

By Claudia Meléndez Salinas

In a regular year, Katia Cardenal spends several months a year as a globetrotter, in two or three artistic tours, to bring her crystal-clear voice and her new Latin American trova, or ballads, to different corners of the world.

This year is not ordinary. Cardenal, a Nicaraguan singer-songwriter with more than 40 years of artistic life, decided to leave her country nine months ago in the face of increased repression under Daniel Ortega. Since April 18, when thousands began to protest reforms to the pension system that Ortega implemented, the government is accused of imprisoning journalists and of organizing a violent wave of repression that resulted in the deaths of more than 300 people.

Cardenal, who launched her career as a singer around the time when the Sandinista Revolution overthrew Anastasio Somoza, has long been disillusioned with Sandinismo, so it was not difficult to join the chorus of people who want to end Ortega's mandate. But the political climate has made a safe life impossible for the dissidents, she said, and she preferred to leave everything rather than continue living under a constant threat of repression.

"This is a dictatorship that has started to kill people, to repress, to jail political prisoners, to persecute journalists and leaders. With the kind of music I do, with my poetry, I've always tried to promote people's rights, human rights, and I do not think I can live in Nicaragua," Cardenal said in Spanish in a telephone interview from Maryland.

So the singer-songwriter has been touring 13 countries since June, and will likely settle in Norway for some time after her tour ends. This Saturday Cardenal will be performing in Seaside, courtesy of Palenke Arts.

"The music of Guardabarranco (Katia's long-time duo with her late brother Salvador) has been part of the essential soundtrack of my life," said Juan Sánchez, program director of Palenke Arts. "They are poetic hymns to life, friends and the environment ... I was lucky enough to catch a Guardabarranco concert for the first time 25 years ago and I have been singing their songs ever since.

"Last year was the first time that I saw Katia with her new accompanist: her daughter Nina in a house concert in Santa Cruz after a 12-year hiatus. I was blown away, not only because their songs still resonate so powerfully in me, but because Nina's

powerful and precise guitar playing matches perfectly with her mother's beautiful vocals. We're thrilled to have them."



Cardenal began singing at age 15 in her school's choir. Later she joined her brother Salvador to form Duo Guardabarranco, a name that pays homage to the national bird of Nicaragua. Via Guardabarranco, the Cardenals toured Europe and Latin America, singing their songs of brotherhood and protection of the environment.

Although she continued to sing duets with her brother until his death in 2009, Cardenal launched her solo career and has recorded 26 albums — three of them produced by Jackson Browne. She established a record label in 2004, Moka Discos, and continues touring with her daughter, guitarist Nina Cardenal.

Her belief in the promise of revolution made her participate in the literacy campaigns promoted by the revolutionary government in the early 1980s. But in a few years, Cardenal realized the double edge of the populist government.

"I started to understand the double side," she said. "On the one hand they promote love for the poor, the rescue of human rights, work, education and on the other hand there is corruption, lies, favoritism, all that double face that has the Latin American left. We have seen it in Venezuela and in Cuba, that does not go with me. I am a person who advocates for freedom and tolerance. It is difficult if one is not servile to the party, all doors are closed."

Government supporters have threatened Cardenal through social networks, accusing her of being a “traitor” and “murderous.”

“It’s the language they use. They write (to) me on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter. They have slandered me. And because of the insecurity and lack of work I could not live there, I would be imprisoned or threatened but I will not expose myself to that. The power of the music is stronger outside, inside it would be impossible for me to sing,” she said.

On her tours she also asks for support for Nicaraguan refugees in Costa Rica — according to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, there are more than 50,000. Cardenal plans to settle in Norway to wait for the political storm to pass.

“Good is always going to defeat evil,” she said. “The Nicaraguan people are fighters, brave, they do not give up. I have absolute and blind faith that this will end soon. I believe that prayer and art are instruments that bring light, that sow hope, faith and courage in hearts.

“Sometimes I feel defeated but I sing again, and seeing the faces of people marching with my songs in the background, I believe again and renew my commitment with what I do.”