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COVID-19 and the state: Nicaragua case study

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Abstract: Unlike Latin American peers, and contrary to World Health Organization recommendations, Nicaragua eschewed lockdowns and other common strategies to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. Analysts have since demonstrated how Nicaraguan authorities dramatically under-reported the number of deaths and infections that resulted (though a dearth of data complicates cross-country comparisons). Questions remain about the government's decision to pursue a hands-off strategy in the first place. This paper argues that rather than optimizing for fewer cases and deaths, the authoritarian government of President Daniel Ortega instead attuned its pandemic response to other, political and economic, variables. In the context of a pre-existing sociopolitical crisis that threatened the regime's legitimacy and territorial control, policy-makers were primarily interested in safeguarding macroeconomic indicators and fomenting a sense of normalcy among the populace. For related reasons, they restricted public health information and criminalized citizen-led public health efforts. In the Nicaraguan case, government and leadership mattered more than state capacity in determining the public health response.

Key words: Nicaragua, Daniel Ortega, authoritarianism, leadership, state capacity, crisis

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1 Introduction

Nicaragua's COVID-19 experience was unique. Unlike most Latin American peers, Nicaraguan authorities eschewed lockdowns and other common strategies to mitigate spread; their containment policies were among the world's weakest. Nicaragua is the poorest country in Central America, itself a lower-income subregion of Latin America, and scores relatively low on indexes of state effectiveness. Still, the public health measures that Nicaragua implemented in response to the pandemic—as well as fiscal policies to alleviate socioeconomic consequences—were weak even by comparison with countries with similar health infrastructures (Gisselquist and Vaccaro 2021). Even more unusual was the reported health impact: according to official statistics, Nicaragua experienced many fewer infections and fatalities than its neighbours, despite the hands-off public health response. For example, Guatemala—a developing country that experienced 'typical' health outcomes (Gisselquist and Vaccaro 2021)—has roughly 2.5 times the number of inhabitants but reported approximately 28 times as many cases and 37 times as many deaths in the first year of the pandemic.[1] In the second half of the first year (October 2020 – March 2021), the Nicaraguan Health Ministry (MINSA) reported, with mechanical stability and precision, exactly one COVID-related death per week (Confidencial 2021a).

The second part of the puzzle is easy to explain: local and international public health experts widely acknowledge that the Nicaraguan government has brazenly withheld or manipulated information on health outcomes (Huete-Pérez et al. 2021; Pearson et al. 2021; Vannini 2021), dramatically downplaying cases and deaths for various reasons outlined in the paper below (Human Rights Watch 2021).[2] But questions remain about the first part of the puzzle: Why did the government in Managua decide to forego containment and economic support policies in the first instance? The unusual Nicaraguan response to the pandemic, which saw government officials actively promote mass agglomerations of people at non-essential events such as political rallies and music festivals, prompted headlines around the world condemning it as 'reckless', 'bizarre', and disrespectful of Nicaraguans' human rights (Amnesty International 2020; Human Rights Watch 2020; Washington Post Editorial Board 2020). Public health scholars and other social scientists were left scratching their heads; absent an obvious explanation for why the country would reject international recommendations and buck the trend established by neighbouring governments, some analysts suggested that President Daniel Ortega and other members of the state elite had behaved in an 'irrational' fashion (Pearson et al. 2020). Indeed, most scholars expect that governments will seek to leverage the state's capacity, authority, and legitimacy (measures of a state's effectiveness) in order to protect citizens' lives. It follows, then, that most countries should have responded to an exogenous shock such as the coronavirus pandemic by enacting policies designed to reduce infections, hospitalizations, and deaths (Fukuyama 2020).

However, scholars also hold that effective state institutions are beneficial because they can help bring about economic growth and social stability; we therefore expect strong institutionality to mitigate other potential problems caused by an external shock, such as economic dislocation and

[1] By the middle of March 2021, Guatemala (population 18.25 million) had reported 183,014 cases (10,028.24 per million) and 6,578 deaths (360.44 per million). In the same period, Nicaragua (population 6.7 million) reported 6,537 cases (975.33 per million inhabitants) and 175 deaths (26.11 per million) (Our World in Data 2021 a, b).

[2] After October 2020, NPR reported, the Nicaraguan government reported 'just one COVID-19 death per week. However, an independent investigation of data through August 2020 showed more than 7,500 deaths than the previous year. The Health Ministry's own data put the number of excess deaths between 2019 and 2020 at nearly 10,000' (NPR 2021).

social conflict. Therefore, theories of governance and the state leave open the possibility that policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic could be optimized towards outcomes beyond the realm of public health. They also acknowledge that state capacities—in this case, the robustness of a state health system—do not by themselves determine pandemic response; existing research shows that state resources are mobilized in different ways and to different ends depending on the leadership in place (Enriquez et al. 2020; Fukuyama 2020). Therefore, analyses of COVID-19 and the state in the Global South should examine all dimensions of state effectiveness while also considering the specific context in which governmental policy decisions are made (paying special attention to the unique interests and worldviews of top leaders in charge at the time of the pandemic).

A close analysis of the Nicaraguan case, one that explores how the COVID-19 challenge overlapped with an existing political and economic crisis, can explain the country's outlier response to the pandemic. When Nicaragua's first cases were reported in March 2020, the country was in the midst of a severe economic recession born from a political crisis that began two years earlier. In the spring of 2018, an avalanche of street protests against the authoritarian rule of President Daniel Ortega—in power since 2007—disrupted the normal functioning of society and called into question the government's legitimacy (its right to continue ruling) and authority (its ability to exercise power to, among other things, bring about order and security) (The Economist 2018b). While security forces came close to losing territorial control in only a few isolated instances, many observers expected the ruling Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) to either collapse under domestic and international pressure or accede to protesters' demands to hold democratic elections (The Economist 2018a). The Ortega government only regained its footing after ordering a violent crackdown—one which claimed at least 300 lives and prompted strong criticism from international human rights bodies—that further polarized society and led more actors in Nicaragua and beyond to question the government's continued hold on power (IAHCR 2018). Ortega and his wife, Vice President Rosario Murillo, argued that domestic and international criticism formed part of deliberate attempts to delegitimize their family's rule and bring about a 'coup' (Fernando Álvarez 2018). When the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a global pandemic, government elites in Nicaragua had to reckon with not only problems of state capacity (the number of beds, doctors, medical equipment, etc.), but also vulnerabilities in terms of state legitimacy and authority.

The government's lack of transparency admittedly makes it difficult to document policy-makers' motives and reasoning as they navigated the pandemic. But limited official communiqués and leaked government documents provide important clues. Restricted or distorted information also complicates the assessment of public health impacts. Reporting from independent medical associations and other Nicaraguan civil society actors, when juxtaposed with official statistics, provides some insights; international observers, including multilateral public health institutions and human rights organizations, help to round out the picture. But absent information that is comparable in its completeness to that provided by other countries, definitive conclusions about the health impact of COVID-19 on Nicaragua—let alone cross-country comparisons—are unsustainable at this time. This analysis focuses on the period between March 2020 (when the first infections were reported in Nicaragua) and March 2021 (when the first vaccines arrived). For reasons discussed below, it has become even more difficult to obtain credible death and case statistics after March 2021.

This paper argues that, rather than optimizing for fewer cases and deaths (as many studies would assume), the authoritarian government of President Daniel Ortega instead attuned its pandemic response to other, political and economic variables. *Al pueblo de Nicaragua y al mundo*, a May 2020 White Paper from Ortega's office, declared that Nicaragua would 'seek a balance between public health and a healthy economy' (Secretaría Privada para Políticas Nacionales 2020). In practice, the government response leaned towards the latter. In the context of pre-existing political instability

that threatened the regime's legitimacy and survival, policy-makers were especially interested in safeguarding macroeconomic indicators and fomenting a sense of normalcy and continuity among the populace. For related reasons, they demonized calls for quarantines (suggesting that those measures would disrupt growth and normalcy) and severely restricted public health information. Independent monitoring by Nicaraguan civil society, along with excess death statistics (the country ranked third-worst in the world as of August 2020), suggests that health outcomes were, at minimum, far worse than the government reported (Financial Times coronavirus tracker; NPR 2021). At the same time, the Nicaraguan economy performed better (measured by the annual Gross Domestic Product growth rate) than the Latin American average in 2020, though it is still unclear the extent to which lockdowns—or lack thereof—explain this performance gap. Furthermore, by the end of the period covered in this article, ruling elites implemented new laws in the context of the pandemic that further criminalized political and civil society leaders who had called for international sanctions, a democratic transition, or the FSLN's removal from power. After one year of pandemic, in other words, President Daniel Ortega's regime looked more consolidated than it did prior to it.

Though the impact of COVID-19 on Nicaraguan society is currently difficult to measure, its government's outlier policy response makes the country uniquely valuable for debates on why some states were more effective than others in responding to the pandemic. A close analysis of the case highlights well-known challenges to state-centred, comparative analysis; for example, countries' tendency to underreport public health outcomes is an important theme here. But the Nicaraguan case also raises wider questions about how to frame and approach individual country studies. In Nicaragua, government and leadership mattered more than state resources or capacities; the latter created the context and imposed constraints, but the former ultimately determined the policy response. To understand the connection between the two requires that we look beyond state capacity and ask how state elites perceived the ways in which the pandemic might affect state legitimacy and authority. In adopting a leadership lens to understand the state–pandemic nexus in Nicaragua, this article also engages the topics of denialism and regime type, exploring how these concepts can be constructively employed to analyse and classify cases.

2 The initial response: quasi-denialism

According to most democracy indexes Nicaragua is a fully-consolidated authoritarian regime, and ranks among the least democratic countries in the Western hemisphere (Economist Intelligence Unit 2021). Regime type deepens the puzzle of the Nicaraguan response to the pandemic. In comparing policy responses between democracies and non-democracies, some initial studies noted that the latter were quicker to impose quarantines, lockdowns, and other restrictions in order reduce infections, prevent hospitalizations, and therefore save lives (Cheibub et al. 2020). Authoritarian governments, the thinking goes, may be more willing than democratic systems to assume certain political costs—namely, the curtailment of citizens' basic civil rights—associated with drastic mitigation policies. In controlling all branches of the Nicaraguan government, President Ortega and Vice President Murillo had wide latitude to act as they deemed fit; in fact, scholars have argued that Nicaragua's pandemic response—in its lack of transparency or accountability, and in the disproportionately controlling role played by the presidential couple—further underscored the authoritarian character of the country's political regime (Thaler 2021). And yet, despite facing few checks against their ability to act upon policy preferences, Ortega and Murillo decided against restricting gatherings or movement of citizens. In fact, in the first month of the pandemic Nicaraguan authorities adopted a quasi-denialist stance, assuring citizens that the virus was not likely to cause widespread infections or hospitalizations; extraordinary measures, they suggested, were uncalled for and life should go on as usual. To understand this unique initial

response in the March-April 2020 period, researchers should take note of the political context in Nicaragua, asking how state elites previously consolidated their power and how they perceived future risks to their continued rule.

A pre-existing political and economic crisis, dating back to the spring of 2018, 'conditioned' the ways in which state and society responded to the arrival of COVID-19 three years later (Jarquín and Martí i Puig 2021). After arriving at the presidency through free elections in 2007, President Ortega gradually consolidated control over the judicial and legislative branches of government, as well as key institutions including the country's security forces. The FSLN, by then completely hegemonized by the Ortega family, was able to achieve stable authoritarian rule by manipulating elections, repressing dissent, reaching corporatist agreements with key non-state actors—namely, the business elite and the Catholic Church—and offering social peace and consistent economic growth to the population at large (Thaler 2017). In April 2018, however, latent resentments over the Ortega family's political project exploded in the form of massive street demonstrations. Over a period of roughly six weeks, protesters vandalized government propaganda and erected roadblocks across the country in a bid to force Ortega to the negotiating table, disrupting the state's ability to provide order and stability. A resultant anti-government coalition—composed of civil society, student movements, and Ortega's erstwhile allies in the Church and private sector—demanded the president's resignation or, at minimum, early elections with full democratic guarantees. In a sultanistic regime where the lines between public and private (and the party and the state) are blurred (López Baltodano 2020; Stuenkel and Feldmann 2017), to satisfy those demands likely would have entailed a significant revision of the present state formation. In response to this broad-based questioning of their legitimacy, Ortega and Murillo denied the anti-government coalition's self-identification as a peaceful, pro-democracy movement. Instead, they suggested that the Nicaraguan government was the victim of an 'attempted coup attempt' supported by hostile outside actors, including the government of the United States. The FSLN regained full territorial control only after launching a brutal campaign of police and paramilitary violence that killed hundreds, displaced thousands, and engendered sanctions from the international community. The repression further polarized Nicaraguan society and, combined with other disruptions caused by street protests, contributed to a severe economic recession in 2018. But it also ensured the survival of current state elites, who in July 2018 had claimed victory by assuring Nicaraguans and international onlookers that 'normalcy' had been restored (Jarquín and Thaler 2020).

When WHO officials declared a global pandemic on 11 March 2020 and urged governments to take corresponding measures, the Nicaraguan leadership reacted as if it were carrying forward earlier efforts to neutralize political dynamics that had called their government's legitimacy and future into question. Namely, they denied the nature of the threat, downplayed its severity, and generally worked to ensure that fears associated with COVID-19 did not cause panic or loss of confidence in state institutions. Within days of the WHO declaration, all of Nicaragua's Central American neighbours announced strict lockdowns and closed borders. Meanwhile, Nicaraguan Health Minister Carolina Dávila promised that Nicaragua would do neither of those things (Confidencial 2020). Rather than closing schools or encouraging Nicaraguans to stay at home, Vice President Murillo called on citizens to attend a mass rally on 15 March, titled 'Love in the Times of COVID-19', where they would march in solidarity with other nations affected by the virus (Times of Israel 2020). In other words, Nicaraguan officials did not deny that the pandemic was real; they only denied that it would affect Nicaragua the way it affected other countries (one prominent FSLN radio host told listeners that COVID-19 was a disease of 'rich and bourgeois' countries, not poor ones) (El País 2020). In fact, even as authorities swore off typical mitigation strategies (Huete-Pérez and Hildebrand 2020), leaked Health Ministry documents showed that officials had taken the threat seriously since January 2020, quietly making limited interventions:

preparing hospitals for eventual outbreaks, screening foreign visitors at borders, and creating a system of door-to-door, in-person visits to trace the virus (Ministerio de Salud 2020). The subtle implementation of these policies is difficult to reconcile with the fact that authorities did not initially make them public, instead expressing an official discourse marked by strong elements of denialism. The disconnect between discourse and some policies lent further credence to the view that Ortega and Murillo were constrained by the same cognitive framework they previously adopted in response to the 2018 political crisis, characterized by an impulse to insist on normalcy and continuity, even as severe dislocations were taking place (Jarquín and Martí i Puig 2021).

During the first month of the pandemic, Nicaraguan state elites gave little indication as to why they were not implementing health measures widely adopted across Latin America and strongly recommended by international organizations. With a gross national income per capita of US$1,850 in 2020 (the Latin American average is $7,612), Nicaragua had relatively few resources to mobilize towards pandemic response (World Bank 2020b). Measured in terms of physicians and hospital beds per 1,000 people, the country also lags behind the regional average when it comes to health coverage (World Bank 2020c, d). However, Nicaragua is not the only country with scarce resources and low capacity. Central American neighbours El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras all spend less on healthcare systems (as a percentage of GDP) that cover even less of their respective populations (World Bank 2022). Still, only Nicaragua decided against major mitigation strategies.

Compounding the confusion was the fact that Nicaragua was among the last countries in the Western Hemisphere to report a confirmed case and one of the last to acknowledge community transmission. In the first month, the MINSA reported suspiciously low numbers of cases and deaths compared with neighbour countries that had closed borders or issued stay-at-home directives (see Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1: Total COVID-19 cases and deaths in Central America (cumulative—per million inhabitants) after one month: 12 March 2020 – 12 April 2020

Country	Confirmed cases	Confirmed deaths
Costa Rica	115.78	0.58
El Salvador	19.18	0.92
Guatemala	8.49	0.27
Honduras	39.05	2.48
Nicaragua	1.34	0.15

Source: author's construction based on Our World in Data/Johns Hopkins University CSSE (Centre for Systems Science and Engineering) COVID-19 data (Our World in Data 2021a).

Table 2: Total COVID-19 cases and deaths in Central America (cumulative—total) after one month: 12 March 2020 – 12 April 2020

Country	Confirmed cases	Confirmed deaths
Costa Rica	626	4
El Salvador	159	6
Guatemala	180	5
Honduras	419	25
Nicaragua	9	1

Source: author's construction based on Our World in Data/Johns Hopkins University CSSE COVID-19 data (Our World in Data 2021a).

Some sympathetic voices celebrated that Nicaragua had the lowest infection rate in the hemisphere (Perry 2020); but the Nicaraguan government refused to disclose how many tests it had conducted, making it impossible to verify the real extent of the spread.[3] Furthermore, journalistic investigations found indications of widespread community transmission (such as unusual numbers of hospitalizations and burials), as well as evidence that doctors and public health officials were being punished for encouraging the population to self-quarantine and take other measures. As the founder and president of the Nicaraguan Academy of Sciences put it, the country lacked 'credible public data to understand the degree to which COVID-19 had spread in the country' (Huete-Pérez 2020), a claimed echoed by officials from the Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO), who charged Nicaragua with failing to provide accurate data and implementing 'inadequate' prevention and control policies (France 24 2000).

These inconsistencies led to the creation of the so-called Citizens' Observatory—a conglomerate of public health experts, doctors, and civil society actors—which went directly to hospitals to attempt an unofficial account of the pandemic's reach. In the first month of the pandemic, the Observatorio Ciudadano reported orders of magnitude more infections than the government (see Table 3).

Table 3: Total COVID-19 cases (cumulative) after one month: 12 March 2020 – 11 April 2020

Official confirmed cases (MINSA)	9
Unofficial count of 'suspected' cases (Citizens' Observatory)	202

Source: author's construction based on Our World in Data/Johns Hopkins University CSSE (Centre for Systems Science and Engineering) COVID-19 data (official confirmed cases) (Our World in Data 2021a) and Observatorio Ciudadano COVID-19 en Nicaragua data (unofficial count) (Observatorio Ciudadano, multiple dates).

The disconnect between official and unofficial counts added to the chaos and further polarized Nicaraguan society. Many opposition voices accused the government of punishing the population through its unorthodox pandemic response, a claim which some scholars echoed: the Ortega government's policies and lack of transparency were, as one analyst put it, 'consistent with and a continuation of the crimes against humanity committed in 2018 and 2019' (Cupples 2020).

Throughout the turbid first few weeks of the pandemic, President Daniel Ortega was entirely absent. Perhaps hoping to avoid alarming the population, he went more than a month without making appearances or statements of any kind. When he finally delivered a televised speech on 15 April 2020, he hinted for the first time at an official explanation for why the government had decided against lockdowns, quarantines, or stay-at-home orders: 'Nicaraguans haven't stopped working', the leader explained, 'because if they stop working the country will die' (El 19 Digital 2020). Ortega was apparently alluding to a wider trade-off facing countries across the world, especially in developing regions: between protecting lives and protecting economic livelihoods. This simple explanation for the lack of lockdowns would mature in the subsequent weeks, though questions would remain.

[3] Our World in Data reports no data on the number of tests realized in Nicaragua. See also Huete-Pérez (2020).

3 A Swedish model for poor countries?

In a subsequent televised speech on the 1 May holiday, President Ortega reiterated these arguments. Calls to stay at home, he once again suggested, threatened to 'destroy' an economy driven primarily by the informal sector. This time, however, the Nicaraguan head of state expanded upon another theme: the pandemic's intersection with the country's pre-existing political crisis. Specifically, he claimed that those groups calling for quarantines and physical distancing were the same ones that had allegedly attempted a 'coup' against his government in 2018. He told Nicaraguans that bad-faith opposition groups, disguised as medical professionals and civil society organizations, were seeking to exploit the pandemic in order to undermine the stability and order that the regime had achieved at great cost (Luna 2020). Both of these implied policy logics—one preoccupied with employment and economic growth, the other concerned with the threat that the pandemic posed to state authority and legitimacy—were made explicit through government communiqués around this time. On 15 May 2020, the Nicaraguan presidency responded to growing international criticism by releasing a 'White Paper' explaining the reasoning behind its unorthodox pandemic response.

The 73-page document, titled *To the Nicaraguan People and the World: A Report on COVID-19 and a Singular Strategy*, made the formal argument that quarantines, lockdowns, and stay-at-home orders were inappropriate in the context of the second-poorest country in Latin America and the Caribbean: 'The policy is based on the fact that 40 per cent of the population lives in rural areas and 80 per cent of urban workers belong to the informal sector' (Secretaría Privada para Políticas Nacionales 2020: 3). On the one hand, the document defended the government's public health choices by pointing to certain qualities and attributes particular to the Nicaraguan case. Its 'singular' approach of eschewing lockdowns was allegedly justified, for example, because the country's 'Family and Community Health Model'—a framework that taps local and municipal networks in order to target and expand state interventions in public health—made it better-prepared to weather the pandemic than other countries with similar income levels. On the other hand, the White Paper made a more generalizing, abstract argument about economic costs associated with lockdowns. The authors noted that the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA) projected that the region—where most countries acted swiftly to close borders and prevent mass gatherings—would experience its worst GDP contraction since the 2008 global financial crisis. Interruptions to economic activity caused by quarantines, the document implied, were the main culprit: 'In the face of such unfavorable scenarios at the regional and global levels, the Government of Reconciliation and National Unity (GRUN) has not declared a quarantine or closed the economy … Nicaragua will seek a balance between public health and a healthy economy' (Secretaría Privada para Políticas Nacionales 2020: 16). Officials added that major interventions of this sort would not do much, in any event, to prevent stresses on the health system; this idea was consistent with claims from Nicaraguan scientists that the government was seemingly pursuing a 'herd immunity' strategy (Huete-Pérez et al. 2021). Despite arguing that Nicaragua's response was 'singular', and even though it rejected a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to the pandemic, the document also invited other developing countries to emulate Nicaragua's hands-off approach given the economic trade-offs. In doing so, the White Paper compared the Nicaraguan response to that of Sweden, a high-income European country with a robust state health infrastructure that also imposed fewer physical distancing measures than its peers: 'Nicaragua and Sweden represent alternatives to the total "lockdown" of a developing country and developed country, respectively … Nicaragua is the same example as Sweden, but among developing countries' (Secretaría Privada para Políticas Nacionales 2020: 12–13).

Additionally, the White Paper fleshed out Ortega's arguments regarding the country's unique political context. First, it acknowledged that Nicaragua—unlike Central American neighbours and

the Latin America region more generally—was already experiencing an economic recession when the virus hit in 2020, largely as a result of the 2018 political crisis. Having achieved an annual GDP growth rate higher than 4 per cent for eight years in a row, the Nicaraguan economy contracted by over 3 per cent in 2018 and 2019 (see Table 4).

Table 4: GDP growth (annual %), three years preceding coronavirus pandemic (2020)

Country	2017	2018	2019
Costa Rica	4.2	2.1	2.2
El Salvador	2.3	2.4	2.6
Guatemala	3.1	3.2	3.9
Honduras	4.8	3.8	2.7
Latin America and Caribbean	1.9	1.6	0.8
Nicaragua	4.6	−3.4	−3.7

Source: author's construction based on World Bank (2020a).

The economic costs of lockdowns, authorities believed, were even less acceptable in this scenario. Second, the White Paper argued that criticism of the government's pandemic response, both at home and abroad, was politically motivated:

> With the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the coup-plotting opposition of Nicaragua and its sponsors among US covert operations agencies have lashed out with a massive disinformation campaign; following their old habit of lying daily to the Nicaraguan people in an attempt to undermine confidence in the government; they have seen in the pandemic a great opportunity to terrorize and disinform the population … They criticize the government for not establishing quarantines, closing borders, prohibiting the entry of foreigners to national territory, or closing public schools and universities, all with the purpose of weakening the economy. (Secretaría Privada para Políticas Nacionales 2020: 45)

In other words, state elites denied the nature of criticism from health professionals, civil society, and international organizations. Rather than being interested in reducing infections and hospitalizations, officials argued, these actors were reviving the 'coup attempt' from 2018, in alliance with hostile outside forces in the United States, Europe, and parts of Latin America. In the face of those attacks, the Nicaraguan presidency argued, 'the economy must be protected in order to avoid an increase in poverty and all that would represent in terms of health, morbidity and mortality'.

The White Paper clarified much of the logic behind Nicaragua's outlier response to the pandemic, but several questions remained unanswered. For example, the document did not explain why the presidency had waited until the end of May—well over two months after the pandemic had been declared—in order to explain its 'singular' policies to the population in any detail. Nor did the White Paper offer an explanation for the lack of widespread, easily accessible testing; nothing in the document suggested that testing or contract tracing were contradictory to the overall strategy of keeping the country open for business. Finally, while it explained why the government had not decreed lockdowns, closed schools, or restricted economic activities, it failed to explain why officials had actively promoted non-essential gatherings such as sporting events, festivals, and political rallies.

In retrospect, President Ortega and his inner circle—in having a quasi-denialist initial reaction to the pandemic—may have been prisoners of the same cognitive framework that guided them through the political instability of 2018 (Jarquín and Martí i Puig 2021). Sensitive to any shocks—either natural or human-made—which might lead Nicaraguans to question the government's

legitimacy or ability to provide stability, state elites were led by an impulse to insist on normalcy and continuity. In the first month of the pandemic, said impulse led officials to tell Nicaraguans that COVID posed no threat; they also took actions to censor citizens calling for quarantines and mask-wearing, accusing some of deliberately attempting to sow panic in the population (Parkin Daniels 2021). Most of this denialist impulse subsided over time, as official sources of authority started encouraging citizens to wear masks indoors and increase hand-washing.

Regardless, the government never stopped policing information regarding infections, hospitalizations, deaths, and tests realized—an issue the White Paper danced around. In response to claims that officials had drastically distorted information to minimize the death toll, the document simply stated that the number of deceased due to viral disease was, *prima facie*, not unusual. It omitted mention of the strikingly low number of reported infections compared with Central American neighbours (see Tables 5 and 6).

Table 5: Total COVID-19 cases and deaths (cumulative—per million inhabitants) by the time of White Paper publication: 12 March 2020 – 25 May 2020

Country	Confirmed cases	Confirmed deaths
Costa Rica	185.05	1.95
El Salvador	304.21	5.37
Guatemala	206.03	3.23
Honduras	416.28	18.09
Nicaragua	41.63	2.54

Source: author's construction based on Our World in Data/Johns Hopkins University CSSE COVID-19 data (Our World in Data 2021a).

Table 6: Total COVID-19 cases and deaths (cumulative—total) by the time of White Paper publication: 12 March 2020 – 25 May 2020

Country	Confirmed cases	Confirmed deaths
Costa Rica	951	10
El Salvador	1983	35
Guatemala	3,760	59
Honduras	4,189	182
Nicaragua	279	17

Source: author's construction based on Our World in Data/Johns Hopkins University CSSE COVID-19 data (Our World in Data 2021a).

By the date of the document's release, the Nicaraguan Health Ministry had acknowledged only 17 COVID-related deaths; however, the Citizens' Observatory's unofficial count—which had begun to be cited in international coverage in parallel to official statistics—reported 598 'suspected' COVID-19 deaths by that point (see Table 7).

Table 7: Total COVID-19 deaths (cumulative—total) by the time of White Paper publication: 12 March 2020 – 25 May 2020

Official confirmed deaths (MINSA)	17
Unofficial count of 'suspected' COVID deaths (Citizens' Observatory)	598

Source: author's construction based on Our World in Data/Johns Hopkins University CSSE COVID-19 data (official confirmed deaths) (Our World in Data 2021a) and Observatorio Ciudadano COVID-19 en Nicaragua data (unofficial count) (Observatorio Ciudadano, multiple dates).

The wide gap between official and unofficial statistics persisted throughout the year covered by this analysis (see Table 8), as did the enormous gap between reported health outcomes in Nicaragua compared with Central American neighbours (see Tables 9 and 10), which reported over 15 times

as many COVID-related deaths per million inhabitants on average. Independent investigations by Nicaraguan journalists proved how the Nicaraguan government had massaged the data. Based on leaked data from the Nicaraguan Health Ministry, one investigation found that thousands of deceased patients, having tested positive for COVID-19 during hospitalization, were listed on their death certificates as having died of other causes (most often atypical pneumonia or hypertension) (Miranda and Salazar 2021). An investigation by *The Lancet*, based on interviews with Nicaraguan physicians, corroborated claims that doctors had been fired or otherwise sanctioned for speaking publicly about the virus and pressured to misreport any deaths resulting from COVID-19; some even reported 'having been pressured into denying patients oxygen' in order to suppress evidence of COVID-19 (Parkin Daniels 2021).

Table 8: Total COVID-19 cases and deaths (cumulative—total) after one year: 12 March 2020 – 10 March 2021

	Cases	Deaths
Official confirmed cases (MINSA)	6,537	175
Unofficial count of 'suspected' cases and deaths (Citizens' Observatory)	13,237	3,002

Source: author's construction based on Our World in Data/Johns Hopkins University CSSE COVID-19 data (official confirmed cases) (Our World in Data 2021a) and Observatorio Ciudadano COVID-19 en Nicaragua data (unofficial count) (Observatorio Ciudadano, multiple dates).

Table 9: Total COVID-19 cases and deaths (cumulative—per million inhabitants) after one year: 12 March 2020 – 11 March 2021

Country	Confirmed cases	Confirmed deaths
Costa Rica	40,441.69	554.19
El Salvador	9,482.86	296.85
Guatemala	9,925.72	357.87
Honduras	17,532.26	428.40
Nicaragua	975.33	26.11

Source: author's construction based on Our World in Data/Johns Hopkins University CSSE COVID-19 data (Our World in Data 2021a).

Table 10: Total COVID-19 cases and deaths (cumulative—total) by the time of White Paper publication: 12 March 2020 – 11 March 2021

Country	Confirmed cases	Confirmed deaths
Costa Rica	207,832	2,848
El Salvador	61,814	1,935
Guatemala	181,143	6,531
Honduras	176,427	4,311
Nicaragua	6,537	175

Source: author's construction based on Our World in Data/Johns Hopkins University CSSE COVID-19 data (Our World in Data 2021a).

We can only speculate as to the reasons why the government chose to restrict information on public health outcomes to such a degree. Economist Quitzé Valenzuela-Stookey points out that transparent information on cases and deaths would have undermined the government's entire strategy of maintaining a sense of normalcy, stability, and continuity: 'If the government's reasoning is that even stringent lockdown measures will be insufficient to prevent nation's health system from being overwhelmed, their lack of transparency and clear messaging makes sense. Announcing resignation to a high death rate would be politically disastrous.' To emphasize the economic costs of lockdowns, Valenzuela-Stookey added, was more politically viable (Valenzuela-Stookey 2020). There was also a strong precedent for this behaviour in Nicaraguan institutions in the recent FSLN era; two Nicaraguan public health scholars note that centralism, insularism, and

data manipulation are central features of a health system defined by 'strong partisan interference and corruption in the health sector' (Sotelo and Vargas 2020).

Though some puzzles remained, the White Paper demonstrated that the state response was not irrational. In flauting most recommendations from the WHO and PAHO, ruling elites followed a discernible strategy—'a strategy of balance between the pandemic and the economy, fighting vigorously against the coronavirus and COVID-19 without closing our economy'—that optimized for economic growth while neutralizing the risk that the pandemic would create political dynamics that might renew calls for regime change. Even though its policies contradicted assumptions that states would mobilize resources to prevent infection and therefore reduce lives, and although policy-makers evinced an unusual resignation to deaths and infections, Nicaragua's outlier response was not necessarily incompatible with prevailing theories of governance. State elites, in this case, behaved as one might expect: they prepared to mitigate the various consequences posed by a multifaceted external shock such as the global pandemic. As the next section discusses, leadership—and, in particular, the way in which specific state elites perceive risks to government and society—determined which consequences (economic growth versus hospitalizations, for example) received the greatest emphasis.

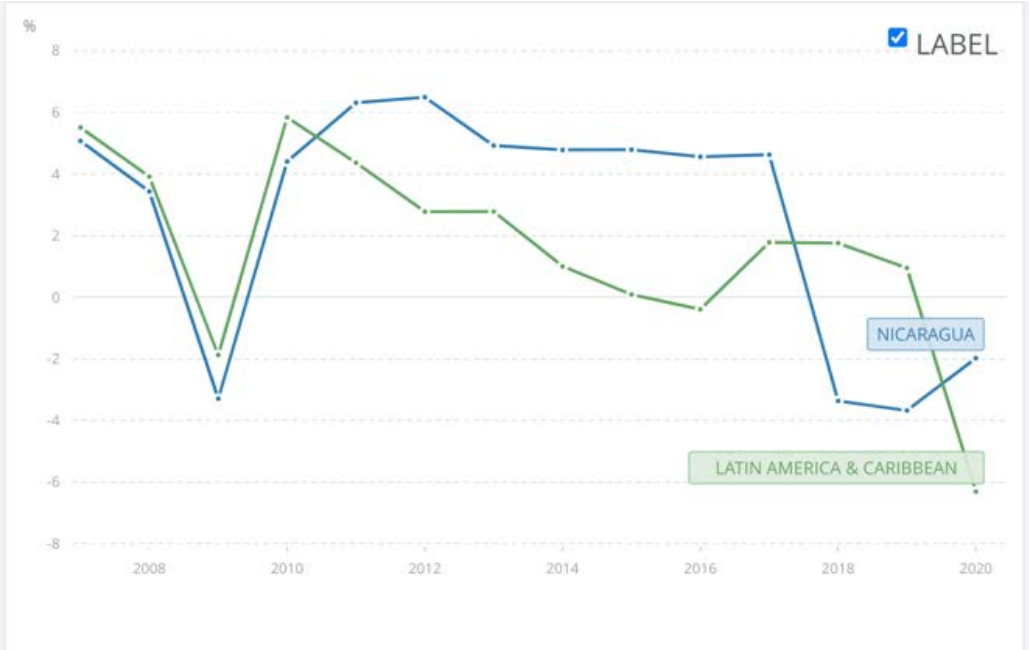
4 Health, political, and economic impacts (and problems of interpretation)

It is difficult to measure the 'success' or 'failure' of state responses to an external shock like the COVID-19 pandemic, given the inevitably multidimensional nature of the challenge. As a recent study of citizen trust in state institutions noted, 'the pandemic and its countermeasures are not only a public health crisis; it is also a global economic shock, a shifter of policy and politics, and a bringer of ubiquitous insecurity and uncertainty. These interlinked crises do not post a uniform challenge' (Brück et al. 2020). Models that predict state responses to the pandemic based on indexes of authority, legitimacy, and capacity must acknowledge that said responses may be unevenly spread across different dimensions of the external shock. In the Nicaraguan case, a unique political context informed the way that state elites perceived the principal risks posed by the pandemic; policy-makers worried that pandemic-related disruptions to daily life and economic growth would fuel opposition claims that state elites lacked the legitimacy or authority to continue governing. The country's unorthodox policies—eschewing lockdowns and keeping the economy open in lieu of economic support policies—were born from those calculations, as previous sections described. Assessing the relative success of those policies is further complicated by the lack of credible data, comparable to that which we have for other countries, on public health impacts in Nicaragua; it is difficult, in other words, to say whether the country fared worse or better than, say, neighbouring Honduras. Nonetheless, a government leadership approach to the state–pandemic nexus in the Nicaraguan case—aside from providing a fuller explanation of the country's unorthodox pandemic policies—points to wider insights on how to approach the comparative study of state responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in the Global South.

The Nicaraguan economy outperformed both Central American neighbours and the Latin American average in 2020, though it is unclear if and how pandemic-related policy responses contributed to this outcome. A quick glance at annual GDP growth rates since the global financial crisis tells a simple story (see Figures 1 and 2). After plummeting alongside the Latin American average in 2008/09, the Nicaraguan economy tracked the regional average for the subsequent decade, growing at a better-than-average pace. In 2018, however, disruptions caused by protests and regime repression saw the Nicaraguan GDP growth rate abruptly crash, falling well below the regional average. While the Nicaraguan economy still contracted in 2020, and though pre-2018 growth rates still seem a distant prospect, Nicaragua managed a soft landing during the COVID-

19 pandemic in 2020, such that the recession caused by the 2018 political crisis no longer looks out of place in the wider regional panorama. However, questions remain about the role that pandemic-related policies played in this outcome; some recent research, for example, casts doubt on the health–economy binary upon which Nicaragua premised its decision against lockdowns (McKee and Stuckler 2020). Economist Abelardo Medina has suggested that Nicaragua 'leveraged the advantage that other countries were closed' in order to boost agricultural and manufacturing exports (Cota 2021).[4] Future research will have to consider whether or not the decision to keep the economy open was a good investment in terms of GDP growth or productivity in the long run. And, as Medina notes, any potential economic benefits must be measured against the human cost

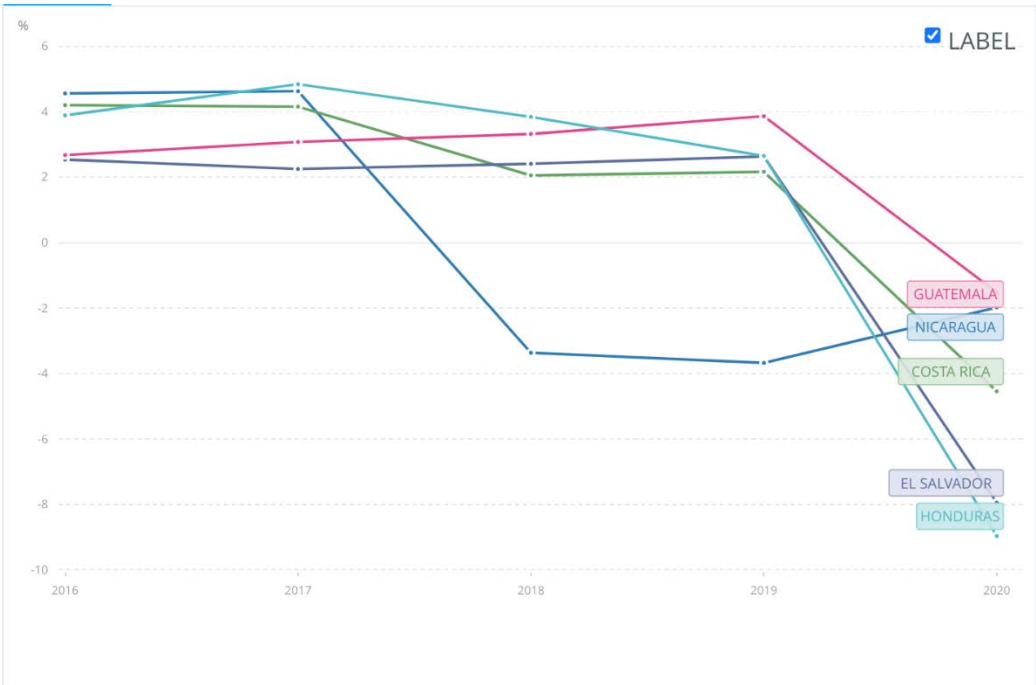
Figure 1: GDP growth (annual %), Nicaragua vs Latin America and Caribbean, 2008–20



Source: reproduced from World Bank (2020a) under CC BY 4.0 licence.

[4] 'It is very likely', Medina added, 'that a majority of Nicaraguans were not affected financially [by the pandemic], but the cost was in that they lost family members.'

Figure 2: GDP growth (annual %), Nicaragua vs Central American countries, 2017–20



Source: reproduced from World Bank (2020a) under CC BY 4.0 licence.

Unfortunately, it is unusually difficult to calculate the human cost in the Nicaraguan case. During the pandemic's initial stages, many scholars warned that by avoiding major distancing measures or lockdowns, Nicaragua courted the prospect of catastrophically high rates of infections and deaths compared with other Latin American countries. In retrospect, some characterized Nicaragua's pandemic response as 'disastrous' (Schwartz and Thaler 2022). Such a decisive assessment is difficult to sustain given the incompleteness of the data currently available. Comparisons across countries are not possible because the data for Nicaragua—be it the heavily distorted official statistics or unofficial estimates by the Citizens' Observatory—are not directly comparable with the official statistics provided by other countries.

Nevertheless, the available evidence does allow us to conclude that, at minimum, the public health impacts were far worse than what the government acknowledged. A *Financial Times* analysis of excess deaths—held up by many researchers as the 'gold standard' for measuring COVID-related health impacts (Beaney et al. 2020) paints an even darker picture. According to their reporting, only two countries in the world (Ecuador and Mexico) fared worse than Nicaragua in terms of excess deaths (Confidencial 2021b). Based on excess data statistics, one study found that only Tajikistan undercounted COVID-19 deaths on a greater scale than Nicaragua (Karlinsky and Kobak 2021). However, Nicaragua suddenly stopped reporting excess death statistics in August 2020, limiting the viability of cross-country comparisons based on that measure.[5] Assessments must also consider that, in any event, not all outcomes were determined by state policies; in the absence of major quarantine policies, non-state actors (such as business organizations, medical associations, and human rights groups) launched campaigns during peak outbreaks calling on citizens to stay at home. The Citizens' Observatory, without which we would have very little information on health impacts in Nicaragua, was part of this non-state response to the pandemic.

[5] Our World in Data reports no data on excess deaths in Nicaragua after August 2020.

Given such incomplete information, only the architects of the Nicaraguan experiment remain in a position to judge whether they successfully achieved the 'balance' between public health and economic growth that they had sought. Over the course of the pandemic's first year, international observers took note of the fact that striking numbers of FSLN party members—including at least 12 senior officials—were dying of pulmonary illnesses (Robles 2020). On 13 April 2021, Paul Oquist—cabinet official, top Ortega advisor, and purported author of the May 2020 White Paper—died of COVID-related symptoms, though his government did not register his death as COVID-related (Miranda 2021).

While public health and economic impacts are difficult to determine, states elites seemingly found more unambiguous success in satisfying the political logic of their pandemic response. Two years before COVID-19 particles arrived in Nicaragua, ruling elites were in a tenuous position; they faced widespread street protests, a relatively unified opposition, and doubts about the FSLN's ability to maintain control. Over time, however, Ortega and his inner circle were able to reverse all of these adverse scenarios. The pandemic, which under many circumstances might have once again put the government on shaky terrain (Thaler 2020), saw them gain further ground. In the context of the pandemic, the National Assembly—directly controlled by Ortega and Murillo—implemented new laws that further criminalized dissent and civil society activity under felonies such as 'treason', 'money laundering', and 'conspiracy to undermine national sovereignty'. In a scenario in which many Nicaraguans were afraid to congregate for fear of contracting the virus, the government—bent on maintaining a *de facto* police state—faced a diminished risk of street protests. Importantly, fragmented anti-government actors failed to turn Ortega's unusual pandemic response into a rallying cry for opposition unity, nor did they seize the opportunity to present themselves as a coherent governing alternative to the current regime. Instead, as the government sought to make good on its vision of providing order and relative stability, opposition actors descended into greater infighting. As a result, the FSLN government was more strongly consolidated after a year of global pandemic than it was before, though only time will tell if these policies contributed to political stability in the long run (Jarquín and Martí i Puig 2021).

The Nicaraguan case points to challenges, both old and new, to cross-country analyses of how states and societies responded to the coronavirus pandemic. The under-reporting of infections and deaths, for instance, is a widespread problem that complicates comparisons between countries; the Ortega government is an extreme example in this regard. But Nicaragua also stands out because it is a case where government and leadership clearly mattered more than state capacity in determining the policy response. Most studies on the Nicaraguan case have reached similar conclusions (Schwartz and Thaler 2022). The primacy of the leadership variable also fits with wider research on the Latin America region, where state responses—in terms of containment strategies and economic support policies—varied widely during the first year of the pandemic. As one analysis noted, the biggest determinant of health outcomes was not inequality, informality, state effectiveness, or levels of social trust. Instead, the most salient factor 'has turned out to be leadership. The countries that have been among the hardest hit and that have driven the region's ballooning case and death rates are led by politicians who have downplayed the severity of the crisis, denied that government can do anything about it, or mounted poor policy responses that condemned hundreds of thousands of people across the Western Hemisphere' (Enriquez et al. 2020).

This is not to suggest that state effectiveness *ex ante* was irrelevant. State capacity constrained the Ortega government's policy options. For example, their pandemic White Paper noted how the country's low-income status made lockdown-based containment strategies unsustainable, suggesting that they might have pursued another policy path under different economic circumstances. The weakness of the state in other areas may also have shaped Ortega and Murillo's options and decision-making in other ways. Sensitive to a recent experience (the 2018 political

crisis) in which state authority had been significantly compromised, policy-makers seemingly felt compelled to pursue policies that would prioritize the ability to provide order and stability. It can also be inferred that the state's relatively low levels of legitimacy—its ability to acquire the consent of the population to govern—also informed the unique way in which government leaders behaved. In a country lacking separation of powers, elected officials, or other ingrained accountability mechanisms, Nicaragua's presidential couple had unconstrained decision-making authority. And in pursuing policies that clearly contradicted international health recommendations, they were not constrained by semi-autonomous government agencies led by scientists or medical experts; the presidency could control all aspects of the public health response in minute detail. In summary, it is difficult to imagine Ortega's unorthodox pandemic leadership in a scenario where the Nicaraguan state enjoyed greater capacity, legitimacy, and authority, and where power was distributed more equally around the political arena.

In analysing the state–pandemic nexus in Nicaragua through a leadership lens, this paper has also engaged with ongoing debates about the relevance of regime type to responses to the COVID-19 crisis. In the case of the Ortega government, authoritarianism matters—though not in any mechanistic way. In Nicaragua, the interests and capacities of the state are not easily distinguished from the interests and resources of a small ruling elite. Moreover, the government's personalistic and dynastic qualities—unique in the Western hemisphere—mean that levels of accountability and transparency are especially low, even when compared with those of other non-democracies. In its quasi-denialist initial response, and its refusal to provide credible information throughout the pandemic, the government was following precedents established during the earlier consolidation of an authoritarian regime (Thaler 2021). Prior to the pandemic, scholars had also found that the country's health infrastructure was heavily 'politicised' (Vargas-Palacios et al. 2018). However, deeply consolidated authoritarianism in no way precluded a response that followed international health recommendations; non-democratic regimes in Cuba and Venezuela (Nicaragua's closest partners) implemented major mitigation strategies in line with, or at times surpassing, those seen in Latin American democracies.

This analysis of Nicaragua also raises questions about how we taxonomize state responses to the pandemic. In assessing the Ortega government's policies, scholars typically group Nicaragua under the 'denialist' category of countries; indeed, one analysis called the country 'an extreme case of disease denialism' (Buben and Kouba 2020). In one sense, denialism is an apt and revealing label: in the way that they downplayed the pandemic's severity and shrugged off international criticism, Ortega and Murillo behaved similarly to other world leaders, such as Alexander Lukashenko (Belarus) or Jair Bolsonaro (Brazil), frequently seen as being denialist in their response. In some ways, Nicaragua's presidential couple went further: they criminalized the efforts of citizens and the medical community to disseminate information and advice regarding the virus. At the same time, the denialist tag obscures two key facts. First, the Nicaraguan government's official discourse on the virus shifted significantly over time, abandoning outright scepticism about COVID-19 after the first two months of the pandemic. Second, there is no evidence that key policy-makers—including the presidential couple, who reportedly took significant measures to protect and immunize their family—denied the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic, or that they were indifferent to its impact on Nicaraguan society (Gutiérrez 2020). In fact, as the above analysis has demonstrated, they were highly alarmed and implemented a discernible strategy, albeit one that marked a striking departure from international recommendations and privileged economic outcomes over public health priorities.

5 Conclusion

This paper has attempted to contextualize two major outliers regarding Nicaragua's experience in the COVID-19 pandemic. First, it showed that the country's spectacularly low rates of death and infection were the result, as one study put it, of 'purposeful misdiagnosis or underreporting' (Karlinsky and Kobak 2021). Second, it argued that Nicaraguan leaders' decision to forgo quarantines and other recommended mitigation policies was part of a rational strategy to prioritize economic growth and a sense of normalcy over public health. These leaders made assessments that were unique to Nicaragua's political context but also specific to their position within it. They judged that the most severe risk associated with the pandemic was the possibility of disruptions that would enable calls for regime change by anti-government actors at home and abroad. They also reasoned that lockdowns would stunt the economic growth necessary to maintain the social stability that, in turn, underpins the Ortega-Murillo family's dynastic authoritarian project. Another set of Nicaraguan state elites, working with the same state capacities and limitations, would likely have arrived at a different calculus. Therefore, a complete understanding of Nicaragua's pandemic response requires consideration not only of the state but of elite government ideas and interests.

The Nicaraguan case is especially challenging to analyse. This is due, first, to a lack of transparency: without minimally credible information about cases and deaths from official sources, it becomes difficult to accurately measure the public health impacts of the government's policies. Second, it is challenging to analyse because these policies themselves are so very controversial. In responding to COVID-19, President Daniel Ortega—who less than two years prior had been accused by the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights (IACHR) of committing 'crimes against humanity' during repression of protests in 2018—ignored advice from international medical authorities, criminalized civil society public health initiatives, and grossly manipulated information about the virus and its spread. Few, if any, scholars would condone any of these policies; this fact has naturally driven many observers towards a critical stance. Indeed, this paper has been critical of the Nicaraguan approach to the pandemic: it argued that the regime's authoritarian nature was a decisive factor, it cited evidence that authorities had lied about cases and deaths, and it called into question some of the reasoning behind the government's decision to eschew lockdowns and other mitigation strategies. However, in the interest of providing a complete explanation of Nicaragua's pandemic response, it sought to take said reasoning—expressed in official communiqués and speeches—as seriously as possible.

Importantly, the arguments in this paper should be read with the understanding that dynamics will shift over time. In the long term, other differential health impacts may emerge between countries which implemented or avoided lockdowns, respectively. The health, economic, and political consequences of COVID-19—and the unorthodox way in which the Nicaraguan government responded—are likely to evolve over time. Since March 2021, the end of the period discussed in this essay, the government of Daniel Ortega further restricted public information on COVID-19. As part of a wider crackdown on dissidents and civil society ahead of elections in November 2021, security forces worked to dismantle the Citizens' Observatory, making credible information on health impacts even more difficult to procure. The arrival of vaccines in March 2021 (as of this writing, Nicaragua enjoys one of the lowest vaccination rates in the Western hemisphere) will affect every dimension of the pandemic. Many of the puzzles surrounding the Nicaraguan case can only be answered with greater time and hindsight.

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