

Catholic Approaches to Mining: Cases of Impact

The Cerro Pavón Project, Diocese of Matagalpa, Nicaragua

Municipality of Rancho Grande, Nicaragua

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Summary

On 12 October 2015, the Nicaraguan Government declared the Cerro Pavón mining project, promoted by Canadian mining company B2Gold, unviable. The decision followed a decade of organised grassroots resistance in the municipality of Rancho Grande in the department of Matagalpa. The case study analyses the conditions that led to this outcome, focusing on the role of the Catholic Church in providing pastoral support, raising eco-theological awareness, and facilitating multi-level political coordination. Drawing on an analytical framework that integrates political ecology, social movement theory and pastoral theology, the case study highlights three key converging conditions: a) an ecclesial tradition rooted in the Second Vatican Council and a preferential option for the poor; b) a prior process of sustainable agriculture as strategy of resistance to the impacts of the agrarian counter-reform and neoliberal policies; and c) a repertoire of nonviolent collective action that transcended ideological and religious barriers to forge common grounds in the defence of land and livelihoods. While the Rancho Grande case sets a significant precedent for socio-environmental movements in Central America and offers a sign of hope, it is important to recognize that this successful case has faced dire setbacks in the context of Nicaragua's sociopolitical crisis, marked since 2018 by escalating repression under Daniel Ortega's authoritarian regime.

1. Background

Since the 1990s, the advance of mining extractivism in Central America has generated an increasing number of socio-environmental conflicts in rural territories and among Indigenous peoples (Alfaro, Sosa and Sánchez, 2018; García et al., 2022; Spalding, 2023). Following Daniel Ortega's rise to power in 2007, Nicaragua has been one of the Central American countries where mining activity has increased and expanded the most (Hendricks and Sánchez, 2021; Sánchez, 2017). The Ortega government has promoted a development agenda based on the intensive exploitation of natural resources, with an emphasis on open-cast metal mining. This political commitment to mining extractivism has placed the Nicaraguan state in direct confrontation with rural communities who see their livelihoods, health and ancestral relationship with land under threat.

The Ministry of Energy and Mines granted a concession in the Cerro Pavón area of the municipality of Rancho Grande, in the department of Matagalpa, in 2004 to Minerales de Nicaragua, Inc. (Minesa). Minesa sold the rights in 2010 to Canadian mining company Minerales Nueva Esperanza S.A., a subsidiary of B2Gold. The concession was granted without prior consultation with the local community, and triggered a conflict between state authorities and the company on one side, and rural communities on the other, who formed the Guardians of Yaoska movement (*Guardianes de Yaoska*) to resist the project. The significance of this case lies in two aspects: it was the first movement, entirely organised by small-scale farmers, to successfully overturn a mining concession in Nicaragua. It was also a contentious process in which the Church played a central role through the pastoral support provided by the Diocese of Matagalpa, and whose leadership combined environmental awareness-raising with political coordination amongst affected communities. This religious dimension proved decisive in the development of ecological awareness, community organisation and the capacity for political advocacy.

To understand the role of the Catholic Church in the socio-environmental conflict in Rancho Grande, one first needs to situate it within the broader context of the relationship between religion and politics in Nicaragua. Throughout Nicaragua's history, this relationship has been marked by tensions and shifting alliances between

religious and political leadership.¹ During the 20th century, the Nicaraguan Church oscillated between social conservatism and, following the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), a commitment to the poor and social justice. Among the most significant moments of this commitment were those during the revolutionary struggle against the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza (1971–1979) and, afterwards, the Church’s support for and subsequent distancing from the Sandinista revolution (1979–1990). A first historical milestone was a pastoral letter issued by the Bishops’ Conference of Nicaragua in 1971. The letter echoed the principles of liberation theology and condemned the Somoza regime for “the existence of social structures that generated poverty and inequality” (Baltodano, 2008, p. 786). From 1972 to 1978, further pastoral letters spoke of “the need to be agents of history,” the duty to create “just structures” and “the social responsibility of Christians” (Ferrero, 2010, p. 456).



In the face of the Somoza dictatorship’s escalating repression, religious leaders and bishops openly documented and denounced the serious human rights violations committed against small-scale farmers, community leaders and trade unionists, amongst others. At a meeting granted by President Somoza to Bishop Julián Barni of the diocese of Matagalpa and Bishop Salvador Shaffer of the diocese of Zelaya on 20 May 1976, the church leaders presented him with a list of people who had disappeared from rural communities in the central and northern regions of the country. They demanded that the President clarify their whereabouts (Ferrero, 2010). The Nicaraguan religious leadership also brought these denunciations at an international level before the US House of Representatives and the Congressional Subcommittee on Human Rights.

With regard to the second phase after the Sandinista revolution (1979–1990), in its early stages, the Catholic hierarchy and the Sandinista National Liberation Front (*Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional*, FSLN) maintained an open relationship characterised by active support for the revolutionary process. However, as time went on, the relationship between the Church and the FSLN faltered. At the economic level, there were conflicts between the Church and the government on the issue of land confiscation and the government’s economic and industrial policies. At the political level, the Church was concerned about the re-founding and organisation of a single-party state and its repressive dimension. There was also conflict regarding the social functions of education and religious institutions, and the references to Christianity and liberation theology by the FSLN government to justify its actions,² references which the Church condemned given the government’s repressive character (Ávila, 1998, p. 323). This background helps to understand both the mutual mistrust between the Church and the state, and the Church’s ability to establish itself as an autonomous political actor in opposition to state power, which will be central, as the next sections will show, to the actions of local communities in response to the mining project in the municipality of Rancho Grande in the department of Matagalpa.

¹ For a history of the relationship between religion and politics in Nicaragua, see Álvarez (2008), Ferrero (2020), Houtart and Lemer-
cinier (1989) and Pérez-Baltodano (2003).

² The Sandinist government saw in the revolution a way of promoting justice and solidarity with the poor. Some members who had been formed in their youth by the Catholic Church saw the Sandinist revolution as a material historical expression of solidarity and preferential option for the poor which the Second Vatican Council documents exhorted the Church to embrace. The Sandinist government included three Catholic priests in its initial years: Ernesto Cardenal as Culture Minister, Miguel de Scoto as Minister of Foreign Affairs and Fernando Cardenal as Education Minister, all of whom subsequently condemned by the Vatican and forbidden to exercise their priestly ministry.

Historically, the diocese of Matagalpa, in central Nicaragua, has been characterised by its social commitment, which has its roots in the Second Vatican Council and its reception in Latin America by the Latin American Episcopal Council (CELAM). In their 1968 conference in Medellín, the Latin American and Caribbean bishops promoted a preferential option for the poor and a conception of the Church as a prophetic and solidarity-based community. In this regard, it is worth highlighting the legacy left by the two bishops who led the diocese of Matagalpa during the Second Vatican Council and its aftermath.

Influenced by the Council, bishop Octavio José Calderón Padilla, who was in office from 1946 to 1970, promoted pastoral care of the land, social initiatives aimed at guaranteeing the rights to healthcare and education, and community development projects. These were based on assessments of the needs arising from the situation of poverty and marginalisation faced by rural communities. These initiatives also relied on the active collaboration of pastoral workers, such as catechists, and rural youth. In June 1970, when Julián Luis Barni Spotti was appointed bishop of Matagalpa, he organised and supported a pastoral meeting, with guidance from CELAM, which aimed at bringing the churches in the diocese into line with the Second Vatican Council and the 1968 Medellín conference. Bishop Barni had a pioneering commitment to the defence of human rights, and was one of the bishops who most vigorously denounced the human rights violations perpetrated by the Somoza dictatorship. As mentioned earlier, he publicly confronted President Somoza over disappearances. He left the diocese in 1982 to become bishop of the diocese of León.

This tradition of the diocese of Matagalpa centred on the pastoral care of the land, social justice, and the defence of human rights has been sustained over the decades following the departure of these two pioneering bishops, from the promotion of agricultural cooperatives to the denunciation of human rights violations during periods of armed conflict. When the mining concession was granted in the diocesan territory in 2004, this history led to the formation of a network of committed laypeople, catechists and pastoral workers, acting as multipliers and extensions of the Church's preferential option for the poor and commitment to human rights within rural communities. In a context characterised by a clergy shortage and limited state presence, this pastoral network infrastructure generated widespread social reach and deep community roots. It would also prove decisive in the emergence of a social movement against metal mining in the municipality of Rancho Grande.

The current bishop of Matagalpa, Rolando José Álvarez Lagos, who took office in 2011, has been one of the most outspoken religious leaders in criticising extractivism as a model of social and economic development in Nicaragua. His training in Catholic social teaching at the Pontifical University of Salamanca in Spain, and his commitment to the poor, have led him to promote the Church's social teachings in the diocese and express pastoral care for the most vulnerable sectors of society (Sánchez, 2017). His leadership and charisma, alongside those of the Vicar General, Mgr. Edgard Sacasa – who was educated at the Central American University of El Salvador under the influence of liberation theologians Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría – have given the diocese of Matagalpa a theological and pastoral orientation clearly committed to the causes of social justice, as well as the ecological cause.



The adoption of an ecological dimension to the preferential option for the poor in the diocese of Matagalpa has been the result of a process of maturation nourished by the Church's social teachings and the diocese's tradition of pastoral care for land and commitment to human rights. As Mgr. Sacasa explained during an interview conducted in the author's previous research on the case:

There is a pastoral option, which is the ecological option. Let's say it begins with the gentlest measures, such as reforestation, the establishment of nurseries, and the founding of ecological clubs – in other words, positive ecology. But what led us in this case was the biblical spiritual principle of the creation of the earth; obviously, this is now a new factor. This is no longer positive environmentalism, but environmentalism in defiance, environmentalism in protest, environmentalism that clashes, that denounces, that confronts the powerful (Sánchez, 2016, p. 107).

This distinction between positive and protest environmentalism is fundamental to understanding the evolution of ecological pastoral care in the diocese. The first phase, centred on reforestation, tree nurseries and environmental clubs, corresponded to a practice of environmental care devoid of its political dimension. The second phase, by contrast, emerged when the threat posed by mining became a concrete reality, and the diocese realised that the defence of creation necessarily entailed a confrontation with the economic and political powers seeking to destroy it.

The clergy of the Diocese of Matagalpa have drawn inspiration for their environmental formation from several theological sources, which have included the ecotheology turn in liberation theology (Boff, 1996, 2008) and Catholic social teaching, especially as it is set out in the Aparecida document (CELAM, 2007) and, in particular, since June 2015, in Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si'*. This ecological option was not exclusive to the diocese of Matagalpa but a commitment shared with the Nicaraguan Bishops' Conference as a whole (*Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua*, CEN). In its letter to President Daniel Ortega, dated 21 May 2014 and entitled "In Search of New Horizons for a Better Nicaragua", the CEN expressed its solidarity with the resistance struggle of the communities of Rancho Grande as follows:

[...] nor do we overlook the seriousness of the problem posed by open-cast mining for the conservation and balance of the environment. We call on the government to require mining companies already operating in the country to take the necessary measures to protect people's lives and prevent environmental pollution. We call on the government expressly to refuse permission for such projects in areas untouched by mining, such as the municipality of Rancho Grande in Matagalpa, and to respect the decision of its inhabitants. We propose that, with regard to mining, the current law on the 'Exploitation of Natural Resources' (No. 20) be amended. (CEN, 2014, paragraph 20)

The bishops clearly demanded that the government halt the expansion of mining-based extractivism into new territories and, in turn, respect the customary will of communities who reside in these areas. In the same letter, CEN (2014) expressed another ecological concern regarding the construction of an interoceanic canal project that would link the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans as an alternative to the Panama Canal. The bishops wrote that, if going ahead, the project:

will radically affect the culture, way of life, and work of our communities and future generations (...) [Therefore], it is crucial and urgent that the project be discussed in greater depth, by listening to the opinions of domestic and international scientists who are experts in the field, reconciling the constitutional, geological, technical, and environmental aspects, and calmly weighing the risks that such a megaproject poses to the protection of our environment and natural resources (CEN, 2014, paragraph 27).

The protest movement against the canal project organised nearly 100 marches and asked for the repeal of Law 840, which marked the planning of the project. In all of these demonstrations, the protestors were brutally repressed. Currently, the canal protest leadership is in exile. In November 2024, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights held the State of Nicaragua internationally responsible for violating the right to free, prior and informed consent of the Rama and Kriol Indigenous peoples, as well as the Black Creole Community of Bluefields, in connection with the interoceanic canal project.

2. The case of the Cerro Pavón project in Rancho Grande

One of the first warning signs of the mining project came when residents noticed the presence of unknown people who were conducting surveys and collecting soil samples in several communities. At first, the local population was unaware of the nature of the study or its purpose. They were struck by the fact that the technicians were travelling through villages collecting various types of stones and flints, which they then carried away in their backpacks. Later, Fr. Edward Custer (known as “Teodoro”), then the parish priest of Nuestra Señora de Fátima in Rancho Grande,³ informed the communities that the study being conducted was for mining exploration. This confirmed that a mining concession was granted without first consulting the communities or conducting a socio-environmental impact assessment, as required by Nicaraguan law.⁴

At the time of the authorisation of the concession, the municipality of Rancho Grande had a population of approximately 49,730 inhabitants (INIDE, 2005). The local economy is centred on agricultural production and trade, including coffee, cocoa, rice, taro, cassava, oranges, avocados and other produce. Some of the production is for local supply and some, especially organic coffee and cocoa, are exported to the German market, with direct links to the German chocolate company Ritter Sport (Sosa, 2015). Thanks to sound agroecological practices and favourable climate and soil conditions, its productive system guarantees local families food security. Another of the municipality’s assets is that its ecosystem forms part of the Macizo de Peñas Blancas Nature Reserve, one of the six protected areas that make up the core of the Bosawás Biosphere Reserve. The Reserve boasts water resources such as the Yaoska River basin, which flows through 35 municipalities across six departments. Other rivers of great importance to the lives and activities of the people of Rancho Grande are the Manceras, Kiwaska and Babaska. This ecosystem, which has been supporting the livelihoods of local communities for generations, has increasingly come under threat from mining, and especially gold mining, which requires large quantities of water and chemicals to separate the ore from the soil.

Over the last twenty years, Nicaragua has been the scene of two converging trends that have given rise to a form of authoritarian extractivism with serious consequences in the political, social, economic and environmental spheres, and these trends have intensified during Ortega’s government. On the one hand, a model of capital accumulation based on the extraction of raw materials for global commodity markets has taken hold, underpinned by the dispossession and degradation of territories and of the lives of those who live in them. On the other hand, there has been a rapid process of dismantling democratic institutions, resulting in an autocratic regime. As Svampa (2017, p. 62) warns, the maxim “the greater the extractivism, the less democracy” is proving true.

Daniel Ortega’s government inherited and reinforced the neoliberal regulatory, institutional and public sector reforms that had been promoted during the government of Violeta Barrios de Chamorro (1990-1997). In the case of the mining sector, legislative reforms favoured mining companies by granting them tax benefits and simplifying the administrative procedures involved in the concession awarding process. For example, the deadlines, requirements and scope of the environmental impact assessments that companies were obliged to carry out were reduced, creating a kind of express concession. As for tax advantages, the Chamorro government granted generous tax benefits that reduced the payment of taxes and royalties to a maximum of 3% (Martínez Espinoza, 2019).⁵ By 2015, Nicaragua became the seventh most attractive destination for mining investment in Latin America (Jackson and Green, 2016, p. 40).

³ Fr Custer was a member of the Maryknoll missionary congregation. He became resident parish priest in the 1990s until 2004, after which he became a member of the pastoral team. He left in Nicaragua in 2008. He died in 2024.

⁴ In Nicaragua, the state does not distinguish between mining exploration, exploitation and processing. When it grants a concession, it gives a company simultaneous the rights to explore, exploit and process minerals.

⁵ During the Somoza dictatorship, American mining companies paid 1.5% of their profits from exported gold in taxes. The Sandinista government nationalised all mineral resources in the 1980s, and mining was conducted on a small scale by the state. In comparison with other regions, the Honduran state requires mining companies to pay 10% of their net gain, Guatemala requires them to pay 5% of their gross income, Panama requires them to pay 12.5% of their gross mineral exports.

Such an institutional regulatory environment, combined with the rise in the international price of gold (which has progressively increased since 2005) and the increase in the flow of foreign investment, triggered a surge in applications for mining exploration and exploitation in Nicaragua. In 2015, there were 277 mining concessions in Nicaragua, representing 10.5% of the total land area, up from 83 concessions in 2006. In 2023, metal mining concessions covered an area of 2,757,854 hectares, equivalent to 23.17 % of the country's total land area (MEM, 2024). This has led to the expansion of mining activity into new territories inhabited by rural communities and Indigenous peoples, and has triggered multiple socio-environmental conflicts, where the state's response has been repressive and criminalising. For example, in the municipality of Santo Domingo, a conflict with B2Gold in 2013 resulted in 141 people injured and 47 detained, including 12 community leaders who were imprisoned for two months (CLACS, 2013). In the municipality of Bonanza, clashes in 2015 with the Minesa resulted in one death, 12 people injured and 33 detained (AFP, 2015). In the municipality of El Limón, also in 2015, police action with regard to protests against B2Gold resulted in the death of one police officer, left 25 people injured, and led to 23 arrests (Navarrete, 2015).



In response to the Ortega government's escalating repression of the protests, the Nicaraguan Centre for Human Rights (*Centro Nicaragüense de Derechos Humanos, CENIDH*) lodged a complaint with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) regarding the manipulation of the justice system to dismantle social protest. It highlighted especially the collusion between the police, the judiciary and mining companies, with the aim of dismantling social mobilisation and safeguarding the economic interests of the latter, to the detriment of the socio-environmental and territorial rights of the communities in which the mining enclaves are located (Nuñez et al., 2016).

3. The Catholic Church's Response to Mining in Rancho Grande

Raising awareness and sharing experiences

As noted above, the origins of the anti-mining movement in Rancho Grande date back to 2004, when the then parish priest warned against the Ministry of Energy and Mines' granting, without prior consultation, of a 49,000-hectare mining concession to Minesa, a Nicaraguan mining company which had Canadian capital. This licence would have involved open-cast mining and, given its size, would have affected not only the municipality of Rancho Grande, but also Waslala and San José Bocay – areas characterised by vast biodiversity, protected areas, and agricultural and livestock farming geared towards a family economy.

Fr. Custer, a Maryknoll Missioner, connected with the Maryknoll Sisters of Guatemala regarding the devastating effects of mining.⁶ Based on that exchange, he promoted activities aimed at raising awareness and mobilising the community, supported by his pastoral team formed of catechists, Eucharistic ministers, lay preachers and youth ministry workers. Several social organisations working in the area joined this process of providing information and raising awareness about the dangers of metal mining. They shared their technical expertise, participatory working methods, and tools for popular education and experience in defending rights, amongst other contributions. Notable among these organisations were the Association for Communal Agricultural Development and Diversification (*Asociación por el Desarrollo y la Diversificación*

⁶ This exchange was facilitated by the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns which had advocated for environmental rights and the right to prior consultation in La Puya in Guatemala around the Progreso VII Derivada and El Tambor projects. The Maryknoll sisters worked on the educational dimension of advocacy, running educational initiatives related to integral ecology, and engaged at the same time in international advocacy in the United States.

Agrícola Comunal), the Association for Integral Community Development (*Asociación para el Desarrollo Integral Comunitario*), the Matagalpa Community Movement, the Centre for Wellbeing and Community Support for Environmental Transformation (*Centro de Iniciativas de Bienestar y Asistencia Comunitaria para la Transformación Ambiental*), Radio Voz, and the Matagalpa branch of CENIDH, amongst others.

One strategy that strengthened understanding of the issues arising from mining, as well as the political agency of the rural leadership in Rancho Grande,⁷ was on-site visits and exchanges of experiences with communities affected by mining activity in other parts of the country and in Central America. These visits were facilitated and financed by the parish and other organisations such as the Humboldt Centre. This type of contact acted as “shock therapy”, which, according to Rodríguez and Hesse-Rodríguez (2000, p. 62), “provides people with the opportunity to develop a greater capacity for observation, comparison and analysis.” In other words, this dynamic contributed to an understanding of the causes and effects of socio-environmental problems and motivated mobilisation.

Community organisation and inter-institutional coordination

The Guardians of Yaoska movement succeeded in establishing an organisational structure which comprised working committees across the 36 villages (*comarcas*) of the municipality of Rancho Grande. In each village, the committees carried out various complementary lines of work: training, awareness-raising, communication, and the coordination of advocacy and mobilisation efforts. According to a defence lawyer for CENIDH, the Guardians of Yaoska movement developed a capacity to mobilise more than 40,000 people (Equipo Envío, 2014).

Another strength that characterised the movement was its political autonomy and its spirit of self-sacrifice, as a community member who describes himself as an “illiterate farmer with little resources,” points out:

In this struggle, we did not depend on any organisation to provide us with money or to provide us with a van to go to a meeting or a march. We mobilised by walking for between one and four hours to bring information to every farmer, every producer who needed to know the truth. We did this without making any distinctions whatsoever. Women and men of all political persuasions and all religions took part (Equipo Envío, 2014).

This autonomy and capacity for community self-management were fundamental to preserving the movement’s integrity in the face of pressure from the government and the mining company, and even in the face of opportunism from certain political parties of various ideological persuasions.

The common objective of defending Rancho Grande’s land and natural resources not only contributed to the reorganisation of the farming community, but also succeeded in bringing together a group of stakeholders at the departmental level, known as the Matagalpa Strategic Group (*Grupo Estratégico de Matagalpa*, GEM). This forum served as a platform for coordinating resources and planning activities amongst the various organisations which sought to halt the mining project. This collaborative effort enabled greater public impact, multiplied and amplified critical voices opposing the mining project, raised awareness of the issue, and provided institutional support which, to a certain extent, protected leaders of the Guardians of Yaoska movement from repression and various threats.

Another valuable contribution from GEM was the communication strategy driven by local and community media. Among these communication initiatives was the creation in 2003 by parish priest Marlon Velásquez of a radio station. The station ran information programmes on the mining project and became a key channel for raising awareness of the consequences of mining and disseminating the social teachings of the Church and its ecological commitment. When *Laudato Si’* was published, the parish radio station also broadcast readings and commentaries on the text, tailored to the concerns of its audience, including the opportunity for listeners to call live with their questions and preoccupations, which were then

⁷ Traditionally, rural communities have been considered clients by the political class, who promised them money and goods at election time in exchange of votes. They also perceived themselves as passive recipients of assistentialist policies promoted by the government and social organisations. In the case of Rancho Grande, rural communities were strengthened as autonomous actors, capable of defining their own vision of well-being and community development, on the basis of agro-ecology. In other words, they did not need the sponsorship of the political class, and they prioritised their common interest as communities over ideological party loyalty.

discussed in the programme. In addition, the parish priest or a qualified member of the parish team commented every day on the readings of the liturgical calendar and connected them with Catholic social teaching. Other radio programmes included the sharing of the experiences of the Guardians of Yaoska movement and their exchanges with other mining-affected communities in Central America. There were also radio programmes on good agro-ecological practices such as composting techniques, pest control using biocides and preparation and improvement of native seeds. Some of these programmes were retransmitted through other local radio stations in the department of Matagalpa.



One of the most creative strategies in the repertoire of collective actions by the Guardians of Yaoska movement was the organisation of ecological festivals. They aimed to counter the narrative promoted by the International Mining Conference organised by the national agency for the promotion of foreign investment (ProNicaragua), the private sector Council (*Consejo Superior de la Empresa Privada*, COSEP), and the Chamber of Mining about the supposed benefits of mining as a driver of economic development, a source of jobs, a solution to the problem of poverty, and even as an environmentally friendly activity thanks to its technological innovation. In parallel to these business community's pro-mining events, the Guardians of Yaoska movement organised ecological festivals as a way of

celebrating life, biodiversity and rural culture committed to agroecology, creating spaces for people to come together, strengthening community identity, “buen vivir” (i.e., the concept in moral theology and philosophy of “good living” that is consistent with ecological ethics, and is often connected to Indigenous cultures and spiritualities), and awareness of the need to care for the environment. Local agricultural produce and other goods were displayed at the festivals, contributing to the construction of a genuine alternative to the extractivist development model, one based on sustainable agriculture, the conservation of natural resources and community wellbeing. This alternative vision was deeply rooted in the agroecological practices that small-scale farmers had been developing for decades in the region.

Support and discernment with communities with regard to political violence

As already noted, Daniel Ortega's regime, starting in 2007, adopted an increasingly repressive approach to managing socio-environmental conflicts, and the Guardians of Yaoska was subjected to various forms of political violence. For example, a female leader was criminalised for having painted a slogan that said “No to Mining” on the perimeter wall of the B2Gold mining company's office in Yaoska. However, the violence went beyond judicial criminalisation, as another community leader recounted:

There were many acts of intimidation (...) hooded men would turn up at people's homes and ask the family if they had any weapons or drugs. Some people were imprisoned and even remained in custody for a month after a hunting rifle was found in their possession, even though they had purchased it legally and had not committed any offence. Others were not taken to the police station but to the mining company's premises to be interrogated (Sánchez, 2016, p. 114).

The hostility and threats were directed not only at community leaders, but also at the parish priest and members of his pastoral team:

Lately, the death threats against the priests have given us even more courage. Many preachers have been stopped by the police at road junctions as they leave their communities. They check them to see if their documents are in order. ‘Ah, you work with that priest over there!’ (Sánchez, 2016, p. 50)

When marches against mining were organised, the government and the Rancho Grande municipal council organised a counter-march using hired people, with the aim of provoking clashes or incidents that would lead to violence. In this way, they sought to delegitimise the cause for which the local farmers were fighting.



Among the high-impact strategies in the repertoire of non-violent actions was the school strike that began on 13 July 2014 and concluded on 12 October 2015. This was organised when the mining company launched a campaign in the municipality's schools through talks that underlined the benefits of mining. Promotional materials from the mining company – such as caps, T-shirts, etc. – were handed out. In response to this situation, parents decided to stage a school boycott: no children or teenagers would attend school until these talks ceased.

One also has to note an episode when the bishop and the diocese's clergy averted a violent reaction by local communities. A group of young people had been disheartened by so many years of struggles and had been planning the possibility of setting fire to the offices of B2Gold. Bishop Álvarez convinced them to continue their struggles in a nonviolent way so as not to discredit their cause and give excuses to the regime. In response, the Guardians of Yaoska also organised a meeting with their older members who had participated in the armed conflict during the Sandinista revolution and shared their experience of choosing a violent response to injustices. This was an exercise in dialogue where younger generations learned about the past conflict and the maturation process in the service of communities, and they abandoned their plan to set fire to the mining company offices.

This peaceful opposition to the project forced officials at the ministerial level, namely the Deputy Minister of Energy and Mines, the Minister for the Environment and Natural Resources, and the Minister for Education and Sport, to visit the municipality of Rancho Grande. They attempted in vain to persuade the leadership of the Guardians of Yaoska to end the school strike and support the mining project. To demonstrate the communities' determination to reject the project, the movement organised a "Pilgrimage for Life" on 3 October 2015. This mobilisation and mass march against mining was jointly organised by the Guardians of Yaoska, the Diocese of Matagalpa and its clergy, including Bishop Álvarez, evangelical pastors and the Matagalpa Strategic Group. More than 50,000 people participated, and the event was regarded as a popular referendum against the mining project.

Uniting around what is common

On 12 October 2015, a week after the Pilgrimage for Life, the Nicaraguan government declared the Cerro Pavón mining project unviable. The opposing parties, united under the Guardians of Yaoska movement, succeeded in achieving their objectives. They brought mining operations in their municipality to a standstill and prevented their development, despite the fact that the alliance between the state and the mining company had deployed numerous strategies involving intimidation and violence.

In addition to the above factors, such as awareness-raising of the ecological consequences of mining, community organising, and alternative development practices through agro-ecology, some other key factors contributed to the government's decision about the unviability of the project. A first factor is the cohesion and cross-sectoral nature of the Guardians of Yaoska movement. The inclusion of leaders from different political parties (Sandinistas, Conservatives and

Liberals) and different faith communities (Catholics and Evangelicals) gave the movement a level of cohesion, legitimacy and representativeness that made it resilient and difficult to dismantle. Second, some movement leaders broke away from their political parties. A Sandinista leader recounted: “I belong to the FSLN; I have been a member of the Frente for as long as I can remember – my family and all – but from the moment all those things were happening here, I never went back to a meeting, either of the party or of the mayor’s office” (Sánchez, 2017, p. 57). This ability to prioritise the common good over party loyalty was a decisive factor. A third factor is the legitimising role of the Catholic Church. The Nicaraguan Bishops’ Conference, through its letter to President Ortega, and the pastoral leadership of the Diocese of Matagalpa, provided moral and political support that legitimised the movement’s demands and protected it, to a certain extent, from the most brutal repression. Fourth, the movement successfully linked the discourse on environmental protection with the communities’ concrete needs for survival. As one leader put it: “They often told us we were ignorant, and on many occasions, they told us that what we lacked was civilisation (...) But we said many times on the radio that to love the land, you don’t need that “civilisation”” (Sánchez, 2017, p. 44). Fifth and finally, in response to the violence of the state, the community chose the path of nonviolent resistance. The nonviolent collective actions ranged from school strikes, pilgrimages, eco-festivals to peaceful demonstrations. These prevented the government from having a pretext for mass repression, maintained public support for the movement’s cause, and forced the government to change course and cease its repressive measures.

Socio-political crisis: authoritarianism and mining extractivism

18 April 2018 marked a turning point in Nicaragua’s recent history, and in the struggles of the Guardians of Yaoska movement to protect their territories from the negative social and ecological consequences of mining. What began as protests against a reform of the Nicaraguan Social Security Institute’s (INSS) pension system, which affected pensioners’ already meagre pensions and was introduced without consultation, turned into the largest and most widespread civil uprising ever recorded in the country (Cabrales and Sánchez, 2019; Sánchez and Osorio, 2020).

The Ortega regime responded to this social mobilisation with an escalation of repression, to such an extent that the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) denounced it as a crime against humanity perpetrated by the state. The IACHR documented the deaths of at least 355 people, many of them as a result of extrajudicial executions; thousands were injured, suffering permanent physical and psychological consequences; and more than 5,000 people were subjected to arbitrary detention in inhumane conditions (CIDH, 2018; Group of Experts on Human Rights in Nicaragua, 2025a).

The scale and scope of the human rights violations, and the profiles of the direct and indirect victims, highlight two key points. Firstly, the political violence was planned, organised, coordinated and carried out by a repressive state and pro-government armed groups led by the government of Daniel Ortega. Secondly, this repressive machinery was intended to keep the government in power, repress and punish specific groups who had participated in the April 2018 civic uprising and in previous protests, such as the protests against the Cerro Pavón project in Rancho Grande and against the interoceanic canal project, and exercise total control over the state and the population. Since April 2018, the Ortega regime’s strategies and mechanisms of political violence have developed along an intensifying progression (AI, 2018; GREDHN, 2025a): 1) lethal and mass violence (2018–2020); 2) selective repression (2021), involving the imprisonment of the seven opposition presidential candidates; 3) closure of civic spaces (2022), involving the mass revocation of legal status of social organisations, universities and media outlets; and 4) total control (2023-present), characterised by the expulsion, deprivation of nationality and confiscation of assets of hundreds of Nicaraguans (GREDHN, 2025b).

Within this repressive, police-state context, various processes are being deployed to dismantle any possibility of social organisation and mobilisation. Individuals deemed to be “opponents” or “enemies of the regime” are criminalised and prosecuted. This process has been coordinated by the Public Prosecutor’s Office with the support of the Sub-Directorate-General for Police Investigation and Intelligence and the leadership of the Judicial Assistance Directorate (GREDHN, 2025b). They issue arrest warrants based on lists compiled by the intelligence network and political secretaries in the territorial districts and neighbourhoods. This network has led to widespread repression and an extensive surveillance network – one police officer for every 100 households – which has forced many Nicaraguan defenders and activists into mass exile, after having been threatened, attacked or persecuted. It is estimated that about 10% of the Nicaraguan population



is currently in exile (including the author of this case study), including 250 journalists who fear for their lives. Other leaders and social movements have opted for self-preservation and low-profile passive resistance. The leaders of the Guardians of Yaoska have not escaped this persecution and are currently operating clandestinely to protect themselves from imprisonment.

It is important to note that the repression has been directed not only against individuals, but also against collectives and their institutions. On 15 October 2020, the Legislative Assembly passed the Foreign Agents Act, which, according to Amnesty International (AI, 2024), “imposes disproportionate restrictions

that hinder international funding for organisations, thereby limiting their legitimate human rights advocacy activities” (p. 2). Furthermore, the regime has curtailed the right to freedom of association and participation in public affairs. The deregistration of more than 5,600 non-governmental organisations has dismantled the civic space, affecting more than one million people who depended on services and development projects. Many of these organisations had been carrying out social oversight and denouncing abuses committed by the Ortega government, such as corruption, nepotism, clientelism, the authorisation of extractive projects without prior and informed consultation, violent colonisation, and the dispossession of community land belonging to Indigenous peoples and people of African descent. The Catholic Church has also been persecuted, with at least 73 pastoral agents, including priests and religious, arbitrarily detained, 37 priests expelled from the country, and 36 church properties confiscated (Molina, 2025; GREDHN, 2025a).

In practice, the rule of law and due process guarantees have been dismantled, whilst a network of surveillance and social control through agents of violence has been established across much of the national territory. Consequently, communities, movements and other social actors have found themselves in a situation of total legal defencelessness, with no possibility of resisting threats such as the encroachment of extractive projects. Under these circumstances, the Ortega regime is taking advantage of the situation to push ahead with such projects in contexts where it had historically faced resistance and legal challenges, as was the case in Rancho Grande. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that in such a repressive political context, the Ministry of Energy and Mines in 2019 reactivated the licence for Cerro Pavón, with operations commencing in 2023. The mining rights to B2Gold’s El Pavón mine were acquired by the Canadian company Calibre Mining. Since then, the operations have remained a deep wound that the communities of Rancho Grande suffer through with a sense of powerlessness.

4. Concluding Reflections

The dynamics of the political struggle in the municipality of Rancho Grande cannot be understood outside its historical, socio-environmental and political context. The social mobilisation against mining was a sustained process lasting approximately a decade, between 2004 and 2015. The initial actions, led by religious leaders, were aimed at raising awareness and warning of the dangers and effects of mining on the communities. Gradually, other social organisations joined this process, providing technical assistance and organisational expertise.

This socio-environmental conflict reflects the conflict between two visions of development: on the one hand, an extractive-based vision which destroys the natural resources that support livelihoods, and on the other, one based on sustainable agriculture which had been practised for decades by the small-scale farmers of Rancho Grande. For them, this conflict was not limited to the economic sphere but also extended to the irregular and opaque nature of the mining concession process. These clashed with the exercise of citizenship and the sense of social justice rooted in the Christian tradition and the rural movement. The environmentalism of small-scale farmers in Rancho Grande has deep roots in the process of adopting sound production practices in line with sustainable agriculture as resistance against the industrial agrochemical production model promoted during the neoliberal agrarian counter-reform of the 1990s, which included the liberalisation of land markets, the indebtedness of cooperatives that had to borrow from private banks, and the proliferation of high-cost agrochemical products.

The social and ecological tradition of the Catholic Church – liberation theology, CELAM (2007), *Laudato Si'* and the wider Catholic social tradition – was of vital importance, as was its pastoral commitment to supporting the Guardians of Yaoska movement, echoing its demands at the highest levels of the country's politics. This support empowered the social movement and gave it legitimacy, above all because it reinforced the religious dimension of local struggles, giving it greater resilience in the face of threats and adversity.

The “option for life” in defence of the environment was a mobilising force that succeeded in firmly uniting various stakeholders, transcending political ideologies and religious affiliations. It also united and strengthened the local population – which was largely opposed to mining. The movement incorporated in its narrative the view that the underlying root of the conflict with the mining company and the government was a conflict between two opposing visions of development, a hegemonic, colonising and predatory development model versus a sustainable development model. The movement's nonviolent collective action, such as the organisation of agro-ecology festivals, demonstrated that an alternative to an extractivist development model was possible.

Until the 2018 repression, the Guardianes de Yaoska movement succeeded in achieving its demands peacefully in an adverse context, where conflicts generally tend to escalate into collective violence. In addition to setting this precedent, from a nonviolence perspective, the case highlights the need for ongoing discussion of strategic choices regarding development models and their socio-environmental viability. The experience of Rancho Grande demonstrates that the convergence of church-based pastoral work, rural ecological awareness and nonviolent collective action can generate real alternatives to extractivism. In a regional context where violence against environmental defenders has reached alarming levels, this case offers a lesson in hope and a roadmap for other movements fighting to defend their territories and livelihoods.

Another lesson from the case of Rancho Grande, in the context of a socio-political crisis, is that the effectiveness and sustainability of the outcomes of a mobilisation process in defence of territories and life can be reversed or dismantled through a set of repressive and social control strategies, coordinated and planned by a police state and an authoritarian regime. This reveals the opportunism and complicity of mining companies in exploiting contexts of socio-political crisis and serious human rights violations to carry out their extractive projects against the will of local communities and to the detriment of their socio-environmental rights, their natural resources and their territory. In some circumstances, mining companies operate beyond the scrutiny of society, communities, the Church and the academic community, all spaces of monitoring which have been closed off in Nicaragua.

The case of Rancho Grande, which was the first time a concession decision had been overturned in Nicaragua, aims to bring to light the valuable contribution of the Church's pastoral accompaniment to communities resisting extractive mining projects. It also represents a historical account of the commitment to defending life and caring for our common home. As Pope Francis has stated in *Laudato Si'*, we must “realise that an authentic ecological approach always becomes a social one; it must integrate issues of justice into debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor” (Paragraph 49). The peasant struggle in Rancho Grande embodies, on the one hand, a sign of hope and, on the other, a call for international solidarity with community leaders and the Nicaraguan Church, who have suffered and continue to suffer repression in an authoritarian context.

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