



Dec 12, 2018 10:46 GMT

## **EXPERT COMMENT: Nicaragua: Jeremy Corbyn must end his silence over the country's repressive regime**

Hilary Francis, Vice Chancellor's Research Fellow in Global Challenges at Northumbria University, looks at Labour's reaction to those that have died in a government crackdown in the Central American country.

The Nicaraguan government began a brutal crackdown in April which has left at least 325 dead. Protests against social security reforms were violently put down, but the repression only fanned the flames of dissent. As more protesters came onto the streets, the government reacted with yet more

force. Paramilitary groups were formed to suppress the demonstrations and the protesters' road blocks which sprang up across the country.

Amnesty International reports that most of the victims of the crisis have died "at the hands of state agents". According to the UN's human rights office, the evidence "strongly indicates" that the repression is being carried out "with the acquiescence of high-level state authorities and the national police, often in a joint and coordinated manner".

Despite this international consensus, and Jeremy Corbyn's decades of support for the Nicaragua solidarity movement, the Labour leader has said nothing at all about Nicaragua since the violence began. Meanwhile, a number of senior figures within Labour have been criticised for their apparent support for the Nicaraguan regime.

In early December, the Latin America 18 Conference took place in London. Jeremy Corbyn sent a video message of support to the event. Dan Carden, Labour's shadow secretary for international development, told the audience that Donald Trump has no right to support "regime change" in Nicaragua.

Carden's perspective – that the violence in Nicaragua is the result of a failed US-backed right-wing coup – was shared by all speakers on Nicaragua at the conference. This is the Nicaraguan government's view, and apparently it was the only acceptable one. A group of Nicaraguan feminists was thrown out of the event for holding up a banner that was critical of the Nicaraguan regime.

### **On the wrong side**

In May, shadow foreign secretary, Emily Thornberry, did ask the Foreign Office about Nicaragua. She was told that the UK government was "concerned" about the repression. But Labour's involvement in the conference follows a series of incidents in Oxford, Wales and Lewisham, London, where local Labour leaders have faced criticism for their links with the Nicaraguan regime. After the Lewisham incident, Amnesty International UK expressed concern about the "whitewashing" of human rights abuses.

Labour MP Chris Williamson is a particularly vocal supporter of the Nicaraguan government. He regularly meets with Nicaragua's ambassador, Guisell Morales-Echaverry, who has played a lead role in defending the Nicaraguan government's actions in the UK.

In contrast, the Scottish government has made a robust statement on the crisis, stating “we are shocked by this needless loss of life and the disproportionate response of the Nicaraguan authorities”. The British ambassador to Nicaragua has also called on the Nicaraguan authorities to “put an end to the violence and exercise their responsibility to protect peaceful protesters”.

Labour’s support has its roots in the solidarity networks of the 1980s. In 1979, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) led a popular movement that overthrew the Somoza dictatorship that had ruled Nicaragua for more than four decades. During the 1980s, the Sandinista government relied on solidarity groups in the UK and elsewhere in their struggle against a US-funded proxy war that left at least 30,000 dead.

In 2007, to the delight of many in the solidarity movement, FSLN leader and former president Daniel Ortega returned to power. Ortega has rolled out social programmes funded by Venezuelan aid, but he has also eroded Nicaragua’s democratic structures: overturning a constitutional prohibition on reelection and depriving opposition candidates of their right to stand. Despite this, and allegations of sexual abuse of his stepdaughter Zoilamérica Ortega, Ortega’s government has continued to receive support from overseas.

Ortega’s supporters see the current crisis as a replay of the David and Goliath struggle of the 1980s. They suggest that Nicaragua is once again the victim of US intervention. But if Corbyn and others think history is simply repeating itself in Nicaragua, they need to look again.

### **A conspiracy?**

The Nicaraguan government asks us to believe that the current violence is the result of a conspiracy involving Colombian and Mexican drug traffickers, terrorism, organised crime, the US and the European Union.

It claims that this conspiracy has been coordinated by opposition political parties within Nicaragua, particularly the Sandinista Renewal Movement (MRS). But the MRS has an eighth of the support of the UK Liberal Democrats and is in no position to engineer a coup.

The same is true of the other opposition parties. A September 2018 poll showed that none of them commanded more than 4% of the vote in Nicaragua. Since April, hundreds of thousands of people have faced down riot

police in the country's streets. It's not credible to suggest that opposition political parties persuaded these protesters to give up their lives when they can't even persuade Nicaraguans to give them their votes.

Others on the international left don't share Corbyn's reticence about Nicaragua. Noam Chomsky, Pablo Iglesias of Podemos in Spain, and former Uruguayan President José Mujica have all spoken out against Ortega.

In June, paramilitaries linked to the government killed an entire family because, a survivor told local news reporters, they refused to let government forces use their roof for sniper attacks on protesters. The paramilitaries burnt the house down and stood guard so the victims couldn't escape. Six people – grandparents, parents and children aged two and five months – died. The head of the Organisation of American States, Luis Almagro, called it a crime against humanity.

But none of this has provoked a response from the Labour leader. Since April, Jeremy Corbyn has used Twitter to express solidarity with the people of 30 different countries. Nicaragua is not one of them. If Corbyn and others within Labour think that the Nicaraguan government is still worthy of their support, then they need to look more closely at the evidence. A condemnation of this violence is long overdue.

This article was originally published by The Conversation. You can read it [here](#)

---

Northumbria is a research-rich, business-focused, professional university with a global reputation for academic excellence. To find out more about our courses go to [www.northumbria.ac.uk](http://www.northumbria.ac.uk)

If you have a media enquiry please contact our Media and Communications team at [media.communications@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:media.communications@northumbria.ac.uk) or call 0191 227 4604.

## Contacts



### **Rik Kendall**

Press Contact  
PR and Media Manager  
Business and Law / Arts, Design & Social Sciences  
rik.kendall@northumbria.ac.uk  
07923 382339



### **Andrea Slowey**

Press Contact  
PR and Media Manager  
Engineering and Environment / Health and Life Sciences  
andrea.slowey@northumbria.ac.uk  
07708 509436



### **James Fox**

Press Contact  
Student Communications Manager  
james2.fox@northumbria.ac.uk



### **Kelly Elliott**

Press Contact  
PR and Media Officer  
kelly2.elliott@northumbria.ac.uk



### **Rachael Barwick**

Press Contact  
PR and Media Manager  
rachael.barwick@northumbria.ac.uk  
07377422415



### **Ruth Lognonne**

Press Contact  
PR and Media Officer  
ruth.lognonne@northumbria.ac.uk  
07971274253



**Gemma Brown**

Press Contact

PR and Media Officer

[gemma6.brown@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:gemma6.brown@northumbria.ac.uk)