



NHSMUN

Background Guide | *OAS*

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Greetings Delegates!

Welcome to the Organization of American States (OAS) committee at NHSMUN 2025! My name is Angel Eunisse Yanga, and I am honored to serve as your Director for Session I. It is a privilege to guide you through impactful discussions affecting the Americas, where diverse countries face shared challenges and opportunities.

I have been involved with Model UN since high school, where I developed a passion for diplomacy, research, and international cooperation. After representing Brazil in UNRWA, I am excited to now support delegates as they sharpen their skills and deepen their understanding of critical issues. Currently, I am a Biology major on a pre-med track at Bucknell University. I am a POSSE Los Angeles Scholar and a student researcher under the Field/Reeder Lab! This past summer, I spent a month in Arua, Uganda, conducting ecoimmunology research on Angolan free-tailed bats to study their immune responses to Ebola-like particles in vaccines. Outside of research, I enjoy crafting and building new things. I love making hand-written watercolor cards, laser-cut keychains and 3d-printed stationery for my closest friends and family.

The Organization of American States (OAS) faces urgent challenges, including responding to the serious human rights abuses and loss of democracy in Nicaragua, where authoritarian rule has silenced voices and forced many to flee. At the same time, narco-trafficking deeply threatens political stability across Latin America. As powerful drug cartels use violence and corruption to influence the government and weaken institutions. As delegates, you will be challenged to balance complex realities and work toward practical, fair, and sustainable policies. Whether you are new to Model UN or an experienced delegate, I encourage you to fully engage with your committee, listen carefully to others, and bring your best ideas forward. This is your chance to influence meaningful debate on a pressing issue that impacts real lives.

On behalf of the entire staff team, I look forward to welcoming you to the conference and witnessing your growth as delegates. Together, let's strive to build a more peaceful and just future for the Americas!

Respectfully,
Angel Eunisse Yanga
Organization of American States
Director, Session I
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Dear Delegates,

Hello and welcome to the Organization of American States (OAS) committee for NHSMUN 2025! My name is Alejandra Vargas, and I am more than honored to be your Director for Session II. I am looking forward to sharing this amazing experience with all of you.

I am currently in my fourth year of university at Universidad Americana, Nicaragua, where I study Diplomacy and International Relations—a field I am deeply passionate about and one that first introduced me to the world of Model UN. Since I began participating in MUN in 2022, it has been an incredibly rewarding journey. It has allowed me to meet inspiring people and develop skills that continue to shape me both personally and professionally.

Beyond MUN, I am also a huge sports fan—I absolutely love football (and I am the biggest Barcelona supporter you will ever meet!), as well as Formula 1 and baseball. When I am not passionately watching my favorite teams, I am probably enjoying movies or binge-watching TV shows. Also, I may or may not be a little obsessed with Taylor Swift and Harry Styles!

We have worked hard to prepare a Background Guide to support your preparation for this year's important and complex topics: "Responding to the Situation in Nicaragua" and "The Political Influence of Narco-Trafficking in Latin America." These issues are deeply relevant to the region and to the mandate of the OAS, and I encourage you to explore them with depth, critical thinking, and an open mind. Research thoroughly, ask questions, and never lose the curiosity that drives meaningful change.

I hope you leave NHSMUN not only with unforgettable memories but also with a stronger passion for international affairs and a drive to make a real impact in the world. I cannot wait to meet all of you and hear the amazing ideas and solutions you bring to this committee. If you have any questions or concerns, do not hesitate to reach out.

Best regards,

Alejandra Vargas

Organization of American States

Director, Session II

nhsmun.oas@imuna.org



A NOTE ON RESEARCH AND PREPARATION

Delegate research and preparation is a critical element of attending NHSMUN and enjoying the debate experience. We have provided this Background Guide to introduce the topics that will be discussed in your committee. We encourage and expect each of you to critically explore the selected topics and be able to identify and analyze their intricacies upon arrival to the conference.

The task of preparing for the conference can be challenging, but to assist delegates, we have updated our [Beginner Delegate Guide](#), [Advanced Delegate Guide](#), [Research Guide](#), and [Rules of Procedure Guide](#). In particular, these guides contain more detailed instructions on how to prepare a position paper and excellent sources that delegates can use for research. Use these resources to your advantage. They can help transform a sometimes overwhelming task into what it should be: an engaging, interesting, and rewarding experience.

To accurately represent a country, delegates must be able to articulate its policies. Accordingly, NHSMUN requires each delegation (the one or two delegates representing a country in a committee) to write a position paper for each topic on the committee's agenda. In delegations with two students, we strongly encourage each student to research each topic to ensure that they are both prepared to debate throughout the committee. More information about how to write and format position papers can be found in the Research Guide. To summarize, position papers should be structured into three sections.

I: Topic Background – This section should describe the history of the topic as it would be described by the delegate's country. Delegates do not need to give an exhaustive account of the topic. It is best to focus on the details that are most important to the delegation's policy and proposed solutions.

II: Country Policy – This section should discuss the delegation's policy regarding the topic. Each paper should state the policy in plain terms and include the relevant statements, statistics, and research that support the effectiveness of the policy. Comparisons with other global issues are also appropriate.

III. Proposed Solutions – This section should detail the delegation's proposed solutions to address the topic. Descriptions of each solution should be thorough. Each idea should clearly connect to the specific problem it aims to solve and identify potential obstacles to implementation and how they can be avoided. The solution should be a natural extension of the country's policy.

Each topic's position paper should be **no more than 10 pages** long double-spaced with standard margins and 12 point font size. This is a maximum; **3–5 pages per topic is often a suitable length**. The paper must be written from the perspective of your assigned country and should articulate the policies you will espouse at the conference.

Each delegation is responsible for submitting position papers on or before **February 20, 2026**. If a delegate wishes to receive detailed feedback from the committee's dais, a position must be submitted on or before **January 30, 2026**. The papers received by this earlier deadline will be reviewed by the dais of each committee and returned prior to your arrival at the conference. Instructions on how to submit position papers will be shared directly with faculty advisors.

Complete instructions for how to submit position papers will be sent to faculty advisers via email. If delegations are unable to submit their position papers on time, please contact us at nhsmun@imuna.org.

Delegations that do not submit position papers will be ineligible for awards.

COMMITTEE HISTORY

The Organization of the American States (OAS) is a regional association formalized in 1948 in Bogota, Colombia. Nevertheless, it started working in December 1951. Its origin can be traced back to the first American integration in 1825 with the Congress of Panama, led by Simon Bolivar. In these first meetings, topics such as the continent's economic recovery and the organization of democratic governments after the independence wars were discussed.¹ In 1890 the First American International Conference—the direct predecessor of the OAS—took place in Washington, DC. This makes the OAS the first regional group.² Today, the organization has 34 member states. The participation of these countries implies an obligation to the organization's basic pillars: democracy, human rights, security, and development.³ The failure to comply with these values has led countries to be suspended from the OAS, such as Cuba.

One of the main purposes of the OAS is to encourage peace and solidarity between its members. In consequence, the OAS looks to improve security in the continent. Therefore, if necessary, provide peaceful solutions to conflicts. Even though the OAS is not part of the United Nations (UN), the function of this organ is similar and goes along with the first article of the UN Charter, which highlights the importance of peace and security. As written in Article 1 of the OAS Charter, its purpose is to: “achieve an order of peace and justice, to promote their solidarity, to strengthen their collaboration, and to defend their sovereignty, their territorial integrity, and their independence.”⁴ In addition, the group acts based on democracy, human rights, and security. The OAS provides important support to the countries by guiding them in building and improving their institutions to overcome potential challenges. Some of these aids provided by the OAS include reforms of their electoral systems, training personnel for government positions, preparing for natural disasters, migration, and scholarships, among others.⁵

The most important and authoritative body is its own General Assembly (GA). Likewise, each state has a representative and a right to one vote. The supreme authority within the organization is the Secretary General. This position is currently occupied by Albert Ramdin, who was re-elected in March 2025.⁶ Finally, the organization is led by these documents: the OAS Charter, the Inter-American Democratic Charter, the Social Charter of the Americas, and GA resolutions.⁷

1 “THE PANAMA CONGRESS. A FAILED ATTEMPT AT LATIN AMERICAN UNION,” THE FEDERALIST, accessed September 28, 2025, https://www-thefederalist-eu.translate.goog/site/index.php/en/notes/2175-the-panama-congress-a-failed-attempt-at-latin-american-union?_x_tr_sl=en&_x_tr_tl=es&_x_tr_hl=es&_x_tr_pto=wapp

2 “OAS: Our History,” OAS, accessed September 22, 2025, https://www.oas.org/en/about/our_history.asp.

3 https://www.oas.org/en/about/what_we_do.asp

4 “CHARTER OF THE ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN STATES,” Interamerican Commission of Human Rights, accessed September 22, 2025, <https://www.cidh.oas.org/basicos/english/basic22.charter%20oas.htm>.

5 “OAS: Cooperation,” OAS, accessed September 22, 2025, <https://www.oas.org/en/about/cooperation.asp>.

6 “OAS: General Assembly,” OAS, accessed September 22, 2025, https://www.oas.org/en/about/general_assembly.asp.

7 “OAS: Documents,” OAS, accessed September 22, 2025, https://www.oas.org/en/information_center/default.asp.

A person with long dark hair, wearing a light blue t-shirt and dark jeans, stands with their back to the camera. They are holding a Nicaraguan flag high above their head with both arms. They are positioned behind a wall made of stacked bricks. In the background, there is a lot of smoke rising from the ground, and a fire is burning on the right side. The sky is blue with some clouds. The overall scene suggests a protest or a moment of national pride during a conflict.

Responding to the Situation in Nicaragua

Photo Credit: Voice of America

Since coming to power, the Nicaraguan government has drawn major criticism. Human rights groups report that President Daniel Ortega and his wife, Vice President Rosario Murillo, have changed the constitution and weakened democratic institutions. Together, they have concentrated power in their hands, taken control of all branches of government, and silenced political opposition.¹

According to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), one of the most visible consequences

of this consolidation has been the suppression of freedom of speech.² Since the 2018 protests, independent media outlets have been shut down, journalists imprisoned or forced into exile, and laws passed to criminalize dissent. The state's control over the narrative has not only restricted civil liberties but also contributed to widespread fear and civic disengagement. Thousands of professionals, students, and entrepreneurs have had to flee the country in one of the largest waves of migration in Nicaragua's history.³

The Organization of American States (OAS) has been one of the strongest critics of Nicaragua's democratic decline. Even though Nicaragua officially left the OAS in 2023, the group continues to act. It reports on human rights abuses, supports Nicaraguans forced into exile, and calls for a return to constitutional order. This highlights the role of international organizations in defending human rights and democracy.⁴

TOPIC BACKGROUND

The History of Democracy in Nicaragua

Anastasio Somoza García played an important role in shaping Nicaragua's politics during the 20th century. He rose to power through his connections in the military and his involvement in the Liberal Party, starting with smaller government roles before gaining greater authority. The Somoza family held power from the 1930s to the 1980s,

often referred to as the Somoza era. For more than four decades, they stayed in control through military support, alliances with economic elites, and limits on political opposition.⁵

In the early 20th century, Nicaragua experienced US interventions as part of the so-called "Banana Wars." US Marines were stationed in the country for two decades to protect American economic interests, including companies like the United Fruit Company. These actions fueled

local resentment and resistance, most notably led by Augusto César Sandino, who organized the Army for the Defense of the National Sovereignty of Nicaragua (EDSN) to fight against US forces and defend Nicaraguan independence.⁶

In 1933, Anastasio Somoza was appointed Chief of the National Guard, a force created and trained by the US Marines to replace their departing troops. This gave him enormous military power. With US backing and control over the country's only armed institution,

1 Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. "Nicaragua: Alarming Erosion of Freedom and Academic Autonomy." *UN News*, n.d. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/11/1156741>.

2 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), "Nicaragua: UN Experts document serious human rights violations targeting the country's university sector," press release, November 8, 2024, www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/11/nicaragua-un-experts-document-serious-human-rights-violations-targeting?sub-site=HRC.

3 "Nicaragua," *Human Rights Watch*, January 11, 2024. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/nicaragua>.

4 "Seven Years After the Beginning of the Crisis in Nicaragua, IACHR Condemns Consolidation of the Authoritarian Regime." *Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR)*, April 14, 2025. https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/jsForm/?File=/en/iachr/media_center/preleases/2025/073.asp&utm_content=country-nic&utm_term=class-mon.

5 Katherine Hoyt, "Race, Class and Sandino's Politics," *Against the Current*, no. 57 (July/August 1995), <https://againstthecurrent.org/atc057/p2643/>.

6 Stoyack, Aaron. 2025. "The Banana Wars: How the US Plundered Central America." *TheCollector*. May 25, 2025. <https://www.thecollector.com/the-banana-wars-how-the-us-plundered-central-america/>.



US Marines holding Sandino's Flag (Credit: Unknown author)

Somoza quickly became the most powerful figure in Nicaragua. Revolutionary leader Augusto Sandino recognized this as a threat to democracy and national security. Viewing Sandino as an obstacle to his rise, Somoza ordered his assassination in February 1934, removing one of the last major challenges to his leadership.⁷

In 1936, Somoza forced President Juan Bautista Sacasa from office and ran for president himself.⁸ The election process was heavily influenced by Somoza's control of the National Guard, and major political actors. Taking office in

1937, Somoza consolidated power by aligning with wealthy elites, expanding the role of the National Guard, and gradually extending his rule through constitutional changes. By 1938, he held authority over the army, congress, and the judicial system.⁹ The National Guard's power grew quickly. They controlled radio, telegraphs, mail, immigration, health services, taxes, and railroads.¹⁰ Confident in his power, Somoza defied the Conservatives by seeking to stay in office beyond the constitutional limit. In 1938, he called a

Constituent Assembly to extend his rule and give himself another eight-year term.¹¹

However, by the mid-1940s, both domestic opposition and US criticism of his government began to grow. In response to challenges, Somoza relied on strategies such as appointing allied leaders, staging coups, and manipulating constitutional reforms. Though the United States at times cut ties with his government, Cold War dynamics and anti-communist policies later encouraged Washington to restore relations.¹²

In the 1944 elections, Somoza faced opposition from some liberals who formed the Independent Liberal Party (PLI). The US government also opposed his candidacy. In response to the growing opposition, Somoza set up a puppet government by nominating Leonardo Argüello. Argüello took office on May 1, 1947, while Somoza stayed as head of the National Guard. Soon after, Argüello began to resist Somoza's control. In response, Somoza staged a coup and replaced him with a family friend, Benjamín Lacayo Sacasa. At the same time, US President Harry S. Truman cut diplomatic ties with Nicaragua. To expand his control, Somoza called for another Constituent Assembly

7 Mastronardi, Nancy. "Sowing of Augusto Nicolás Calderón Sandino: 91st Anniversary of His Passage to Immortality." *ALBA-TCP*. February 21, 2025. <https://www.albatcp.org/en/2025/02/21/sowing-of-augusto-nicolas-calderon-sandino-91st-anniversary-of-his-passage-to-immortality/>.

8 Feinberg, Richard E. "Nicaragua and the Sins of Somoza." *The Washington Post*, September 27, 1981. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/entertainment/books/1981/09/27/nicaragua-and-the-sins-of-somoza/aefecab9-6ce9-494d-89dd-2b33967f2389/>.

9 "Nicaraguan Students Campaign Against Government." n.d. *Global Nonviolent Action Database*. Accessed June 15, 2025. <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/nicaraguan-students-campaign-against-government-1944>.

10 "Nicaraguan Students Campaign Against Government," *Global Nonviolent Action Database*.

11 "Nicaragua - the Somoza Era, 1936-74." n.d. Accessed June 15, 2025. <https://countrystudies.us/nicaragua/11.htm>.

12 Amy. "What Was Somocismo Like? Life in Nicaragua During the Somoza Dictatorship." *JP+ Noticias De Nicaragua Y El Mundo*, November 19, 2024. <https://jpmas.com.ni/what-was-somocismo-like-life-in-nicaragua-during-the-somoza-dictatorship/>.

to draft a new constitution. The assembly appointed his uncle, Víctor Román Reyes, as president. The new constitution included strong anti-communist measures to regain US support. The United States refused to recognize Somoza's regime. However, in 1948, pressure from the rest of Latin America pushed Washington to restore formal diplomatic ties with Nicaragua. After an economic growth in the 1950s and 1960s, mainly driven by increasing cotton and cattle exports, his promise of "commercial liberty" helped win back the backing of the upper class.¹³

Despite these successes, opposition to Somoza intensified. The National Guard gained a reputation for corruption and repression, and political opponents often faced intimidation or imprisonment. Somoza survived several attempts on his life, but in 1956 he was assassinated by Rigoberto López Pérez, a young poet opposed to the regime.¹⁴ Following his death, Somoza's sons, Luis Somoza Debayle and Anastasio "Tachito" Somoza Debayle, inherited political and military power. Luis served as president from 1957 to 1963, allowing limited political freedoms but maintaining

control through restrictive elections. Anastasio Debayle later became president in 1967 after another contested election, ruling with even tighter control.¹⁵

Luis Somoza Debayle stayed in power until 1967. As his health declined, his brother Anastasio ran in the elections that year. In February 1967, Somoza Debayle won the presidency through a repressive campaign against the opposition.¹⁶ When he became president, Somoza Debayle gained full political and military control of Nicaragua. Corruption and violence grew under his rule, which fueled stronger opposition. During his presidency, Anastasio changed the constitution to extend his rule until 1972. As opposition pressure grew, he agreed to form a three-member junta to govern from 1972 to 1974.¹⁷

By the 1970s, Nicaragua faced rising inequality, poor social conditions, and mounting opposition. A devastating earthquake in 1972 destroyed much of Managua, killing tens of thousands. International aid poured into the country, but widespread accusations of corruption damaged the regime's legitimacy. Somoza

Debayle's fortune grew significantly, while many citizens struggled to rebuild their lives.¹⁸

The opposition, led by Pedro Joaquín Chamorro and Ramiro Sacasa, formed the Democratic Liberation Union to promote political pluralism. Somoza responded with harsher repression and strict media censorship. He was elected president in September 1974. Despite internal and international criticism, Somoza remained in power through the 1970s, relying on censorship, repression, and control of state institutions. However, public discontent, combined with corruption and economic hardship, gradually eroded the foundation of Somoza family rule, setting the stage for the rise of revolutionary movements later in the decade.¹⁹

The Rise of Ortega

After Somoza Debayle's re-election in 1974 and the extension of the presidential term, opposition grew. Conservatives, moderate liberals, and Catholic Church leaders joined the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) in leading mass protests against Somoza's regime. On January 10, 1978, journalist Pedro Chamorro

13 Moya, Kelvin David Pavón. "Nicaragua's Historical Relations With the United States and Its Involvement in the National Context (1937-1963)." *Universidad Nacional Autónoma De Nicaragua*, Managua. May 9, 2022. <https://camjol.info/index.php/torreon/article/download/14278/17295?inline=1>.

14 Minster, Christopher. "Biography of Anastasio Somoza García, President of Nicaragua." *ThoughtCo*. July 29, 2019. <https://www.thoughtco.com/biography-of-anastasio-somoza-garcia-2136349>.

15 "Nicaragua's Political Parties and Movements (Part I)." *Revista Envío*. November 1984. <https://www.revistaenvio.org/articulo/3957>.

16 "Recent Nicaraguan Election History." 1978. *Central Intelligence Agency*. <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80T00634A000400010066-0.pdf>.

17 "Education." n.d. *Revisiting the Nicaraguan Revolution*. Accessed June 16, 2025. <https://nicaraguanrevolution.omeka.net/exhibits/show/revisiting-the-nicaraguan-revo/education>.

18 Lucena, Anais. "This Is How the Worst Earthquake in Nicaragua Was Experienced 50 Years Ago." *El Ciudadano*, December 26, 2022. <https://www.elciudadano.com/en/as-a-horror-movie-this-is-how-the-worst-earthquake-in-nicaragua-was-experienced-50-years-ago/12/26/>.

19 Lucena, Anais. "This Is How the Worst Earthquake in Nicaragua Was Experienced 50 Years Ago."

was assassinated after years of criticizing the Somoza regime. He had already been imprisoned multiple times during the 1960s and 1970s for his opposition. His death became a turning point that sparked a revolution, led by the FSLN. As unrest grew, the OAS proposed a peaceful transition with a three-man junta, but Somoza rejected the plan.²⁰

Amid the chaos, the Sandinista movement gained strength and credibility. Inspired by the Cuban Revolution, they took their name from Augusto Sandino, a Nicaraguan leader who fought US occupation in the early 20th century. The Sandinistas also received support from Cuba and the Soviet Union, while public outrage after Chamorro's assassination further fueled their cause. By 1979, the Somoza family began to lose support from the United States, especially after the killing of US journalist Bill Stewart by the National Guard.²¹

This incident was a tipping point for President Jimmy Carter, who opposed Somoza's human rights abuses and began cutting off US support. During this time, different factions of the FSLN unified and organized uprisings in key cities like León, Estelí, and

Masaya. The National Guard was eventually overwhelmed, and on July 17, 1979, Somoza fled into exile in Paraguay, where he was later assassinated. However, Nicaragua's instability did not end with his departure.²²

The isolation of Somoza by the United States played a major role in the downfall of his regime. Although President Jimmy Carter did not fully support the Sandinistas, he strongly opposed the Somoza government's repeated human rights abuses. As a result, the US began cutting off diplomatic

But this was not the end of chaos and instability in Nicaragua.

ties and military support for Anastasio Somoza Debayle, further weakening his hold on power.²³ The FSLN began coordinating attacks in cities nationwide, with the capital being the last target on the list. The National Guard was overwhelmed by the conflict and collapsed. On July 17, 1979, Anastasio Somoza Debayle exiled in Paraguay, where he was later assassinated.²⁴

After the revolution, the Sandinistas and other political figures created a provisional government called the "Junta of National Reconstruction." It included Daniel Ortega for the FSLN, Sergio Ramírez for "The Twelve," Moisés Hassan for the Broad Front of the Nation, Alfonso Robelo for the Nicaraguan Democratic Movement, and Violeta Barrios de Chamorro as a moderate voice. This first Junta lasted less than a year, as Chamorro and Robelo resigned after concerns that the FSLN was seeking too much control. Their exit, combined with censorship and restrictions on political plurality, led to the rise of new opposition groups.²⁵

The Sandinistas also became involved in regional conflicts, supplying weapons to Salvadoran guerrillas. Therefore, the United States armed the Contras, a counterrevolutionary group. Reports from this time accused the Sandinista government of serious human rights abuses, including torture, disappearances, and forced relocations, such as the displacement of the Miskito people. In July 1980, Defense Minister Humberto Ortega announced that elections would be postponed until 1985, while Daniel Ortega suggested that the revolution itself

20 Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training. "Tachito Crumbles – the End of Nicaragua's Somoza Dynasty." Accessed June 8, 2025. <https://adst.org/2015/03/tachito-crumbles-the-end-of-nicaraguas-somoza-dynasty/>.

21 Martin, John. "How an ABC News Correspondent's Murder Shaped Cold War History in Nicaragua." *ABC News*. July 12, 2018. <https://abcnews.go.com/International/back-abc-news-correspondents-murder-shaped-cold-war/story?id=56520233>.

22 Cardenal, Rodolfo. 1986. "La Crisis De La Iglesia Nicaragüense," *Revista Latinoamericana De Teología* 3, no. 8 (1986): 181–211. <https://revistas.uca.edu.sv/index.php/rlt/article/view/6173>.

23 "Carter Must End Aid to Somoza." *The Harvard Crimson*. September 19, 1978. <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/1978/9/19/carter-must-end-aid-to-somoza/>.

24 Thomas, Jack Ray. "Somoza Is Forced Out of Power in Nicaragua." *EBSCO Information Services*. 2023. <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/history/somoza-forced-out-power-nicaragua>.

25 "Primera Proclama Del Gobierno De Reconstrucción Nacional." 1979. *Enrique Bolaños Foundation*. <https://sajurin.enriquebolanos.org/docs/Primera%20Proclama.pdf>.

was a form of “vote.” Growing tensions peaked in November 1980 when business leader Jorge Salazar was killed in a setup by Sandinista security forces. In response, opposition parties and private organizations withdrew from the Council of State, deepening the political divide.²⁶

In the early 1980s, the United States cut economic aid to Nicaragua, and the Sandinista government declared a state of emergency that restricted political freedoms. Daniel Ortega became the main leader, though critics argued power was concentrated within the FSLN. In 1984, Ortega won the presidency in elections observed as generally fair, despite ongoing censorship and repression. His government faced US sanctions and a civil war with the Contras but pursued peace efforts, including the 1987 Esquipulas II Accords and a 1988 ceasefire. In 1990, national elections brought Violeta Barrios de Chamorro to power, ending Sandinista rule and marking a major political transition.²⁷

From the 1990s to the early 2000s, Ortega ran for president three times but was unsuccessful. His political comeback came in the 2006 elections, which he won partly because of divisions among

the liberal parties. Once Ortega returned to the presidency in 2007, he began consolidating power by strengthening presidential authority over the legislature. He maintained support among some sectors of society who remembered the revolution but also faced criticism for restricting opposition parties, influencing election outcomes, and amending the constitution to extend presidential terms.²⁸

The Tipping Point in 2018

On April 18 2018, people around Nicaragua took the streets to protest. These protests were sparked by the new proposed social security reforms that would have required bigger contributions from workers while simultaneously providing fewer benefits for retirement. These protests were larger, more recurring, and explicitly called for the removal of the current government.²⁹

Many Nicaraguans saw the reform as an opportunity to speak out against not only that specific policy, but also the many repressive actions the government had carried out over the years. This movement was led largely by university students. While the demonstrations began peacefully, the situation quickly

escalated after President Ortega and Vice President Rosario Murillo ordered police and paramilitary groups to stop any protests, even those that were entirely nonviolent. Amnesty International reported that the government started to respond with severe violence, such as tear gas, rubber bullets, and even live ammunition. At least 25 people were killed in the first few days. Furthermore, hospital staff were instructed to deny medical care to any wounded protesters. Independent media reporting on the protests were raided or taken off air, and several journalists were attacked. In Bluefields, a city on the Caribbean side of the country, the journalist Angel Gahona was fatally shot during a livestream by a police sniper.³⁰

This harsh response fueled greater public anger and unrest, leading to both violent protests and increased repression by the state. In May, the crisis worsened. On May 13, 2018, tens of thousands organized a march to honor the mothers of the victims killed during the April protests. This march, like many others, was met with violent measures by the police and paramilitary. Amnesty International reports that Ortega’s government policy was “shoot-to-kill.”³¹ During the month of May, there were various reports of

26 Stephen Kinzer, “Managua Journal: Foes of Sandinistas Defiantly Hail ‘Martyr,’” *The New York Times*, November 22, 1986, www.nytimes.com/1986/11/22/world/managua-journal-foes-of-sandinistas-defiantly-hail-martyr.html

27 “Procedure for the Establishment of a Firm and Lasting Peace in Central America (Esquipulas II).” *United Nations | Peacemaker*. August 7, 1987. <https://peacemaker.un.org/en/node/9275>.

28 Purcell, Richard. “The Rise of Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua.” *Geopolitical Monitor*. November 5, 2021. <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/background-politics-in-nicaragua/>.

29 Ali, Zara. “Nicaragua on the Brink: Protests, Elections, and Mass Atrocity.” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*. March 25, 2023. <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2023/03/17/nicaragua-on-the-brink-protests-elections-and-mass-atrocity/>.

30 “Despite Bloody State Repression, the People of Nicaragua Will Not Be Silenced.” *Amnesty International*. May 31, 2018. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/05/despite-bloody-state-repression-the-people-of-nicaragua-will-not-be-silenced/>.

31 “Nicaragua: Violent Attack on Mass Mother’s Day March in Managua.” *Amnesty International*. May 30, 2018. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/05/nicaragua-violento-ataque-a-multitudinaria-marcha-de-las-madres-en-managua/>.



Protest in Nicaragua (Credit: Jorge Mejía Peralta)

arbitrary arrests and torture against people participating in the protests. Even further, there were enforced disappearances, like Marco Novoa who was abducted and tortured for eight days.³²

In response to the conflict, the UN and OAS called for immediate cessation of violence and opening independent investigations. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), under the OAS, expressed immense concerns over the intensifying of the conflict and human rights violation in Nicaragua. The Commission condemned the disproportionate use of force by the state and pro-government groups. It urged

the Nicaraguan government to immediately disband paramilitary forces, stop any form of repression and restore diplomatic dialogue based in international law and the enforcement of human rights.³³ Additionally, the UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, called on the Nicaraguan Government to consider the requests of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to visit the country to assist national dialogue to strengthen respect for human rights and peaceful conflict resolution.³⁴

As of late November of 2018, the conflict left at least 325 people dead, more than 2,000 injured,

hundreds illegally detained and tortured, and more than 52,000 exiled in neighboring countries. Human rights significantly deteriorated during this year. During the unrest, President Ortega and his government ignored most human rights abuse claims from civil groups and international organizations. They called protests a threat to stability and labeled opponents as “terrorists” or enemies of the state. Ortega refused dialogue with human rights bodies, saying they were biased or linked to US interests. He accused them of using humanitarian concerns to promote foreign interference. This left Nicaragua more isolated and raised doubts about the government’s transparency and accountability.³⁵

Suppression of Freedom of Speech

Freedom of expression is a fundamental human right, enshrined in article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Since 2018, there has been a noticeable increase in restrictions on freedom of speech. Following the events of that year, the president appeared to grow more concerned about potential dissent, leading to a tightening of control over the media, including journalists, television and radio outlets, social

32 Rivas, Elmer. “Nicaraguan Student Describes His Torture in a Clandestine Prison.” *Confidencial*. July 23, 2018. <https://confidencial.digital/english/nicaraguan-student-describes-his-torture-in-a-clandestine-prison/>.

33 “IACHR Confirms Reports of Criminalization and Legal Persecution in Nicaragua.” *Inter-American Commission on Human Rights*. August 2, 2018. https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/media_center/PReleases/2018/169.asp.

34 “Secretary-General Condemns Ongoing Violence in Nicaragua.” *United Nations | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases*. June 1, 2018. <https://press.un.org/en/2018/sgsm19063.doc.htm>.

35 “2018 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Nicaragua.” *US Department of State*. Accessed June 25, 2025. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/nicaragua/>.

media platforms, and individuals expressing critical views of his administration.³⁶

In 2018, following the assassination of journalist Angel Gahona, the government destroyed Radio Dario (a national radio station) and seized the property of 100% Noticias and Confidencial, national media outlets that were known for reporting the injustices committed by the government.³⁷ Moreover, they imprisoned the directors of TV station 100% Noticias.³⁸ Other directors and workers from small to medium news outlets faced constant fear for their lives as their homes and workplaces were constantly surveilled by the national police.

Moreover, the Nicaraguan government has also resorted to legal measures to further restrict freedom of press, including the “Special Law on Cybercrimes.” This law establishes prison terms of two to four years for “those who promote or distribute false or misleading information that causes alarm, terror, or unease in the public.”³⁹ The law also allows the government to define what kind of information fits that description.⁴⁰

Ortega has closed or confiscated at least 61 media outlets over the past 18 years. Some were shut down by having their licenses revoked, others were suffocated economically, and some involved military takeovers and seizure of assets. Additionally, the government has also overseen the imprisonment of 15 journalists, media professionals and executives, with four still in detention without publicly stated justification. 283 journalists have gone into exile while 25 media workers and executives have had their citizenship revoked.⁴¹ The government has organized structures called CPCs, which serve as informants to the regime. Their role involves reporting to authorities if they observe or hear individuals expressing criticism of the government. Such reports can lead to those individuals facing legal consequences, including potential detention by the police.⁴²

The long-term consequences of press and speech censorship in Nicaragua have deeply affected the country’s social and political space. Most national radio stations, and television channels avoid reporting critically on political matters, as doing so risks severe repercussions,

including exile or the loss of operating licenses. This has left Nicaraguans with limited access to real, objective information, as much of the media content is shaped by self-censorship or government influence. As a result, open debate has nearly vanished, and citizens still living in the country are often reluctant to speak out publicly.

International groups, like Human Rights Watch, have said that Nicaragua continues to be one of the most repressive countries in terms of freedom of speech.⁴³ Journalists have to operate under constant threat of surveillance, harassment, imprisonment, and forced exile. Citizens who share content critical of the government on social media may face serious consequences, including being denied entry into the country or facing legal action under charges such as ‘treason.’ These measures have created an insecure and vulnerable climate within the population.⁴⁴

36 “Freedom of Expression and Opinion.” n.d. *United Nations Human Rights | Office of the High Commissioner*. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/topic/freedom-expression-and-opinion>.

37 Voice of America, “VOA Statement on Suspension of License of VOA Affiliate Radio Dario in Nicaragua,” press release, August 16, 2022, <https://www.insidevoa.com/a/statement-on-suspension-of-license-of-voa-affiliate-radio-dario-in-nicaragua-/6704077.html>.

38 “Freedom of Expression and Elections in Nicaragua.” *Inter-American Dialogue*. April 23, 2021. <https://thediologue.org/analysis/freedom-of-expression-and-elections-in-nicaragua>.

39 *Media, NGO offices taken over by government in Nicaragua*, The Associated Press, December 23, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/media-television-nicaragua-daniel-ortega-51a468e27305779268d902daf42fc1a6>.

40 “Nicaragua Approves ‘Cybercrimes’ Law, Alarming Rights Groups.” *PBS News*. October 27, 2020. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/nicaragua-approves-cybercrimes-law-alarming-rights-groups>.

41 “The War on Journalism in Nicaragua: 60+ Media Outlets Shut Down or Confiscated.” *Confidencial*. March 24, 2025. <https://confidencial.digital/english/the-war-on-journalism-in-nicaragua-60-media-outlets-shut-down-or-confiscated/>.

42 “Nicaragua Once Again, No Freedom of Speech.” *Chapultepec Index on Freedom of Expression and the Press*. https://www.indicedechapultepec.com/indice/20/informes_en.pdf.

43 Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2025: Nicaragua*, 2025.

44 Free Press Unlimited, *Nicaragua*, accessed August 27, 2025, www.freepressunlimited.org/en/countries/nicaragua.

Mass Migration, Economic Crisis, and the Closure of Civic Institutions

Under the Ortega-Murillo regime, Nicaragua's economy has come to rely heavily on money sent from remittances by nearly 900,000 migrants living abroad. These are not directly collected by the government, but they play a key role in keeping the economy afloat by boosting spending and increasing tax revenues. As more people leave the country to escape poverty and repression, the amount of money they send back has grown significantly, rising about 45 percent in 2023 alone. This growing dependence on remittances could allow the government to avoid investing in public services, while also easing the political pressure by encouraging potential critics to leave the country.⁴⁵

The economy faces ongoing issues such as inflation, political instability, and a challenging business environment, which has paralyzed the sustainable development. These economic pressures continue to drive migration, as many Nicaraguans seek better opportunities abroad,

contributing to a cycle where emigration becomes both a response to and a factor in the country's economic challenges. Nicaragua is currently experiencing significant outward migration, with over 10 percent of its population residing abroad due to a combination of socio-political, and economic pressures. Many of these migrants live in irregular situations, especially those seeking asylum or employment.⁴⁶

These movements have evolved from traditional patterns of labor migration to more complex flows that include refugees, asylum seekers, and transmigrants.⁴⁷ Nicaraguan migration today must be understood within the context of changing international policies, especially those of the United States. Between 2023 and 2025, about 93,000 Nicaraguans entered the US through the Biden administration's humanitarian parole program. This program gave migrants two years of legal status and work authorization but did not create a path to permanent residency. As of mid-2025, more than 60,000 Nicaraguans in the program have yet to secure a more stable status. Their future remains uncertain, not only because of the program's termination under

the Trump administration, but also due to the risk of not being allowed back into Nicaragua.⁴⁸ The return of migrants without proper reintegration mechanisms risks amplifying existing social tensions and potentially subjecting individuals to renewed state repression.

These economic and migratory crises cannot be separated from the regime's gradual deconstruction of Nicaragua's civic and educational institutions, which has both fueled and been fueled by the same forces driving migration. Over the past several years, the Ortega-Murillo regime has taken apart over 5,600 independent institutions, depriving thousands of citizens of essential services, civic engagement, and educational opportunities.⁴⁹ The government has dissolved around 5,000 NGOs, including religious and humanitarian groups, accusing them of failing to disclose financial information or having expired governance status. Among those affected were the national Scouts association, several Catholic and Evangelical organizations and a science and health university group. These closures were politically motivated to fit the government's agenda.⁵⁰

45 Divergentes, and Alice Arlen. "The Hidden Sacrifices of Nicaraguan Migrants Fueling the Ortega-Murillo Regime's Economy." *Divergentes*. November 12, 2024. <https://www.divergentes.com/the-hidden-sacrifices-of-nicaraguan-migrants-fueling-the-ortega-murillo-regimes-economy/>.

46 "Nicaragua - Market Overview." *International Trade Administration*. February 29, 2024. <https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/nicaragua-market-overview>.

47 "Nicaragua - Migrants & Refugees Section." *Migrants & Refugees Section*. March 16, 2022. <https://migrants-refugees.va/country-profile/nicaragua/>.

48 "Over 60,000 Nicaraguans 'At Risk' of Deportation After End of US Parole." *Confidential*. March 25, 2025. <https://confidential.digital/english/over-60000-nicaraguans-at-risk-of-deportation-after-end-of-u-s-parole/>.

49 Vatican News, "Nicaraguan government dissolves another 169 NGOs," Vatican News, August 30, 2024. <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/world/news/2024-08/nicaragua-government-cancels-169-ngos.html>.

50 "Nicaragua Shuts Down Scouting Association and Several Other Social and Religious Groups." *AP News*. February 16, 2024. <https://apnews.com/article/nicaragua-crackdown-scouts-daniel-ortega-ceb7679bad9155e5f69d6cf34e16d606>.

The consequences have been immense. More than 600,000 children and youth have lost access to educational services provided by these NGOs, and the financial loss exceeds half a billion dollars in lost donations. Civil organizations that have previously championed education, healthcare, and community development have been forcibly dissolved, leaving vulnerable populations without essential support. At the same time, the regime has confiscated the assets of all these organizations, and frozen their bank accounts, consolidating material control over infrastructure all over the country.⁵¹

Parallel to this attack on NGOs, the government has dismantled higher education institutions viewed as centers of dissent. Between 2021 and early 2024, 40 private universities lost legal recognition, many that had offered sanctuary to student protesters back in 2018. The regime has also amended academic governance legislation to centralize control in a heavily politicized National University Council (CNU), effectively removing institutional autonomy.⁵² The seizure of Universidad Centroamericana (UCA), a Jesuit institution widely rewarded for its academic excellence, marked

a pivotal moment for many Nicaraguans. In August 2023, authorities declared the Jesuit order illegal, later confiscated UCA's assets, closed its campuses, and accused them of fostering terrorism. The UN's High Commissioner for Human Rights issued a statement on their social media condemning this act as a violation of the right to education.⁵³

The dismantling of research infrastructure, including molecular biology labs, herbariums, and science centers, has stifled independent scientific investigation.

Observers say that Nicaragua is suffering the worst assault on academic freedom in the region in decades.

Many researchers have fled, the job market stopped growing, and data production on critical issues like COVID-19 and environmental change stopped.⁵⁴

Additionally from attacking academic freedom, another sector that has been deeply hurt has been the Catholic church. Since

2018, the government has instilled terror within the church. It has even gone so far as to start a fire in the Cathedral of Managua and has broken into different churches around the country and abruptly interrupted masses.⁵⁵ All of this is an attempt to have total control of all citizens and all groups around the population.⁵⁶

All the reasons mentioned before have caused the civic space in the country to be totally erased. By having educational and economic setbacks and a stagnation of knowledge and freedom of speech, the government has been able to have total control of the educational system and over the narrative that is pushed within the country. International bodies have condemned these violations as incompatible with Nicaragua's obligation under international human rights treaties and highlighted their direct effect on fundamental freedoms.⁵⁷ By dismantling civic and educational institutions, the regime not only suppresses dissent, it suppresses the very foundations of democratic resilience and national development.

51 Wilfredo Miranda Aburto. "What About My Future?": Ortega Jeopardizes the Education of 600,000 Children and Youth With His NGO Crackdown." *Divergentes*. August 22, 2024. <https://www.divergentes.com/ortega-jeopardizes-the-education-of-600000-children-and-youth-with-his-ngo-crackdown>

52 "Ortega Regime 'Undermines' Universities' Contribution to Nicaragua's Development." *Confidencial*. November 11, 2024. <https://confidencial.digital/english/ghren-ortega-regime-undermines-universities-contribution-to-nicaraguas-development>

53 "Nicaragua Seizes Catholic University Accused of Being 'Centre of Terrorism.'" *Al Jazeera*, August 17, 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/17/nicaragua-seizes-catholic-university-accused-of-being-centre-of-terrorism>

54 UN News, "Nicaragua: Alarming erosion of freedom and academic autonomy," November 8, 2024, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/11/1156741>

55 Dany Diaz, "In Nicaragua, the Ortega Regime Steps up Efforts to Silence Civil Society—especially the Catholic Church," *America Magazine*, August 18, 2022, <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2022/06/27/nicaragua-ortega-catholic-church-243221?>

56 Diaz, "In Nicaragua, the Ortega Regime Steps up Efforts to Silence Civil Society."

57 "IACHR Confirms Reports of Criminalization and Legal Persecution in Nicaragua," *Inter-American Commission on Human Rights*.

CURRENT STATUS

Political Power Consolidation

In November 2024, the National Assembly, dominated by the FSLN, approved several constitutional reforms that amended over 100 articles. This led critics to describe the process as a near-total rewrite of the constitution. The regime has been able to cement these changes through a legislative process initiated by President Ortega. The National Assembly established a Special Constitutional Commission tasked with consulting and assessing the reform proposal submitted by Ortega and Murillo. The Commission concluded that the reform was well substantiated and did not contradict the established procedure for constitutional reform. Ortega characterized the measure as a partial reform to the existing text.⁵⁸ However, the process moved with unusual speed. Within 48 hours, the National Assembly approved the proposal. Despite its presentation as a partial amendment, the UN Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua expressed profound concern that the scope of changes

was far-reaching.⁵⁹ The new constitution officially came into force on February 18, 2025.

These amendments removed all forms of separation of powers and political pluralism, consolidating all powers under the executive branch and reaffirming that Nicaragua is a “revolutionary, socialist” state.⁶⁰ By February 12, 2025 the amended constitution stated in article 15 that “The People exercise the power of the State through the Presidency of the Republic, which directs the Government and coordinates the Legislative, Judicial, Electoral, and Public Administration and oversight bodies, as well as the autonomous entities.”⁶¹ This article increases the executive branch’s control over other parts of government, leading to greater centralization of power. Responsibilities that once belonged to independent courts, electoral bodies, and the legislature are redefined as “organs” under presidential authority.

In addition, Article 121 introduces a co-presidency, requiring that one man and one woman be elected together to serve six-year terms. This co-presidency also supervises the electoral office, which is responsible for overseeing

and regulating the voting process, and appoints both a president and vice-president. At first glance, this reform appears to promote gender equality in Nicaragua’s highest office, fitting into the government’s narrative of progress and inclusivity. However, in practice it reflects what has already existed informally for years: the shared rule of Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo. Rather than broadening democratic participation, the system instead concentrates political power within a single household. The IAHCR and the OHCHR warned that these amendments consolidate an authoritarian model with fewer protections for fundamental rights.⁶²

All these major constitutional changes were enacted by unanimous votes in the National Assembly, which is composed entirely by Sandinistas deputies. Furthermore, in May 2025, the legislature approved a constitutional amendment stripping dual nationality from Nicaraguans with immediate majority rule and no dissent. This was presented as a measure of national loyalty, yet many see it as punitive towards exiled dissidents and opposition

58 “Constitutional Reform Approved, Giving ‘Absolute Power’ to Ortega and Murillo,” *Confidencial*. November 22, 2024. <https://confidencial.digital/politica/aprueban-reforma-a-la-constitucion-politica-que-entrega-poder-absoluto-a-ortega-y-murillo/>.

59 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), “Nicaragua: UN Group of Human Rights Experts alarmed by far-reaching change to the Constitution,” November 25, 2024, www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/11/nicaragua-un-group-experts-alarmed-far-reaching-change-constitution.

60 “Nicaragua: Latest Reforms to the Constitution Expand Executive Powers,” *The Library of Congress*. July 2, 2025. <https://www.loc.gov/item/global-legal-monitor/2025-07-02/nicaragua-latest-reforms-to-the-constitution-expand-executive-powers/>.

61 Nicaragua, *Constitucion Politica de la Republica de Nicaragua*, art. 15 (2025), <https://www.asamblea.gob.ni/assets/constitucion.pdf>

62 “IACHR Condemns the Constitutional Reform in Nicaragua Which ‘Establishes an Authoritarian Regime.’” *Nicaraguan Perspectives*, December 1, 2024. <https://nicaperspectives.org/2024/12/iachr-condemns-the-constitutional-reform-in-nicaragua-which-establishes-an-authoritarian-regime>.

leaders.⁶³ In addition, one of the changes was introducing “volunteer police.” Following this amendment, in late February 2025, Ortega and Murillo officially introduced approximately 30,000 civilians into the volunteer police force, an auxiliary security body intended to support the official National Police and military in maintaining order.⁶⁴ While Ortega’s government portrays the initiative as a patriotic effort to “defend peace and security,” independent observers and UN experts warn it institutionalizes paramilitary forces reminiscent of those used during the 2018 protests, raising alarm about expanded tools for repression.⁶⁵

By systematically changing constitutional structures and having legislative dominance, the Ortega-Murillo regime has transformed Nicaragua’s democratic institutions into extensions of the executive branch. Further, the constant abuses of power have led to the disappearance of the rule of law. These measures have significantly strengthened the government’s authoritarian control and further restricted the civil and political parties of the Nicaraguan people.⁶⁶

Nicaragua’s International Isolation and its Democratic Consequences

The Ortega regime has isolated the country from international organizations. This has caused a global concern over the implications of what this may bring for the future of Nicaragua. Ortega and Murillo have portrayed international organizations as channels through which global powers can exert political and economic influence over smaller states. The OAS historically played a crucial role in promoting democracy, human rights, and multilateral dialogue across the Western Hemisphere.

On November 19, 2023, two years after initiating the process, Nicaragua officially declared its exit from the organization. Following this, the Nicaraguan government had accused the OAS of interfering in its internal affairs and labeled the organization as an instrument of US influence. This point carries particular weight, given the long-standing tension between the two countries. This position extends beyond US involvement to include

a broader rejection of intervention by international organizations.⁶⁷ Nicaraguan authorities recalled that the OAS had overstepped its role by condemning the country’s 2021 presidential elections as unfair and undemocratic. By taking this decision, Nicaragua distanced itself from the organizations and all the mechanisms for conflict resolutions and democratic accountability. Further, the regime confiscated the OAS offices in Managua.⁶⁸ This withdrawal is part of a pattern reflecting a broader policy of rejecting international scrutiny.

Beyond the OAS, Nicaragua has also withdrawn from several United Nations agencies, including the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).⁶⁹ The Nicaraguan government stated that its decision to leave UNESCO was meant to protect national sovereignty and prevent foreign organizations from pushing political agendas. Critics, however, argue that leaving UNESCO limits Nicaragua’s access to international cooperation programs and reduces opportunities for cultural and educational exchange. The decision followed UNESCO’s announcement on May 3, 2025,

63 “Regime Defends Dual Nationality Ban, Set to Take Effect in 2026,” *Confidencial*. May 23, 2025. <https://confidencial.digital/en/english/regime-defends-dual-nationality-ban-set-to-take-effect-in-2026>.

64 “Accused of Repression, Nicaragua’s Ortega Swears in Hooded ‘volunteer’ Force,” *France 24*, February 27, 2025. <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20250227-accused-of-repression-nicaragua-s-ortega-swears-in-hooded-volunteer-force>.

65 “Nicaragua launches ‘volunteer’ police force that critics fear will be paramilitary,” *Reuters*. January 17, 2025. <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/nicaragua-launches-volunteer-police-force-that-critics-fear-will-be-paramilitary-2025-01-18>.

66 Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2025: Nicaragua*.

67 Alice Arlen. “Nicaragua Leaves the OAS: Organization Overtaken by the Totalitarian Drift of the Ortega-Murillo Dictatorship,” *Divergentes*, November 16, 2023. <https://www.divergentes.com/nicaragua-leaves-the-oas-organization-overtaken-by-the-totalitarian-drift-of-the-ortega-murillo-dictatorship>.

68 Wilfredo Miranda Aburto, “The Ortega regime has officially withdrawn Nicaragua from the OAS,” *El País* (English Edition), November 21, 2023, <https://english.elpais.com/international/2023-11-21/the-ortega-regime-has-officially-withdrawn-nicaragua-from-the-oas.html>.

69 Agencia EFE. “Ortega and Murillo Pull Nicaragua From UNESCO, Fifth Agency This Year,” *Confidencial*, May 5, 2025. <https://confidencial.digital/en/nation/ortega-and-murillo-pull-nicaragua-from-unesco-fifth-agency-this-year/>.

that it would award a press freedom prize to *La Prensa*, Nicaragua's oldest newspaper. *La Prensa* has long reported on the country's political and civil life but was shut down in August 2021 when the government blocked its access to printing paper. Since then, the outlet has continued operating in exile and online.⁷⁰

Moreover, on February 27, 2025 Nicaragua announced its withdrawal from the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC). Murillo called the decision independent and final, additionally she dismissed the UN reports as “falsehoods” and “slander.”⁷¹ They also announced its withdrawal from the United Nations Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process. This decision prevents Nicaraguan civil society and the global community from assessing the country's human rights record through a structured and cooperative mechanism.⁷² The UPR is designed to allow countries to review each other's human rights practices, calling for mutual improvement and dialogue. The withdrawal from the UNHRC

signals the Nicaraguan government is shifting away from engaging in multilateral discussions on human rights.⁷³ This stance limits opportunities for dialogue and improvement on human rights issues while weakening international mechanisms that promote accountability and cooperation. The government's continued suppression of dissent further restricts public debate, raising concerns that these policies could worsen challenges to human rights and democratic governance in Nicaragua.⁷⁴

Further, in March 2025, the government announced they were also exiting both the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the International Labor Organization (ILO), stating that they reaffirm their unwavering rejection of all forms of disrespect, false claims, and hostile actions.⁷⁵ Additionally, the government also withdrew from the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and also ordered the immediate closure of its representation and offices in Managua. This came after the

agency listed Nicaragua among the countries suffering from the highest levels of hunger in the world.⁷⁶

These decisions reflect the government's stance against what they perceive as external interference, but also raise concerns about the damaging of democratic accountability and transparency. While the current administration tries to argue that these actions protect national interests, critics warn that the resulting isolation may weaken democratic institutions, restrict civil liberties, and obstruct constructive engagement with the international community.⁷⁷ This directly impacts the future of Nicaragua's politics and the path that is going to take to regain international trust and cooperation.

Sustainable Development Goals

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a global blueprint for achieving a better and more sustainable future by 2030. Adopted by all UN member states in 2015, the 17 goals

70 “Nicaragua Is Quitting a UN Agency Over a Press Freedom Award. Here's a Look at the Issue,” *AP News*. May 4, 2025. <https://apnews.com/article/unesco-nicaragua-withdraws-press-freedom-d3c3c33d333e6859038b2e4591891da6>.

71 “Nicaragua Withdraws From UN Human Rights Council,” *Reuters*. February 28, 2025. <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/nicaragua-withdraws-un-human-rights-council-2025-02-28/>.

72 “Organisations Denounce Nicaragua's Withdrawal From Human Rights Council, Absence From Universal Periodic Review,” *ISHR*, March 28, 2025, <https://ishr.ch/latest-updates/nicaragua-organisations-speak-out-against-the-states-decision-to-withdraw-from-the-human-rights-council-and-absent-itself-from-the-universal-periodic-review/>.

73 “Nicaragua Withdraws From UN Human Rights Council,” *Reuters*.

74 “Nicaragua,” Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. July 15, 2025. <https://www.globalr2p.org/countries/nicaragua/>.

75 Jimoh, Abdullahi. “Nicaragua Withdraws From Two More International Organisations,” *News Central*, March 2025. <https://newscentral.africa/nicaragua-withdraws-from-two-more-international-organisations/>.

76 AFP - Agence France Presse. “Nicaragua Quits UN Food Agency, Demands Offices Shut,” *Barrons*, February 4, 2025. <https://www.barrons.com/news/nicaragua-quits-un-food-agency-demands-offices-shut-3d7e125d>.

77 Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), “*Nicaragua: Six Years after Social Protests, IACHR Urges Reestablishment of Democracy, End to Repression and Impunity*,” April 18, 2024, https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/jsForm/?File=/en/iachr/media_center/PReleases/2024/075.asp.

address a wide range of challenges, including poverty, inequality, climate change, and peace.⁷⁸

One of the most important of these goals, SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions is the center of this topic. It is particularly relevant to discussions about democracy, governance, and human rights. SDG 16 aims to “promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels.”⁷⁹ SDG 16 focuses on reducing violence, ensuring access to justice, and promoting accountable institutions.

In Nicaragua, recent political developments have created major obstacles to this goal. The government’s withdrawal from organizations like the OAS and various UN bodies has raised

doubts about its commitment to democracy and the rule of law. Reports from international observers also point to limits on civil liberties, political diversity, and freedom of expression, making progress toward SDG 16 especially difficult. The OAS has long worked toward goals similar to SDG 16, focusing on democracy, human rights, and peaceful conflict resolution. It supports these aims through electoral observation, human rights dialogues, and institutional strengthening.⁸⁰

Its initiatives resonate with the UN’s global agenda, including the efforts outlined in SDG 16, by fostering peaceful societies and robust institutions in the Americas. Dialogue between national governments and international institutions is essential for progress on peace, justice, and institutional reform. By stepping away from

these cooperative frameworks, Nicaragua risks further isolating itself from mechanisms designed to support democratic governance and protect human rights.⁸¹

The Sustainable Development Goals provide a comprehensive framework that addresses not only economic growth and environmental sustainability but also social inclusion and the protection of fundamental rights. For countries like Nicaragua and others around the world, aligning national policies with the SDG agenda can help build resilient societies, reduce inequalities, and ensure that development benefits all citizens. The SDGs offer an opportunity for states to work together towards the same objectives, fostering dialogue, accountability, and long-term peace both regionally and globally.

BLOC ANALYSIS

As a regional organization, the OAS reflects the diversity of political perspectives and priorities found across the Western Hemisphere. In response to the situation in Nicaragua, member states have expressed a range of positions, often influenced by their national interests and

interpretations of democratic governance. Some countries have voiced clear concerns regarding the political developments in Nicaragua, while others have expressed views that acknowledge or support the current government’s leadership. There are also member states that have chosen

to maintain a neutral stance, preferring to prioritize dialogue and non-intervention. This range of perspectives highlights the complexity of building consensus within the OAS, especially on sensitive issues related to sovereignty, democracy, and human rights.

⁷⁸ Department of Economic and Social Affairs. “THE 17 GOALS | Sustainable Development.” *United Nations*, n.d. <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>.

⁷⁹ “Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions.” *United Nations Sustainable Development*, October 20, 2023. <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/peace-justice/>.

⁸⁰ OAS - Organization of American States. “Statement by the OAS General Secretariat on the Elections in Honduras,” December 17, 2017. https://www.oas.org/en/media_center/press_release.asp?sCodigo=E-092/17.

⁸¹ Department of International Law (DIL). “Charter of the Organization of American States (A-41).” *Organization of American States*, n.d. https://www.oas.org/en/sla/dil/inter_american_treaties_A-41_charter_OAS.asp.

Regime-aligned States

This bloc is composed of countries who follow a similar way of governance to the Ortega administration. It will be a bloc that recognizes and supports the Ortega-Murillo regime and emphasizes the importance of national sovereignty, self-determination, and the protection of states from foreign interference. They often critique what they view as disproportionate influence from global powers, particularly the United States, and frame their positions as part of a broader historical struggle against interventionism in Latin America and the Caribbean. These governments use isolationism primarily to protect their hold on power by minimizing foreign influencing and criticism.⁸² They frame this isolation as a defense of national sovereignty and resistance from external interference, which helps nationalist support and legitimize their rule internally.

In this bloc, countries like Venezuela, Honduras, and Bolivia would be key actors. For instance, Nicolas Maduro has openly supported the Ortega regime during his years in office, he has worked towards strengthening their bilateral ties and celebrates the “heroism” of the Sandinista government.⁸³ Furthermore, in 2024, president

Xiomara Castro from Honduras showed support towards the Ortega regime and their proposition for a new Secretary General for the Central American Integration System (SICA).⁸⁴

In the context of the OAS, this bloc actively speaks out in defense of Nicaragua, and might not recognize an OAS resolution that oversteps Nicaragua’s domestic governance. It is important to note that while these countries broadly align in their defense of Ortega, each one has its own motivations and internal political considerations that shape the extent and nature of their support.

Neutral Bloc

This second bloc adopts a neutral position towards the Ortega regime, choosing neither to support nor directly condemn the Nicaraguan government. This bloc is predominantly composed of Caribbean states, including Barbados, Dominica, Trinidad and Tobago, and others, alongside other countries like Mexico. The new administration under President Claudia Sheinbaum has expressed a foreign policy commitment to non-intervention, respect for sovereignty, and the promotion of peaceful diplomacy.⁸⁵

Countries in this bloc typically remain impartial in disputes involving regime legitimacy or internal political affairs. They often encourage the use of diplomatic channels, dialogue, and consensus-building, while avoiding alignment with more polarized positions. This bloc tends to advocate for measured approaches, focusing on regional stability without directly taking sides in contentious political situations. Nevertheless, positions within this bloc are not unchanging, some countries may lean slightly toward one side or the other depending on evolving regional dynamics, leadership changes, or specific developments in Nicaragua.

Regime-opposing Blocs

This last bloc consists of countries that have taken a critical stance against the Ortega-Murillo government, expressing concerns over democratic backsliding and human rights issues in Nicaragua. This group is generally led by the United States, Argentina, Canada, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Peru, Ecuador, and Brazil. While most of the governments are center-right or right-leaning, the bloc also includes left-wing leaders such as President Lula da Silva in Brazil who shares concerns about democratic erosion

82 Dr. Christina Cottiero and Dr. Cassandra Emmons, *Understanding and Interrupting Authoritarian Collaboration* (Washington, D.C.: International Foundation for Electoral Systems, May 2, 2024), <https://www.ifes.org/publications/authoritarian-collaboration>.

83 Vaz, Ricardo. “Venezuela to Establish ‘New Map of Cooperation’ With Nicaragua.” *Venezuela Analysis*, January 12, 2022. <https://venezuelanalysis.com/news/15429/>.

84 Efe. “Opositores Nicaragüenses Critican a Xiomara Castro Por Abogar a Favor De Ortega En El SICA.” *SWI swissinfo.ch*, August 25, 2024. <https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/opositores-nicaragua%C3%BCenses-critican-a-xiomara-castro-por-abogar-a-favor-de-ortega-en-el-sica/87433997>.

85 “Claudia Sheinbaum Will Continue Mexico’s Policy of ‘Non-intervention’ Against Dictatorships.” *Confidencial*. n.d. <https://confidencial.digital/politica/claudia-sheinbaum-continuara-con-politica-mexicana-de-no-intervencion-frente-a-dictaduras/>.

and have distanced themselves from Ortega and his administration. The deterioration of Lula and Ortega started back in 2023 and have only worsened since.⁸⁶

These countries emphasize the promotion of democratic governance, free and fair elections, and the protection of fundamental rights, aligning closely with core principles of the OAS Charter. They have voiced specific objections to Nicaragua's 2021 electoral process, which

they argue lacked transparency and inclusiveness. This bloc raises alarms about restrictions on civil liberties and political pluralism in Nicaragua. They advocate for resolutions condemning human rights violations, calling for democratic restoration and increased international scrutiny. Still, even within this group, there are variations in tone, intensity, and diplomatic strategy, some countries push for harsher measures, while others prefer to maintain dialogue or prioritize regional consensus.

These blocs represent the complex political landscape of the Americas. While each group brings different values and priorities to the table, their interaction shapes the regional conversation about governance, stability, and human rights in Nicaragua. Understanding these divisions is essential to appreciating the OAS's role as a multilateral forum where consensus is often challenging but dialogue remains vital.

COMMITTEE MISSION

The OAS was created with the mission of promoting justice, peace, solidarity, and collaboration among the independent states of the Americas. Its central purpose is to strengthen democracy, protect human rights, foster integral development, and ensure security throughout the Western Hemisphere.⁸⁷ As stated in its founding charter, the OAS seeks to uphold the principles of representative democracy, advance social equity, and resolve conflicts through dialogue and respect for international law.⁸⁸ Its member states have committed to promoting

and defending democratic institutions as essential for development and regional stability.

In the case of Nicaragua, the OAS has been very constant and vocal about the restoration of democratic order, despite Nicaragua not being a part of the organization.⁸⁹ The OAS has condemned the lack of transparency in the 2021 elections, the persecution of political opponents and journalists, and the closure of civic and academic institutions.⁹⁰ The OAS's engagement in Nicaragua exemplifies its broader commitment to defending the values that they stand for. It serves as a platform

for collective action, diplomatic pressure, and multilateral dialogue. In its vision statement from 2014, OAS proclaims that it “strengthens democracy, promotes and protects human rights, advances integral development, and fosters multidimensional security with justice and social security inclusion for the benefit of the peoples of the Americas.”⁹¹

To tackle the problem at hand, delegates must find solutions that can focus and range around facilitating dialogue between diaspora communities and regional partners, supporting independent media training, or providing

⁸⁶ Rogero, Tiago. “Brazil Cuts Ties With Nicaragua as It Rethinks Links With Leftist Authoritarians.” *The Guardian*, August 9, 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/aug/09/brazil-nicaragua-expel-ambassador-venezuela>.

⁸⁷ Organization of American States. “Who We Are,” n.d. https://www.oas.org/en/about/who_we_are.asp.

⁸⁸ “Charter of the Organization of American States (A-41),” *Organization of American States*. n.d. https://www.oas.org/en/sla/dil/inter_american_treaties_A-41_charter_OAS.asp.

⁸⁹ Organization of American States, General Secretariat, “Statement from the OAS General Secretariat on the Proposed Constitutional ‘Reform’ in Nicaragua,” November 20, 2024, https://www.oas.org/en/media_center/press_release.asp?sCodigo=E-091/24.

⁹⁰ OAS - Organization of American States. “Resolution: Outcome of the Permanent Council’s Deliberations of November 29, 2021, on the Situation in Nicaragua,” December 8, 2021. https://www.oas.org/en/media_center/press_release.asp?sCodigo=S-015/21.

⁹¹ Organization of American States (OAS), General Secretariat, “With a Vision, a Plan and a Defined Method, the OAS is Building toward the Future,” press release E-044/18, 2018, https://www.oas.org/en/media_center/press_release.asp?sCodigo=E-044/18.

platforms for Nicaraguan NGOs to present evidence and policy proposals. It is important to remember these measures may not produce immediate political change, they help open and maintain channels of communication, support the resilience of democratic actors, and keep the country's situation visible within the inter-American system.



The Political Influence of Narco-Trafficking in Latin America

Photo Credit: AteneaSGP

In many countries within Latin America, drug trafficking gangs known as cartels cause significant political, socioeconomic, and cultural challenges. These groups make and sell illegal drugs such as cocaine and heroin. Cartels generate a lot of money, often used for paying off police officers, judges, and even high-ranking politicians.¹ In many cases, they rely on threats and violence to achieve their goals, making it difficult for governments to maintain control within their territories.²

The issue has intensified in countries like Mexico, Colombia, and Venezuela.³ For example,

36 political candidates were assassinated ahead of Mexico's 2021 elections.⁴ In Colombia, former armed rebel groups have transitioned into drug trafficking operations. These groups now control poor rural areas where cocaine plants are cultivated.⁵ Because of this, many people have limited faith in their governments to keep order.⁶

Governments try different ways to stop the cartels. Some use the army and police to fight them.⁷ However, this can cause more fighting and hurt innocent people. Other governments support people who have drug problems and give

farmers new ways to earn money.⁸ These programs help, but often they do not have enough money or workers to make an impact. In Colombia, almost half of the people living in the countryside are in poverty.⁹ This makes it hard for farmers to stop growing coca plants, as they rely on the cartels for financial sustainability. In Guatemala, about one out of four young people have no work or school.¹⁰ Thus, having limited ways to improve the quality of one's life makes the cartels attractive.

TOPIC BACKGROUND

The Origins of Narco-Trafficking in the Americas

The rise of narco-trafficking in the Americas must be examined from its complex origins. Today's drug networks operate with modern logistics and have vast

influence. This influence is the result of centuries of buildup and is deeply intertwined with the region's history. Drug use and trade in the Americas predates modern boundaries. As early as the pre-Columbian period, Indigenous groups used coca leaves for spiritual and practical purposes.¹¹

These early uses were largely ritualistic or medical, a part of local cultural traditions. However, this changed when coca began to be exported abroad. This led to the expansion of coca and the rise of criminal enterprises around it. By the mid-20th century, Latin America began exporting significant

1 InSight Crime, "How Criminal Groups Influence Local Politics in Latin America," InSight Crime Foundation, 2022, <https://insightcrime.org/news/criminal-groups-local-politics-latin-america/>

2 Human Rights Watch, "World Report 2022: Events of 2021," Seven Stories Press, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022>

3 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), "World Drug Report 2023," UNODC, 2023, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/wdr2023.html>

4 BBC News, "Mexico elections: At least 36 candidates killed ahead of midterms," BBC, June 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-57337289>

5 International Crisis Group, "Deeply Rooted: Coca Eradication and Violence in Colombia," ICG, 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/andes/colombia/087-deeply-rooted-coca-eradication-and-violence-colombia>

6 International Crisis Group, "Deeply Rooted: Coca Eradication and Violence in Colombia."

7 Amnesty International, "Mexico: Military Abuses Continue with Impunity," Amnesty, 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/10/mexico-military-abuses-continue-with-impunity/>

8 The Brookings Institution, "Drugs and Development: The Dilemma of Alternative Development in the Andes," Brookings, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/drugs-and-development-in-the-andes/>

9 The Brookings Institution, "Drugs and Development: The Dilemma of Alternative Development in the Andes."

10 International Labour Organization via IndexMundi, "Share of youth not in education, employment or training, total (% of youth population) – Guatemala," ILO, 2019, <https://www.indexmundi.com/facts/guatemala/indicator/SL.UEM.NEET.ZS>

11 Paul Gootenberg, "The 'Pre-Columbian' Era of Drug Trafficking in the Americas: Cocaine, 1945–1965," *Americas* 64, no. 2 (October 2007): 133–176, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tam.2007.0148>.

amounts of refined cocaine. The primary customers were in the United States.¹² This trade was made easier by the lack of trade controls following the end of WWII.

The political systems within Latin America have allowed narco trafficking to develop into what we see today. Inequality and rural poverty laid the foundation for where cartels could grow. Small farmers in countries like Colombia, Bolivia, and Peru often turned to coca due to this poverty.¹³ Drug trafficking became a tool for these rural areas to survive, with little economic prospect outside of them. This cycle of poverty and cartel growth spiraled into the stranglehold they have on the region today.

The drug trade also exposed the many issues prevalent in Latin America. These include weaknesses in national governments during the 20th century, rampant poverty, corruption within institutions, and weak controls over trade. These conditions gave fertile grounds from which these cartels could grow.¹⁴

Government responses often worsened the situation. In many cases, law enforcement and political

elites were either complicit or too weak to challenge growing narco-networks. The fragile political institutions and low state presence, especially in remote or rural areas, were most susceptible to becoming hubs for production and trafficking.¹⁵ These near-stateless areas became strategic corridors for drug cartels, allowing them to establish social and economic control.

Cold War geopolitics played a direct role in shaping trafficking routes and drug economies. The US-led anti-communist efforts in the region diverted attention and resources away from anti-drug policies. Some authoritarian regimes allowed traffickers to operate in exchange for bribes or political convenience.¹⁶ This dynamic fostered the modern development of narco-driven states, where drug traffickers penetrate politics, judicial systems, and even militaries, leaving most states in social, economic, and humanitarian turmoil.

Cartels' Use of Violence, Bribery, and Intimidation

As drug trafficking matured into a transnational enterprise in the Americas, drug networks, also known as cartels, evolved beyond mere smuggling operations into powerful armed actors that rival and outmaneuver governments. These methods not only sustain illegal markets but also deeply destabilize civil institutions across many OAS member states.

Violence is the most visible and brutal tool used by cartels to maintain control and eliminate competition. Cartels treat urban neighborhoods and border regions as battlegrounds, often targeting not only rivals but also police, journalists, and civilians. In 2024 alone, homicide rates surged in multiple countries with heavy cartel presence. It is reported that Honduras, Mexico, and Ecuador are all hotspots for cartel trafficking and continue to see extremely high murder rates linked to organized crime.¹⁷ In 2009 at Ciudad Juárez, cartel gunmen stormed a drug

12 Gootenberg, "The 'Pre-Columbian' Era of Drug Trafficking in the Americas: Cocaine, 1945–1965," 133–176.

13 Isabela De los Rios Hernández, "Knowledge, Soil, Politics, and Poverty: How Drug Trafficking Has Kept Its Hold on Latin America," Harvard International Review, June 26, 2024, <https://hir.harvard.edu/knowledge-soil-politics-and-poverty-how-drug-trafficking-has-kept-its-hold-on-latin-america/>.

14 Gootenberg, "The 'Pre-Columbian' Era of Drug Trafficking in the Americas: Cocaine, 1945–1965," 133–176.

15 Tommy E. Murphy and Martín A. Rossi, "Following the Poppy Trail: Origins and Consequences of Mexican Drug Cartels," *Journal of Development Economics* 143 (March 2020): 102433, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdeveco.2019.102433>.

16 Linda Farthing, "Theorising state–narco relations in Bolivia's nascent democracy (1982–1993): governance, order and political transition," *Third World Quarterly* 38, no. 11 (2017): 2568–2584. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01436597.2017.1374839>.

17 Insight Crime, "Insight Crime's 2024 Homicide Round-Up," Insight Crime, accessed June 4, 2025, <https://insightcrime.org/news/insight-crime-2024-homicide-round-up/>.

rehabilitation center and killed 18 people.¹⁸ This was meant as a message to their rival organisation.

This performative brutality is increasingly being used in Latin America to ensure obedience and suppress revolts.¹⁹ In 2011, the San Fernando massacre in Tamaulipas, Mexico, revealed the extreme violence cartels can cause. Members of the Los Zetas cartel hijacked passenger buses and killed at least 72 migrants. Later, authorities discovered more than 190 bodies in mass graves, showing the scale of the tragedy and the dangers migrants face when cartels control territory.²⁰ The San Fernando massacre was designed to intimidate both competitors and communities while asserting territorial control over migration and trafficking routes. More recently, in April 2025, Ecuador witnessed a cockfight massacre, where 12 people were executed by gunmen dressed in fake military uniforms, which is another display of how gangs use military-grade tactics and symbolism to inspire fear.²¹ These killings serve the

purpose of dismantling local resistance, enforcing cartel rule, and discouraging government interference. Cartels increasingly use symbolic acts of terror to send messages against rivals, political leaders, and civilians.²² Such tactics also make resistance seem futile, ensuring communities fall in line through fear under the cartel.

Bribery is the quieter, but equally harmful, pillar of cartel influence. Cartels often allocate a portion of their revenue toward corrupting police officers, military

This practice, commonly known as “plata o plomo” leaves public officials with two options: take the bribe or face the bullet.

commanders, and elected officials. Thus, cartels have infiltrated high levels of government, weakening judicial systems and turning law

enforcement into a tool for cartel protection rather than public safety.²³

In El Salvador, the Taxis Cartel operated for over two decades by bribing judges, mayors, and police. This web of corruption enabled the group to traffic drugs and extort businesses with impunity until its leaders were finally arrested in 2013 and 2018.²⁴ The scale of corruption in Honduras was revealed with the US prosecution of Tony Hernández, the brother of President Juan Orlando Hernández. Testimonies revealed that he received at least USD four million in bribes from drug traffickers and orchestrated assassinations of rivals. US officials described Honduras as a narco state, where political elites worked hand-in-hand with traffickers.²⁵ Allegedly, cartel money is still funneled to a brother-in-law of President Xiomara Castro of Honduras, to further narco-favored actions within society.²⁶ This corruption weakens institutions, which allows cartels to grow, making them increasingly dangerous to prevent and root out corruption.

18 Tracy Wilkinson, “Mexico: Drug gang attack on rehab clinic leaves 10 dead,” Los Angeles Times, September 4, 2009, <https://www.latimes.com/la-fg-mexico-rehab-attack4-2009sep04-story.html>.

19 International Crisis Group, “Curbing Violence in Latin America’s Drug Trafficking Hotspots,” Crisis Group, 2013, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/colombia-ecuador-guatemala-honduras-mexico/108-curbing-violence-latin-america-drug-trafficking-hotspots>.

20 Open Society Justice Initiative, “New Document Throws More Light on Mexico’s San Fernando Killings,” Open Society Justice Initiative, accessed June 16, 2025, <https://www.justiceinitiative.org/voices/new-document-throws-more-light-mexico-s-san-fernando-killings>.

21 Lesley Cosme Torres, “Gunmen in Military Uniforms Kill 12 at Cockfight in Ecuador,” People, April 29, 2024, <https://people.com/gunmen-military-uniforms-kill-12-cockfight-ecuador-11718940>.

22 International Crisis Group, “Curbing Violence in Latin America’s Drug Trafficking Hotspots.”

23 Congressional Research Service, “US and International Efforts to Combat Drug Trafficking: Policy Issues,” CRS Report R41576, 2025, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R41576>.

24 Organization of American States, *The Drug Problem in the Americas: Analytical Report* (Washington, D.C.: Organization of American States, 2013), <https://www.oas.org/docs/publications/layoutpubgagdrogas-eng-29-9.pdf>.

25 Congressional Research Service, “US and International Efforts to Combat Drug Trafficking: Policy Issues,” CRS Report R41576, 2025, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R41576>.

26 Mabel Salazar, “Honduras leader: US must respect my anti-corruption efforts,” Associated Press, February 2, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/xiomara-castro-coup-carlos-zelaya-honduras-corruption-60fc69e941f8b8ed55b770da530468bf>.

Intimidation operates in tandem with violence and bribery. It targets broader sectors of society. Journalists are frequent victims and media outlets in cartel-controlled zones face censorship, threats, or targeted killings. Local communities are often coerced into silence or recruited into the cartel economy under threat of death or economic ruin. Even entire police forces have resigned in fear, as seen in parts of Michoacán and Guerrero in Mexico.²⁷ In Veracruz, Mexico, a state long contested by the Zetas and Sinaloa cartels, press workers became deliberate targets for cartel violence. On May 3, 2012, World Press Freedom Day, the brutalized bodies of photojournalists Guillermo Luna, Gabriel Hüge, Esteban Rodríguez, and Luna's partner Irasema Becerra were found dumped in a sewage canal in Boca del Río.²⁸ The journalists had previously fled their homes due to threats from organized crime but returned after government inaction left them unprotected. All four had ties to reporting on the cartels.²⁹ Veracruz became a graveyard for media freedom under Governor Javier Duarte, with at least eight journalists murdered during his leadership from 2010 to 2016.³⁰ This type of intimidation ensures a

climate of impunity where cartels can operate openly, knowing a few will challenge them.

Manipulation of Elections and Governments

Beyond street-level violence and the narcotics trade, Latin American cartels have strategically entrenched themselves in politics, particularly at the local level. They target areas with weak state presence to easily gain control and influence. Unlike the overt violence often used to intimidate civilians or journalists, cartels' political tactics are more insidious. They undermine democratic institutions from within.

Latin America's illicit networks have long targeted state institutions to exploit and co-opt them. Organized crime groups embed themselves in political systems, using elections as access points to launder money, gain immunity, and steer national policies. They have focused on capturing the control of their local governments. This is especially prevalent in rural and border regions, where state reach is fragmented and patronage politics dominate.³¹

Patronage politics refers to a system where offices are controlled through familial or economic ties. This weakens democracy in the region and leaves it vulnerable to corruption. Municipal offices offer both institutional resources and political legitimacy, which can be weaponized to protect smuggling corridors, redirect public contracts, and shield them from prosecution. In Mexico, Honduras, and Colombia, local elections have seen candidates openly backed or coerced by cartels.³² In some cases, political hopefuls must pay cartels for permission to run for office; in other cases, cartels place their own candidates. This ensures direct control of governance.³³

In Mexico, local elections have been repeatedly infiltrated by cartel interests. In Sinaloa, Governor Ruben Rocha was accused of being supported by the Sinaloa Cartel. Reports suggest that his 2021 election was secured through suppression, intimidation, and cartel funding. In Honduras, Juan Orlando Hernandez, the former president, received USD one million from El Chapo's Sinaloa Cartel to finance his 2013 campaign, using this support to facilitate cocaine routes through

27 International Crisis Group, "Drug Trafficking in Latin America: Visual Explainer." Crisis Group, accessed June 16, 2025, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/visual-explainers/drug-trafficking-latin-america/>.

28 IFEX, "Three Photojournalists Found Dead in Veracruz," IFEX, May 4, 2012, <https://ifex.org/three-photojournalists-found-dead-in-veracruz/>.

29 "Mexico elections: A quick guide," BBC News, May 4, 2012, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-17945766>.

30 IFEX, "Three Photojournalists Found Dead in Veracruz."

31 Ivan Briscoe et al., *Illicit Networks and Politics in Latin America* (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD), Netherlands Institute of International Relations (Clingendael), 2014), <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/illicit-networks-and-politics-in-latin-america.pdf>.

32 Will Freeman, "Latin American Organized Crime's Real Target: Local Government," *Americas Quarterly*, February 18, 2025, <https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/latin-american-organized-crimes-real-target-local-government/>.

33 Ivan Briscoe et al., *Illicit Networks and Politics in Latin America*.

Central America to the US.³⁴ His brother, Tony Hernandez, was later convicted for running a major trafficking operation while in Congress and was sentenced to life in US federal prison.³⁵ The JOH administration embedded the cartels in the executive branch, blurring the lines between the state and cartel.

The manipulation extends beyond elections into the civil registries and identity systems. Civil registries are responsible for maintaining official records of births, deaths, marriages, and citizenship documentation. Cartels are increasingly tainting records to launder identities, move across borders, and commit state-level fraud. According to the OAS, the tri-border area between Ecuador, Colombia, and Peru has become a strategic region for illicit groups exploiting weak identification protocols. In this region, drug trafficking networks forge national IDs and travel documents, or bribe underpaid registry officials, enabling operatives to move undetected across international boundaries or assume false identities to evade

arrest.³⁶ These manipulations compromise border security and create institutional vulnerabilities that cartels exploit over time.

In Guatemala and Paraguay, illicit networks with trafficking ties have extended control into judiciaries and electoral commissions, effectively eroding any semblance of democratic independence.³⁷ Reports indicate that the cartels have placed loyalists within the government to such an extent that attempts at preventing voter manipulation is near impossible.³⁸ In Paraguay, trafficking groups with connections to Brazil's Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) have corrupted both civil ID issuance and border control mechanisms. Ultimately, this allows weapons, drugs, and people to flow freely while obstructing law enforcement.³⁹

These tactics go beyond smuggling. By corrupting identification systems, cartels launder criminal histories, register shell corporations, access public services, and even vote multiple times under fraudulent identities. In some cases, minors are issued fake IDs and trafficked, while known

criminals erase or alter records by infiltrating data systems.⁴⁰ The result of these actions is the erosion of state authority.

At a transnational level, cartels exploit institutional blind spots and systemic corruption to awaken governance from the inside out. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime warns that organized crime cannot thrive without collusion and in the Latin American context, this collusion becomes systemic.⁴¹ In some countries, such as Nicaragua, the boundary between the government and organized crime has become less clear. Political parties may depend on drug money to win elections, and traffickers sometimes become involved in public projects, government contracts, or even security forces. This overlap makes it harder to fight cartels because corruption allows them to gain influence within state institutions.⁴² As such, cartel influences distort democracy and rewire states into tools for criminal advancement.

34 Noah Hurowitz and Haven Orecchio-Egresitz, "El Chapo Gave \$1 Million to Honduras President," Business Insider, February 22, 2024, <https://www.businessinsider.com/el-chapo-gave-1-million-campaign-honduras-president-hernandez-2024-2>.

35 US Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York, "Former Honduran Congressman Tony Hernández Sentenced To Life In Prison And Ordered To Forfeit Over \$138 Million For Drug Trafficking And Weapons Offenses," press release, March 30, 2021, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/former-honduran-congressman-tony-hernandez-sentenced-life-prison-and-ordered-forfeit>.

36 Organization of American States, "The OAS Promotes Inter-Institutional Cooperation for Civil Registry along the Borders of Ecuador, Colombia and Peru," press release E-295/13, August 6, 2013, https://www.oas.org/en/media_center/press_release.asp?sCodigo=E-295/13.

37 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *The Globalization of Crime: A Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment (TOCTA)*, (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, June 2010), https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/TOCTA_draft_2603_lores.pdf.

38 Laura Sanz-Levia and Fernando Jiménez, "Breaking democracy: illegal political finance and organized crime in Guatemala," *Crime Law and Social Change* 75, no. 4 (January 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10611-020-09918-x>.

39 Scott Decker and David Pyrooz, "Gang violence worldwide: Context, culture, and country," in *Small Arms Survey 2010: Gangs, Groups, and Guns* (Geneva: Small Arms Survey, 2010), 128–155.

40 Decker and Pyrooz, "Gang violence worldwide: Context, culture, and country."

41 UNODC, *TOCTA*.

42 Roberto Orozco, "Drug trafficking is embedded in Latin America's politics and economy," *Revista Envío*, December 2019, <https://www.revistaenvio.org/articulo/5732>.

Cartel Dependency and Institutional Mistrust

In places where the government is weak, missing, or not trusted, drug cartels and gangs have stepped in to take control. These groups act like a replacement for the government. They provide safety, services, and even a sense of belonging. They give out food, protect people, and offer quick street justice. Sometimes, this seems more helpful than what the government can offer. As people start depending on these cartels to survive, the gangs ask for loyalty and silence in return. This relationship takes away people's power and makes the government seem even weaker. When governments cannot offer basic help or services, criminal groups step in and become part of everyday life.⁴³

For instance, in Ecuador, the government has pulled back from some areas. This has allowed big drug cartels from other countries to work with local gangs. These gangs now exercise control by setting curfews, giving out food, and solving arguments. They act like a local government. However, this “new government” has had disastrous results. Ecuador saw about 7,872 murders in 2023. That is a murder rate of 43 per 100,000 people, which is a big jump from just 7.8 per 100,000 in 2020.⁴⁴ People in these areas are starting to depend on the very criminals who



State of Emergency in Ecuador (Credit: Martin.vascovinueza)

make their communities unsafe. Over time, this makes criminal rule feel normal and slowly weakens the idea of democracy.

In some neighborhoods, gangs and cartels exercise more control than elected leaders. This situation has given rise to what many describe as a “narco-culture”—a way of life shaped around drug traffickers and their influence. Narco-culture is reflected in music, fashion, and social media, where the criminal lifestyle is sometimes portrayed as normal, even glamorous. For many young people facing poverty and limited opportunities, this image of power and wealth can appear desirable. As admiration for this

lifestyle grows, respect for laws and public institutions continues to weaken.⁴⁵

Governments across the region have often tried to respond by deploying the military to demonstrate strength and restore order. However, these strategies rarely address the deeper causes of instability. Inequality, unemployment, and lack of opportunity all contribute to the influence of organized crime. For example, in January 2024, Ecuador's President Daniel Noboa declared a state of emergency to combat gang violence and regain control of prisons. While the military temporarily restored order, powerful groups such as

⁴³ Carmen Moran Brena, “The ‘Mexican Auschwitz’ is just the beginning: Violence and silence are the norm in Jalisco,” *El Pais*, March 24, 2025, <https://english.elpais.com/international/2025-03-24/the-mexican-auschwitz-is-just-the-beginning-violence-and-silence-are-the-norm-in-jalisco.html>.

⁴⁴ Inigo Alexander, “No clear way out — how Ecuador descended into gang violence,” *Al Jazeera English*, February 14, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/14/no-clear-way-out-how-ecuador-descended-into-gang-violence>.

⁴⁵ Tyler Biscontini, “Narcoculture in Mexico,” *EBSCO*, 2023, <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/law/narcoculture-mexico>.

Los Choneros, Los Tiguerones, and Los Lobos soon reasserted their influence. In response to the military offensive, gangs carried out a new wave of violence. This included kidnappings and the now-infamous incident where they took over a live television news broadcast, showing their power and ability to spread fear. This example highlights how short-term shows of force, without long-term reforms, can fail to solve the underlying problems and may even worsen them.⁴⁶

High murder rates in Latin America are not only linked to gangs but also to weak government institutions. In many rural areas, murders go uninvestigated and unpunished, which normalizes violence and removes deterrents for future crimes. In Mexico, trust in law enforcement is extremely low. Surveys show that around 93 percent of crimes are never reported to or investigated by authorities. As a result, many citizens no longer expect protection or justice from the police. Into this gap, criminal groups insert themselves, offering a distorted sense of safety. They build influence not only through fear but

also because, in many communities, they appear more responsive and effective than government institutions.⁴⁷

Government Strategies Against Drug Trafficking

Government-led crackdowns on cartels often rely on militarized force, yet their impacts on organized crime are mixed and frequently produce unintended consequences. Mexico's war on drugs, launched by President Felipe Calderón in 2006, deployed over 45,000 soldiers into cartel-dominated hotspots. Even though the government took down several major drug leaders, the murder cases drastically went up. It almost tripled in five years, rising from eight per 100,000 people in 2005 to 29 in 2010.⁴⁸ This spike marked a grim milestone. Rather than weakening the cartels' influence, the state's heavy-handed approach fragmented major criminal organizations into dozens of smaller and often more violent splinter groups. According to Mexico's Attorney General's Office, between 60 and 80 new

criminal organizations emerged as a direct result of Calderón's focus on kingpin targeting.⁴⁹

Under President Enrique Peña Nieto, the Mexican government shifted toward a more institutional strategy. Rather than emphasizing arrests of high-profile figures, his administration focused on violence reduction and systemic reform. Key efforts included the creation of a national gendarmerie, the expansion of federal police capabilities, and new legal frameworks to improve coordination among security forces.⁵⁰ However, despite these changes, violence continued to rise. Mexico's homicide rate reached a record high during Peña Nieto's presidency in 2015, with nearly 9,000 more murders than the previous year.⁵¹ Without the support of the broader public and their trust, any campaign is unlikely to yield results. Analysts argue that fragmented cartels and an overstretched judicial system created conditions where violence, extortion, and localized turf wars could flourish, further undermining public confidence in state-led security solutions.⁵²

46 "Ecuador's state of emergency," Penn Today, January 22, 2024, <https://penntoday.upenn.edu/news/ecuador-state-emergency-daniel-noboa-Adolfo-Macias>.

47 Ena Aguilar Pelaez, "Impunity in Mexico: 93% of Crimes Go Unreported," GPJ, April 5, 2023, <https://globalpressjournal.com/americas/mexico/impunity-mexico-93-crimes-go-unreported>.

48 Giacomo Battiston et al., "How the Mexican War on Drugs Fuelled Organised Crime," *VoxDev*, September 24, 2024, <https://voxdev.org/topic/migration-urbanisation/how-mexican-war-drugs-fuelled-organised-crime>.

49 International Crisis Group, *Peña Nieto's Challenge: Criminal Cartels and Rule of Law in Mexico* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, March 19, 2013), 3–5, <https://crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/pena-nietos-challenge-criminal-cartels-and-rule-of-law-in-mexico.pdf>.

50 Washington Office on Latin America, *Mexico's Rule of Law and the Drug Trade*, accessed July 9, 2025, <https://www.wola.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Mexico-section-WOLA-WHDPC.pdf>; Michael Loconsolo, "Mexico's Drug War: An Examination of the US Response and Alternatives," Naval Postgraduate School, June 2014, https://calhoun.nps.edu/bitstream/handle/10945/42676/14Jun_Loconsolo_Michael.pdf?sequence=1.

51 Nubia Nieto, "The Development of Narcotrafficking and Corruption in Mexico," *Anuario Latinoamericano: Ciencias Políticas y Relaciones Internacionales* 6 (2018): 213–234, <https://bibliotekanauki.pl/articles/682971.pdf>.

52 Nieto, "The Development of Narcotrafficking and Corruption in Mexico," 220.

In El Salvador, President Nayib Bukele has spearheaded one of the most extreme examples of militarized anti-gang policy in the region. Beginning in 2022, Bukele declared a nationwide state of exception that suspended key constitutional protections.⁵³ This included the right to legal counsel and freedom of assembly under the justification of fighting gangs such as MS-13 and Barrio 18.⁵⁴ Within 18 months, over 70,000 individuals were arrested, many without formal charges or access to due process.⁵⁵ This mass incarceration campaign, coupled with a highly visible military presence, yielded a dramatic drop in homicides. The country recorded just 2.4 homicides per 100,000 people in 2023, down from 103 per 100,000 in 2015, a staggering 90 percent decrease.⁵⁶

The strategy earned Bukele widespread domestic support. His approval ratings have hovered above 90 percent. However, it has drawn significant criticism from human rights organizations, including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International.⁵⁷ They warn that normalizing authoritarian tactics for the sake of short-term security sets a dangerous



Prison in El Salvador (Credit: Presidencia El Salvador)

precedent where democratic norms and legal protections are sacrificed for political popularity.⁵⁸ Moreover, civil society groups have documented over 84,000 cases of arbitrary detention, including reports of torture and lack of legal recourse.⁵⁹ The long-term risks of this model may empower future leaders to use similar measures for political repression. El Salvador's strategy illustrates the danger of conflating militarized success with structural security. Thus, El

Salvador presents an important case study for what to learn and avoid in the pursuit of weakening the cartels.

In contrast, Colombia's "Total Peace" initiative represents a strategic departure from militarized responses. Introduced under President Gustavo Petro in 2022, the initiative seeks to negotiate with over 30 armed groups through ceasefires, community dialogues, and reintegration programs.⁶⁰ However, the peace process remains

53 US Department of State, *2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: El Salvador*, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/el-salvador/>.

54 Juliana Rubio and Andrea Casique, *The Burgeoning Regional Appeal of Mano Dura Crime-Fighting Strategies* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 29, 2024), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/burgeoning-regional-appeal-mano-dura-crime-fighting-strategies>.

55 "El Salvador Takes Firm Steps in Eliminating Drug Traffickers," *El Salvador in English*, accessed June 4, 2025, <https://elsalvadorinenglish.com/2025/03/12/el-salvador-takes-firm-steps-in-eliminating-drug-traffickers/>.

56 Tiziano Breda, "Latin America Likes Bukele's 'War on Gangs.' That's a Problem," International Crisis Group, December 15, 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/central-america/el-salvador/latin-america-likes-bukeles-war-gangs-thats>.

57 Tom Phillips, "It's a war on the people: El Salvador's mass arrests send thousands into despair," *The Guardian*, June 8, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/jun/08/its-a-war-on-the-people-el-salvadora-mass-arrests-send-thousands-into-despair>.

58 Howard Campbell, "El Salvador and the Bukele Anti-Crime Experiment: Is it Working?" *Small Wars Journal*, February 11, 2025, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/2025/02/11/el-salvador-and-the-bukele-anti-crime-experiment-is-it-working/>.

59 "El Salvador: Criminal law reforms exacerbate human rights violations against children and adolescents," Amnesty International, February 27, 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/02/el-salvador-reformas-ninez-y-adolescencia/>.

60 International Crisis Group, *Colombia: Total Peace, Local Peace*, January 30, 2025, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/andes/colombia/colombia-total-peace-local-peace>.

fragile. Localized ceasefires have been partially successful in regions such as Chocó and Arauca, but implementation has been hindered by mistrust, intra-group violence, and resistance from local elites and military actors.⁶¹ Moreover, critics argue that the initiative lacks enforcement mechanisms and relies too heavily on goodwill from groups with little incentive to disarm. Without stronger oversight, the process risks becoming symbolic rather than substantive.⁶²

Together, these examples illustrate the divergent paths Latin American governments are taking to confront narco-violence. Militarized crackdowns like those in Mexico and El Salvador can yield short-term security gains but often come at a high cost. Meanwhile, negotiated peace plans such as Colombia's offer sustainable solutions but face immense logistical, political, and social challenges. A key takeaway across all cases is that government-led

crackdowns must be accompanied by long-term investments in justice systems, community development, and democratic accountability. Without addressing the root causes—poverty, marginalization, institutional fragility—any security policy risks becoming a temporary fix. Latin America's future security lies not in the strength of its armies, but in the strength of its institutions.

CURRENT STATUS

Regional and International Partnerships

In recent years, countries in the Americas have worked more closely to address the root causes of crime and insecurity, including drug trafficking. Instead of relying only on police and military responses, governments are also focusing on education, healthcare, and stronger community institutions.

One example is the Universal Civil Identity Program in the Americas (PUICA), run by the Organization of American States (OAS). PUICA helps people in vulnerable and remote communities gain access to official identification

documents, which are necessary for healthcare, education, and legal travel. Since its launch in 2008, PUICA has supported the issuance of more than 19 million birth certificates and national ID cards across the region. The program also works to strengthen civil registry systems: it has installed 44 auxiliary registry offices in hospitals in countries including El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, and Paraguay, and has trained over 3,000 civil registrars in Latin America on the right to identity and proper registration processes. By reducing the number of people living outside the formal system, PUICA helps limit the ability of drug traffickers to exploit undocumented individuals for smuggling, recruitment, or cross-

border movement. Strengthening legal identity systems makes it harder for criminal networks to operate invisibly and easier for states to track and disrupt illicit activities.⁶³

Education is increasingly seen as a tool to strengthen communities in Latin America by building trust, fairness, and resistance to corruption. One example is the Education for Justice (E4J) initiative, created by UNODC. It aims to promote a culture of lawfulness by integrating lessons on integrity, fairness, and justice into education at the primary, secondary, and university levels. For younger students, E4J provides interactive tools to build values like empathy, respect, and conflict

61 International Crisis Group, "Protecting Colombia's Most Vulnerable on the Road to Total Peace," accessed June 7, 2025, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/andes/colombia/98-protecting-colombias-most-vulnerable-road-total-peace>.

62 Luis Jaime Acosta, "Colombia to Spend \$4.25 Billion to Buy Land for Poor Farmers," *Reuters*, October 13, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/colombia-spend-425-billion-buy-land-poor-farmers-2023-10-13/>.

63 "Universal Civil Identity Program in the Americas (PUICA)," OAS, accessed September 23, 2025, <https://www.oas.org/ext/en/democracy/PUICA>.

resolution. At the secondary level, it develops practical materials to help youth understand issues such as corruption, crime, and rule of law. Finally, at the university level, it supports professors with resources to teach about organized crime, terrorism, cybercrime, drug trafficking, corruption, and related topics. By providing free online tools, games, and academic modules, along with training workshops and conferences, E4J equips educators worldwide to help students become more active, responsible citizens. Education programs aim to help young people think critically, speak up for fairness, and spot harmful messages. This approach is valuable in combating drug trafficking because it reduces the influence of criminal groups over vulnerable youth, while promoting alternatives rooted in lawfulness and civic responsibility. By fostering resilience against corruption and illegal activity, education helps cut off the human and social networks that traffickers rely on to maintain their power.⁶⁴

Health programs are also part of this new approach. In recent years, health programs have become a key part of broader efforts to prevent violence and strengthen communities. One example is Peru's Familias Fuertes: Amor y Límites, a

PAHO/DEVIDA program adapted from Iowa State University's Strengthening Families curriculum. It works with adolescents aged 10-14 and their caregivers through seven weekly sessions to improve family communication, parental skills, and help prevent drug use and risky behavior. To date, over 8,300 facilitators have been trained across 23 regions in Peru, and more than 122,670 families have participated.⁶⁵

In Paraguay, the 2022 Mental Health Law was passed to expand access to mental health services. Through initiatives such as the Mental Health Gap Action Programme (mhGAP), Paraguay has increased service availability in clinics and through community health workers. The policy reforms aim to reach those in both urban and rural areas. Nevertheless, challenges remain as in many places there are still too few mental health professionals and insufficient funding.⁶⁶

Canada has taken steps to use health, youth, and community programs as part of its strategy to reduce gang involvement and violence. For example, the Youth Gang Prevention Fund (YGPF), managed by Public Safety Canada's National Crime Prevention

Centre, supports community-based initiatives that offer mentorship, positive role-models, and alternatives for youth at risk of joining gangs.⁶⁷ At the curriculum level, Canadian provinces have also begun integrating emotional learning and conflict mediation into K-12 classrooms. This is aiming to reduce the early onset of aggressive behaviors and school-based violence.⁶⁸

The United States has been investing more in community-based programs to interrupt violence and support trauma recovery. One example is the Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Abuse Program (COSSAP), run by the US Department of Justice, which funds many local, state, and territorial projects that offer support for substance abuse, treatment, prevention, and recovery services.⁶⁹ Another example is Cure Violence / CeaseFire / Safe Streets programs in cities such as Chicago and Baltimore. These programs use former gang members or outreach workers as mediators ("violence interrupters") who work in violent neighborhoods to de-escalate conflicts and change social norms about retaliation. In Baltimore's Safe Streets program, certain neighborhoods saw reductions in killings by up to 56 percent in

64 *Education for Justice*, (UNESCO), https://www.unodc.org/documents/e4j/flyers/info_sheet_E4J_EN_rev.pdf.

65 "Building bridges between parents and adolescents for a healthier Peru," PAHO, accessed September 23, 2025, <https://paho.org/adolescent-health-report-2018/country-focus-peru.html>.

66 "How did Paraguay, with the support PAHO/WHO, achieve this?" WHO, accessed September 23, 2025, <https://www.who.int/about/accountability/results/who-results-report-2020-mtr/country-story/2023/transformational-change-through-policy-is-improving-access-to-and-quality-of-mental-health-services-in-paraguay>.

67 Public Safety Canada, "Youth Gang Prevention Fund," last modified December 2024, <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/cntrng-crm/crm-prvntn/fndng-prgrms/yth-gng-prvntn-fnd-en.aspx>.

68 Public Safety Canada, "Evaluation of the National Crime Prevention Strategy," 2023, <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrcls/pblctns/2023-vtn-ncps-snpc/index-en.aspx>.

69 US Department of Justice, *Audit of the Bureau of Justice Assistance Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Abuse Program* (Office of the Inspector General, March 13, 2024), <https://oig.justice.gov/sites/default/files/reports/24-054.pdf>.



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Poster in which the DEA offers 50 million dollars for Nicolás Maduro (Credit: Drug Enforcement Administration)

program sites.⁷⁰ These community-driven initiatives offer alternatives to criminal retaliation.

Together, these public health, education, and community based programs reflect a growing shift from reacting to violence with force to preventing it through support and resilience. Governments are beginning to understand that long-term safety comes from investing in youth, creating opportunities, and supporting mental health. But serious challenges still get in the way. Many of these programs rely on short-term or unreliable funding, which makes it hard to keep them running or expand them to more areas. While new technologies and school programs

are helping build stronger, more informed communities, challenges like broken equipment, limited funding, and rural service gaps remain. Still, these efforts with international partnerships show that long-term progress depends on more than just security. It also requires trust, access, and support for more people left behind.

Case Study: The Situation in Venezuela

Under Donald Trump's administration, the United States has sharply increased its military posture in the Caribbean and along Venezuela's coast to counter drug trafficking networks tied to the

Maduro regime. Analysts say this shift involves not only heightened naval and aerial interdictions, but also the formal designation of Venezuelan-aligned transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) and drug cartels as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) and Specially Designated Global Terrorists. Such designations expand the legal tools the US may use, such as enabling broader sanctions, intelligence sharing, and potentially military action. Moreover, the administration increased the bounty on Maduro to USD 50 million, and has said this is a war on narco-terrorists.⁷¹

Part of this escalation includes the provision of new assets to US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM). Since 2020, SOUTHCOM has received increased supplies such as Coast Guard cutters, surveillance aircraft, naval destroyers, and army units, explicitly for counter-narcotics operations in waters near Venezuela and through the Caribbean. This build-up is intended to improve interdiction capacity and pressure traffickers.⁷²

The military buildup is tied to the Trump administration's broader strategy toward the Maduro government. These efforts are informed by geopolitical alignments. Venezuela is aligned with US adversaries such as Russia, China, and Iran. US leadership emphasizes that drug cartels' in

⁷⁰ "Cure Violence," NCG, accessed September 23, 2025, <https://nationalgangcenter.ojp.gov/spt/Programs/139>.

⁷¹ "What to know about Trump's war on drug trafficking from Venezuela," Atlantic Council, September 10, 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/what-to-know-about-trumps-war-on-drug-trafficking-from-venezuela/>.

⁷² Atlantic Council, "What to know about Trump's war on drug trafficking from Venezuela."

Venezuela have an enormous financial size. SOUTHCOM estimates that TCOs operating out of or through Venezuela collect revenues of over USD 310 billion in 2023. This figure is greater than the combined defense budgets of all thirty-one Latin American and Caribbean countries. Such statistics are used to justify the increased US military, diplomatic, and financial commitment in the region.⁷³

Tensions intensified in September 2025 after a US strike on a Venezuelan boat the White House claimed was carrying drugs. The strike killed 11 people, but Washington did not release proof that the victims were traffickers. Nicolás Maduro responded by writing a letter to Donald Trump, offering direct talks with US envoy Richard Grenell. In the letter, Maduro denied all involvement in narco-trafficking, called the accusations “fake news,” and insisted that Venezuela was free of drug production. He invited Trump to pursue dialogue instead of war and even promised to share “compelling data” to support his claims.⁷⁴ Moreover, Maduro has tried to portray itself as the victim of US aggression. By publicizing its Russian fighter jets and staging large-scale drills, the Venezuelan government has framed

Washington’s operations as an external threat meant to destabilize its sovereignty.⁷⁵

While there is clear intention and increasing capability, the report underscores significant risks and challenges with the strategy. One major concern is whether US operations will cross into Venezuelan sovereign territory, which could escalate toward military conflict or provoke retaliation from the Venezuelan armed forces. Venezuela maintains a functional air defense system with external support (namely from Russia). These factors highlight the delicate balance between counter-narcotics goals and the risk of sparking broader geopolitical tensions.⁷⁶

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a set of 17 global goals adopted by all United Nations member states in 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Their aim is to end poverty and other deprivations, improve health, education, and equality, promote economic growth, protect the planet, and

build peaceful, just, and inclusive societies. Each goal has multiple targets and indicators so countries can measure progress.⁷⁷ Efforts to address the social and institutional causes of narco-trafficking in the Americas closely align with three Sustainable Development Goals: SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), SDG 13 (Good Health and Well-being), and SDG 4 (Quality Education).

SDG 16, which promotes peaceful and inclusive societies, is the most impactful aspect in fighting narco-trafficking in the Americas.⁷⁸ The presence of gangs and cartels often coincides with areas where formal justice systems have failed. In countries like Honduras and Guatemala, where impunity rates for homicide reach as high as 95 percent, the absence of justice mechanisms has allowed criminal groups to impose their forms of “street justice.”⁷⁹ This undermined the legitimacy of state institutions and perpetuated cycles of violence. In response, national and regional actors have turned to civil reform and judicial modernization as pathways to restoring public trust. Access to legal identity is aligned with SDG 16, as it enables citizens to vote, enroll in school, access justice, and resist coercion by criminal

⁷³ Atlantic Council, “What to know about Trump’s war on drug trafficking from Venezuela.”

⁷⁴ Stefanano Pozzebon, “Venezuela’s Maduro wrote to Trump after US strike on alleged drug boat,” *CNN*, September 21, 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/2025/09/21/americas/maduro-letter-trump-venezuela-intl-latam>.

⁷⁵ Vanessa Buschschlüter and Jessica Rawnsley, “US destroys alleged Venezuelan drug boat, killing three,” *BBC*, September 15, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx2jel4gyezo>.

⁷⁶ Atlantic Council, “What to know about Trump’s war on drug trafficking from Venezuela.”

⁷⁷ “The 17 Goals,” United Nations, accessed September 23, 2025, <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>.

⁷⁸ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), “Sustainable Development Goal 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions,” UNDP, accessed 2025, <https://www.undp.org/sdg16-peace-justice-and-strong-institutions>.

⁷⁹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Global Study on Homicide 2023: Patterns and Trends in Latin America* (UNODC Publishing, 2023), <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/global-study-on-homicide.html>.

actors. Without identity, there is no accountability. In reclaiming accountability, governance becomes possible to gain.

SDG 3 is focused on ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being. This has become one of the most important aspects in addressing the public in the narco-crisis.⁸⁰ Across the Americas, mental health has been an area of recent focus. Cartel-influenced communities often suffer from untreated trauma, substance abuse, and intergenerational violence. In response, countries like Paraguay have begun building decentralized mental health systems as tools for crime prevention. Paraguay's Mental Health Law of 2022 led to the establishment of community mental health centers in over 30 rural districts, reaching approximately 380,000 people previously

underserved by the healthcare system.⁸¹ These health offices offer individuals tools to process grief, resist recruitment, and seek help without fear of stigma or retaliation. However, these programs face limitations. Resources are often stretched thin, and rural or Indigenous communities remain undersourced. As such, achieving the full ambition of SDG 3 in this topic will require long-term investment and consistent political will.

SDG 4 advocates for inclusive and equitable quality education.⁸² Education provides one of the most long-term counterweights to the sense of inevitability that narco-culture promotes. In regions where dropout rates remain high and job prospects are few, cartels often fill the vacuum. This offers youth a distorted version of

stability, power, and belonging. Recognizing this, governments have scaled up both traditional and non-traditional educational interventions. UNESCO's Global Citizenship Education modules are adopted across 30 Latin American and Caribbean countries.⁸³ The purpose of these modules is to teach youth about social narratives, build empathy, and develop civic responsibility. In schools that adopted these modules in Argentina, Uruguay, and the Dominican Republic, students demonstrated a 20 percent increase in civic engagement and discrimination awareness.⁸⁴ Yet, the road to universal quality education remains long. Infrastructure gaps persist, teachers lack training in trauma-informed dialogue, and curriculum reforms are unevenly implemented.

BLOC ANALYSIS

Points of Division

Countries are not fully united in how they respond to narco-trafficking and its damage to society. While clearly all face cartel violence, corruption, or social

breakdown, their responses vary. Some focus on government reform and social programs. Others rely on military force. Lastly, some plan on regional support. For example, Uruguay is known for its strong courts and low levels of corruption,

ranking first in Latin America.⁸⁵ In contrast, El Salvador has taken a hardline approach, arresting over 70,000 people since 2022 to fight gang violence.⁸⁶ Over time, these different approaches have created blocs within the OAS. These blocs

⁸⁰ United Nations, "Sustainable Development Goal 3: Good Health and Well-being", United Nations, accessed 2025, <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal3>.

⁸¹ Ministry of Public Health and Social Welfare, *Paraguay, Mental Health Law Implementation Report 2023* (Asunción, 2023), <https://www.mspbs.gov.py/mh-law-report-2023>.

⁸² United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), "Sustainable Development Goal 4: Quality Education," UNESCO, accessed 2025, <https://en.unesco.org/themes/education2030-sdg4>.

⁸³ UNESCO, *Global Citizenship Education: Regional Implementation in Latin America and the Caribbean* (UNESCO Publishing, 2024), <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000375623>.

⁸⁴ UNESCO, *Impact Assessment Report on Civic Engagement and Anti-discrimination Awareness in Latin America* (UNESCO Publishing, 2024), <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000375624>.

⁸⁵ Transparency International, *Corruption Perceptions Index 2023*, <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2023/index/ury>.

⁸⁶ Human Rights Watch, "El Salvador: Thousands Jailed, Abuses in Gang Crackdown," December 7, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/12/07/el-salvador-thousands-jailed-abuses-gang-crackdown>.

influence how countries work together on funding, security, and development. Understanding these divisions is key to creating long-term solutions that match each country's strengths and needs. It is also important to note that these blocs are not exclusive and countries may belong to many blocs.

Legal and Institutional Reform Advocates

The first bloc includes countries that focus on improving their laws and government systems to fight crime. These countries include Uruguay, Chile, Costa Rica, and Paraguay. They believe that strong laws and fair courts are the best way to stop criminals long-term. These countries try to keep people's trust by solving problems fairly, instead of just using strict police actions. Their plans include helping more people get official ID cards, making courts more transparent, and supporting groups that fight corruption. This way, the government can rid itself of dishonest and unfair behavior on an institutional level. For example, Uruguay and Costa Rica are known for having fair courts and less corruption compared to other countries in the region.⁸⁷

Moreover, these countries focus on helping public services to stop crime in the long term. They believe

that poverty, trauma, and lack of belonging are some of the main reasons why people join cartels or get involved in crime. To fix this, these countries are creating more jobs for young people, offering education that understands trauma, and improving mental health services. Rural areas are especially taken into account when planning for these initiatives. For example, Paraguay is building more mental health centers in small towns.

These countries often urge the OAS to support building better systems instead of focusing only on military actions. However, their slow, careful approach can conflict with countries that want faster action through security and military force.

Militarized or Hybrid Enforcement States

The second group includes countries that use the military and police to fight drug cartels. These countries are Mexico, Colombia, El Salvador, Honduras, the United States, and the Dominican Republic. They believe it is very important to take back control quickly and often use soldiers and police to do this. For example, El Salvador has arrested over 70,000 people they think are gang members since 2022.⁸⁸ This has caused a lot of controversy despite the apparent

success in crime reduction. Mexico also deploys soldiers to fight drug traffickers but tries to pair this with social programs at the same time.⁸⁹

This group focuses more on stopping violence right now than making large changes to laws or society. However, not all countries in this group agree. For example, Colombia's President Petro is trying a new plan called "Total Peace."⁹⁰ This plan encourages talking with armed groups and helping poor rural areas, instead of only using the military. Still, many countries in this group continue to depend heavily on their armies as the main tool to fight crime. To strengthen their efforts, they often call on the OAS for more funding, better information sharing, and stronger border security. However, critics argue that these strategies sometimes lead to human rights violations, raising questions about how effective or fair they really are.

Regional/International Cooperation Leaders

These countries view drug trafficking as a problem that affects the entire region, not just individual states. They believe international cooperation is the best way to address it. Members of this group include Canada, Panama, Colombia, and the Dominican Republic. They often support

⁸⁷ World Justice Project, *Rule of Law Index 2023*, <https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/global/2023/Uruguay>.

⁸⁸ BBC News, "El Salvador: One Year into Emergency Measures, What's the Impact?" March 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-64957869>.

⁸⁹ Washington Office on Latin America, "Mexico: Military Roles Continue to Expand," May 2023, <https://www.wola.org/analysis/mexico-military-public-security/>.

⁹⁰ International Crisis Group, "Deepening the Dialogue in Colombia's Peace Process," October 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/andes/colombia/colombias-total-peace>.

projects that improve information sharing, fight cybercrime, and prevent illegal money transfers. For example, Canada is also helping by giving money to projects that build better ID systems and make

government spending more open in Central America.⁹¹ This group wants to lead global meetings and share big ideas that work across borders and shared training for workers. But some smaller countries

worry that the bigger countries might get too much control. Others are unsure how beneficial it is sharing military and secret information among the group.

COMMITTEE MISSION

The Organization of American States (OAS) has a mission to help keep peace, protect human rights, and support democracy and development in the Americas.⁹² The OAS works to ensure that people can live in fair and safe countries where leaders are chosen through free elections. However, criminal organizations known as cartels pose serious challenges in many Latin American states. These groups spread violence, intimidate voters, and even interfere in elections. By undermining governments and weakening democratic systems, cartels make it harder for countries to remain stable and fair. The OAS is deeply concerned about these threats and seeks to support member states in protecting democracy, safety, and strong institutions.⁹³

In 2008, the OAS supported a regional plan called the “Hemisphere Drug Strategy,” where countries agreed to fight drug crime by sharing information

and improving laws.⁹⁴ While this plan encouraged cooperation, it did not stop cartels from becoming stronger. One challenge was that some countries did not fully trust one another or follow the plan closely. Another issue was that the strategy did not do enough to support poor communities or address the root causes that push people to join cartels. To improve results, the OAS has been testing new approaches. By 2023, it shifted its focus toward providing young people with jobs and education, instead of relying mostly on police action. The goal is to break the cycle of crime by offering people safer and better opportunities.⁹⁵

While the OAS does not have the power to deploy military forces or arrest cartel leaders, it plays a key role in fostering dialogue, promoting anti-corruption measures, and coordinating actions against criminal organizations. It can also help countries provide people with better opportunities,

like jobs and education, so fewer individuals are drawn into drug cartels. Although the OAS cannot solve these problems alone, its continued involvement in Latin America is impactful. It can support fair elections, assist countries that are struggling, and help communities access better schools, jobs, and safety.⁹⁶

Ultimately, success will require thoughtful cooperation and sustained commitment. Member countries must address organized crime while also building stronger, more equitable systems. Delegates in this committee are called to work together to craft solutions that not only combat cartels but also empower communities. By proposing innovative policies and fostering international collaboration, you can help shape a future where drug cartels no longer hold such destructive power.

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RESEARCH AND PREPARATION QUESTIONS

The following research and preparation questions are meant to help you begin your research on your country's policy. These questions should be carefully considered, as they embody some of the main critical thought and learning objectives surrounding your topic.

Topic A

1. How should the international community balance respect for Nicaragua's sovereignty under the UN Charter with the Inter-American Democratic Charter's commitment to protect democratic institutions and human rights?
2. What concrete steps should be taken to protect freedom of expression and civil liberties in Nicaragua?
3. How has the Ortega government's centralization of power impacted Nicaragua's economy and the opportunities available to its people?
4. In what ways could economic reform or economic policy promote democratic change in Nicaragua?
5. What does Nicaragua's democratic decline signal for the broader Western Hemisphere? How can regional organizations prevent similar trends from spreading in Latin America?
6. What steps are necessary to rebuild democratic trust and political stability in Nicaragua if a transition of power occurs?
7. What lessons from Nicaragua's democratic struggles can be applied to other Latin American states facing similar threats of authoritarianism?

Topic B

1. How effective is your country's current approach to preventing drug-related violence, and how is it viewed by the public and international partners?
2. In what ways has your country tried to balance short-term security measures with long-term strategies to prevent future violence?
3. What is your country's position on sharing intelligence, resources, or data with neighboring states or international organizations?
4. How can resolutions promote sustainable funding, capacity-building, and rural access to education and mental health programs, and what role would your country be willing to take in this effort?
5. How have drug cartels influenced your country's political institutions, elections, or local governments?
6. What specific social, economic, or geographic factors make your country vulnerable to narco-trafficking influence?
7. What international or regional organizations has your country worked with on anti-narcotics initiatives, and how successful have these partnerships been?
8. What alternative development strategies (such as job creation, land reform, or community programs) has your country considered or implemented to reduce cartel influence?

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Topic A

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