

# The “Human Rights Industry” and Nicaragua

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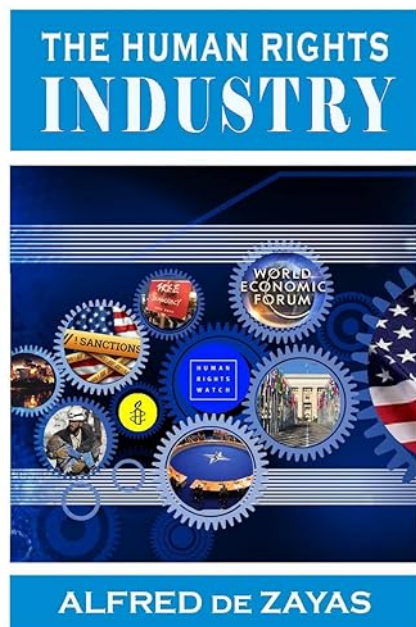
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*Why do United Nations human rights bodies focus on some countries, but not others? Why do organizations like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International appear to ignore important evidence presented to them? And why do the media repeat stories of human rights abuses without questioning their veracity?*



These issues and more are examined in [one of 2023’s most remarkable books](#): *The Human Rights Industry* by Alfred de Zayas. It is remarkable for two reasons. One is that it brings together the insights of de Zayas and other experts into the ways in which “human rights” have been distorted to serve the interests of Western governments, principally those of the United States.

But it is also remarkable because it is not the view of an outsider, but that of someone who is perhaps more immersed than anyone of his generation in the whole field of human rights, bringing 50 years of experience to his analysis. His conclusions are damning, but de Zayas is far from pessimistic, offering a multi-point plan as to how questions of human rights could be better addressed globally, with the real interests of ordinary citizens paramount, not subservient to those of Washington, the European Union or other centers of power.

As a reader, one whose work is very briefly referenced, what struck me forcefully is how much of the book rings true for the country where I live, Nicaragua. It does not receive the same attention as countries like Venezuela or Syria, but almost all of the analysis in the de Zayas book applies to the abuse and manipulation of human rights issues in the Nicaraguan context.

This article identifies some of the key insights in *The Human Rights Industry*, and shows how they fit, in many cases remarkably closely, with experience in Nicaragua, focusing on the period before, during and after the coup attempt against the Sandinista government in 2018. The subject matter ranges from the macro-level of Nicaragua's treatment by the United Nations and its human rights mechanism, through its treatment by regional bodies, by individual governments and by international human rights organizations, right down to the behavior of the handful of so-called human rights bodies in Nicaragua itself.

## Nicaragua's "Human Rights" Bodies

The base of the "human rights industry" consists of small, local organizations which, as de Zayas points out, may in some cases do excellent work. However, he qualifies this by saying: "There are few fields that are as penetrated and corrupted by intelligence services as the human rights NGOs."

De Zayas estimates that perhaps 30% are so penetrated—a remarkable assertion that must be taken seriously given his knowledge of the sector. He goes on to warn specifically against those funded by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) or George Soros's Open Society Foundation.

Image: Source: [dagobertobelluci.wordpress.com](https://dagobertobelluci.wordpress.com)



The NED's website shows that, between 2016 and 2020, it spent almost \$1.2 million in funding "human rights" bodies in Nicaragua, in addition to funding many other activities. In 2018, Nicaragua had three main "human rights" NGOs, known for their initials in Spanish as the CPDH, ANPDH and CENIDH, as well as several smaller organizations, most receiving foreign funding. Both CPDH and ANPDH were financed by the NED. CPDH also [received more than \\$7 million](#) from an offshoot of the Organization of American States (OAS).

The ANPDH was originally set up by the Reagan administration at the time of the *Contrawar* in Nicaragua, to whitewash *Contra* atrocities (the funding of these bodies by the NED in the 1980s, through an intermediary called Prodemca, was [reported at the time](#) by *TheWashington Post*). CENIDH is not known to have received NED funding but in the build-

up to the coup attempt was awarded [a staggering \\$23 million](#) by various European institutions, some with government connections. Over \$10 million of this was allocated for staff salaries alone, an astonishing amount in a low-income country.

De Zayas warns that human rights assessments by such bodies may be compromised and should be treated with skepticism. In Nicaragua's case, their biased coverage and one-sided assessments, especially in terms of killings and other abuses during the 2018 coup attempt, have been [documented in detail](#). The most extreme example is that of the ANPDH, which actively accompanied violent opposition activists and even attempted to cover up their worst atrocities.

As *The Grayzone* [reported in 2019](#), when the ANPDH broke up in 2018 and its employees left for Costa Rica, they accused the former director, Álvaro Leiva, of appropriating funds from U.S. bodies such as the NED. Worse, they revealed that Leiva ordered them to inflate ANPDH's casualty counts during the coup attempt, because he believed padding the death tolls would help secure extra U.S. funding.

One of the enduring myths of the coup attempt was that hundreds of people were killed by the police. Within ten days of the start of the violence, *The New York Times* was [already reporting](#) "...the deaths of dozens of people this month, many at the hands of the police, human rights groups say." *The Guardian* [later said that](#) "At least 322 people have been killed and 2,000 others injured—mostly by the police and pro-government paramilitary groups."

[According to ANPDH](#), the figure reached 561, although the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) [said](#) the "crackdown" led to 325 deaths. Detailed analysis by the Nicaraguan National Assembly's Truth Commission put the real death toll at 270. Most importantly, a *minority* were protesters; most were bystanders or people trying to pass through opposition roadblocks, Sandinista supporters or police officers (22 of the latter were killed, and more than 400 injured).

A lawyer and analyst, Enrique Hendrix, [showed in detail](#) how the "human rights" NGOs inflated their figures. De Zayas concludes that "foreign-funded NGOs built up a completely distorted picture...in which all violence was blamed on the government."



The violence of the anti-Ortega protesters during the country's 2018 U.S.-backed coup attempt was obscured in the U.S. media and by the human rights industry. [Source: [ticotimes.net](https://www.ticotimes.net)]

Not surprisingly, all three “human rights” bodies were closed down by the government after 2018, having exhausted its patience with their blatant propaganda activities. Similar bodies now operate from Costa Rica: For example, CENIDH was reborn as *El Colectivo de Derechos Humanos Nicaragua Nunca Más*; it gives no indication of its funding source on its website, but it received a [“democracy award” from the NED](#) in 2021. It continues to offer poorly evidenced reports, for example, that, by the end of 2023, one in every nine Nicaraguans [had been forced to leave the country](#).





El Colectivo de Derechos Humanos Nicaragua Nunca Más as featured on NED website. [Source: [ned.org](https://ned.org)]

ANPDH reopened in Costa Rica and received more than \$700,000 from USAID in 2020-2021. U.S. agencies such as the NED and USAID are still actively working with many organizations linked to Nicaragua, and the Open Society Foundation has just contracted a prominent opponent of the Sandinista government to administer a \$25 million fund to [promote women's political leadership](#).

## The Corrupt Role of the OAS and IACHR

“At international level,” Alfred de Zayas writes, referring specifically to Nicaragua, “numerous institutions relied on unverified reports to advance a caricature of a despotic regime that kills its citizens, white-washing opposition violence.” He goes on to name the OAS, the IACHR and even the United Nations as echoing “the same biased narratives.” All of these bodies fed on the information provided by local NGOs and still do so now that many are based abroad. Yet soon after the start of the violence, these bodies were all invited by the Nicaraguan government to visit and conduct their own appraisal of events.

This is where it went wrong. Various human rights experts such as the Chilean lawyer Antonia Urrejola (later foreign minister in Boric’s government) came on such official missions, were presented with detailed evidence by the government and allowed to make a range of visits (e.g., to prisons). However, they then presented extremely biased reports which largely ignored the government’s evidence and omitted accounts by victims of opposition violence, in many cases having refused even to meet them. Understandably, after months of showing considerable patience, in December 2018 the government [rescinded its agreement](#) to allow delegations from these international bodies.

Here are two of the worst examples of IACHR bias. One was the result of a group of “experts” visiting the country with the government’s approval during a six-month mission.

The [GIEI-Nicaragua](#) (*Grupo Interdisciplinario de Expertos Independientes*) provided a 468-page report to the IACHR, focused particularly on deaths that occurred on May 30, 2018, when two large marches were held in Managua, one by the opposition and one by Sandinista supporters. The report examined deaths among government opponents, and only briefly referred to Sandinista deaths and injuries to police officers.

Crucially, [it was shown to have ignored and manipulated evidence](#) from its own experts. It ignored evidence of the use of firearms by the opposition, manipulated the analysis of its own weapons expert, and omitted any evidence that contradicted its findings. As a result of the report's gross distortion of the May 30 events, a large number of organizations and individuals [wrote to the IACHR](#) and separately to the OAS, but received only a peremptory reply.

In another example from March 2021, the IACHR held [an open session on Indigenous people's rights in Nicaragua](#), to which no democratically elected representatives of Indigenous communities were invited, only spokespeople from two opposition-oriented NGOs. One was CEJUDHCAN, a recipient of USAID finance. The other, CALPI, has accused the Nicaraguan government of [genocide](#). Four NGOs from outside Nicaragua also spoke, including the Oakland Institute in California, [which is funded](#) (*inter alia*) by the Howard G. Buffett Foundation.

The U.S.-based Alliance for Global Justice, a supporter of the Nicaraguan revolution, made a submission to the IACHR before the hearing, but this was ignored and no one from AFGJ was called to give evidence. In fact, of several witnesses, the only support for the government's excellent record in serving Indigenous communities came from Nicaragua's attorney general. She successfully rebuffed the opposition arguments, and the IACHR pursued them no further, but of course it was the false accusations made at the hearing which received publicity.

Alfred de Zayas specifically notes the tendency for the IACHR to make "politically sensitive petitions disappear." At the IACHR, he remarks, "politically incorrect" victims have "little or no chance of being heard." These are just two of the more egregious examples of the IACHR doing exactly that.

## The Bias Shown by United Nations Human Rights Institutions

De Zayas points out that UN bodies often "capriciously decide to target one country but not another," especially picking on countries which "oppose the Western unipolar vision." This can lead to "demonizing a particular country in furtherance of other countries' foreign policies." This has repeatedly happened with the OAS and IACHR in relation to Nicaragua, but is now also the regular practice of UN bodies. Typically, the Human Rights Council or the Human Rights Commissioner will issue a report based largely on "evidence" from opposition spokespeople or NGOs, many now based outside of Nicaragua. The Nicaraguan government will oppose the report, but their representations or those of pro-government bodies will be ignored.



Source: [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com)

Only a year ago, the UN Human Rights Council established a “Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua” (GHREN) which, in February 2023, published a highly biased [report](#). It went so far as to claim that Nicaragua’s government had committed “crimes against humanity.” The “experts” even went beyond their mandate and recommended further economic sanctions. A “collective” of small opposition NGOs [had open access](#) to the GHREN, and clearly had a strong influence on their work. The pro-revolutionary Nicaragua Solidarity Coalition quickly prepared [a detailed critique of the report](#). For example, it showed how the GHREN’s chronology of events in the city of Masaya during the coup attempt omitted almost all opposition violence, including murders, torture and destruction of municipal buildings and Sandinista homes.

Alfred de Zayas joined other human rights specialists in condemning the report as being unprofessional, biased, incomplete and concocted to justify further coercive sanctions to damage Nicaragua’s economy (such unilateral coercive measures have been condemned by the UN General Assembly, most recently in Resolution 77/214 of December 2022 and by the Human Rights Council in Resolution 49/6). Yet when the Nicaragua Solidarity Coalition sent the lengthy petition and supporting evidence to the UN Human Rights Council and to the “group of experts,” there was no response. After multiple emails containing further evidence, only a single, one-line reply was received, pointing the Coalition to the material on the GHREN’s website.

In *The Human Rights Industry*, de Zayas concludes that the real purpose behind such expert groups or commissions is “to denigrate and destabilize the targeted government to facilitate undemocratic ‘regime change’ as desired by one or more powerful countries.” They are part of the “hybrid war arsenal” which such countries employ. He goes on to refer specifically to the GHREN’s report on Nicaragua, labeling it a “political pamphlet” and saying that its accusations of crimes against humanity are undeserving of detailed comment.

Needless to say, the GHREN’s judgment was [reported widely](#) in the international media; none investigated the GHREN’s work or how its conclusions were reached.



Since the report was published, opposition figures have often been invited to address the UN. Félix Maradiaga, recipient of U.S. funding via the NED and other bodies, [spoke at a UN human rights summit](#) in May 2023. Medardo Mairena, found guilty in Nicaragua of organizing an attack on a police station in 2018 which left five people dead, but released under a 2019 amnesty, [spoke at a UN Human Rights Council](#) event in December 2023, decrying Nicaragua's "grave human rights violations."

## The Role of Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International

Neither Human Rights Watch (HRW) nor Amnesty International (AI) escapes the attention of *The Human Rights Industry*. De Zayas points out that HRW can be "instrumentalized as an arm of U.S. pressure against independent states" and that it often "discredits governments seeking socialist alternatives." On Nicaragua (as on China and Venezuela) HRW "seems to follow the State Department line," especially in its endorsement of sanctions (known more precisely as "unilateral coercive measures") and has even taken credit for the new sanctions imposed by Trump in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic.

De Zayas is critical of AI's dependence on sources of funding aligned with U.S. foreign policy, its likely penetration by the U.S. security services and its reliance on poorly sourced information from local NGOs. In fact, AI paid particular attention to Nicaragua during and immediately after the 2018 coup attempt, issuing two major reports that were based overwhelmingly on opposition sources—whether local NGOs or so-called "independent" media that were heavily funded by U.S. agencies.

A group of activists working with the Alliance for Global Justice was so alarmed at the obvious bias in AI's work that it prepared a detailed response to the [second report](#), which AI pejoratively titled *Instilling Terror*. AFGJ's *Dismissing the Truth* [showed in detail](#) the bias, omissions and errors in AI's report. For example, it unraveled the story of a police officer who, according to AI, was killed by his fellow officers. This unlikely explanation had been offered by his estranged mother, an opposition supporter, via a local NGO. In reality there was convincing evidence, including from his partner (also a police officer), that he was killed by an opposition sniper.

Several attempts were made to engage with AI about its report, including a formal complaint via their published procedures and the offer to discuss it at their London headquarters. There was never anything more than a peremptory response.

## "Human Rights Industry" Reports Are Endorsed by Corporate Media

Alfred de Zayas says of the mainstream media that, when aggressive action is taken against countries like Nicaragua that have governments not favored by Washington, their response is to demonize the leaders of such countries. Nicaragua could hardly be a clearer example, with its elected leader Daniel Ortega regularly referred to as a "dictator" running an "authoritarian regime" and of course—as we saw earlier—committing "crimes against humanity" or even "genocide."

Nicaragua has suffered from a succession of concocted stories, relating to its [alleged "failure" to tackle Covid-19](#) to the accusation that [Nicaraguan migrants are fleeing "repression."](#) One that originated from a local "human rights" group attempted to label U.S. meat imports from Nicaragua as "conflict beef" because cattle ranches were allegedly displacing Indigenous people protecting Nicaragua's forests. The story, shown by [Reveal](#) and



the [PBS NewsHour](#) and then picked up by other news outlets such as the BBC, was shown to have glaring gaps and falsehoods by [FAIR](#) (Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting). The NGOs promoting the “conflict beef” story, including the journalists involved, [were shown by Rick Sterling](#), writing in *CovertAction Magazine* to be linked back to bodies such as USAID and Soros’s Open Society Foundation.

## The Government Tightens Up on Foreign-Funded NGOs

Having tolerated dozens of NGOs that received U.S. money to promote “human rights” and “democracy” in the period before 2018, only to see them play key roles in the attempted coup, it was inevitable that the government would clamp down on their activities. It did so by passing legislation comparable to the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA), which the U.S. has had in place since the 1930s and has since strengthened on various occasions. De Zayas points out the irony: “When Nicaragua passed legislation comparable to FARA, when they started enforcing the law and some U.S. allies and funding recipients...were punished, the US media sent out howls of outrage.”

Nicaragua was in the unusual position, for a small country with only seven million people, of having thousands of NGOs, many set up in the 1980s, of which a proportion were still active but many were redundant. As well as affecting the few dozen NGOs actively engaged in U.S. regime-change activities, the result of applying the new law to all NGOs was that many closed, in some cases because they were already defunct, and in others because they could not meet the new, stringent requirements, or refused to do so. The media labeled this as a “crackdown” which was “laying waste to civic society”; *The Washington Post* said the country is “a dictatorship laid bare.”

[As I pointed out for FAIR](#), none of the media reports asked basic questions, such as what these non-profits have done that led to the government taking this action, whether other countries follow similar practices, or what international requirements about the regulation of non-profits Nicaragua is required to comply with.

Nicaragua’s reality is that it is the subject of continuing U.S. aggression. The local “human rights” NGOs, rightly closed down after their role in the coup attempt, are like the hydra-headed monster, springing up afresh in Costa Rica and still fostered not only by Washington directly but also by its allies in the international “human rights” industry. If there is less space for dissent in Nicaragua than there was before 2018, this is evidently what Washington wants. Decrying “human rights” abuses, imposing unilateral coercive measures on a country with one of the lowest incomes per head in the continent, refusing to recognize a popularly supported election and expressing alarm about Nicaragua’s ties to Russia and China, all help to sustain the myth that (as claimed by Presidents Trump and Biden) the country is an “extraordinary threat” to U.S. security.

Washington’s regime-change plans failed in 2018, but it has not given up.

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