

Written Statement presented to the House of Representatives  
Committee on Foreign Affairs

“The Ortega-Murillo regime’s war against the Catholic Church and civil society in Nicaragua:  
Bishop Alvarez, political prisoners and prisoners of conscience”

By  
Juan Sebastián Chamorro Ph.D.

Political activist and  
former Candidate for the Presidency of the Republic of Nicaragua

March 22th, 2023.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity.

Thank you, Members of Congress, for putting attention of what is happening in Nicaragua

My name is Juan Sebastián Chamorro. I was kidnapped by the police from my house the night of June 8<sup>th</sup>, 2021. I was captured in front of my wife and daughter, who left the country afterwards. My family did not know anything about me until I was able to see my sister August 30<sup>th</sup>, that is almost 3 months after my capture.

As political prisoner I suffered arbitrary detention and jail, inhumane treatments, threats, constant interrogations and subject to punishments if I did not obey the rules. I was condemned to 13 years in prison in a fake trial, I was banished from my country and stripped from my nationality.

My story is the story of thousands of Nicaraguans who decided to defend freedom, justice and democracy. One year and eight months, or 611 days in captivity suffering injustice only reinforced my determination to fight for freedom and democracy.

The lack of freedom and democracy in Nicaragua is the result of an absolute destruction of the state of law in Nicaragua, which started after the rise of power of Daniel Ortega in 2007.

Today, as the result of this authoritarian project, in Nicaragua

1. There is no law.
2. There is no independent media.
3. There are still several political prisoners in jail, including Monsignor Alvarez
4. The prospect of continuing suffering by millions of Nicaraguans is very strong.

The repression against the Catholic Church in Nicaragua is unprecedented in the history of Latin America. Nicaragua is the only country that has broken diplomatic ties with the Holy See in more than a century. Not even the most brutal dictatorships in Latin America had the boldness to do so. As one diplomat put it, one of the principles of Pontifical diplomacy is to stay in country no matter what, unless the mission is expelled. This is exactly what happened, making Nicaragua one of only 14 countries without diplomatic relations with the Vatican, and the only one in the region.

Ortega's attacks to the Catholic Church can be traced back to the eighties, where priests were incarcerated and expelled from the country. An important attack was the treatment against the Holy Father, Saint John Paul the Second in April of 1984, when the Government organized a protest in the middle of a solemn mass.

The exile of Monsignor Baez was a clear sign that Ortega was aiming at the hierarchy of the Church. Church leaders like him stood firm, in front of the abuses, the death and the violence that erupted to stop the peaceful popular uprising in April 2018. Monsignor Alvarez, also a member of the Episcopal Conference, was also a critic of the regime and soon began to be the focus of police harassment which led to his house arrest August 19<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

Alvarez was not the only one captured. Four other priests, five seminarists and support personnel from Alvarez archdiocese were taken. We shared jail with them and saw their sufferings but also

their strength, given by the faith and the strong ideals and principles of their leader, our pastor Alvarez.

So, the question is: why Ortega's war against the Church? The reason is simple. After putting all the opposition in jail, repressing all forms of protests, the dictator had to deal with the last standing voice defending freedom, peace and human dignity. Ortega had to silence the voice of the Church in order to impose his message of hate and violence.

Mr. Chairman, Ortega's violence goes beyond members of the Church. By prohibiting processions during Holy Week, he is repressing millions who march, every year on Good Friday, with devotion to express their faith.

Ortega has closed hundreds of Church-affiliated charities, leaving without support thousands of people who depended on those NGO's for their education, health, and wellbeing. This is unfair and inhumane. Innocent victims should not pay the price of the stubbornness of a single family to remain in power.

I asked one of the priests what the police claimed was his crime, he said the police captured him because of something that he said in his sermon. When a priest is put in jail because of this, how lower can a dictatorship can go? Unfortunately, Mr. Chairman, the Ortega's dictatorship can go deeper, he knows no limits.

We Nicaraguans are deeply religious, and the Catholic Church plays a fundamental role in our society. I believe Ortega has made a fundamental mistake, just as he did it in the eighties, to confront the Church. Back then, it was one of the reasons behind his failure in the elections of 1990. Now, he has made the same mistake, and the attack against the Church will accelerate the final demise of his regime.

Many of us, Mr. Chairman, paid with our own freedom the act of resistance against tyranny and oppression. We need the international community to help us Nicaraguans, in our fight for democracy and freedom. It is crucial to maintain pressure against those responsible of crimes, deaths and abuses. I believe that justice will prevail, but only if we maintain as an unified force to combat oppression. The international community and the US in particular, have taken tremendous steps towards the liberation of Nicaragua, we need your support for the rest of this voyage.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, I would like to thank Congress, the Administration, and the American people for the support we have received since our departure from Nicaragua and arrival to the US in that plane in February. I am also thankful for the efforts to reunite our families and expedite our legal situation. Thanks to the United States for that commitment to freedom and justice.

From this city shines the light of freedom, illuminating millions throughout the world who are still suffering from the chains of injustice.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.