

NICARAGUA: CIVICUS MONITOR WATCHLIST

OVERVIEW OF RECENT RESTRICTIONS TO CIVIC FREEDOMS





INTRODUCTION

Since the end of May 2021, Nicaragua's authorities have carried out an unprecedented crackdown on civil society and the opposition. Dozens of political leaders and human rights defenders were arrested and prosecuted as the government acted to silence critics and opponents ahead of presidential elections in November. At least 45 civil society organisations have had their legal status revoked since July 2021. In addition, authorities raided newspapers' offices, banned correspondents from major international news outlets and interrogated several journalists as part of an investigation into civil society groups. While the recent months have seen Nicaragua's government escalate repression, civic space conditions in the country have been systematically worsening since widespread protests for social rights in April 2018 set off an enduring socio-political crisis.

ARRESTS OF HRDS AND POLITICAL OPPOSITION

In May 2021, Nicaraguan authorities [launched](#) an investigation into the Violeta Barrios de Chamorro Foundation and several of its former managers over alleged inconsistencies in its financial reports. On 1st June 2021, prosecutors [filed](#) charges against the Foundation's former director Cristiana Chamorro, who was also one of the most prominent opposition leaders expected to challenge Daniel Ortega in upcoming presidential elections. Chamorro was subsequently placed under house arrest. In the following weeks, authorities [detained](#) five other presidential pre-candidates, several of whom were also civil society leaders – including Medardo Mairena, coordinator of the campesino movement, and Félix Maradiaga, a leader of opposition coalition Unidad Azul y Blanco (UNAB). Some of the arrests were based on alleged crimes committed in 2018 during mass protests, despite an Amnesty Law [approved](#) in June 2019 which had determined the immediate release of political prisoners who were detained in the crisis.

At least 35 people have been detained since May, among them human rights defenders, Sandinista dissidents, journalists, members of the political opposition and business leaders. In many cases these arrests may amount to [enforced disappearances](#), as those detained were kept incommunicado from their families and legal representatives for several weeks, without any information from authorities on their whereabouts, the conditions of their detention or the charges against them. According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), some of the arrests present elements that could be considered [torture or ill-treatment](#). On 31st August 2021, Nicaragua's authorities finally began to allow visits to some of the persons deprived of liberty in recent months. Their families [reported](#) that their loved ones were being kept under harsh conditions, which included daily interrogations and prolonged solitary confinement.

There are concerning signs that this crackdown is far from over. On 8th September, human rights defender Amaru Ruiz was [charged](#) for allegedly “conspiring to undermine national integrity”. He had [denounced](#) a massacre against the Indigenous community of Kiwakumbah on the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua, which left at least 18 Mayangna and Miskitu people dead in August 2021.

ABOUT THE CIVICUS MONITOR

The CIVICUS Monitor is a research tool that provides quantitative and qualitative data on the state of civil society and civic freedoms in 196 countries. The data is generated through a collaboration with more than 20 civil society research partners, and input from a number of independent human rights evaluations.

The data provides the basis for civic space ratings, which are based on up-to-date information and indicators on the state of freedom of association, peaceful assembly and expression. Countries can be rated as:

CLOSED

REPRESSED

OBSTRUCTED

NARROWED

OPEN

The CIVICUS Monitor rates civic space – the space for civil society – in Nicaragua as “[Represed](#)”.



CSO CLOSURES

Between July and August 2021, at least 45 civil society organisations had their legal status [revoked](#) by Nicaraguan authorities. On 28th July 2021, Nicaragua's lawmakers cancelled the legal personality of 24 organisations, 15 of which were medical associations or provided health services to communities. In some cases, their leaders had expressed criticism of the government's management of the COVID-19 pandemic. Another 21 organisations had their status revoked in the following weeks, including international organisations operating in Nicaragua, feminist groups, civil society coalitions and organisations working on the promotion of social, economic and cultural rights.

Authorities have resorted to a wide range of repressive legal instruments to cancel these organisations' registrations, criminalise civil society and prosecute rights defenders and the opposition. These include the laws on '[foreign agents](#)', on [cybercrimes](#) and on crimes against sovereignty (or '[traitors to the homeland](#)'), in combination with previously existing legislation on financial crimes and regulations on non-profit oversight. In this regard, the wave of repression was enabled, and set up, by the restrictive laws approved in late 2020 and early 2021. In many of the cases, the country's government justified CSO closures [saying](#) civil society organisations had failed to comply with reporting requirements, had obstructed authorities' work and engaged in financial irregularities. In the case of leaders arrested, authorities often [accused](#) them of acting to "undermine sovereignty and independence" and of "inciting foreign interference".

ATTACKS ON INDEPENDENT MEDIA

At the beginning of August 2021, National Police [opened](#) an investigation into the independent newspaper La Prensa and its employees on suspicion of "customs fraud and money laundering". On 12th August 2021, the newspaper published its last print edition, saying authorities were withholding print resources. The following day, police raided the newspaper's headquarters, turned off its servers, disconnected electricity and internet access and detained the employees, who were in the building for several hours. La Prensa's director, Juan Lorenzo Holmann, was detained during the raid.

A similar raid had taken place on 20th May 2021, when police [raided](#) the provisional offices of the news outlet Confidencial, run by journalist Carlos Fernando Chamorro. The reporter was later [indicted](#) for alleged money laundering and his radio programme was censored. In this period, over a dozen journalists were [summoned](#) by authorities to give witness testimony in the investigation against the Violeta Barrios de Chamorro Foundation. In some cases, such as that of Univisión correspondent María Lilly Delgado, prosecutors refused requests for the presence of trusted lawyers during the questioning. Delgado was later told she had become an investigated party, rather than a witness. In addition, authorities [arrested](#) sports journalist Miguel Mendoza and banned entry of the New York Times correspondent Anatoly Kurmanaev into Nicaragua in June 2021.



RECOMMENDATIONS

TO NICARAGUA'S GOVERNMENT:

- Drop charges against and release detained human rights defenders, political opponents, civil society leaders and journalists.
- End the practice of arbitrary detention and enforced disappearances. Provide reparations to victims and take steps to ensure their protection.
- Investigate the attack on the Mayangna Sauni As territory in August 2021 and guarantee justice to victims. Protect Indigenous peoples' wellbeing by safeguarding their right to land and the fulfilment of their human rights.

TO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY:

- Support multilateral initiatives, including at the Human Rights Council, which ensure international scrutiny on Nicaragua, particularly ahead of elections, and further accountability and justice for crimes under international law.
- Urge Nicaragua to implement the recommendations of OHCHR, the precautionary measures and recommendations of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) and the recommendations of the Interdisciplinary Group of Experts (GIEI) and allow them access to the country.
- Express support for human rights defenders and provide material and diplomatic support to civil society, journalists and activists at risk.