

# NICARAGUA 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion; provides for freedom of belief, religion, and worship; and states no one “shall be obligated by coercive measures to declare his or her ideology or beliefs.” The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) reported “serious human rights violations in the context of social protests in Nicaragua” surrounding demonstrations opposing social security reforms in April, which resulted in “excessive and arbitrary use of police force,” stigmatization campaigns, and other human rights abuses. Amnesty International reported that in October the state had implemented a strategy of repression. On July 13, police killed two students and injured at least 10 others in a 15-hour attack on a Roman Catholic Church in Managua providing refuge to student protesters from a nearby university campus. Catholic leaders reported physical attacks and verbal insults, death threats, and intimidation campaigns by progovernment groups and ruling party (Sandinista National Liberation Front, or FSLN) activists associated with President Daniel Ortega and Vice President and spouse Rosario Murillo. Media reported Deputy Chief of Police Ramon Avellan physically assaulted Father Edwin Roman in Masaya on September 9, after the priest asked government supporters to turn down ruling-party propaganda music playing outside the church during a funeral service. Observers said Bishop Silvio Baez was a frequent target of government harassment because he condemned its human rights abuses. According to religious leaders and media, there were many incidents of vandalism and the desecration of sacred items in Catholic churches throughout the country. Progovernment supporters frequently disrupted religious services by playing loud music through speakers positioned outside of churches. Many religious leaders said the government politicized religion in the context of what the IACHR and other international bodies characterized as an ongoing political crisis and social conflict in the country. Religious leaders said the government retaliated against clergy perceived as critical of the government. According to religious leaders, Catholic and evangelical Protestant leaders who provided shelter and medical assistance and defended human rights of peaceful protesters were routinely victims of government retribution, including slander, arbitrary investigations by government agencies on unfounded charges, withholding tax exemptions, reducing budget appropriations, and denying religious services for political prisoners. Catholic leaders said the government continued to use religious festivities, symbolism, and language in its laws and policies to promote its political agenda, a practice that Catholic leaders said undermined the Church’s religious integrity.

According to media, on December 5, a Russian national woman threw sulfuric acid at a priest at the Managua Metropolitan Cathedral during confession. By year's end, the priest was still at a local hospital with burns over his entire body and a serious infection. While some civil society leaders familiar with the case stated they believed the government sent her to the church, there was no evidence linking the attack to government officials. A Jewish leader said his group's interfaith director met regularly with Christian and Muslim counterparts as part of relationship-building efforts.

The Vice President of the United States repeatedly called on the government to cease violence and attacks on the Catholic Church and expressed the U.S. government's support for faith communities in their fight for human rights, democracy, and freedom. U.S. embassy officials met with Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials to raise concerns over religious freedom in light of the country's sociopolitical crisis. Senior U.S. government leaders and the embassy used social media to express concern over attacks on the Catholic Church and other religious groups. Additionally, embassy officials engaged like-minded members of the diplomatic corps to address concerns over religious freedom in the country. Embassy representatives met regularly with a wide variety of religious groups, including Catholics, evangelical Protestants, Moravian Lutherans, Muslims, and the Jewish community, to discuss the groups' concerns about politicization of religion and governmental retaliation against politically active religious groups.

### **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 6.1 million (July 2018 estimate). According to the 2005 census (the most recent available), conducted by the Nicaraguan Institute of Statistics and Census, 59 percent of the population is Catholic and 22 percent evangelical Protestant, including Pentecostals, Mennonites, Moravian Lutherans, and Baptists. A survey conducted in June 2017 by M&R Consultants estimates Catholics compose 46 percent of the population, evangelical Protestants 33 percent, and religious believers without affiliation 14 percent. Groups that together constitute less than 4 percent of the population include Jehovah's Witnesses, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Moravian Lutheran Church, Jews, Muslims, and nonbelievers.

The Moravian Lutheran Church is largely concentrated in the country's North and South Caribbean Coast Autonomous Regions. A majority of its members are of indigenous or Afro-Caribbean descent.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion. It provides for freedom of belief, religion, and worship, and it states no one “shall be obligated by coercive measures to declare his or her ideology or beliefs.” The constitution states there is no official religion; however, the law entrusts government-controlled, community-level action groups, known as Family Committees, with the responsibility for promoting “Christian values” at the community level.

The requirements for registration of religious groups – with the exception of the Catholic Church – are similar to those for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Registration requires an application, articles of association, and designation of officers. The National Assembly must approve a group’s application for registration or legal standing. Following approval, the group must register with the Ministry of Government as an association or NGO, which allows it to incur legal obligations, enter into contracts, or benefit from tax and customs exemptions. Following registration, religious groups are subject to the same regulations as other NGOs or associations, regardless of their religious nature. The Catholic Church as a religious group is not required to register because its presence in the country predates the legislation; however, the government requires organizations dedicated to charity or other social work affiliated with the Catholic Church to register.

Ministry of Education regulations for primary school education establish that the basis for the methodology and curriculum for elementary grade levels are the “Christian, Socialist, Solidarity” principals and “Human Development” policy. The government’s 2018-21 Human Development policy establishes the promotion of religious and faith-based festivities as a key component of all government policy.

Missionaries of all religious affiliations must obtain religious worker visas and provide information regarding the nature of their missionary work before the Ministry of Interior will authorize entry into the country. A locally based religious organization must provide documentation and request travel authorization from the Ministry of Government seven days prior to the arrival of the visiting person or religious group. The process generally takes several weeks to complete.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

## Government Practices

The IACHR reported “serious human rights violations in the context of social protests in Nicaragua” surrounding social security reform protests that broke out in April, resulting in “excessive and arbitrary use of police force,” stigmatization campaigns, and other human rights violations. Many religious leaders said the government politicized religion in the context of what the IACHR, the United Nations, and other international organizations called the country’s ongoing political crisis and social conflict. On July 13, police led a 15-hour attack, using high-caliber ammunition, against the Divine Mercy Church in Managua, which had provided refuge to approximately 200 students trapped in the siege and medical assistance to injured students who had protested at a nearby public university campus. Media reported informal armed groups, also known as “parapolice,” allied with the FSLN and working in coordination with police, killed two students and injured at least 10 others in the attack. The Catholic Church spoke out against the violence through clergy homilies and pastoral letters, calling for respect of human rights, investigation, and prosecution of crimes, reparation for victims, the end of excessive use of police force, and the disarmament of parapolice. By year’s end, the government had not investigated the deaths but prosecuted students for the incident and verbally accused the Catholic Church of a “terrorist and criminal mind.”

In June progovernment armed groups shot live ammunition at clergy and student protesters during the rite of confession conducted in a partially open space during active protests and violent suppression in Managua, according to Catholic clergy. In July government supporters and FSLN activists physically assaulted senior Catholic Church leadership, including the papal nuncio, while they were attempting to assist persons sheltered in St. Sebastian Basilica in Diriamba.

On September 9, media reported Deputy Chief of Police Ramon Avellan grabbed and insulted Father Edwin Roman in Masaya after the priest asked government supporters to turn down ruling-party propaganda music playing outside the church during a funeral service.

In July media reported government supporters attacked the vehicle of Catholic Church spokesperson Bishop Juan Abelardo Mata, breaking the windows and slashing its tires. FSLN supporters surrounded the bishop and prevented him from leaving until civic leaders negotiated a truce with the National Police to facilitate his release.

Bishop Silvio Baez, who observers said was one of the most outspoken of members of Catholic Church leadership on human rights abuses and in calling for a secular state, was a frequent target of government harassment. On October 23, the San Pablo Apostol community, a Catholic-based denomination that does not recognize the Nicaragua Bishops' Conference or Vatican leadership and publicly pledged its support for the government, called a press conference for official media and announced it had an audio recording of Baez conspiring with opposition activists to overthrow the government. The religious community and FSLN followers demanded Baez leave the country and return to the Vatican, "where he never should have left." Laureano Ortega, son of President Ortega, called the bishop a "murderer and coup monger" on social media. Online sources said sound technicians investigated the audio recording and found someone had edited it and concluded it was not an original recording. Following the accusations, media reported a heavy presence of parapolice and armed FSLN supporters around Baez's home. According to media reports, in an apparent reference to the Baez case, government officials, including a Supreme Court justice, stated bishops did not have immunity and could be prosecuted and convicted for their political activism and alleged attempts to overthrow the government.

Catholic leaders reported attacks on clergy, provoked by what they said was the government's stigmatization and slander, which they said had led to a reduction in ecclesiastical travel by approximately 90 percent. The leaders reported three priests had to go into exile due to threats from government supporters; death threats and assaults by government supporters and FSLN activists against the Catholic Church internally displaced two others. According to media sources, some government officials forced workers to sign petitions denouncing Catholic Church leadership.

Government officials stated there was nothing governmental or societal preventing freedom of religion or expression in the country. They stated violence against religious leaders was isolated, not systematic, and stated some religious leaders had encouraged violent actions among their followers.

Religious groups said the government politicized religious beliefs, language, and traditions, including by coopting religion for its own political purposes. Religious groups also said that, as a form of retaliation stemming from the country's sociopolitical crisis that began in April, the government infringed on religious leaders' rights to practice faith-based activities, including providing safe spaces in churches to students and others fleeing violence. Catholic clergy and media

reported cases of government officials, including President Ortega, slandering, stigmatizing, and urging supporters to retaliate against houses of worship and clergy for providing shelter, medical assistance, and mediation attempts to stop violent action by government security forces against peaceful protesters. Government leadership, including the president and vice president, referred to Catholic Church leadership as “terrorists,” “coup mongers,” and “diabolic.” In some speeches, government officials differentiated between the “good” Catholics and the “bad” bishops, the latter who they said were more outspoken and active in the political crisis. The government specifically targeted clergy that called on President Ortega to cease repression, said the president lacked political will to resolve the crisis, and placed responsibility with President Ortega for the repression that resulted in hundreds killed or injured and thousands detained.

The IACHR reported several “aggressions and acts of harassment committed against members of the Catholic Church in Nicaragua” due to the Church’s role in the country’s sociopolitical crisis. The IACHR stated members of the Catholic Church were victims of a government stigmatization campaign due to their efforts to protect the human rights and integrity of peaceful protesters, as part of their faith-based beliefs. Amnesty International documented and reported “serious human rights violations committed or permitted” by the government, including attacks on bishops of the Catholic Church throughout the sociopolitical crisis.

Catholic and evangelical Protestant leaders reported financial retaliation against groups deemed critical of the FSLN. Religious leaders said the government provided or withheld tax exemptions for individual churches based on the political affiliation of a church’s leadership. The government also cut national budget appropriations for individual Catholic and evangelical Protestant churches that amounted to a 42-percent reduction from \$1.3 million to \$740,000, following antigovernment demonstrations. Government officials said the cuts were part of an overall budget decrease, while media investigations reported the reduction in appropriations specifically targeted churches that provided support to wounded and endangered protesters. Religious leaders said the appropriation cuts particularly affected those groups active in the sociopolitical crisis and favored churches perceived to be friendly to the government.

Both Catholic and Protestant leaders said there were investigations of their organizations by the government anti-money-laundering body, the Financial Analysis Unit (UAF), primarily for financial transactions the government said were tied to the protests. Human rights organizations reported government authorities used the UAF to prosecute opposition members on questionable and unfounded

terrorism charges. Evangelical Protestants also said the government's use of the UAF and other government retaliation mechanisms against NGOs might result in a church losing its legal registration as a form of government retaliation over the pastor's political preference or his faith-based work. Evangelical Protestant leaders said the legal registration requirements categorizing churches as NGOs put evangelical Protestant churches at a disadvantage, leaving them particularly vulnerable to government actions against them.

Clergy and media reported government supporters and FSLN party activists committed acts of vandalism, including desecration of sacred items such as the holy sacrament, altars, tombs, and statues; thefts; and attacks on churches in Carazo, Masaya, Managua, Granada, Matagalpa, Esteli, and Jinotega, in some cases with police support. Prominent churches had FSLN slogans painted on their walls, along with such labels as "coup mongers," "terrorist," and "murderer," terms which local human rights organizations said the government regularly used against those it perceived as enemies.

Similar to media reporting, religious leaders said government supporters and FSLN activists routinely interrupted Catholic services in Managua, Masaya, and Granada by loudly playing partisan music in front of churches, and in some cases, interrupting services with political propaganda and verbally harassing clergy and the congregation members. During a September 8 progovernment march in Granada, government supporters entered a Catholic church during Mass, waving red and black FSLN party flags and chanting "terrorists," "murderers," and "coup mongers," among other epithets. After clergy in Catarina, located in Masaya Department, announced the church would hold a somber Mass to commemorate its patron saint instead of its usual festivities, on December 26, progovernment militants entered the church and shouted ruling party chants, verbally assaulted clergy and congregation, and attempted to extract the church's patron saint. At demonstrations of government supporters, participants mocked Catholic Church leadership. Clergy reported authorities expelled one student from a public university after they questioned him about a picture posted on social media in which the student appeared with a priest whom police and parapolice had attacked on several occasions.

Catholic and evangelical Protestant officials reported the government celebrated religious festivities for political and partisan purposes, saying these actions greatly diminished the ability of the churches to conduct their own celebrations. They said that, while these government actions had occurred for years, they had become more prevalent and carried stronger messaging in the context of the country's

sociopolitical crisis. One example, cited by religious authorities and reported by media, was the Catholic celebration of Saint Geronimo in Masaya, a traditional weeklong event. Clergy cancelled the traditional patron saint festivities to respect the mourning of families who lost loved ones during protests and announced they would instead mark the occasion with a Mass. FSLN municipal government officials, in tandem with local police, disregarded the local clergy's decision and held a parade with a replica of the original patron saint statue. They played at high volume a mix of religious and partisan music outside the church during the Mass in commemoration of the patron saint. Referring to another event, an evangelical leader said he had requested the government not to participate in a religious celebration; however, in spite of the request, a government official came to the event, and state media insisted the religious leader give an interview.

Catholic clergy and congregation volunteers reported barriers to their faith-based volunteer work in prisons, primarily restricting Catholic clergy critical of the government access to political prisoners. Evangelical Protestant volunteers did not report barriers to carry out their faith-based activities in prisons. Official media, however, reported prisoners were attending Catholic and evangelical Protestant celebrations. Several Catholic leaders said that, starting in July, prison wardens also denied Catholic clergy perceived as critical of the government access to male political prisoners, preventing them from offering religious sacraments such as communion and confession to the detainees.

Ministry of Education policy for public school curricula continued to require "Christian-based" education through civics classes and participation in state-sponsored religious events. Religious leaders called on the government to respect the constitution's mandate for a secular state; however, schools required students to participate in processions to commemorate Catholic religious events and festivals. Municipal governments and the central government continued to hold celebrations of Purisima, in which Catholics commemorate the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary, conflicting with the Church's official celebrations and despite the Church's call to respect the sacredness of its festivities. Government employees reported participation in these religious celebrations was mandatory; they risked losing their jobs if they did not attend. National budget appropriations continued to fund state-led religious celebrations, with funding assigned to the different government agencies responsible for aspects of the events. Catholic leadership said government manipulation of religious festivities for partisan purposes undermined their religious integrity. Government officials also stated that, while there was no state religion, government officials sometimes spoke about religious issues and participated in religious events based on their



personal beliefs. The officials said the state performed only administrative functions for religious events and festivities and was involved with these events for cultural, economic, and security reasons.

Catholic and evangelical Protestant leaders said the government continued to restrict travel selectively for some visa applicants intending to travel to the country for religious purposes based on the perceived political affiliation of the applicant's local sponsor. Representatives of both groups stated visiting religious leaders received additional scrutiny and faced selective application of laws if the government believed they or their local sponsor posed a political threat or had not pledged their support to the FSLN.

Muslim community leaders reported no limitations in government approval of entry visas and temporary residence permits for Muslim leaders. They said a spiritual leader sponsored by the Egyptian government and a teacher sponsored by the Saudi Arabian government both obtained legal status according to national law.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

On December 5, media reported a Russian national woman attacked a priest at the Managua Metropolitan Cathedral by throwing sulfuric acid at him during confession. At year's end, the priest was still at a local hospital with burns over his entire body and a serious infection. Official media portrayed the woman as a feminist; however, local feminist organizations denounced the attack and clarified they had no affiliation with her. The Church refrained from making assumptions. Some civil society leaders familiar with the case stated they believed the government sent her; however, there was no evidence linking the attack to government officials.

A Jewish leader reported that his group's interfaith director met regularly with Christian and Muslim counterparts as part of relationship-building efforts.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

The Vice President of the United States repeatedly called on the government to cease violence and attacks on the Catholic Church and expressed the U.S. government's support for faith communities in their fight for human rights, democracy, and freedom. U.S. embassy officials met with Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials and emphasized the importance of religious freedom, including the

right of religious groups and their members to participate peacefully in the public sphere in accordance with their beliefs.

On November 18, the ambassador attended Sunday Mass at Managua Metropolitan Cathedral, his first Sunday in the country. Following Mass, the ambassador stated he was honored to share Mass with the community in Managua. Media covered his attendance widely. The ambassador also attended the local festivity of Griteria in which Catholics celebrate Purisima, the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary, at various churches.

Through official social media accounts, senior U.S. government leaders and the embassy expressed concerns over the maligning of and physical attacks on Catholic Church clergy and properties during the country's sociopolitical crisis. Embassy officials met with representatives from at least six other like-minded diplomatic missions to engage on concerns over religious freedom in the country.

Embassy representatives met regularly with leaders from a wide variety of religious groups, including Catholic and a diverse selection of evangelical Protestant groups, the Moravian Lutheran Church, the Nicaraguan Islamic Association, and the Jewish community. At these meetings, embassy representatives discussed concerns about the politicization of religion, governmental retaliation against politically active religious groups, limitations to freedom of religion, and the possibility of holding interfaith working groups to promote respect for religious freedom, diversity, and tolerance.