News

Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega speaks during a meeting in Managua Nicaragua Nov. 8, 2

Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega speaks during a meeting in Managua Nicaragua Nov. 8, 2018. Ortega called his nation's Catholic bishops a "gang of murderers" in a Sept. 28, 2022, speech that also insulted a U.S. diplomat. (CNS photo/Jorge Cabrera, Reuters)



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Mexico City — September 29, 2022

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Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega blasted Catholic leaders as a "gang of murderers," in comments amping up persecution of the church and scorning Pope Francis' call for dialogue in the Central American country.

In a fiery address, Ortega took aim at Nicaragua's Catholic bishops for promoting democracy as an exit from the country's political crisis, alleging without proof that they called on protesters to kill him during the 2018 protests -- which his regime

violently repressed.

He called the bishops and Francis "the perfect dictatorship," then asked, accusatorially, "Who elected the bishops, the pope, the cardinals?"

He continued in the Sept. 28 speech marking the 43rd anniversary of the National Police: "With what moral authority do they speak of democracy? Let them start with the Catholic vote. ... Everything is imposed. It's a dictatorship, the perfect dictatorship. It's a tyranny, the perfect tyranny."

Catholic clergy in Nicaragua have remained mostly silent as Ortega -- who won elections in 2021 after disqualifying and imprisoning opposition candidates -- has persecuted priests and bishops speaking out on issues of human rights and democratic deterioration. The government also has closed church-run charitable and education initiatives, along with Catholic radio stations, and expelled priests and nuns, including the Missionaries of Charity.

Ortega claimed in his comments that he was Catholic, but did not feel "represented," partly because, "We hear talk of democracy, and they don't practice democracy."

The comments come as Bishop Rolando Álvarez of Matagalpa remains under house arrest after being taken by force from the diocesan curia Aug. 19. The priests arrested with him in the pre-dawn raid are still being held in the notorious El Chipote prison, where the regime keeps its political prisoners.

"What ignorance! Such lies and such cynicism. A dictator giving lessons on democracy," tweeted Auxiliary Bishop Silvio José Baez of Managua, who left the country for safety reasons in 2019. "Someone exercising power in an illegitimate way, criticizing the authority that Jesus granted his church; someone who is atheist, regretting that he doesn't feel represented by the church."

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Francis broke his silence on Nicaragua on Aug. 21, calling for "open and sincere" dialogue.

He told reporters Sept. 15: "There is dialogue. That doesn't mean we approve of everything the government is doing or disapprove of it."

The pope also urged the Nicaraguan government to allow the Missionaries of Charity to return and defended the former apostolic nuncio, Archbishop Waldemar Stanislaw Sommertag, who was expelled from Nicaragua.

Ortega was first president between 1979 to 1990 after the Sandinista movement ousted then-dictator Anastasio Somoza. He later won election 2006 and has won multiple reelections -- though the 2021 vote was condemned as a sham by international observers and not recognized by countries such as the United States.

In his speech -- which included denunciations of other international critics and a defense of North Korea's nuclear tests -- Ortega disparaged U.S. Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs Brian Nichols, calling him a racial slur beginning with N and mocking his appearance.

Observers say the relationship between Ortega and the Catholic Church has been complicated during Ortega's two presidencies -- especially with the late Cardinal Miguel Obando Bravo. Ortega promised to visit the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe if he returned to power, and in 2007 he headed directly to the Marian shrine after landing at the Mexico City airport.

Journalist Carlos F. Chamorro, director of the Nicaraguan newspaper Confidencial, says the church came into confrontation with Ortega after some priests and bishops showed support for protesters who called for Ortega's ouster in 2018, opening their parishes for people injured or fleeing priests and paramilitaries.

Chamorro told Catholic News Service Ortega "has the objective of closing the last civic space that remains in the country, which is space for freedom of conscience, the freedom to preach and religious liberty."