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FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

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Nicaragua

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The constitution provides for freedom of the press, but in practice the government places notable restrictions on the media's ability to inform the public. In 2012, President Daniel Ortega and his Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) continued policies that have been in place since they took power in 2007, including preferential treatment for the progovernment media and denial of official advertising to the independent and opposition press.

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 as independent voices avoid confronting the authorities. Cases of judicial intimidation have also been reported; judges are often aligned with political parties, and some have barred journalists from covering certain stories. In March 2012, according to local news reports, pro-Sandinista government officials in the municipality of Somoto, in the north of the country, ordered the Telecommunications and Mail Institute (TELCOR) to shut down Channel 13, which

was carried by Concas, the local cable company. Juan Carlos Pineda, director of the shuttered station, said the request to TELCOR was made because the station had accused the local Sandinista government of corruption.

A 2007 law established the right to access public information. However, the Ortega administration is highly secretive, and the president has given no press conferences since taking office in 2007, according to local reports. Journalists who are loyal to the ruling party receive favorable treatment, including exclusive access to official press briefings—at which no questions are generally taken by administration officials—and government events. In addition, the administration makes near-daily use of a law, intended to facilitate the delivery of emergency messages, that allows the government to interrupt regular programming to broadcast official statements.

In 2012, media organizations continued to report occasional incidents of threats, harassment, and physical violence against their employees and installations, carried out by both governmental and private actors. *La Prensa*, a leading independent newspaper, claimed that its journalists were repeatedly intimidated by government officials and supporters. In March, Luis Eduardo Martínez, a correspondent for *La Prensa* in Matagalpa, suffered a smear campaign aired on a local television station owned by Nelson Artola, a high-ranking government official. The campaign followed publication of a *La Prensa* story that scrutinized Artola's political career. Separately, Silvia Gonzáles, a correspondent for the daily *El Nuevo Día* in Jinotega, remained in exile due to death threats she received in 2011 from a government sympathizer, which the police have failed to investigate.

There are more than 100 radio stations in the country, which serve as the population's main source of news. Print media represent 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. However, in May 2011, *El Nuevo Diario*, the second-largest newspaper in Nicaragua, underwent an ownership change that led to the ouster of its news director, Francisco Chamorro, over editorial differences, raising doubts about the future of its previously critical editorial stance. Nicaraguan television is dominated by two ownership groups that control eight of the nine free-to-air stations in the country. Mexican media mogul Ángel González controls channels 2, 9, 10, and 11, which garner high ratings by prioritizing entertainment and light news over public debate or investigative

journalism. González, who also owns media outlets in several other Latin American countries, is considered to be on friendly terms with Ortega. The other television conglomerate is controlled by the president's family, which owns channels 4, 8, and 13, while the public Channel 6 is used to broadcast government propaganda. In addition, at year's end the ruling party owned Radio Ya, Radio Sandino, Radio La Primerísima, and Radio Nicaragua. The president or the FSLN also control news websites such as El 19 Digital and Nicaragua Triunfa.

Newspaper owners and press freedom organizations have repeatedly decried enforcement of the "Arce Law," which imposes high tariffs on necessary imported printing materials including ink and paper, stifling independent journalism. The administration also influences media content by steering its substantial official publicity budget toward the Ortega family's holdings or compliant independent outlets.

There are no government restrictions on the internet, which was accessed by approximately 14 percent of the population in 2012. Although the penetration rate remains relatively low, the internet has had a significant impact on the Nicaraguan media landscape. The number of users of the social-networking site Facebook increased from 150,000 to over 700,000 between 2011 and 2012, and many Nicaraguans are now using the internet as a primary source for their news.

2013 SCORES

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20

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