

Election Watch for the Digital Age



Nicaragua

Preelection assessment

General election set for November 7, 2021

Incumbent presidential candidate Daniel Ortega and his allies launched an intensive assault on the opposition in the run-up to November's general election. Empowered by the total control of Ortega's ruling Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) across government branches, the regime has arrested prospective candidates and opposition figures, dissolved competitive parties, limited international election observation, and empowered the National Police – known for their politicized and repressive tactics – with oversight of campaign activities. Under Nicaragua's electoral system, a candidate can win the presidency with as low as a 35 percent plurality of the vote. The low vote threshold provides Ortega with a path to victory over the fragmented and stifled opposition. Alongside the presidency, all 92 seats of the National Assembly will be contested.

Ortega is running for a fourth consecutive and fifth overall term (he served one term from 1985-90). Since returning to office in 2007, he has overseen a period of democratic deterioration. Constitutional reforms passed by a majority-FSLN National Assembly in 2014 removed term limits, paving the way for Ortega's reelection to a third consecutive term during deeply flawed elections in 2016. Ortega's wife, Rosario Murillo, joined him as vice president in his third term and his children have been appointed to prominent positions in government. Mass antigovernment protests in 2018 were met with state violence that left at least 325 dead and ushered in a breakdown of the rule of law that has yet to recover. Independent media face censorship, violence and harassment, and legal penalties. Dozens of journalists have fled since 2018. In late 2020, congress passed two laws preventing "traitors" and those receiving foreign funding from running for public office. The former was used in June to arrest several presidential hopefuls. Separately, Cristina Chamorro, a prominent challenger to Ortega and the daughter of former President Violeta Chamorro, was placed under house arrest mere hours after announcing her intention to run as the presidential candidate for Citizen's Alliance, one of two main opposition coalitions.

Freedom House has identified the following as key digital interference issues to watch ahead of election day:

- **Removal of online content:** Progovernment media outlets sometimes use copyright and Digital Millennium Copyright Act complaints as means of removing unwanted online content. Independent media are routinely barred from state events, including press conferences, and instead rely on footage from progovernment sources to provide comprehensive news coverage. In response, members of the government-aligned media leverage copyright complaints that trigger the removal of independent – and often critical – online content. Forced removal may further inhibit users' already limited access to accurate and independent information ahead of the election.
- **Information manipulation:** The Nicaraguan regime uses multiple strategies to manipulate the digital information sphere. Projects to artificially amplify progovernment narratives have been in progress since at least 2018, when Murillo reportedly first ordered the creation of "troll factories."

An operation exposed in early 2021 involves over 100 employees from various public institutions who were hired to post and comment on social media in defense of the regime. The initiative is housed in the Nicaraguan Post Office, though similar cells operate in other public buildings, and is directed by government officials. Officials also control online information through editorial pressure, directly threatening independent outlets and limiting their access to official information by barring them from state events. Manipulation of online information ahead of the election compounds existing barriers to accessing reliable information.

- **Harassment and violence:** Critical online reporters and outlets are frequently harassed, surveilled, and violently targeted by security forces and unknown actors in retaliation for their work. Journalists risk doxing, smear campaigns, and retribution against their family members. Everyday users are also at risk of intimidation and physical assault. In addition to causing direct harm to individuals, an escalation of these tactics ahead of the election day could encourage further self-censorship about political issues.
- **Arrests and prosecutions:** Online speech is punishable using multiple laws, including a cybercrimes law passed in 2020. The new Special Cybercrimes Law introduces punitive measures explicitly for online speech, including multi-year prison sentences for publishing “fake news” on social media or through news outlets. Authorities also levy unrelated charges in apparent retribution for digital activities. In July 2020, TikTok user Kevin Monzón was arrested and detained for five days for ostensibly threatening another person with a firearm. Analysts suspect his detention was related to antigovernment videos that police had previously warned him against posting. These new and politicized avenues of arrest raise the risk of legal repercussions for those who speak out during the electoral period.
- **Cyberattacks:** Independent news outlets have been targeted with DDoS attacks during recent political events. *Confidencial* and *La Prensa* suffered simultaneous DDoS attacks during the 2018 protests. The perpetrators behind the attacks remain unknown, but press freedom advocates suggested that the goal was to stifle independent condemnation of the government. *La Prensa* also suffered a DDoS attack in May 2019, effectively slowing the site and preventing updates for more than 24 hours. Amid the ongoing crackdown on dissent, cyberattacks could be used to disrupt and silence remaining critical voices.

Nicaragua has a score of 36 out of 100, with 100 representing the least vulnerability in terms of election integrity, on Freedom House’s Election Vulnerability Index, which is based on a selection of key election-related indicators. The score reflects an increasingly restricted political space where free expression is suppressed online and offline, independent media and civil society face physical and digital violence and harassment, and government corruption is unchecked. The country is rated **Not Free** in *Freedom in the World 2021*, with a score of 30 out of 100 with respect to its political rights and civil liberties. Nicaragua will be covered by *Freedom on the Net 2021* for the first time, and the country report and internet freedom score will be available in September 2021. To learn more about these annual Freedom House assessments, please visit the Nicaragua country report in [Freedom in the World](#).