



Freedom of the Press 2015 - Nicaragua

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2015 Scores

Press Status: Partly Free

Press Freedom Score (0 = best, 100 = worst): 52

Legal Environment (0 = best, 30 = worst): 14

Political Environment (0 = best, 40 = worst): 21

Economic Environment (0 = best, 30 = worst): 17

In 2014, President Daniel Ortega and his Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) maintained restrictive media policies that have been in place since the party took power in 2007, including preferential treatment for the progovernment press and denial of official advertising to independent and opposition outlets.

Legal Environment

While the constitution provides for freedom of the press, in practice the government places constraints on the media's ability to inform the public. Defamation and libel remain criminalized, with violations punishable by substantial fines. While the number of legal cases against the press has decreased, the drop has largely stemmed from self-censorship among journalists who fear economic and physical reprisals for critical reporting. Judges are often aligned with political parties; although there were no reported cases of judicial intimidation in 2014, the pattern of judicial partisanship showed no signs of change.

A 2007 law established the right to access public information and modernized government websites, but information on government activities remains difficult to obtain with the exception of a few public entities, like the Central Bank, that abide by the law. The Ortega administration is highly secretive. The politically powerful first lady, Rosario Murillo, presides over an unofficial council that acts as a clearinghouse for government information and routinely denies journalists' requests. Journalists who are loyal to the ruling party receive favorable treatment, including exclusive access to government events and press briefings, at which officials typically take no questions. In addition, the administration exploits a law – intended to facilitate the delivery of emergency messages – that allows the government to interrupt regular programming and broadcast official statements. The

continued consolidation of power by the Ortega administration has enhanced the ability of the government to withhold information. In early 2014, for example, the government remained silent during a 10-day disappearance of Ortega that led to speculation that he had died.

Political Environment

In 2014, journalists and media organizations continued to report threats, harassment, intimidation, and physical violence, carried out by both government and private actors. In February, Leonel Laguna, a journalist at the progovernment Radio La Primerísima and president of the Association of Nicaraguan Journalists (CPN), was fired from the radio station after making remarks critical of the Ortega government in his capacity as CPN president. In July, a Canal 12 cameraman, Xavier Castro, was assaulted with a bat while covering protests outside the Supreme Electoral Council building. A similar incident was reported a week earlier by Edgardo Trejos, a reporter for Canal 2 television. Trejos was trying to interview a government official when the official's driver drove his car into him. Both Castro and Trejos said authorities made no significant efforts to investigate the incidents. A culture of impunity for such attacks prompted dozens of journalists to stage a demonstration before Nicaragua's police headquarters in July 2014, at which they demanded better police protection for reporters. A spokesman for the national police, following the demonstration, said he was not aware of any events that might have prompted the journalists' concerns.

Economic Environment

There are more than 100 radio stations, which serve as the population's main source of news, and which are mostly privately owned. Print media offer diverse political opinions, with several daily papers presenting both progovernment and critical perspectives. Newspaper ownership was traditionally concentrated in the hands of various factions of the politically influential Chamorro family, though the family's influence has declined somewhat in recent years. Television is dominated by two ownership groups that are generally aligned with the ruling FSLN. One group is controlled by the Mexican media mogul Ángel González, and the other by the president's family; together they hold more than 75 percent of the television market. The Communications Research Center of Nicaragua reported in 2013 that channels controlled by Ortega's family were increasingly used to disseminate government propaganda. The ruling party owns Radio Ya, Radio Sandino, Radio La Primerísima, and Radio Nicaragua, while the president of the FSLN controls news websites such as *El 19 Digital* and *Nicaragua Triunfa*.

Newspaper owners and press freedom organizations continue to decry enforcement of the so-called Arce Law, which imposes high tariffs on imported printing materials such as ink and paper. The administration influences media content by steering its substantial official publicity budget toward the Ortega family's holdings or other compliant outlets.

There are no government restrictions on the internet, although civil society groups have complained of unlawful government monitoring of e-mail. The internet was accessed by nearly 18 percent of the population in 2014. Although the penetration rate remains relatively low, the internet has had a significant impact on the media landscape. The number of users of social-networking sites has increased in recent years, and some Nicaraguans are now using the internet as their primary source of news. In a positive development, the *Nicaragua Dispatch*, a crowdsourced news website, came back online in March 2014, serving as a source of news outside the controlled information provided by the Ortega administration.

