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Nicaraguan bishop stayed behind, a symbol of brave defiance to the Ortega dictatorship | Opinion

[BY TEO A. BABUN](#)

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While her husband, President Daniel Ortega, was out of the country in April 2018, Nicaragua's Vice President Rosario Murillo announced a set of punitive social reforms that provoked a massive popular backlash.

Upon his return, Ortega launched a harsh crackdown that led to hundreds of deaths, the arrests of more than 1,000 dissidents, and the closing of independent media outlets and thousands of civil society organizations.

In the run-up to the November 2021 elections, Ortega arrested all opposition presidential candidates, who, along with other political prisoners, suffered inhumane conditions in prison. By locking up his opponents and manipulating the electoral process and vote count, Ortega and Murillo swindled their way to a new term in office.

The reality, however, is that their popular support has collapsed given the hardships Nicaraguans face, and they only retain control through self-serving corruption, domination of state institutions and ruthless authoritarianism.

On Feb. 9, following a U.S.-led international campaign of criticism and sanctions that increasingly isolated Nicaragua, the regime released and deported 222 ex-candidates and other political prisoners to the United States. The now-stateless ex-prisoners have been speaking out about the abuse they suffered and their dreams of a democratic Nicaragua.

After their release, Ortega's puppet National Assembly stripped the former prisoners of their Nicaraguan citizenship and moved to confiscate their property. Days later, the regime, without offering any evidence, stripped the nationality and confiscated the assets of another 94 individuals accused of working to undermine the nation's sovereignty.

These are serious human-rights violations — all governments must uphold the rule of law and respect citizens' rights, including due process, citizenship and property rights.

The prisoner release does not resolve a larger pattern of human-rights abuses, including at least 35 political prisoners still behind bars, the most visible being Monsignor Rolando Álvarez, the bishop of Matagalpa.

Álvarez, a leading regime critic, had the chance to leave the country with the other political prisoners. But he told his captors he wanted to consult with the other bishops first. The regime refused and the next day sentenced him to 26 years for treason and other trumped-up charges. He was remanded to the maximum security infiernillo (little hell) lockup at La Modelo Prison. The name says it all — Ortega-Murillo want to break Álvarez for not submitting to them and will risk making him a martyr.

Ortega, rumored to have health issues, referred to his wife in a Feb. 13 speech as “co-president” and says he will change the constitution to reflect her promotion. But Murillo — whom Ortega pointedly credited with the prisoner-release scheme — is even less popular than her husband. While there are nine Catholic priests imprisoned for denouncing the regime's abuses, Álvarez stands out as a high-ranking figure, appointed by Pope Benedict and defiant of the dictatorship.

What the “co-presidents” need least is for an inspirational national resistance figure to emerge, yet that is exactly what Álvarez has become in these past weeks. His mistreatment guarantees that the much-loved bishop will become an international symbol of the desire of Nicaraguans, who are overwhelmingly religious, for the return of a government that upholds justice and respects human rights.

Some may think the release of political prisoners calls for a relaxation in sanctions and diplomatic pressure by the United States and other international actors. This would be a mistake. As these latest injustices against Álvarez and the lawless stripping of citizenship and properties from Nicaraguans show, it's imperative to maintain pressure on the criminals in Managua.

My organization will continue to support these efforts through disseminating information on human-rights violations, monitoring legal changes that affect rights

and raising awareness of Nicaragua's international human-rights obligations. Our aim is to help bring about accountability in Nicaragua.

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