

The Political Theatre of the U.K. Sanctions Regime. Targeting Nicaragua

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Britain and its partners such as the US are imposing economic sanctions on dozens of governments they don't like, but some individuals in Nicaragua are being targeted on the basis of little or no evidence.

The UK, along with the US and Canadian governments and the European Union, has created a sanctions regime targeting around 40 countries across the globe.

While economic sanctions against states are best-known, they also include thousands of individuals whose assets have been frozen or confiscated, their travel restricted and their ability to do business constrained.

Typically, names are added to a government's sanctions lists with no prior warning or "due process". The individuals affected are in practice unable to challenge their inclusion, since it would require expensive legal action in different countries with an uncertain chance of success.

There is a growing body of opinion, reflected in the work of those such as the Sanctions Kill [campaign](#), that these "unilateral coercive measures" are illegal in international law if they affect the enjoyment of human rights, such as freedom from hunger or access to health care, in the countries targeted.

Neither the UK nor US governments seem deterred either by this or by the adverse effects of their sanctions on the human rights of poor communities.

Targeting Nicaragua

One example is Nicaragua, which was initially targeted during the first Sandinista government in the 1980s, and, more recently, following nationwide protests beginning in

April 2018.

Those protests quickly escalated into open and often violent confrontations between groups of protestors and groups of government supporters with the national police.

The UK government has sanctioned 16 public officials ranging from vice-president Rosario Murillo to various ministers or former ministers, judges and police officers.

A year after he was sanctioned by Washington, last December the UK [sanctioned](#) the mayor of the city of Matagalpa, Sadrach Zelodón Rocha, one of the best known mayors of the ruling Sandinista party in the country.

Strangely, his vice mayor, Yohaira Hernández Chirino, was also added to the UK list, although she has never been sanctioned by the US, Canada, or the EU.

Zelodón Rocha and Hernández Chirino are the only Nicaraguan mayors or deputy mayors on the UK list. The sanctions, subjecting both to “an asset freeze and travel ban”, also extend to members of their immediate families.

Freedom of information

As one of us has known Zeledón Rocha and the rest of his immediate family for more than 30 years, we submitted a formal Freedom of Information request to the UK government asking for clarification of the sanctions decisions that affect both him and Hernández Chirino.

It took several months to get a reply, and it only came on the day on which the UK government’s Information Commissioner had threatened to start legal proceedings against the Foreign Office because of its failure to respond.

The most important question, of course, was on what basis the decisions had been made. The Foreign Office declined to provide specific evidence.

It stated only:

“Zeledón and Hernandez were designated for their involvement in violations of the right to life and right not to be subjected to torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, by promoting and inciting serious human rights violations against protesters.”

It added:

“Before the sanctions were imposed against Zeledón and Hernandez, evidence was collected from a variety of open sources, including civil society reports and media reports.”

Elsewhere in the response, the Foreign Office clarified that its actions relate solely to events in 2018, almost five years before the UK imposed its sanctions.

Nicaragua’s three months of protests in 2018 affected Matagalpa less than some other cities. But they involved, in addition to relatively peaceful marches, an attempted assault on its town hall and police headquarters, the looting and burning of the municipal depot, and

attacks on individual homes by various opposition groups.

Those groups also set up a roadblock controlling all traffic on the only road directly connecting the city to the Pacific half of the country, restricting the flow of food and other goods to and from the city.

Human rights reports

We researched the human rights reports that may have been used by the Foreign Office, seeking to uncover hard evidence for the two classes of human rights violations which empowered the UK government to impose sanctions.

Perhaps the most detailed, and certainly one of the most internationally cited reports, is [the one](#) by the Grupo Interdisciplinario de Expertos Independientes. The GIEI was set up by the Organization of American States in May 2018, with the agreement of the Nicaraguan government, and reported the following December.

Of the 500 pages in its report, around 12 are dedicated to the May 2018 events in Matagalpa, which are at the core of the accusations against Zeledón Rocha.

The GIEI report lists three deaths in Matagalpa from the relevant time period, two of whom were Sandinistas and members of the governing party and none of whom were likely targets of the mayor or deputy mayor.

The report does not attempt to link Zeledón Rocha directly to any of the three deaths. A subsequent [petition](#) by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights makes no mention of him either.

It therefore appears that the Foreign Office's evidence for Zeledón Rocha's "violations of the right to life" is flimsy at best. The sanctions against him cannot therefore be due to the "right to life" class of human rights violations.

It is important to note that it is typical of many human rights reports of this period that deaths among Sandinistas, government officials or police, are either unrecorded or wrongly added to the tally of deaths caused by the government. For example, six other Sandinistas or government officials were killed in Matagalpa in 2018.

Evidence?

What then of the evidence for Zeledón Rocha's violations of the "right not to be subjected to torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, by promoting and inciting serious human rights violations against protesters", the second class of human rights violations that can serve as reasons for sanctions under UK law?

The sole piece of visual evidence linking him to any violations is a single photograph in the GIEI report that allegedly shows him with "shock groups" prior to May 11. Interestingly, none of those visible in the photo are armed, and none are wearing any sort of military gear or face coverings.

In an adjacent photo purportedly showing the same "shock groups", a woman is wearing shorts and sandals – hardly the sort of gear appropriate for paramilitary action. The report then goes on to cite an interview in which Zeledón Rocha was accused of "that day leading

the [paramilitaries]”.

That apparently sufficed as evidence, in spite of the multiple questions that might be raised. For example, why appoint Zeledón Rocha, when he was never in the military, much less in any command position?

During the 1980s, as a licenced civil engineer, he held positions in the ministries of housing and commerce, in the International Red Cross and in the Electoral Commission for the 1990 elections.

In 2001-2005 and since 2008, Zeledón Rocha has served as mayor of Matagalpa, winning national acclaim – including among opposition media outlets – for the extensive development of the city’s housing, health, transportation, educational and recreational infrastructure.

His administrative, technical, and managerial skillset seems conspicuously inappropriate for leading paramilitaries, especially given the plethora of other Sandinistas who have extensive military experience gained during the Contra war of the 1980s.

The wounded

The GIEI report states that 40 people were wounded during the May 15 confrontations between protesters and counter-protesters over a blockade which cut the entire city off from the Pacific side of the country, starving *Matagalpinos* of supplies and food.

Although there are several photographs of wounded protesters, Zeledón Rocha’s name is unmentioned. Instead, blame for the wounded is laid at the feet of the national police, who allegedly fired with military grade weaponry.

Turning to Hernández Chirino, she does not appear at all in the GIEI report, nor in any others we have been able to find. Her appearance in the sanctions list is therefore puzzling and appears to be a case of guilt by association.

She most certainly does not appear to be directly implicated in any way to any human rights violations and was purportedly surprised, if not bewildered, by her inclusion in the sanctions list.

The case for “promoting and supporting grievous violations of human rights” against Hernández Chirino, at least according to the GIEI report, is literally non-existent, and the case against Zeledón Rocha verges on non-existent.

The stated rationale behind the sanctions therefore cannot possibly be the real rationale behind them.

Symbolic importance

It’s hard to believe that those in the US or UK governments charged with deciding who to sanction are aware of the subtleties of Nicaraguan politics at the municipal level. The most straightforward and most probable explanation for the inclusion of Zeledón Rocha and Hernández Chirino in the sanctions list is their symbolic political importance.

Zeledón Rocha in particular is widely known for his achievements, including in [opposition](#)

[media](#) outlets, in developing the region's infrastructure, for the competency of his administration, and for his willingness to work with all sectors of Nicaraguan society, regardless of their political persuasion.

He has therefore earned ever increasing responsibilities, making him an obvious target for those aiming to discredit the government and its policies.

We should also ask why sanctions are used at all. It is widely acknowledged, even by conservative think tanks such as the [Cato Institute](#), that they're utterly ineffective.

Neither Zeledón Rocha nor Hernández Chirino have any assets or interests in assets in any of the countries that have sanctioned them. Neither of them take holidays or travel professionally to any of those countries.

Both the US and the UK governments could easily have discovered that the net effects would be close to zero, and both had the means and the reach to research all that we have covered in this article before imposing their sanctions.

They did not consider it necessary or important to do so, raising the question of what exactly they aimed to achieve, or what behaviour they aimed to change in imposing the sanctions.

Political theatre

Given the lack of compelling evidence coupled with the predictable ineffectiveness of the sanctions, the inescapable conclusion is that the sanctions are simply a piece of political theatre, for domestic consumption in the imposing countries.

Both the US and the UK governments would apparently like to be seen as promoting "free and open societies around the world", in the parlance of the UK foreign secretary. Unilateral sanctions are an approved means towards that end.

Underlying all of this, however, is the uncomfortable truth that this symbolic political posturing has real, material effects, perhaps not directly on those sanctioned, but on the overall climate of international aid, loans, and cooperation with a poor country still trying to recover from the violence of 2018 and the economic damage of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The actions against individuals may be ineffective, but the wider economic sanctions are not. Nicaragua has not been as badly hit in this respect as neighbouring Cuba or Venezuela, but has seen the blocking of loans from the World Bank, several trade sanctions and only minimal medical aid from western countries during the Covid crisis.

[According to](#) Nicaragua's finance and housing minister, development loans have fallen from an average of over \$800 million before 2018 to under \$300 million since then, mainly because of US influence over or blocking of finance from international institutions.

Just as in the cases of Zelodón Rocha and Hernández Chirino, there is neither due process nor any accessible appeal mechanism where Nicaragua can contest these wider actions of foreign governments.

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