

Since Nicaragua's Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) returned to power through democratic elections in 2006, the United States government has poured many millions of dollars into right-wing opposition groups in the Central American country.

These US-funded NGOs have aimed to destabilise the government of Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega, and the need for tighter controls became apparent when a number of NGOs, so-called 'human rights bodies' and opposition media played a central role in a [brutally violent coup attempt in 2018](#), not only supporting the violence but also creating fake news as to who was responsible for it, attempting to blame it on the police or the government and its supporters. Many of the same NGOs and media have also been involved recently in undermining the government's strategy for dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. Their campaigns have caused suffering and loss of life among people deterred from going to public hospitals as a result of fake news about clandestine burials, deaths of prominent public figures or a collapse of the hospital system, often illustrated with photos or videos from other countries which they claimed were from Nicaragua.

Nicaragua's National Assembly responded to the Washington-sponsored violence and destabilisation efforts by passing a law, the Foreign Agents Law, in October 2020 that requires organisations funded by outside governments to [register as foreign agents](#). The law requires all organisations, agencies or individuals, who work with, receive funds from or respond to organisations that are owned or controlled directly or indirectly by foreign governments or entities, to register as foreign agents with the Ministry of the Interior. Anonymous donations are prohibited. Donations must be received through any supervised financial institution and must explain amounts, destinations, uses and purposes of the money donated. Foreign agents must refrain from intervening in domestic political issues, which means that any organisation, movement, political party, coalition or political alliance or association that receives foreign funding could not be involved in Nicaraguan politics. Wálmaro Gutiérrez, Chairman of the National Assembly Committee responsible for scrutiny of the new bill, [offered](#) this synopsis: "Only we Nicaraguans can resolve in Nicaragua the issues that concern us. In summary, that is what the foreign agents law says".

The legislation is very similar to a law passed by the United States in 1938 known as the [Foreign Agent Registration Act \(FARA\)](#). FARA's provisions are the widest and strictest of anywhere in the world. They prevent not just foreign governments, but foreign entities of any kind, from involvement in US political activity. FARA requires a wide range of bodies that receive foreign funding to register as "foreign agents," with severe penalties for non-compliance. A [recent case](#) involving a non-governmental organization (NGO) showed that the law requires registration for activities that are so broad in scope that most people would not consider them to be "political" at all (the NGO deals with environmental projects). The lawyers reporting this case advise NGOs that "they may be required to register under FARA, even if funding they receive from foreign governments is only part of the organisation's financial resources and the proposed work aligns with the non-profit's existing mission."

It is also worth noting that there are many examples globally of measures to control foreign involvement in political activities. For example, of the [countries within the European Union](#), 13 have very strict laws relating to foreign political funding and only four have no restrictions at all. In Sweden, receiving money from a foreign power or someone acting on

behalf of a foreign power is [a criminal offence](#) if the aim is to influence public opinion on matters relating to governance of the country or national security.

Why is the new law not limited to political parties, like the similar restrictions in (for example) some European countries? The reason is that Nicaragua has a small number of very politicised third-sector organizations: NGOs, “human rights” bodies and media organizations that receive foreign funding for political purposes (it also, of course, has thousands of NGOs that receive foreign money for legitimate purposes, such as poverty relief).

Though Washington has had the FARA legislation on the books for more than eight decades, and still uses it regularly, the Biden administration has lashed out at Nicaragua for its decision to pass a similar law. On February 8, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price, a former CIA agent, published a statement condemning the elected Sandinista government. Price claimed that President “[Ortega is driving Nicaragua toward dictatorship](#),” because the new foreign agent law led to the voluntary suspension of operations of a major US government-funded opposition organisation in the country. Price demonised Nicaragua’s democratically elected government as a “regime,” while stressing that the US government is “focused on empowering civil society.” The State Department spokesperson concluded his declaration with a thinly veiled threat: “We urge President Ortega to change course now.”

Today, funding for anti-Sandinista NGOs comes largely through the US government’s regime-change arms the [US Agency for International Development \(USAID\)](#) and the [National Endowment for Democracy \(NED\)](#). The latter was created created by the Reagan administration at the time of the US-funded and directed Contra war against Nicaragua, a war which cost tens of thousands of lives. The stated aim of the NED was ‘to promote democracy’, but its real aim was to destabilise the country.

The real source of the Biden administration’s anger over Nicaragua’s foreign agent law was the announcement that a right-wing opposition group funded with millions of US government tax dollars had decided to shut down.

On February 5, the anti-Sandinista activist organisation the Violeta Barrios de Chamorro Foundation announced that it was [voluntarily suspending operations](#) in protest of the foreign agent law. The US State Department press release falsely accused the Nicaraguan government of closing the Chamorro Foundation. In reality, the Sandinista government was not shuttering or expelling the foundation or any other organisation; rather, they voluntarily decided to cease activities to avoid compliance with the new legislation.

The Chamorro Foundation was founded by and is named after Nicaragua’s neoliberal former President Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, who came to power in 1990 thanks to a US-backed terror war and blockade of the country, along with funding from Washington’s National Endowment for Democracy (NED). In 1991, the NED personally rewarded President Barrios de Chamorro for her loyalty to Washington, giving her a high-profile award.

The Chamorro clan is one of the wealthiest and most powerful oligarch families in Nicaragua. Many right-wing opposition leaders in Nicaragua are Chamorros, and they enjoy

a close relationship with the US government. This oligarch family's foundation is bankrolled by Washington's soft-power arm, the US Agency for International Development (USAID).

While the minimum wage in Nicaragua is just over \$200 per month, [USAID has poured](#) millions of dollars into the Chamorro Foundation, allotting \$1.2 million in 2018, \$1.7 million in 2019 and \$1.7 million in 2020.

The Violeta Barrios de Chamorro Foundation has also been used to [run](#) USAID's [Media Strengthening Program](#) (MSP), funding and training right-wing media activists on behalf of Washington.

According to a review of [USAID's publicly available data](#), the agency has spent the following sums of money just on opposition media outlets in Nicaragua since 2011:

- \$1,697,400 in 2020
- \$1,729,645 in 2019
- \$889,355 in 2018
- \$400,000 in 2017
- \$1,600,000 in 2014
- \$550,000 in 2013
- \$413,163 in 2012 (1)
- \$286,387 in 2012 (2)
- \$541,000 in 2011

And this does not include many millions of dollars more that were rewarded to redacted grantees, whose information is not revealed on the USAID website.

One of the recipients of US government funding through the Chamorro Foundation was Nicaragua's far-right opposition media outlet 100% Noticias. This channel actively encouraged violence during the 2018 coup attempt, promoting extremists who used mortar cannons to kill and injure Sandinista activists and state security forces.

Washington-funded 100% Noticias director Miguel Mora has openly requested that the US military invade his country and overthrow President Daniel Ortega, citing the war on Panama in 1989. Mora also hosted extremists who called on Nicaraguans to organise a violent mob to invade the presidential compound and lynch the elected leader.

The Violeta Barrios de Chamorro Foundation is directed by [Cristiana Chamorro](#), a wealthy right-wing operative who may well be the opposition's presidential candidate in the November 2021 election.

In effect, this means that USAID has been bankrolling Nicaragua's right wing opposition groups and opposition press with millions of dollars over many years.

[USAID allotted](#) more than \$122 million overall on operations in Nicaragua in the five years from 2016 through 2020. The majority of that money went to "Leadership, Management, Governance," the "Municipal Governance Program," and the "Democratic Leadership Development Program" – in other words, funding and cultivating right-wing opposition leaders.

While USAID claims that its projects are "humanitarian," its own publicly available data shows that the vast majority of its spending in Nicaragua goes to funding "Government and Civil Society" and operating expenses for its staff, while less than 1 percent of its money goes to supporting public health and agriculture.

With elections in Nicaragua due to take place in November, the scale of the newly started "RAIN" project suggests to many observers that it has [a dual purpose](#): supporting the opposition's election campaign, but also laying the groundwork to delegitimise the elections in the event of another Sandinista victory. The US Embassy and the State Department will continue to assert that the Nicaraguan government is running "a sustained campaign of violence and repression," contrary to Nicaraguans' "right to free assembly and expression," regardless of whether the new law is implemented. It is clearer than ever that some NGOs and similar bodies are an integral part of this offensive.

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