

## FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

# Nicaragua

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The constitution provides for freedom of the press, but in practice the government acts to restrict it. In 2011 the administration of President Daniel Ortega and his Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) continued to demonize the independent and opposition press while favoring progovernment outlets. Ortega has claimed that right-wing business magnates retain a stranglehold on the media, but his own family, party, and supporters have recently taken control of many outlets, especially television and radio stations.

Criminal libel laws are used frequently against journalists and news outlets. Judges are often aligned with political parties, and some have barred journalists from covering certain stories. Cases of judicial intimidation have also been reported. Many journalists belong to pro- or anti-Sandinista professional associations. In February 2011, a bill that would make “media violence” a criminal offense was introduced in the legislative assembly, raising concerns that it could lead to censorship, self-censorship, and repression of journalists. The bill also includes provisions to reduce crimes against women and would prevent women from being disparaged or satirized in the media.

A 2007 law established the right to access public information. However, Ortega’s administration is highly secretive, and he has given no press conferences since taking office in 2007, according to local reports. Journalists loyal to the ruling party receive preferential treatment, including exclusive access to official press conferences and government events. For example, during the meeting of the Foro de São Paulo in Managua, accreditation to cover the annual meeting of Latin American leftist parties was denied to news organizations known for their critical reporting on the Ortega administration, such as *El Nuevo Diario*, *La Prensa*, Channel 2, and Channel 12. According to the Inter American Press Association, the spokesperson for the event, Silvio Esteban Rodríguez, confirmed that he did not have authorization to accredit any reporting team from those outlets.

There were few reports of physical attacks against journalists, but media organizations were subject to threats and harassment by both governmental and private actors. In February 2011, *El Nuevo Diario*’s correspondent in Masaya, Mercedes Vanegas, was threatened by the former head of police after the publication of information and photos indicating that his son was a suspect in a murder case. Also in February, Luis Galeano, an investigative reporter at *El Nuevo Diario*, received death threats resulting from his reporting for a series of articles on official corruption. Two days before the articles were published, Galeano received a call from an unknown number on his mobile phone, with the caller telling him that he had “72 hours to live.” The death threat was later reiterated in an anonymous letter addressed to Galeano and sent to the newspaper. In September, *El Nuevo Diario*’s correspondent in the northern city of Jinotega, Silvia González, fled the country after receiving numerous death threats. She wrote a series of articles beginning in February about a former guerrilla, Gabriel José Garmendia, widely known as “Yajob,” who was killed under mysterious circumstances, according to news reports. She also wrote about corruption in the local government.

## 2012 SCORES

### PRESS STATUS

**Partly Free**

### PRESS FREEDOM SCORE

**49**

### LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

**13**

### POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

**20**

### ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

**16**

There are 10 Managua-based television stations and more than 100 radio stations, which serve as the population's main source of news. Print media are diverse, with several daily papers presenting both progovernment and critical perspectives. Newspaper ownership has traditionally been concentrated in the hands of various factions of the politically influential Chamorro family, while the prominent Sacasa family dominates the television industry. However, in May 2011, *El Nuevo Diario* underwent an ownership change when businessman Ramiro Ortiz Mayorga purchased a 61 percent stake. In December, the paper's longtime news director, Francisco "Chico" Chamorro, was forced to resign from his post—a result of alleged disputes with the new owners regarding the paper's critical editorial stance on the government. Mexican media mogul Angel Gonzalez, noted for his holdings in Guatemala and Costa Rica, also owns significant outlets in Nicaragua. Several media enterprises are owned and controlled by Ortega's family and the FSLN, and Ortega continued to bolster his administration's influence by acquiring more outlets in 2011. At year's end, the ruling party owned radio stations Radio Ya, Sandino, Primerísima, and Nicaragua. The president or the FSLN also control news websites like El 19 Digital and Nicaragua Triunfa, and nearly half of Nicaraguan television news channels, including Channels 4, 6, and 91. Ortega's children manage the stations Multinoticias and Channels 8 and 13.

The government uses economic means to exert pressure on the media. It is known to steer official advertising toward state-owned and regime-friendly outlets. In January 2011, broadcasts by Canal 15 Condega TV were taken off the air because of government pressure. In February, there were reports that the government tried to block the importation of paper used for printing *El Nuevo Diario*, allegedly in reprisal for its reporting on wrongdoing and nepotism in the administration.

There are no government restrictions on the internet, which was used by approximately 11 percent of the population in 2011. Although the penetration rate remains relatively low, the internet has had a significant impact on the Nicaraguan media landscape. The number of Facebook users increased from 150,000 to 700,000 in the past year alone, and many Nicaraguans are now using the internet as a primary source for their news.

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