

Nicaragua judges debate Ortega councils

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MANAGUA, Nicaragua --

Six judges on Nicaragua's Supreme Court have thrown out a law meant to block neighborhood councils that will report directly to President Daniel Ortega. But other judges call the ruling itself illegal.

Ortega established the councils last week, ignoring opponents who argue they are a return to Cuban-inspired citizen groups that Ortega used as his eyes and ears when he was president two decades ago while battling U.S.-backed Contra rebels.

Backers say the groups are an expression of local democracy, distributing subsidized food, helping police keep the peace and participating in making local policy decisions.

Six pro-Ortega judges on the court's eight-member constitutional section held an unusual late-night meeting Wednesday and ruled that the councils are protected by citizens' constitutional rights "to organize and participate directly in public affairs."

The decision struck down an opposition-backed law that was scheduled to take effect Thursday and would have sharply limited the councils' power.

But Supreme Court President Manuel Martinez said the court decision itself was illegal because the Ortega allies held the meeting late at night, outside of regular business hours, and without notifying opposition judges.

He argued that the full 16-member court, which is heavily politicized, would still need to rule on the matter.

Ortega lost a 1990 election, but returned to the presidency in January after winning elections last year.