

NICARAGUA 2019 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.” According to numerous press reports, President Daniel Ortega and Vice President Rosario Murillo used hateful rhetoric condoning and inciting harassment, intimidation, and physical attacks targeting Roman Catholic clergy, worshippers, and places of worship. These reports stated the Nicaraguan National Police (NNP), along with progovernment groups and ruling party (Sandinista National Liberation Front, or FSLN) activists, routinely harassed and intimidated religious leaders and desecrated religious spaces. Catholic leaders reported physical attacks and verbal insults, death threats, and intimidation campaigns by the NNP and groups associated with President Ortega and Vice President Murillo, such as the Sandinista Youth. The NNP and progovernment groups attacked Catholic worshippers on numerous occasions after they attended church services in which they prayed for political prisoners, including at least two occasions in which NNP officers fired rubber bullets and tear gas canisters at worshippers as they left Mass. According to religious leaders and media, individuals tied to the government or government proxies continued to commit acts of vandalism and desecration of sacred items in Catholic churches and cemeteries throughout the country. Police and 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 the ongoing political crisis and social conflict in the country. Religious leaders said the government and its proxies took aggressive actions, including harassment, death threats, and physical assaults, against clergy perceived as critical of the government. According to local press, Catholic and evangelical Protestant leaders who provided shelter and medical assistance to peaceful protesters in 2018 continued to be 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. In October social media accounts posted photos of students bashing pinatas made in the image of Catholic priests hanging from nooses. Some Twitter accounts linked to the Sandinista Youth wing of the FSLN circulated the photos with the caption, “Be a patriot, kill a priest.” 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.

A Russian national who in 2018 threw sulfuric acid at a priest of the Immaculate Conception Cathedral in Managua during confession, was found guilty of charges on bodily injury and exposure of others to imminent danger. The individual was sentenced to eight years in prison in May. In August media reported the attacker was seen on a plane flying to Panama. There was no official statement confirming or denying the release of the attacker from prison.

In July the Vice President singled out government leaders in Nicaragua for their persecution of Catholic clergy, stating the government targeted “Church leaders for defending democracy and religious freedom.” Senior U.S. government officials repeatedly called upon the Ortega government to cease violence against and attacks on Catholic clergy, worshippers, and churches. U.S. embassy officials continued to raise concerns over restrictions on religious freedom in the context of broader repression with Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials. Embassy officials met regularly with Catholic Church leaders, as well as a wide variety of representatives from other religious groups, including evangelical Protestants, Moravian Lutherans, Muslims, and the Jewish community, to discuss restrictions on religious freedom and to foster religious tolerance.

On December 18, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State placed Nicaragua on the Special Watch List for having engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 6.1 million (midyear 2019 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. According to a survey conducted in July by Borge and Associates, the percentage of evangelical Protestants is increasing and the percentage of Catholics decreasing. Borge and Associates found Catholics make up 43 percent of the population, evangelical Protestants 41 percent, and religious believers without affiliation 14 percent. According to the Borge survey, groups that together constitute less than 2 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 – except for the Catholic Church, which has a concordat with the government – 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, and 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” principles 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

In July the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights' (IACHR) Special Monitoring Mechanism for Nicaragua reported "constant harassment" of participants in various public events by the government, including at religious ceremonies and masses, particularly when those participants were thought to hold antigovernment views. The IACHR reported that on June 15, groups associated with the government attacked worshippers who had attended a Mass at the Cathedral of the Assumption of Mary in Leon. The report also noted attacks by police on June 16 and June 30 at the Immaculate Conception Cathedral in Managua, stating that police used rubber bullets, tear gas, and sound grenades on worshippers emerging from masses dedicated to the release of political prisoners. Nine people were reported injured in the attacks. The IACHR stated, "These events happened in a context of threats against the Catholic Church and against religious leaders, issued as intimidating comments on social media or as graffiti on the walls of some religious buildings." According to the report, one priest from Esteli left the country after receiving threats.

Father Edwing Roman, a priest granted precautionary (protective) measures by the IACHR since 2018, continued to be a victim of harassment and received multiple death threats during the year. According to press reports, on February 13, police detained him in his vehicle. The police searched his vehicle and attempted to confiscate his telephone while on a call with a journalist. A policewoman hit Roman's face in the attempt. Moments after the police released him, progovernment social media accounts circulated defamatory information against the priest, stating he was stopped for driving under the influence of alcohol. The posts included photographs showing liquor bottles inside his car. Roman said the police planted the bottles as part of the government's continued effort to discredit him.

On November 14, at the Church of Saint Michael in Masaya, Father Roman hosted a group of mothers of political prisoners as they began a hunger strike to demand the release of their children. According to *La Prensa*, a heavy police presence surrounded the church within minutes, impeding access and preventing anyone inside the church from exiting. Within hours, the government cut off water and

electricity to the church, leading to the spoilage of Roman's insulin supply kept in a refrigerator in the church. Due to the electrical outage in the church, during the morning of November 15, a parishioner attempted to hand Roman a new supply of insulin and small bags of ice through a window, but police pushed the person away. Police arrested 16 individuals who arrived at the church to provide the striking mothers with water. According to *Confidencial*, a digital press outlet, they were charged with trafficking of weapons, munitions, and explosives and would face trial on January 30, 2020; lawyers for the accused said the police planted military-grade weapons inside their vehicles after detaining them. On November 22, Roman and the hunger strikers left the church in a Red Cross ambulance and were treated at a local hospital. At year's end, water and electricity had not been restored to the church.

According to media, on November 18, as families of political prisoners began a hunger strike in the Immaculate Conception Cathedral in Managua, government-aligned groups rallied outside the cathedral. According to media, as darkness fell, NNP officers and riot police, who had surrounded and blocked access to the cathedral, allowed a group of at least 30 government-aligned individuals inside the cathedral. The reports stated that once inside, they physically assaulted Father Rodolfo Lopez and Sister Arelys Guzman and desecrated sacred items and spaces, while the NNP officers and riot police remained outside and did not intervene. The events were captured on video and circulated on social media. According to the reports, the government-aligned individuals spent the night of November 18 beside the altar of the cathedral, menacing the hunger strikers who had locked themselves inside the sacristy.

The Catholic Church continued to speak out against violence perpetrated by the government and progovernment groups and a lack of democratic institutions through clergy homilies and pastoral letters, calling for respect of human rights and the release of political prisoners. In one letter dated May 1, the Conference of Bishops stated that, given the government's current posture, they expected pain and suffering to continue for most Nicaraguan families. "Political prisoners, lack of respect for constitutional rights, exiles, refugees, asylees, poverty, unemployment, insecurity... show that without the presence of God who has placed his tent among us, we have no future." They also addressed in the same letter the absence of independence among government bodies and lack of basic freedoms.

On November 19, the Conference of Jesuit Provincials of Latin America and the Caribbean issued a statement calling for justice and denouncing the violent

targeting of opponents of the Ortega-Murillo government. The statement said, “We want to continue being attentive to the voices of those who are suffering the unmerciful tyranny of power that tries to subject the dreams of freedom and democracy through terror, repression, torture, and killings.”

In April Auxiliary Bishop of Managua Silvio Baez, termed by multiple press outlets, including *La Prensa* and Reuters, as one of the most outspoken critics of government human rights abuses, was recalled to the Vatican indefinitely. Independent media and observers interpreted the Vatican’s decision as a response to the constant harassment and death threats against him. In 2018, FSLN partisans demanded Baez leave the country and return to the Vatican, from “where he never should have left.”

During the year, sources provided different estimates regarding how many clergy had remained in exile and how many had returned. They did not provide details, stating fear that the government could retaliate against returning clergy.

In speeches during the year, President Ortega frequently stated the “bishops” did not stand with “the people” against sanctions and other “aggressions.” In a November speech, Ortega told a crowd in Revolution Plaza that “high priests are always asking that Nicaragua be crucified and with those high priests are the cowards, the traitors to their country, who go on their knees to ask that Nicaragua be crucified.” According to local human rights organizations and political analysts, Ortega and FSLN proxies frequently used this type of language to vilify and dehumanize the opposition.

Religious groups said the government continued to politicize 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 2018, the government continued to infringe 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 their perceived opposition to the government.

With an economic crisis that sources stated was precipitated by the government’s violent suppression of prodemocracy protests in 2018, the national budget shrank substantially. Budget cuts to religious groups continued. Following robust

funding in 2018 and dramatically decreased funding in 2019, funding for both Catholic and Protestant churches and religious groups was eliminated entirely from the 2020 budget. Local media viewed this as retribution for religious leaders' outspoken opposition to the government, particularly among Catholic clergy.

On November 2, media reported government supporters and FSLN partisans entered Catholic cemeteries in several parts of the country where families were celebrating the Day of the Dead and desecrated tombs of individuals killed by government forces and pro-Ortega militias, commonly called "parapolice," in the April 2018 prodemocracy uprising. Media reported that NNP officers and local FSLN officials stood by as the desecration occurred. Media also reported acts of vandalism against Catholic churches, including graffiti painted on their walls stating, "devils in cassocks" and "coup plotters," terms identified by local human rights organizations as used regularly by the government and its supporters against those they perceived as enemies.

Catholic clergy said the government denied them access to prisons following the 2018 prodemocracy uprising. Prior to April 2018, clergy said, they regularly entered prisons to celebrate Mass and provide communion and confession to detainees. Media reported on numerous occasions a large presence of NNP officers and police vehicles surrounding the Immaculate Conception Cathedral in Managua. The officers intimidated worshippers and denied them access to the cathedral, stating the cathedral was closed or closing access to nearby streets.

According to press and social media reports, Catholic Church leaders throughout the country continued to experience harassment from government supporters, who often acted in tandem with police. In November Cardinal Leopoldo Brenes publicly called for an end to the harassment of clergy and churches. Other Catholic leaders privately said they felt fear and intimidation when celebrating Mass. Priests said they often saw progovernment civilians attempt to intimidate them into public silence on political issues by recording their Sunday homilies, a practice that did not occur prior to April 2018. According to media, in October during a Catholic religious procession in Esteli, police together with masked parapolice lined the streets and intimidated the participants with high caliber weapons. The congregation took refuge inside the cathedral behind closed doors. At one point, parapolice pointed a gun at a group of seminarians inside the church premises, prompting a seminarian to scuffle with the parapolice in an attempt to block the parapolice from shooting.

Ministry of Education policy for public school curricula continued to require “Christian-based” education through civics classes and student participation in state-sponsored religious events. Notwithstanding these requirements, a Catholic bishop said he received reports from multiple localities that the government prohibited public schools from hosting religious services during end-of-school-year activities, a longstanding tradition in both public and private schools. The Ministry of Education did not issue an official statement confirming or denying the bishop’s statement.

Photographs posted on social media depicting university students bashing pinatas resembling priests hanging from nooses went viral in October. Signs attached to the pinatas read, “the enemies of the people.” Media identified the individuals in the photographs as members of student body governments affiliated with the Sandinista Youth wing of the ruling FSLN. In several re-tweets of the images, accounts linked to the Sandinista Youth encouraged followers to “be a patriot, kill a priest.” Civil society groups denounced the heightened harassment of clergy through FSLN-aligned accounts on social media during the week of September 30-October 6.

Catholic and evangelical Protestant leaders said the government continued to restrict travel selectively for some visa applicants intending to visit the country for religious purposes based on the perceived political affiliation of the applicant’s local sponsor. According to Catholic clergy, a 2016 regulation instructing all churches to request entry authorization for their missionaries or religious authorities continued in effect.

According to media, on October 31, the government cut off the electricity supply to a senior assistance home under the administration of a Catholic parish in Matagalpa, despite having paid all outstanding electricity bills. The same parish hosted a food drive for political prisoners on October 18.

In October *Despacho 505*, a digital newspaper, reported the government’s repression of the Catholic Church had “reached the altars.” Cardinal Brenes publicly stated that despite the church having met all the government’s administrative requirements, the General Office of Customs retained without justification a shipping container that included specially processed wine used for the celebration of the Eucharist during Mass. In November, after the cardinal’s public statements and the papal nuncio’s intervention, customs officials released the sacramental wine.

Caritas of Nicaragua, the Catholic Church's social service organization, said the customs office continued to hold 13 containers belonging to Caritas since April 2018 with no explanation for the delay. Caritas said these containers held donations of medical equipment and educational and health material intended for their social work. Caritas also said that since September 2018 the customs office continued to hold a separate container with Bibles. Caritas representatives said the organization, accredited in the country since 1965, had not received since March 2018 its annually renewable certificate from the Ministry of Interior, which technically gave it permission to operate in the country. Caritas representatives said the failure to renew the certificate impeded the NGO from receiving tax exemptions, prohibited the importation of its materials, and hindered its ability to bring in medical missions as part of its social services. The representatives said the organization had not previously had administrative issues with the government in its recent history. They stated they had to reduce their social services because of harassment from government supporters in the communities where they worked.

In November a worker at a Christian, non-Catholic charity in the north-central region of the country reported police harassment, surveillance, and unlawful entry into the worker's home; the worker had noted his prior affiliation with opposition political parties.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

A Russian national who in December 2018 threw sulfuric acid at a priest of the Immaculate Conception Cathedral in Managua during confession, was found guilty and sentenced to eight years in prison by the Sixth Criminal District Court in May. In August media reported witnesses seeing the attacker on a plane flying to Panama. There was no official statement confirming or denying the release of the attacker from prison.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In July the Vice President singled out government leaders in Nicaragua for their persecution of Catholic clergy, stating that the government had targeted "Church leaders for defending democracy and religious freedom." Through public statements and official social media accounts, senior U.S. government leaders and the embassy 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. Embassy

officials continued to raise concerns over restrictions on religious freedom in the context of broader repression with Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials.

The Ambassador and his staff met regularly with senior Catholic Church leaders, as well as with leaders from 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, and limitations on the freedom of religion and fostering diversity and tolerance.

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