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Un manifestante sostiene un crucifijo durante una protesta contra el gobierno del presidente

Un manifestante sostiene un crucifijo durante una protesta contra el gobierno del presidente nicaragüense Daniel Ortega en Managua el 15 de mayo de 2018. (Foto: OSV News/Oswaldo Rivas, Reuters)

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Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega's anti-Catholic persecution is part of a broader trend of threats to democracy around the globe, experts on a Georgetown University panel said Nov. 14.

As part of Georgetown's Dahlgren Dialogues series, co-sponsored by the Office of Mission & Ministry and the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life, the panel brought together Jesuit Fr. Matthew Carnes, a specialist on Latin America who is an associate professor in the Department of Government and in the Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University; Rhina Guidos, the Latin America regional correspondent for Global Sisters Report; Renato Llontop Calosi, a Georgetown University student; and Rep. Jim McGovern, D-Mass., who once, as a congressional staffer, oversaw an investigation into the murders of six Jesuit priests,

their housekeeper, and her daughter in El Salvador.

Carnes said that the way democracies end has shifted in recent decades. This is evidenced "in Latin America in a particular way and with this regime in a particular way," he said. Previously, democracies ended when militaries overthrew the leader of a country, he explained, and this has shifted to leaders who get elected legitimately and change rules to stay in power from the inside.

"But what has changed is that now democracies are dying because elected democratic leaders are dismantling them from the inside," he said. "So Ortega, when he comes back, is legitimately elected. So it's not that he comes to power without a legitimate election. But then, once he's in power, he starts changing the institution so that he can stay in power, eliminating others from being able to run for office, limiting free speech, limiting space, as we've said so often, but also then changing the rules of the game."

Ortega has been president of Nicaragua since 2007 and previously held the post from 1985–1990.

Earlier this year, Nicaragua's government declared the Jesuit religious order illegal and ordered the confiscation of all its property. Women religious in the country also were expelled. The Vatican later closed its embassy in Nicaragua.

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The Nicaraguan government has retaliated against the Catholic Church and other opposition figures. Bishop Rolando Álvarez was sentenced in February to 26 years in prison the day after he refused to be deported to the U.S. with more than 200 other Nicaraguan political prisoners. Pope Francis publicly denounced Bishop Álvarez's sentence and the deportation of other Nicaraguans.

McGovern said the United States "wasn't focused enough" on the threats to democracy presented by Ortega.

"The crackdown on political opposition, the crackdown on free thinkers, and in turn the Jesuits, you know, has been going on for quite some time," McGovern said. "I mean… the warning signs built and built and built."

Carnes said the Ortega regime conducted "a slow-burn tightening of screws" because the Catholic Church "is prominent enough" in the country that it could not target the church outright at the beginning. He praised Jesuits in the country for their efforts to continue to serve despite the crackdown.

McGovern concurred that there is power in such service, crediting the Jesuits with "kind of bringing me back to the Catholic faith."

"And because, quite frankly, it was getting kind of boring for me," he quipped. "I wasn't feeling it, right? And then, I met the Jesuits in El Salvador. And all of a sudden, I started to get excited about my faith again."