

# The State of Religious Freedom in: Nicaragua



*Catholic priest Father Edwin Román accompanies a protester in Nicaragua in 2018.*

Country Factsheet

Winter 2024

- Under the Nicaragua dictatorship of Daniel Ortega, violations of human rights (HRs) including religious freedom have been institutionalized. Any religious leader – regardless of faith – seen as critical of the government is harassed, imprisoned or forced into exile without legal recourse.
- In 2018, Catholic leaders in Nicaragua strongly criticized the Ortega regime for its violent repression of citizen protests of social reforms. Priests opened their churches to peaceful protesters, including students, to provide safe haven from violent police and paramilitaries.
- Catholic leaders have spoken out about HRs violations and governance issues. The Ortega regime has responded with hostility. In March 2023, it closed the Vatican’s embassy in Managua, the first such suspension in the Americas in more than 162 years. The regime also expelled and cancelled the legal status of several Catholic orders, including the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) and the Missionaries of Charity, the order founded by Mother Teresa.
- In August 2023, the Ortega regime confiscated the Central American University in Managua, a prestigious Jesuit-run university, accusing it of being a “center of terrorism.” Authorities seized its assets and suspended classes, leaving thousands of students in limbo.
- Ortega and his wife, Vice President Rosario Murillo, have called Catholic priests “terrorists,” “traitors” and “coup plotters.” According to researcher Martha Patricia Molina, the Ortega regime has unjustly jailed, exiled and blocked the travel to Nicaragua of 176 Catholic priests and nuns. This includes Bishop Rolando Álvarez who spent over 500 days in prison on 26-year sentence (for treason and other charges) before he and Bishop Isidro Mora and 17 priests/lay leaders were released, stripped of their citizenship and deported in January 2024.



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- From April 2018-December 2024, the Catholic Church has been the target of 740 attacks, including the burning of the Managua Cathedral, according to Molina. In 2023, the Church was attacked 273 times, a clear escalation.
- The practice of Catholicism has been selectively criminalized for Nicaraguans. Through 2024, Molina reports state authorities have prohibited 3,369 traditional celebrations and processions from taking place and police constantly surveil parishes and churches.
- All religions are regime victims. Molina documented 70 attacks against Protestant churches, principally the closure of Christian NGOs, the seizing of their assets, repressive acts against pastors, and arbitrary closures of Protestant media outlets, universities and social projects. In December 2023, the regime arrested eleven Nicaraguan pastors associated with the Christian mission Mountain Gateway and two of their attorneys, and confiscated their coffee farm, 47 vehicles and farm buildings. The mission had attracted over one million Nicaraguans at recent events. The regime charged them with money laundering, a charge the mission said is based on misinformation. The Ortega regime has also tried to co-opt or enlist other evangelical leaders with economic benefits and privileges. Any church that criticizes the regime faces cancellation.
- Since 2018, the Ortega regime shut down 3500 civil society organizations, including many religious ministries, charities, and educational institutions. The organizations have had a long presence in the country in service of vulnerable communities.



*Bishop Rolando Alvarez praying while being impeded by Nicaraguan police from entering the episcopal curia.*



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