News



A youth carries a portrait of Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega during commemorations late Sunday, July 18, for the anniversary of the triumph of the 1979 Sandinista Revolution that toppled dictator Anastasio Somoza in Managua, Nicaragua. (AP Photo/Miguel Andrés)

by The Associated Press

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Managua, Nicaragua — July 19, 2021

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The Nicaraguan government organized rallies and festivities Monday to mark the anniversary of the July 19, 1979, revolution that overthrew dictator Anastasio Somoza. But with most opposition leaders jailed, many Nicaraguans say President Daniel Ortega is acting much like Somoza did 42 years ago.

Several of the leading Sandinista revolutionaries who fought alongside Ortega in 1979 have now been jailed by him. Most of those arrested in a crackdown that began in late May are being held incommunicado, at undisclosed locations with no access to lawyers or family visits.

Ortega, 75, is seeking a fourth consecutive term in Nov. 7 elections, and his six main potential rivals have been detained. Most face vague allegations of crimes against the state. Ortega alleges the country's April 2018 street protests were part of an organized coup attempt with foreign backing.

The coronavirus pandemic didn't stop the ruling Sandinista party from decorating plazas and stadiums with the party's black and red flags, and organizing concerts, baseball games and public rallies.

Ortega's wife and vice president, Rosario Murillo, said some 5,000 events — ranging from piñata parties for kids to baseball games — have been scheduled. The parties began on Sunday night with fireworks and revolutionary-era music for thousands gathered at Managua's Plaza de la Fe.

"Thank God for this revolution that has represented struggles and victories for the dignity of the nation," Murillo said.



Women wave Sandinista National Liberation Front flags July 18 during commemorations for the 42nd anniversary of the triumph of the 1979 Sandinista Revolution that toppled dictator Anastasio Somoza in Managua, Nicaragua. (AP Photo/Miguel Andrés)

Those currently under arrest include 65-year-old Dora María Téllez, a former guerrilla commander who later split with Ortega and became a leader of the Sandinista Renovation Movement. Another jailed former Sandinista guerrilla and Renovation Movement leader, Hugo Torres, is 73.

"For us, it is shameful that they are marking July 19 by jailing heroes of the fight against Somoza, like Dora María Téllez, Víctor Hugo Tinoco and Hugo Torres," said Mónica Baltodano, herself a former guerrilla commander.

Tinoco, the leader of the political movement Unamos, is a former assistant foreign minister and former ambassador to the United Nations.

Tellez led a Sandinista assault on the National Palace in 1978, taking hostage members of Somoza's congress in exchange for the release of rebel prisoners. Following Somoza's overthrow, Tellez served as health minister in the first Sandinista government, which ruled from 1979 to 1990.

In a sign of the times, Baltodano spoke to The Associated Press in a telephone interview from a "safe house" in an undisclosed location; she, too, fears she will be arrested soon.

"This regime is the opposite of all the utopia we fought for, and for which thousands of colleagues gave their lives," Baltodano said.

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Some who turned out for the festivities said their support for Ortega is unshaken. "We are here supporting the revolution, love, liberty, and harmony," said Cinthia Cardoza.

After the revolution ousted Somoza, Ortega initially ruled until 1990, when he lost an election after years of U.S.-backed attacks on his government. He returned to the presidency in 2007 after three failed election attempts and won reelection in 2011. He then sidestepped term limits to get himself reelected in 2016, and packed courts and government agencies with allies. The Sandinista party controls the courts and the legislature, and has stifled universities and the Roman Catholic church.

With six of the best-known potential candidates already in jail and the field tilted heavily in Ortega's favor, some have urged the opposition to sit out and not legitimize an Ortega victory. Candidates must register by Aug. 2.

"The November 7 elections are already a fraud foretold," Baltodano said.

The U.S. State Department announced last week it is revoking the travel visas of 100 legislators, judges and prosecutors who it said aided Ortega's regime by applying spurious "treason" and censorship laws to justify the arrest of opponents.

In June, Mexico and Argentina recalled their ambassadors to Nicaragua for consultations, and the Organization of American States passed a resolution condemning the arrests of key opposition figures, as well as prominent businessmen

and former government officials.

Josefina Vijil is the mother of opposition activist Tamara Dávila and sister of Ana Margarita Vijil, who have both both been arrested. They are just two of what Josefina Vijil said were 134 political prisoners in Nicaragua.

"It is impossible to commemorate an uprising that demanded liberty and justice (even though it was later twisted), when there is repression, jailing and censorship," Josefina Vijil wrote in her social media accounts.