's General Office issued a press release stating Cruz was being investigated on "strong evidence that he had conspired against Nicaraguan society and the rights of the Nicaraguan people."⁵⁶ It cited the Law for the Defense of People's Rights to Independence, Sovereignty, and Self-determination for Peace (Law N° 1055), passed in December 2020, which appears to have been designed to block opposition candidates from participating in elections. As described in this report, the law prohibits so-called "traitors"—defined in vague, sweeping terms—from running for or holding public office. Cruz's legal defense team does not have additional information regarding the facts that are the basis of such allegation.

Police raided Cruz's house on June 7. Cruz's driver, who was present during the raid, told Cruz's lawyer that the police had taken "documentation" from the house, though he did not know its content. The lawyer also told Human Rights Watch that the police had showed a search warrant to a private security guard outside Cruz's house, but that he had been unable to access that document through the judiciary's online system.

The lawyer was barred from a June 7 "special hearing for the protection of constitutional guarantees," and a public defender was appointed in his place. The purpose of such hearings—created following a reform of the Code of Criminal Procedure in February, as

⁵⁴ "Statement 004, 2021" ("Comunicado 004, 2021"), Attorney General's Office press release, June 1, 2021 (copy on file at Human Rights Watch).

⁵⁵ Human Rights Watch phone interview with someone with legal knowledge of the case, June 8, 2021. Unless noted otherwise, this case is based on this interview.

⁵⁶ "Statement 008, 2021" ("Comunicado 008, 2021"), Attorney General's Office press release, June 5, 2021 (copy on file at Human Rights Watch).

described above in this report—is to consider requests to extend the deadline to hold detainees under investigation. The Attorney’s General Office requested an extension of Cruz’s detention to 90 days, arguing that the crime he allegedly committed—“of provoking, proposing, and conspiring to undermine national integrity”—was grave and complex and that Cruz would probably hinder the judicial investigation.⁵⁷ According to his lawyer, the judge granted the extension.

Félix Maradiaga

Félix Maradiaga, 44, is an academic and a potential presidential candidate from the opposition coalition Blue and White National Unity (Unidad Nacional Azul y Blanco, UNAB). Maradiaga has suffered from regular police harassment since September 2020.⁵⁸ Officers followed Maradiaga around anywhere he went, including during his political activities. When he tried to travel to other cities to organize political events and meetings, the police said he could not leave Managua.

On December 17, 2020, Maradiaga tried to leave his home but officers said “he did not have authorization to leave.” Maradiaga tried to leave despite the officer’s warning but officers responded violently, breaking two fingers in his right hand. Human Rights Watch has a photo of Maradiaga’s hand that corroborates his injuries.⁵⁹ Between December 1 and February 28, several officers stood all day long outside Maradiaga’s house and barred him from leaving.

After that, the police surveilled Maradiaga every day and followed him everywhere he went. On certain days, without providing an explanation, officers barred him from leaving his home.

On June 8, 2021, Maradiaga complied with a notification from the Attorney’s General Office and visited its offices. Prosecutors interrogated him about funds he received for the Institute of Strategic Studies and Public Policies (Instituto de Estudios Estratégicos y Políticas Públicas), a nongovernmental group he used to direct. They also asked him

⁵⁷ “Statement 009, 2021” (“Comunicado 009, 2021”), Attorney General’s Office press release, June 7, 2021 (copy on file at Human Rights Watch).

⁵⁸ Human Rights Watch phone interview with Berta Valle, Maradiaga’s wife, June 18, 2021. All the information in this case is based on the interview, unless noted otherwise.

⁵⁹ A photograph of Maradiaga’s injuries on file at Human Rights Watch.

whether he had “requested sanctions for government officials,” his lawyer told Human Rights Watch.⁶⁰ They were presumably referring to sanctions to Nicaraguan officials imposed by foreign governments.

Immediately after Maradiaga left the office, officers violently pulled him out of his car and punched him in his face, the lawyer, who was present, said. The police detained him for allegedly “asking for military interventions,” “organizing terrorist and destabilizing acts with funding from foreign powers,” “requesting, exalting, and applauding the imposition of sanctions against Nicaragua and its citizens,” and “inciting foreign interference in Nicaragua’s affairs.”⁶¹ He has allegedly been held incommunicado at El Chipote since then.

Juan Sebastián Chamorro

Juan Sebastián Chamorro, 50, is the executive director of the Civic Alliance for Justice and Democracy and a potential presidential candidate from the Citizen Alliance (Alianza Ciudadana), a coalition of several parties and the Civic Alliance for Justice and Democracy.⁶² He is the cousin of Cristiana Chamorro.

Juan Sebastián Chamorro told Human Rights Watch that multiple police officers, often six or seven at a time, sometimes including anti-riot officials, have been positioned outside his house in Managua almost constantly since September 26, 2020. In October, as he was leaving to participate in a meeting with the Alliance for Justice and Democracy in another city, the police told him he could not leave Managua, he said.

Officers also follow Chamorro wherever he goes and take pictures of him. In February 2021, when a police officer followed him into a restaurant, Chamorro told him to “stop invading his privacy.” The officer responded by hitting Chamorro with his fist three times on the chest.

⁶⁰ Human Rights Watch phone interview with someone with legal knowledge of the case, June 9, 2021.

⁶¹ “Press Statement N° 139-2021” (“Nota de Prensa N° 139-2021”), National Police press release, June 8, 2021 (copy on file at Human Rights Watch).

⁶² Human Rights Watch phone interview with Juan Sebastián Chamorro, June 2, 2021. All the information in this case is based on the interview, unless noted otherwise. “Opposition Candidates Running for Presidency in Nicaragua Say They Are Under House Arrest” (“Aspirantes opositores a Presidencia de Nicaragua dicen tener casa por cárcel”), *EFE*, May 21, 2021, <https://www.efe.com/efe/cono-sur/latinoamerica/aspirantes-opositores-a-la-presidencia-de-nicaragua-dicen-tener-casa-por-carcel/50000764-4542746> (accessed May 28, 2021).

For a week in May, officers barred Chamorro from leaving his house. Officers told him “he did not have the right to go out.” Human Rights Watch reviewed a video showing police officers preventing Chamorro from leaving his house.⁶³

On June 8, Chamorro received a notification from the Attorney General’s Office summoning him to the Attorney General’s Office on June 9.⁶⁴ But, hours later on June 8, the police detained Chamorro and raided his house. His wife, who was present at the time of the raid, said the officers did not present a search warrant, according to Chamorro’s lawyer. A police press release from June 8 said Chamorro was under investigation for allegedly “asking for military interventions,” “organizing terrorist and destabilizing acts with funding from foreign powers,” “requesting, exalting, and applauding the imposition of sanctions against Nicaragua and its citizens,” and “inciting foreign interference in Nicaragua’s affairs.” It cited the Law for the Defense of People’s Rights to Independence, Sovereignty, and Self-determination for Peace (Law N° 1055).⁶⁵ He was allegedly being held incommunicado at El Chipote prison at time of writing.

Other Cases of Arbitrary Arrest and Detention, Including De Facto House Arrest

Valeska Sandoval

Valeska Sandoval, a 22-year-old human rights activist and student at the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua, was arbitrarily arrested during the 2018 protests, beaten while detained, and released after a few days.⁶⁶ She said she sought asylum in the US in 2020, but was deported.

⁶³ Video on file at Human Rights Watch.

⁶⁴ “Juan Sebastián Chamorro García Notification” (“Citación Juan Sebastián Chamorro García”), Attorney General’s Office citation, June 8, 2021 (copy on file at Human Rights Watch).

⁶⁵ Human Rights Watch phone interview with someone with legal knowledge of the case, June 9, 2021; “Press Release N° 140-2021” (“Nota de Prensa N° 140-2021”), National Police press release, June 8, 2021 (copy on file at Human Rights Watch).

⁶⁶ Human Rights Watch phone interview with Valeska Sandoval, May 4, 2021. All the information in this case is based on the interview, unless noted otherwise. See also Kevin Sieff, “She Fled Detention and Torture in Nicaragua for Asylum in the United States. The Government Put her on a Plane back Home,” *The Washington Post*, August 28, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/nicaragua-asylum-us-border/2020/08/27/9aaba414-e561-11ea-970a-64c73a1c2392_story.html (accessed May 5, 2021); Vladimir Vásquez, “Valeska Sandoval: ‘Several Police Beat Me Up,’” *Confidencial*, April 30, 2021, <https://www.confidencial.com.ni/english/valeska-sandoval-several-police-beat-me-tied-up/> (accessed May 28, 2021).

Sandoval was in a Managua mall with friends on April 24, 2021, she said, when she noticed someone following them.

After leaving her friends, she tried to call a taxi. A police officer grabbed her arm. Three anti-riot officers forced her into a police vehicle and took her to El Chipote. Nobody would tell her why.

Two officers took her to what she described as a “warehouse” inside El Chipote and tied her hands with wire to the ceiling, forcing her to remain standing with her hands stretched over her head. One asked “what she had said in the United States.” Anti-riot officers slapped her face and punched her in the stomach, “dislocating” two ribs, she said. Human Rights Watch reviewed photos showing bruises on Sandoval’s face, arms, and abdomen that are consistent with her account.⁶⁷



Valeska Sandoval shows her bruises after being brutally beaten by anti-riot officers, Managua, Nicaragua, April 24, 2021. © 2021 Valeska Sandoval

Officers released her hands and forced her head under water on and off over a period of 20 minutes, she said. Afterwards, they tied her hands up with wire again and left her at the warehouse all day. “Next time we see you, we are going to kill you,” an officer told her that night, “because you continue inciting civil disobedience on your social media accounts.” Two days later, officers used a device to deliver strong electrical shocks to her arm and neck, Sandoval said. She lost consciousness, and woke up when she was thrown from a police vehicle onto the sidewalk in front of her aunt’s home on April 26.⁶⁸

Sandoval was never charged with a crime.

⁶⁷ Photographs of Sandoval’s injuries on file at Human Rights Watch.

⁶⁸ Vladimir Vásquez, “Valeska Sandoval: ‘Several Police Beat Me Up’,” *Confidencial*, April 30, 2021, <https://www.confidencial.com.ni/english/valeska-sandoval-several-police-beat-me-tied-up/> (accessed May 28, 2021).

Constanza Gutiérrez (pseudonym)

Constanza Gutiérrez, 38, represents the Alliance for Justice and Democracy locally.⁶⁹ On September 8, 2020, six police officers arrived at her home, ordered her husband to open the door, and entered without showing a warrant, Gutiérrez told Human Rights Watch.

They arrested Gutiérrez, saying she was “under investigation.” When she asked why, an officer responded, “those were the orders he had received,” she said.

At the station, police accused her of sending an “anonymous” threat to kill an officer. She denied this accusation. The day before her arrest, she had been putting up flyers criticizing the government, and during the interrogation police demanded she provide “a list of all those involved in putting up flyers.” Gutiérrez refused, and police took her to a cell without a bathroom, saying she would not be released until she provided the list.

After a few hours, officers resumed the interrogation, ordering her to provide her phone’s password. When she refused, they ordered her to undress and squat twice, completely naked, while a camera filmed her and male and female officers passed by the open door, staring at her and laughing. She feared police would rape her, she said.

When she was placed back in the cold cell, officers denied her requests for warm clothes or blankets. After a few hours, they questioned her again, repeating their demand for her phone’s password and, when she refused, again forcing her to undress and squat naked. Gutiérrez was interrogated numerous times during the 48 hours she was detained. She received spoiled food and no water during her time in detention.

Police released her without pressing charges, saying they would hold her responsible for “any disturbance that might happen [locally].” Gutiérrez moved to another city.

Bryan Quiroz

Bryan Quiroz, 26, of the Blue and White National Unity (UNAB), was detained three times in 2020.⁷⁰ Earlier, in response to his opposition activities during the 2018 protests, he was

⁶⁹ Human Rights Watch phone interview with Constanza Gutiérrez, February 28, 2021. All the information in this case is based on the interview, except noted otherwise.

⁷⁰ Human Rights Watch phone interview with Bryan Quiroz, January 22, 2021. All the information in this case is based on the interview, except noted otherwise.

arbitrarily arrested, held in extended pretrial detention, and convicted on politically motivated charges. Rights violations during his 2018 prosecution included mistreatment in detention and restrictions on his right to obtain legal representation—he was unable to communicate freely and confidentially with his lawyer.⁷¹

His most recent arrest and detention was on November 20, 2020, when officers detained him in the town of Somoto, where he had gone for a meeting of the National Coalition, a coalition of parties and social movements. He and two other coalition members were waiting for a bus when police asked them for their IDs. After checking Quiroz’s ID, four anti-riot officers forced him into a vehicle, confiscated his phone, and took him to the Somoto police station, Quiroz said. They never said why.

At the station, an officer asked for the password to his phone. Quiroz refused to give it, and the officer threatened him with imprisonment for allegedly trying to “destabilize the country.” A police officer from the Intelligence Unit joined the interrogation, asking who “finances the Coalition.” Officers forced Quiroz to strip and put on a blue uniform.

Quiroz did not have access to legal counsel during his time at the station; he found out after his release that his lawyer had appeared at the station an hour after his arrest but had not been allowed to see him.

When he was released four hours later, an officer threatened him saying, “Many people want you dead around here. A bullet can appear out of nowhere.”

Victoria González and José Valenzuela (pseudonyms)

On December 8, 2020, anti-riot officers in a city next to the border with Honduras arrested Victoria González, 26, and José Valenzuela, 53, lawyers working for a local human rights group.⁷²

⁷¹ Human Rights Watch interviewed Bryan Quiroz for our reporting on the crackdown on opponents in 2018. To see our findings on his case, please see chapter “Torture and Abuses in Detention” in Human Rights Watch, *Crackdown in Nicaragua: Torture, Ill-Treatment, and Prosecutions of Protesters and Opponents*, June 19, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/06/19/crackdown-nicaragua/torture-ill-treatment-and-prosecutions-protesters-and>, pp. 33-36.

⁷² Human Rights Watch phone interview with Victoria González, January 28, 2021; Human Rights Watch phone interview with José Valenzuela, January 26, 2021. All the information in this case is based on these interviews, unless noted otherwise.

The two were visiting the border city to help the family of a person murdered in Honduras recover the body. Officers stopped their car and asked for its registration. González and Valenzuela recorded the incident on their cellphones. The videos from Valenzuela's phone show officers arresting González and Valenzuela and are consistent with their description of events.⁷³ When they said they worked for a human rights group, the officers laughed and confiscated their documents about the Honduras case.

At the station, officers held them in separate rooms. Two female police searched González, frequently touching her breasts, she said. They interrogated her for 20 minutes, insulting her and saying she and Valenzuela were “lying” about what they were doing in the border city.

The officer interrogating Valenzuela said their activities “undermined the government,” Valenzuela recalled, and asked “who was financing them.”

Officers released González and Valenzuela after two hours, threatening to re-arrest them if they did not leave the city.

Santiago Fajardo

Santiago Fajardo, 29, of the Nicaraguan University Alliance (Alianza Universitaria Nicaraguense, AUN), a youth political movement, was arbitrarily detained during the protests in 2018, released under the Amnesty Law passed in 2019, and detained again by anti-riot police at his home in the city of Masaya, on February 4, 2021.⁷⁴

That day, officers demanded that he open the door, Fajardo said, and pointed their rifles at him, making him lie face down on the floor. We reviewed a video showing three police officers arresting Fajardo and pointing their rifles at him.⁷⁵ The officers took Fajardo to a

⁷³ Videos on file at Human Rights Watch.

⁷⁴ Human Rights Watch phone interview with Santiago Fajardo, April 12, 2021. All the information in this case is based on the interview, unless noted otherwise. Human Rights Watch interviewed Santiago Fajardo's brother, Christian Fajardo, for our reporting on the crackdown on opponents in 2018. To see our findings on his case, please see chapter “Torture and Abuses in Detention” in Human Rights Watch, *Crackdown in Nicaragua: Torture, Ill-Treatment, and Prosecutions of Protesters and Opponents*, June 19, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/06/19/crackdown-nicaragua/torture-ill-treatment-and-prosecutions-protesters-and>, pp.54-57.

⁷⁵ “Police Kidnap Released Political Prisoner Santiago Fajardo in His House in Masaya” (“Policía secuestra al excarcelado político Santiago Fajardo en su casa de Masaya,” video clip, YouTube, February 4, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4deoS2Q2rj8&ab_channel=100NOTICIASNICARAGUA (accessed May 26, 2021).



Officers stand outside Fajardo's home, Masaya, Nicaragua, November 27, 2020.
© 2020 Santiago Fajardo

cell in the El Chipote prison. They forced him to strip and interrogated him for about an hour, asking for the names of other Alliance members. They released him after 19 hours, never giving him a reason for the arrest.⁷⁶ Fajardo had been helping collect signatures demanding Ortega implement electoral reforms; during the incident, an officer had told him, “stop asking for signatures or you will be going to prison again.”

Lenin Salablanca

Lenin Salablanca, a 38-year-old merchant and a member of the National Coalition, was arbitrarily arrested during the 2018 protests, charged with “terrorism,” and released under the Amnesty Law.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Carlos Larios, “Police Release Opposition Leader Fajardo after Threatening Him” (“Policía libera al opositor Santiago Fajardo bajo amenazas”), *La Prensa*, February 5, 2021, <https://www.laprensa.com.ni/2021/02/05/politica/2780745-policia-libera-al-opositor-santiago-fajardo-bajo-amenazas> (accessed May 26, 2021).

⁷⁷ Human Rights Watch phone interview with Lenin Salablanca, January 21, 2021. All the information in this case is based on the interview, unless noted otherwise.

Salablanca has been arrested and detained at least four times since. On December 4, 2020, Salablanca saw police outside his house in the town of Juigalpa and went outside to record them with his phone. Police physically tried to take his phone, Salablanca said, and threw him on the ground, dislocating a finger in his left hand. Then, officers arrested him outside of his home.⁷⁸

Officers said they arrested him for being an “activist working against the government,” he said, and forced him into a police vehicle, where they beat him and threatened that they would “not leave marks of the beating” so he would not be able to “file a complaint.”

At the station, an officer ground his boot repeatedly onto Salablanca’s bare left foot, crushing a toe. Police interrogated him and released him after four hours. No charges were brought against him.

Other Cases of Harassment

Kalúa Salazar

Kalúa Salazar, 27, editor-in-chief of radio station La Costeñísima, in the town of Bluefields, has been subject to surveillance since 2019, she said.⁷⁹ Anti-riot officials and police dressed in plain clothes often arrive at her house in the morning, she said, sometimes at dawn. They blast their patrol-car sirens, bang on her gate, and leave after a few hours. Sometimes they insert the barrels of their guns through the bars of her fence.

Salazar was leaving for work on April 19, 2021, when a group of approximately 30 police officers stopped her.⁸⁰ When she started recording the incident on her phone, an anti-riot officer tried to take her phone, wrenching her neck until another officer intervened. They

⁷⁸ Tweet by Coalición Nacional Nicaragua, December 4, 2020, https://twitter.com/Coalicion_nic/status/1334895912448036865 (accessed May 26, 2021).

⁷⁹ Human Rights Watch phone interviews with Kalua Salazar, March 26, 2021, and April 26, 2021. All the information in this case is based on the interview, unless noted otherwise. See also, Noel Pérez Miranda, “Police under Ortega Persecute Journalist Kalúa Salazar” (“Policía de Ortega arrecia asedio contra la periodista Kalúa Salazar”), *Artículo 66*, March 22, 2021, <https://www.articulo66.com/2021/03/22/periodista-kalua-salazar-asedio-policial-dictadura-orteguista-periodismo-independiente/> (accessed May 26, 2021); Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, “Human Rights Situation in Nicaragua” (“Situación de los derechos humanos en Nicaragua”), August/September 2020, http://www.oas.org/es/cidh/MESENI/Boletines/BOLETIN-MESENI-2020_o8_o9.pdf (accessed May 28, 2021), p. 1.

⁸⁰ Committee to Protect Journalists, “Nicaraguan Police Assault Journalist Kalúa Salazar, Block her from Leaving her Home,” April 21, 2021, <https://cpj.org/2021/04/nicaraguan-police-assault-journalist-kalua-salazar-block-her-from-leaving-home> (accessed May 27, 2021).

pushed her into her house, then stayed out front all day for three days, preventing her and her daughters, ages 5 and 11, from leaving during the day, meaning that her daughters could not attend school.

María Laura Jiménez (pseudonym)

María Laura Jiménez, 44, of a human rights, said police were stationed outside her home from November 28, 2020, until the end of March 2021.⁸¹ They often refused to let her leave, she said, calling her a “traitor.” When they let her out, they often followed her in vehicles. She eluded them several times but said she felt as though they had kidnapped her in her own house.

On April 2, 2021, anti-riot officers and police returned, not allowing anyone to leave her house, she said, not even to buy food. When she sought an explanation, they kicked her in the stomach and beat her with a baton, bruising her arm. Human Rights Watch reviewed photographs of the injuries that are consistent with Jiménez’s account.⁸²

Pablo Hernández (pseudonym)

Pablo Hernández, 60, a human rights defender, trade union activist, and former university professor, was arrested in September 2018, prosecuted for peaceful protest activities, and released in 2019.⁸³

Surveillance at his home began in October 2019, he said, and increased in December 2020, when officers stood outside his house from 6:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. every day, telling him he could not leave. They set up traffic cones to keep him from leaving by car. They photographed his house and the people coming and going. We reviewed several photos showing officers outside his home that corroborate part of his account.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Human Rights Watch phone interview with María Laura Jiménez, April 13, 2021. All the information in this case is based on the interview, unless noted otherwise.

⁸² Photographs of Jiménez’s injuries on file at Human Rights Watch.

⁸³ Human Rights Watch phone interview with Pablo Hernández, April 19, 2021. All the information in this case is based on the interview, unless noted otherwise.

⁸⁴ Photographs of police surveillance outside Hernández’s house on file at Human Rights Watch.

On December 18, 2020, Hernández left his house in the middle of the night, when officers were absent. He has since lived in at least five places, moving when hosts become fearful of police retaliation.

Ramiro Cruz (pseudonym)

Police beat and arrested Ramiro Cruz, 56, a leader of the peasant movement, in November 2018, charging him with vague charges of “terrorism” for peaceful protest activities. He was released under the 2019 Amnesty Law.⁸⁵

Since September 2020, pro-government groups, police, and anti-riot officers have surveilled his Managua home from 4:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., Cruz said, sometimes leaving at noon for a few hours. When he tries to leave, officers block the gate and sometimes, using their cars, the street. Police cars also pass by in the middle of the night, blaring messages over their car loudspeaker, such as “We know where the coup plotters live” and “We are one order away from the Commander,” which Cruz understood as a death threat.

Tomás Cáceres (pseudonym)

Tomás Cáceres, 55, a Managua doctor who provided medical care to protesters and government critics, was fired from the hospital where he worked upon the arrest of his son, Manuel Cáceres (pseudonym), in May 2018, in the context of anti-government protests.⁸⁶ Tomás Cáceres’ medical license was rescinded after his son’s arrest. He has not been able to work as a doctor since. His son was released on conditional liberty in December 2019.

Since October 2020, police and government supporters have surveilled Cáceres’ home daily for hours at a time, and he is afraid of trying to leave. When he asked why he was being subjected to surveillance, police told him, “Because you provide medical care to political prisoners.” Cáceres had provided medical support by phone or video-call to detained anti-government critics, protesters, and their families. Officers threatened to cut his water service, he said, and to “put his son back in jail.” By the end of March, authorities had cut the water supply to his home.

⁸⁵ Human Rights Watch phone interview with Ramiro Cruz, April 27, 2021. All the information in this case is based on the interview, unless noted otherwise.

⁸⁶ Human Rights Watch phone interview with Tomás Cáceres, April 22, 2021. All the information in this case is based on the interview, unless noted otherwise.



Tomás Cáceres shows bruises caused by beatings by officers and government supporters, Managua, Nicaragua, mid-January 2021. © 2021 Tomás Cáceres.

On April 9, Cáceres' nephew tried to enter the house to give him money. Government supporters refused to let the nephew in and beat him with fists and batons. When Cáceres rushed out, officers and government supporters beat him as well, hitting him on the back with batons. Human Rights Watch reviewed photos of Cáceres' injuries that are consistent with his account.⁸⁷

Jimena Acosta (pseudonym)

Since December 2020, officers have stood guard day and night outside the home of Jimena Acosta, 50, a lawyer and human rights defender.⁸⁸ When she comes out they threaten to arrest her, she said, and reinforcements regularly arrive to keep her from leaving. Acosta's 12-year-old son, who lives with her, developed Covid-19-related symptoms in January 2021. Officers would not allow her to leave the house to seek health care for her son. She had to call his father, who lives elsewhere, to take her son to a clinic.

Francisco Torres (pseudonym)

Francisco Torres, 23, a member of a student movement, was subjected to arbitrary arrest and prosecution related to the 2018 protests.⁸⁹

After his release under the Amnesty Law, police constantly followed and surveilled him, he said, and pro-government supporters stood outside his home. Within a week it became “unbearable”, and he moved to a safe house in Managua, he said. But police followed him there too, even when he went to the movies or to study at the university. Officers and pro-

⁸⁷ Photographs of Cáceres' injuries on file at Human Rights Watch.

⁸⁸ Human Rights Watch phone interview with Jimena Acosta, March 4, 2021. All the information in this case is based on the interview, unless noted otherwise.

⁸⁹ Human Rights Watch phone interview with Francisco Torres, April 29, 2021. All the information in this case is based on the interview, except noted otherwise.

government supporters photographed him in public places. He left the country several times, migration authorities holding him for two or three hours each time, asking where he was going, who funded his travel, and how long he would be away.

In mid-March 2020, he returned to the city where he used to live to be closer to his family during the pandemic. One day, he returned from buying groceries to find that police had surrounded his home. They remained there all afternoon, saying they had information that he was “organizing meetings and planning actions to destabilize the country.” Between March and June, police stood outside his home for a few hours on weekends. During national holidays and dates related to the 2018 protests, the number of officers increased and they forced him to stay home, saying, “You cannot leave.” On days when he could leave, officials followed him.

Surveillance has increased since June 2020, he said, and counted “105 days of harassment” from January 1 to mid-April 2021. Officers threatened to arrest his mother, he said, and to “send [him] back to prison.”

Manuel Acosta (pseudonym)

Manuel Acosta, 39, a physics and math teacher and activist, was prosecuted for peaceful protest activities in 2018.⁹⁰ Since his release in 2019, police, anti-riot officers, and government supporters have surveilled his home for hours daily, Acosta said, preventing him from leaving, sometimes aiming their guns at him, and calling him a “danger to the government” and a “terrorist and coup plotter.” Only when they leave can he go out for medical care or to buy food.

On dates related to the anniversary of the 2018 protests, police numbers increase, he said. Photos and videos showing officers in front of his house are consistent with Acosta’s account.⁹¹

Civic Alliance for Justice and Democracy

On March 26, seven departmental directors from the Civic Alliance for Justice and Democracy were holding a planning meeting in the city of Matagalpa, when the police

⁹⁰ Human Rights Watch phone interview with Manuel Acosta, April 27, 2021. All the information in this case is based on the interview, except noted otherwise.

⁹¹ Photographs of police surveillance outside Acosta’s home on file at Human Rights Watch.

arrived to break it up, two witnesses told us. The meeting was being held at an office in a bar run by one of the Alliance’s members, who the officers said had no authorization to be running a bar. Two officers went upstairs, where the owner’s office was, and when they saw the people gathered in the room they said through their radio, “Here they are.” According to the witnesses, officers told them “they had no authorization to hold the meeting” and that police “were going to arrest them all.”

Police then called for reinforcements and, shortly after, anti-riot officers appeared. They took photos of the coalition members and forced people to leave the building, pushing, insulting, and threatening them, one witness told us.⁹² They provided no warrant, the witness said.

⁹² Human Rights Watch phone interview with Santiago Bernal (pseudonym), April 22, 2021, and Fabricio López (pseudonym), June 1, 2021. All the information in this case is based on the interview, unless noted otherwise.

Acknowledgments

This report was researched and written by Paula Ini, a research assistant in the Americas Division of Human Rights Watch. It was reviewed and edited by Tamara Taraciuk Broner, acting Americas deputy director; José Miguel Vivanco, Americas executive director; Juan Pappier, Americas senior researcher; Margaret Knox, Americas senior editor, Ximena Casas, Women's Rights Division; Margaret Wurth, Children's Rights Division; Sarah Sadooun, Business & Human Rights Division; Sarah Holewinski, Washington DC Advocacy, Floriane Borel, Geneva Advocacy; Claudio Francavilla, European Union Advocacy; Farida Deif, Canada Director; Louis Charbonneau and Widad Franco, United Nations Advocacy; Joe Saunders, acting program director; and Michael García Bochenek, Senior Counsel, provided program and legal review, respectively.

Americas Division associates Oriana Van Praag and Camilo Moraga-Lewy and Americas Intern Jake Palmer contributed to the report production. The report was prepared for publication by Fitzroy Hepkins, administrative manager, and José Martínez, senior administration coordinator. It was translated into Spanish by Gabriela Haymes.

Human Rights Watch would like to thank the Nicaraguan organizations, activists, and human rights defenders who contributed to this report, many of whom asked not to be identified. Human Rights Watch is deeply grateful to the victims who, despite often incredibly difficult circumstances, shared their testimonies with us.



Critics Under Attack

Harassment and Detention of Opponents, Rights Defenders, and Journalists ahead of Elections in Nicaragua

As Nicaragua prepares for presidential elections scheduled for November 2021, the administration of President Daniel Ortega has launched a campaign of arbitrary detention and harassment of government critics, including human rights defenders, journalists, and members of the political opposition.

Critics Under Attack documents high-profile arrests of four prominent opposition candidates starting in early June 2021 and ongoing harassment of government critics. Nicaraguan authorities have deployed police officers and, at times, members of the military, outside critics' houses, sometimes for days or months. Officers have barred some of them, and at times members of their families, from leaving their homes, and have photographed or asked for IDs of anyone who enters or leaves. Authorities have arbitrarily detained many for hours, sometimes for days, without telling them why they are being held. Some have faced beatings and other ill-treatment—in some cases torture—while in custody. Most are released after questioning without being charged. Officers sometimes threaten to detain them again—or menacingly suggest they could be harmed or killed if they continue criticizing the government.

These abuses appear to be part of a broader strategy to instill fear, suppress dissent, and discourage criticism of any kind. The government has used its majority in the National Assembly to enact far-reaching restrictions on civil and political rights and an electoral “reform” that in fact makes it easier to remove potential political rivals. And after it entrenched its control of the Supreme Electoral Council, Nicaragua’s electoral oversight body, the council banned an opposition party.

As a result, there is virtually no chance Nicaraguans can exercise their fundamental rights to freedom of expression, assembly, and association, nor vote and run for office, if they are seen as opposing the ruling party.

Human Rights Watch calls on the international community to redouble its pressure on Nicaraguan authorities to end the ongoing repression, hold perpetrators accountable, and ensure that Nicaraguans can exercise their political rights in free and fair elections.

(above) Nicaraguan journalist Carlos Fernando Chamorro (L), director of *El Confidencial* and *Esta Semana* news media, just before riot police forced him away from the former offices of *El Confidencial* in Managua on December 14, 2020, after he attempted to hold a news conference outside the building.

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(front cover) Riot police stand guard outside the house of Cristiana Chamorro, former director of the Violeta Barrios de Chamorro Foundation and opposition presidential candidate, in Managua on June 2, 2021, the day Nicaraguan police raided her home without a warrant and placed her under house arrest. She is under investigation on charges that appear politically motivated.

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