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With Nicaragua, Scary Covid Projections Are More Newsworthy Than Hopeful Results

One year ago, as both the Trump administration in the US and the Johnson government in the UK responded fitfully to the growing pandemic, the international media were looking for whipping boys: other countries whose response to the virus was even worse.

There were some cases of obvious neglect—Brazil was and is a prime example (FAIR.org, [4/12/20](https://www.fair.org/article/?title=The-World-Is-Watching-Brazil-Deal-With-Covid-19)). But the press also turned on Nicaragua, repeating allegations from local opposition groups that the Sandinista government was in denial about the dangers, and that the country was poised on the edge of disaster.

When, as the death toll in other countries grew alarmingly, Nicaragua “flattened the curve” of virus cases more quickly than its neighbors, its apparent success was ignored. Despite the importance of identifying how poorer countries can contain the virus effectively, measures used by Nicaragua remain uninvestigated by the international media. Why did this come about?

The media’s feeding frenzy on the Sandinista government began with the **BBC**. Last April, **BBC World** ([4/4/20](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-53424444)) claimed that President Daniel Ortega’s government had taken “no measures at all” in the face of the virus threat. It invented a media trope: Ortega’s “long absence” from public view. (He’d not appeared in person or on TV for three weeks, something not at all unusual.)

Two days later, the **New York Times** ([4/6/20](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/06/world/americas/nicaragua-covid-19.html)) was asking, “Where Is Daniel Ortega?,” adding that his government had been “widely criticized for its cavalier approach,” and that the public “is deeply dubious about government claims.” The **Guardian** ([4/8/20](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/08/nicaragua-covid-19)) joined the chorus that same week, claiming that Ortega was “nowhere to be seen,” adding four

days later that the “authoritarian” Ortega was one of four world leaders in denial about the virus. According to the **Washington Post** (4/13/20), Ortega had “vanished,” leaving a government operating a “laissez-faire approach” to the pandemic.

Not only the headlines but the substance of the stories had many similarities. A government quote (often from Vice President Rosario Murillo) was parenthesized by statements from opposition groups, or by what appeared to be independent medical bodies, such as the Committee of Multidisciplinary Scientists and the Citizens’ Observatory for Covid-19, both of which were openly supported by the opposition.

Juan Sebastián Chamorro, an opposition leader with the same excellent connections to the international media as other Chamorro family members, is the “go to” opposition voice, while frequently quoted sources are Chamorro-owned newspaper **La Prensa** and opposition-supporting news website **Confidencial**, run by Carlos F. Chamorro. (Both of these outlets and the website **100% Noticias**, also strongly critical of the government, have received regular financial support from the Violeta Barrios de Chamorro Foundation, which has benefited from \$4.6 million in USAID funding in the past three years.)

The international media even use reporters with close ties to the opposition. For example, the **Guardian** describes the Managua-based writer of its Covid-19 stories, Wilfredo Miranda, as “freelance,” but at the time he was writing regularly for **Confidencial**. The **Guardian** has a track record of using opposition-aligned journalists: In 2018, along with the **Washington Post** and **BBC**, it ran stories by Carl David Goette-Luciak, who was shown by Max Blumenthal (**Canary**, 9/28/18) to be working with anti-Sandinista groups. (Blumenthal’s report led to open conflict between the **Canary** website and the **Guardian**.) Similarly, the **BBC**’s report on April 4 was from Dora Luz Romero, head of digital information at right-wing **La Prensa**, and the first quote in her story was from that newspaper’s editor-in-chief. The Managua correspondent for the **New York Times**, Alfonso Flores Bermúdez, makes his political sympathies clear in his Twitter feed (for example, referring to those found guilty of armed attacks in the 2018 coup attempt as political prisoners).

The pandemic confirmed trends which have been growing anyway: that it is convenient and cheaper to use local journalists, even if they are uncommitted to balanced reporting, and to give voice to opposition figures who are readily available with quotable comments, often in fluent English. In part this is because government officials are reluctant to engage with the media—a stance which can be criticized, but is a response to the derisive way

their comments are treated (coverage of Ortega's "disappearance" providing some prime examples).

In Covid denial?

There were two main threads to the adverse media coverage in mid-2020. The first was that the Nicaraguan government was in denial about the pandemic, and either unprepared or unwilling to take the necessary steps to combat it. An article I wrote for COHA ([5/30/20](#)) last year responded to these criticisms: While the Nicaraguan government rejected the use of lockdowns as impractical in a country where most people survive on what they earn each day, and few can work without leaving home, in other respects its response to the pandemic was ahead of other countries.

Nicaragua announced its strategy much earlier (in late January, when most Western countries were still dismissing the likelihood of a pandemic); it prepared wards in 18 hospitals to receive Covid patients, and reserved one hospital solely for this purpose; it put health checks in place at points of entry to the country with mandatory quarantines, and it began a program to combat misinformation being purveyed via social media (several rounds of house-to-house visits, a free phone line, streetside clinics and more).

The measures were taken in consultation with experts in Asian countries already dealing with the crisis, such as Taiwan and South Korea, with which Nicaragua has strong links. Yet even when the government published a "white paper" ([5/25/20](#)) setting out its strategy in detail (in English as well as Spanish), it was ignored or discounted as inadequate by international media. The Spanish newspaper **La Vanguardia** ([5/27/20](#)), for example, dismissed it as promoting "herd immunity" when this term did not appear in the document.

If reporters had done some elementary research, they might have discovered that the plans had substance: More than one-fifth of Nicaraguan government spending goes to the public health service; it has built 19 new hospitals in 13 years, and has six more under construction. Nicaragua now has more hospital beds ([1.8 per 1,000 population](#)) than richer countries such as Mexico (1.5) and Colombia (1.7).

The second thread of criticism was that, as a result of government neglect, Covid-19 would run rampant. A huge caseload was forecast, clandestine burials were taking place, and ill-prepared health services were on the point of collapse. The **BBC's** second report ([5/4/20](#)) on Nicaragua, also by Dora Luz Romero, included a prediction by a local NGO called FUNIDES that by June, there would be at least 120,000 virus cases and 650 deaths.

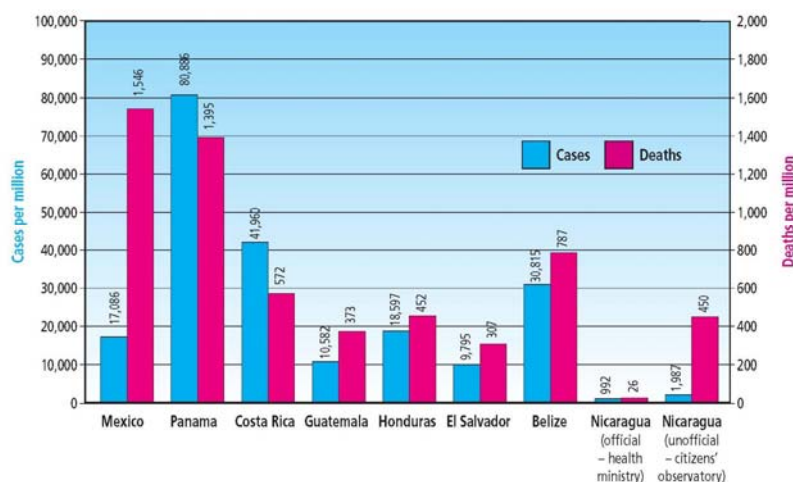
(FUNIDES receives US government money from the National Endowment for Democracy.)

The **New York Times** (5/31/20) called Nicaragua “a place of midnight burials,” without noting the opposition’s practice of creating fake news items with which to confuse people. For example, Nicaraguan residents (like me) could follow pickup trucks loaded with coffins as they made meandering journeys through city streets, in blatant attempts to create panic.

The medical journal the **Lancet** (4/6/20) carried a report in April from 13 doctors, none based in Nicaragua, claiming that “the fragile public health infrastructure could collapse.” This was regularly cited by the general media, ignoring a response in the same journal (4/30/20) from this writer that rebutted the arguments.

Pessimists off the mark

Were the pessimists correct? No, they were widely off the mark. It is just one year since Nicaragua’s first official Covid-19 case, identified on March 18, 2020. Since then, official figures report 6,629 cases in total, whereas the unofficial Citizens’ Observatory reports double this number, 13,278. The higher figure is based on “suspected” (not tested) cases, and according to the observatory website includes “rumors” as one source of information. But even the higher figure is dramatically lower than those for adjoining countries, as this chart shows.



Covid-19 Cases and Deaths per Million in Mexico and Central America. Source: Author calculations based on data from MINSA Nicaragua and Citizens’ Observatory for Covid-19 (3/29/21).

If deaths are counted rather than numbers of cases, Nicaragua's official figure (26 per million inhabitants) is similarly low. The observatory's figure for "suspicious" deaths is considerably higher (450 per million), but this includes reported pneumonia cases. In the event that these are all actually Covid cases, this would still be less than half the current Latin American average of 1,174, by official tallies. (It should be kept in mind that in most countries, the official count of Covid deaths is considerably less than the overall increase in mortality during the pandemic; if there are more deaths associated with Covid in Nicaragua than are officially tabulated, that would make the country the norm rather than the exception.)

But the statistics are not the real story. The untold and more significant one in terms of learning from the pandemic is that Nicaragua's peak of cases and deaths was very short. Essentially it lasted for two months, from mid-May until mid-July. Half the official total cases in the past year occurred in these two months, and since then the daily total has been consistently low. (On no occasion since July has the observatory's unofficial figure of "suspicious" cases exceeded 100 daily.)

The trend could be confirmed by talking to people working in the health service, as I did on various occasions. In late June, an epidemiologist monitoring the situation nationally told me that hospitals were reporting that the peak had passed. In July, I checked with a local hospital that was dealing with virus cases: Its intensive care unit still had Covid patients, two on ventilators, but wasn't full. In August, the same hospital recognized the efforts of all the staff—doctors and nurses, porters and cleaners—in a moving ceremony to mark the end of the crisis, attended by many of the patients who had recovered, and who expressed their thanks for the attention they had received.

This achievement in turning the pandemic into what was, effectively, a short, sharp shock, came despite Nicaragua having no lockdowns. Adjoining countries such as Honduras, El Salvador and Costa Rica had strict lockdowns, yet had many more cases. In Costa Rica, there was a prolonged peak from September until January, an experience directly opposite to Nicaragua's. Honduras continues to have a high incidence of the virus, with hospitals at the point of collapse even in 2021.

All the neighboring countries used the pandemic to become more authoritarian, provoking demonstrations often violently repressed by the police; Nicaragua's measures were all advisory, not compulsory. Nevertheless, it was Nicaragua which was listed by the **New York Times** ([7/29/20](#)) as one of five Latin American countries where democracy "declined" during the pandemic.

What led to Nicaragua's relative success during a period when the pandemic was rampant in neighboring countries? At this stage, no scientific study appears to have been undertaken, so any observations are speculative. One factor seems to be the relative absence of viral transmission by travelers from abroad, since (after the violent coup attempt in 2018) there were few tourists in early 2020 to bring the virus into the country. Health checks at border crossings were introduced and, together with quarantining of new arrivals, appear to have been very effective.

House-to-house visits by "health brigades," approaching 5 million in number, served to raise awareness and combat fake news. Nicaragua's 37,000 health personnel were all trained in handling Covid-19 at an early stage, and have long experience of controlling other viral epidemics. However, the true factors behind Nicaragua's "flattening of the curve" of Covid cases after a short peak clearly warrant much fuller investigation.

Unrecognized success

In September, I wrote in **Popular Resistance** ([9/22/20](#)) that it can only be a matter of time before Nicaragua's effective response to the pandemic is recognized by the corporate media, especially as it is in such contrast to the experience of most other Latin American countries, and of course that of the US and the UK.

Six months later, there is still no sign of this happening. At the beginning of this year, the **Wall Street Journal** ([1/1/21](#)) listed eight countries which handled Covid well; **Time** ([2/25/20](#)) ran a piece listing 11 countries with the "best global responses" to Covid. Neither included Nicaragua.

The **Guardian** ran an article ([12/29/20](#)) mentioning several low-income countries from which the US and UK could learn, omitting Nicaragua. When I pointed this out in [a letter](#) published on December 31, the newspaper immediately published [a reply](#) under the headline "Nicaragua's Covid Story Far From Truth"—noting that the opposition has its own numbers for Nicaraguan Covid cases, but not mentioning that even those numbers are far lower than those of Nicaragua's neighbors.

What is apparent is that Nicaragua's unconventional approach has been derided but, when it turned out to be successful, has been ignored. The Covid-19 Observatory at the University of Miami, which monitors anti-virus measures in Latin America, has a [public policy adoption index](#) which monitors measures taken to reduce social contact (stay-at-home requirements, school closures, etc.): Nicaragua has the lowest score. But as the **Guardian** ([9/19/20](#)) pointed out in September, much of Latin America was subject to

prolonged lockdowns, inducing severe poverty, yet produced five of the top ten countries globally for incidence of the virus. (See **FAIR.org**, [7/30/20](#).) As the exception, Nicaragua's experience should have stood out, not least because it received so much initial media attention for eschewing lockdowns and keeping schools open.

Instead, the international media continued to pour scorn. Even as the pandemic subsided in Nicaragua, the **Washington Post** ([8/8/20](#)) was calling the government's response "bizarre and dangerous." The **Financial Times** ([10/4/20](#)) reported Nicaragua's Covid statistics in October, but gave the impression that the numbers of cases were exceptionally high, part of "a worsening economic and social crisis." As recently as this February, the **Guardian** ([2/19/21](#)) criticized Nicaragua's "stumbling response to the coronavirus pandemic" in a cynical and misleading report characterizing the country's efforts to monitor the use of its air space for satellites and other near-space activities as a grandiose "space agency."

The picture that emerges is one where there was considerably more coverage of dire predictions than of the surprisingly mild outcome as the pandemic ran its course. Covid-19 was a convenient issue on which the Sandinista government, regularly criticized by the international media, could be attacked again.

Journalists, who should be more skeptical of negative reports from local opposition media and NGOs whose political alignment is well-known, simply repeated them as reliable indications of a disaster waiting to happen. Their apocalyptic warnings strengthened the media's narrative that the Sandinista government is failing its people. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that politically useful guesses were found to be more newsworthy than politically inconvenient reality.

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