

# Nicaragua's Evolving Religious Freedom Crisis



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*President Daniel Ortega strategically embraced Catholicism in 2006 through his relationship with Bishop (later Cardinal) Obando y Bravo (Miguel Alvarez, AFP, Getty)*

## Introduction

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Following massive citizen protests in April 2018, Nicaragua’s reputation as a country where religious freedom was once respected has been eroded by the harsh authoritarian actions of President Daniel Ortega and his FSLN party. Government and paramilitary attacks on the faith community, particularly the Catholic Church, continued and intensified during the 2021 general elections campaign. The pressure has not let up in 2022. Through manipulation of the electoral process, arrests of opposition candidates and a rigged vote count in November, Ortega and his wife, Vice President Rosario Murillo, hijacked a new five-year term. The international community has condemned the Ortega-Murillo regime. Although the government has effectively eliminated independent NGOs, media outlets and citizen voices, the last endangered vestiges of a civil society – Nicaragua’s churches and other faith organizations – are leading the fight against political repression and human rights abuses.

In 2019, Outreach Aid to the Americas published the report “Nicaragua’s Evolving Religious Freedom Crisis,” which described the alarming decline in religious freedom in the country as a consequence of concerted efforts by the Ortega-Murillo regime to control, manipulate, intimidate and persecute segments of the faith community.<sup>1</sup> This report looks at how the state of religious freedom has deteriorated over the 2019-2022 period and offers recommendations to the U.S. government and others in the international community for supporting the important role of Nicaragua’s faith community in an eventual national reform process.

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1. This report is available online here: <https://www.oaaua.org/organization-resources/nicaraguas-evolving-religious-freedom-crisis/>

OAA recommends that the international development community consider assistance programs that educate Nicaraguan faith leaders on basic human rights, unify the faith community towards shared objectives, strengthen the role of faith organizations as essential civil society members, and support advocacy initiatives that promote religious freedom as an essential human right. Such programs need to be implemented with the security of implementers and local partners in mind, given recent actions of the Nicaraguan governments to use restrictive laws and harsh enforcement to contain and eliminate opposition voices and independent civil society.

## Nicaragua's Faithful Majority

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As OAA described in its 2019 paper, Nicaragua's constitution guarantees freedom of religion, and the government was generally considered to have respected religious freedom through 2010, near the end of Ortega's second term as president. The U.S. Department of State's International Religious Freedom (IRF) report from 2005, for example, stated that the Nicaraguan government's "policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion," and praised "the generally amicable relationship among religions in society that contributed to religious freedom."<sup>2</sup> In 2010, the IRF report noted the general well-being of religion in Nicaragua.

An M&R Consultants survey found that by 2017 the once dominant Catholic Church declined in membership to 46 percent of the population, while the proportion of evangelicals had risen to 33 percent, with 14 percent considering themselves faithful though non-affiliated and under four percent being Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Moravian Lutherans (mostly indigenous or Afro-Caribbean members, largely concentrated on the Caribbean Coast), and small numbers of Jews, Muslims and nonbelievers.<sup>3</sup> A 1995 study found that there were important political and class distinctions between Catholics and evangelical groups, with evangelical churches making greater inroads among poorer, particularly rural, Nicaraguans historically opposed to the 1979 Sandinista takeover. However, a July 2019 study by Borge and Associates found the proportion of evangelical Protestants grew (from the 2017 report period) to 41 percent while the proportion of Catholics decreased to 43 percent and religious believers without affiliation remained at 14 percent.

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2. Department of State (DOS) information in this paper is sourced from IRF reports for the corresponding years cited. The DOS announced in 1996 the creation of an Advisory Committee on Religious Freedom Abroad, partially as a result of lobbying by faith-based organizations. In 1998, Congress passed the International Religious Freedom Act, that mandated the establishment of the Office of International Religious Freedom to be headed by an Ambassador-at-Large. History of the Office of IRF - Fact Sheet. Office of IRF. Department of State. 2001.

3. 2021 IRF Report – Nicaragua. DOS.

Borge reports that other religious groups, mentioned above, constituted less than two percent of the population, suggesting increasing dominance by Catholic and evangelical faiths.<sup>4</sup>

Although year after year the State Department concluded that there was a healthy separation of church and state in Nicaragua, in fact a mutually beneficial alliance between Nicaragua's ruling family and the Catholic Church pre-dated the Sandinista takeover in 1979. The Somoza family had allowed some new Catholic missions and educational institutions to operate in Nicaragua with the tacit understanding that Catholic leaders avoid politics (e.g., not criticize the ruling family). A new constitution in 1950 staked out the freedom of religious choice while protecting broad Catholic interests. An appreciative Vatican took no issue with the Somoza political dynasty, just as the Church systematically pursued policies of stability in Latin America through other authoritarian leaders, including military-aligned dictatorships. But some Catholic priests in Nicaragua, concerned about inequality and human rights abuses under Anastasio Somoza, deviated from Church policy and supported the peasants' revolt. Following the 1979 Sandinista takeover, some more radical priests openly participated in the revolutionary government, including as cabinet ministers, despite Vatican pressure to avoid politics. Some priests later became disillusioned and parted ways with Ortega, who they saw as increasingly authoritarian.

## Ortega's (Brief) Embrace of Catholicism

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Ortega, who was educated in Catholic schools, was a self-professed Leninist and had surrounded himself by Sandinista atheists. The promotion of atheism never found traction, however, given the many Christians in the revolutionary movement and the fact that Nicaraguans as a whole were religious. The party's official policy from 1969 guaranteed religious freedom. In 2006, just before being elected to a second term, Ortega publicly embraced Catholicism and accepted spiritual mentorship from Bishop (later Cardinal) Miguel Obando y Bravo. Ortega then obtained the National Assembly's support for a strict anti-abortion law, thus cementing his relationship with Obando, and Ortega's family members were sometimes seen at mass.

Ortega's strategic embrace of Catholicism was short-lived, however. He soon declared the Catholic Church to be an enemy and the Ortegas ceased attending mass. The family turned to the evangelical church – Nicaragua's fastest growing religious demographic – and began attending services.<sup>5</sup>

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4. 2020 IRF Report – Nicaragua. DOS.

5. "Nicaragua: Ortega and Murillo Switch to Evangelicals," *Havana Times*, May 2019.

In 2019, Ortega's son and heir apparent, Laureano Ortega Murillo, and his wife, attended an evangelical service, receiving significant state-run media coverage.<sup>6</sup> Former Sandinista guerilla Henry Ruiz described Ortega as using "religion as a tool of ideological domination." Former deputy Eliseo Nunez said the "sudden religious conversion is a game where they (Ortega and Murillo) have no principles or ideologies. Their goal is to hold on to power, even if they have to kill and capture half of Nicaragua, or even convert to Scientology."



*Reyna Rueda, FSLN Mayor of Managua, and Laureano Ortega, son and political heir of Daniel Ortega, at a large gathering celebrating anniversaries of Radio Maranatha and the Rivers of Living Water Church. The photo circulated widely in Nicaragua. (Photo: 19 Digital)*

## The April 2018 Revolt and Attacks on Churches

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Government meddling with religious practice and its attacks on independent churches that were defending the human rights of Nicaraguans were occurring well before the April 2018 protests.<sup>7</sup> In the 2011 presidential campaign, the FSLN inserted religion into its revolutionary platform, adopting the slogan "Christianity, Socialism, Solidarity," and incorporating Christian symbols in its propaganda and later in public works. In 2013, the government introduced obligatory instruction in Christian values to the school curriculum. In 2014, a new family law entrusted community Family Committees (run by the FSLN) with the promotion of Christian values and, ominously, control over Catholic religious festivities.

7. Inter-American Human Rights Commission. "Nicaragua: Concentration of Power and Undermining of the Rule of Law," October 25, 2021.

Religious groups also began to report government harassment for their opposition to official policies. They reported the government selectively withheld benefits for religious operations and delayed customs clearance for imported church goods. Faith community harassment continued in 2015, and some government officials were quoted making anti-Muslim statements. In 2016, the government imposed new entry requirements on religious travelers, typically missionaries, citing concerns about such criminal activities as narcotrafficking. In the 2016-17 period, official retaliation continued against religious groups and other civil society organizations perceived to oppose the government, including blocking the registration of faith organizations and churches.

The State Department's 2018 IRF report documented the rapid decline in government respect for religious freedom following a series of destabilizing events. Prior to 2018, the State Department caveated such reports on declining religious freedom standards in Nicaragua by saying that "there were no societal actions" affecting religious freedom. That changed when austerity measures in April 2018 ignited widescale public demonstrations that were met with harsh repression by police and loyalist FSLN and paramilitary groups. In the weeks that followed, hundreds of Nicaraguans who opposed Ortega, including many students, were killed, imprisoned or went missing. The FSLN-controlled National Assembly passed repressive anti-terrorism measures to outlaw demonstrations and the public use of patriotic symbols such as the flag and its colors. There was U.S., regional and global condemnation of Ortega's human rights abuses, and broad sentiment in Nicaragua that he and his wife must step down, or failing that, that new elections be held. After a short period of dialogue mediated by mostly Catholic leaders, Ortega resisted these calls and consolidated control through party loyalists, including the leadership of the police and the military.

In August 2021, the Nicaraguan Center for Human Rights (CENIDH) wrote, "In 2020 the government's hatred of the Catholic Church has not stopped; on the contrary, it worsens every day, having reached critical levels." There were numerous reports that the Nicaraguan National Police (NNP), along with progovernment groups and ruling party members routinely harassed and intimidated religious leaders and damaged religious spaces, including in a July arson attack on the Immaculate Conception Cathedral in Managua that destroyed a 382-year-old image of Jesus Christ. Catholic leaders reported verbal insults, death threats, and institutional harassment by the police and groups associated with Ortega and Murillo. According to clergy, on several occasions the police and progovernment groups harassed Catholic worshippers after they attended church services in which they prayed for political prisoners, and they blocked parishioners' efforts to raise funds for families of political prisoners. Pro-government supporters also disrupted religious services by staging motorcycle races outside of churches during Sunday services.



*Father Edwin Roman, of Masaya, was one of several Catholic priests targeted by GON and pro-Sandinista groups. After receiving numerous threats, he left Nicaragua. (Alfred Zuniga, AP photo)*

Catholic and evangelical Protestant leaders who provided shelter and medical assistance to peaceful protesters in 2018 continued to experience government retribution, including slander, arbitrary investigations by government agencies, charges they claim were unfounded, withholding of tax exemptions, reduction in budget appropriations, and denying of religious services for political prisoners. The government ordered electric and water companies to cut services to churches led by priests opposed to the government, revoked the visas of at least two foreign priests after they criticized the government, and denied or revoked the permits of schools and clinics run by antigovernment bishops. Government supporters interrupted funerals and desecrated gravesites of protesters. CENIDH wrote in a report on attacks on Catholic churches in 2019 and 2020, that “this case reflects the corrupt and fallacious way in which the Ortega Murillo regime permits impunity against those they consider ‘their political or public enemies,’ crimes that they themselves perversely orchestrate.”

In June 2022, a *Observatorio Pro Transparencia y Anticorrupción* report on Catholic persecution documented 190 attacks on the faith community since 2018.<sup>8</sup> Categories of attacks included graffiti on church walls; aggressions and threats against Catholic priests, bishops and lay persons; the erection of official obstacles to Catholic non-profits; aggressive messages against priests and other senior clergy by Ortega and Murillo; and desecrations, thefts and other criminal acts against churches.

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8. "Estudio revela 190 ataques contra la Iglesia católica en los últimos cuatro años." *Confidencial*, June 7, 2022.

When the Nicaraguan government severed diplomatic ties with Taiwan on December 9, 2021, and recognized the People's Republic of China (PRC), Taiwan attempted to donate its former embassy building to the Managua Catholic Archdiocese.<sup>9</sup> The Ortega administration blocked Taiwan's donation, however, and gave the property to the PRC, stating it supported a one-China policy, that all of Taiwan's properties belonged to the PRC and that it invalidated the donation.

## Ortega's Attack on Independent Civil Society

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Following the citizen protests of April 2018, Ortega, who in the past used soft repression to control civil society, resorted to harsher measures. He cancelled the registration of several prominent civil society organizations (CSOs), detaining their leaders and confiscated their assets. Many had been USAID and other donor grant recipients. Over the last 20 years, Ortega and allied Sandinistas bought up radio, TV and print outlets, giving the government domination of news sources. In the months following the April 2018 revolt, Ortega went after remaining independent outlets, forcing many to close, killed at least one journalist and forced others to flee the country. The attacks continue. In the first four months of 2022, Nicaragua's Association of Independent Journalists and Communicators registered 175 government attacks against freedom of expression, including the jailing of seven prominent journalists and the killing of one in Estelí.<sup>9</sup> The government also made it difficult for international NGOs, who often depend on local NGO partner arrangements, to operate, including by blocking imported relief goods, requiring some to register as foreign agents, and deregistering 163 non-government entities.

As shown in other countries, when authoritarian governments repress civil society organizations, the faith community often becomes the last bastion of citizen defense. As Nicaraguans sought refuge in Catholic churches and the homes of evangelical families after the 2018 government and paramilitary counter-offensive, the Catholic church leadership emerged as human rights defenders and negotiators for a peaceful dialogue. Leaders like Managua Auxiliary Bishop Baez and Cardinal Leopoldo Brenes took on prominent leadership roles. Many priests who sheltered individuals in their churches, came under attack by paramilitaries. There was solidarity on the part of some Protestant pastors, but the most visible supporters to those opposed to the government were Catholic leaders.

The regime ramped up its repression of Nicaragua civil society following the fraudulent 2021 elections. Since the April 2018 protests and through early June 2022, the government or National Assembly had shut down 400 local NGOs – over 300 of which

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9. "Journalists register 175 attacks on press freedom in Nicaragua." *The LA News*, May 28, 2022.



were closed in 2022 - while the Assembly took actions to tighten control the country's universities (their students had been prominent demonstrators – and regime victims – in 2018).<sup>10 11</sup> Most of the affected NGOs work on human rights issues and carry out development, social and cultural work. Heaping on other anti-opposition legislation such as the cybercrimes and sovereignty laws passed over the last 16 months, the National Assembly passed the reform of a law that further regulates and restricts the activities of NGOs.

Because the UN and other observers prioritize the role of civil society in democratic processes, it is not clear whether Ortega has a plan for “replacing” the CSOs that he has banned. In Cuba, the regime has created mass civil society proxy organizations that operate under its control to deflect criticism that such organizations do not exist in Cuba (truly independent CSOs are effectively illegal). These include the Federation of Cuban Women, the National Association of Small Farmers, the Workers' Central Union of Cuba and the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution. In the religious sphere the Cuban regime has created or controls the Cuban Council of Churches, the Yoruba (or “Santería”) Cultural Association, the Islamic League of Cuba, and Pastors for Peace – all of which the government props up as a façade of independent civil society and interfaith cooperation.[1]

[1] OAA internal program notes.



*Monsignor Rolando José Álvarez (left), Bishop of Matagalpa, and Cardinal Leopoldo Brenes (right), Archbishop of Managua, at a press conference in 2018. (EFE/Jorge Torres)*

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10. “Nicaragua: New law heralds damaging crackdown on civil society, UN warns,” UN News, May 9, 2022.
  11. “Nicaragua cancels nearly 200 NGOs in sweeping purge of civil society,” The Guardian, June 2, 2022.

- **Freedom to worship and assemble:** the GON and GON-aligned groups have impeded Catholics from worshipping, including by entering churches, blocking access, and using tactics such as music and political speeches through loudspeakers near churches. These groups also vandalized churches and intimidated and physically attacked Catholic priests and other faith leaders.
- **Right to use of religious symbols:** the Sandinistas have utilized Christian symbols even though the constitution does not recognize a state religion. GON-affiliated groups vandalized religious places and artifacts. They have made copies of patron saints and used religious language, beliefs and traditions for political purposes. They have politicized religious festivities and required government workers and students to participate in government prioritized religious events.
- **Right to teach, write or disseminate religious materials:** the GON has controlled and some cases denied Catholic and Protestant missionaries' access through the visa approval process.
- **Registration to guarantee exercise of religion:** the GON has used registration, including the granting of land titles, to selectively allow or deny religious groups to practice as well as to reward political allies.
- **Right to establish and maintain appropriate charitable and humanitarian institutions:** Caritas and other organizations are being impeded from operating, including by blocking their imported goods and through deregistration. Religious groups say that the fact that their organizations are bureaucratically treated like NGOs makes them more vulnerable to discrimination.
- **Discrimination on basis of religion:** religious leaders accuse the GON of slandering, stigmatizing and urging its followers to retaliate against certain churches and clergy. There has been financial retribution against some churches through the removal of tax exemptions, reallocation of government funding, and targeting by the Financial Analysis Unit for money laundering. (It is worth watching to see if certain religious groups get improved access to GON services - like land titling, which has already occurred - similar to the priority that Sandinista party members have historically received as determined by FSLN-controlled community committees.)

- **When the state recognizes an official religion, it shall not impair the practice of other religions:** though not the official religion, Catholicism has historically held a dominant role in the country. In today's more diverse religious landscape, the current government invokes Christianity and, increasingly, evangelicalism in particular. The Ministry of Education requires that the education curriculum contain Christian principles. The GON requires government workers and students to participate in Christian festivities and assigns Family Committees to promote Christianity. Moreover, the FSLN uses Christian terms in its political slogans and uses Christian symbols in propaganda and public works.
- **Right of prisoners to practice their faith:** Catholic leaders have reported and continue to report that they have been impeded from administering to prisoners.

## An Opportunity for FoRB Advocates

Like other advocates for international religious freedom, OAA appreciates the importance of a faith community having unity in the face of attacks on religious freedom. Cuba, a model of authoritarianism for the Ortega dictatorship and a country where OAA has worked for 25 years to support democracy, development and faith initiatives, is the best regional example of an authoritarian government undermining unity among those in the faith community through various means, including by rewarding churches that are cooperative while punishing those that criticize the regime, and through the arbitrary application of a number of administrative decrees and laws that enable the state to treat religious dissidents as common criminals.

Clearly Nicaragua's divided faith community needs technical assistance to provide a platform for promoting an open society where the faith community is free of government interference, and where churches can be advocates for civil society and human rights. And while many clergy members and other religious leaders are competent to lead their congregations to speak out on important political and social issues, they also can learn from the experience of other countries about the value of a healthy separation of church and state and how this can support fundamental human rights. As such, it is recommended that faith leader education programs draw on international experience and international, including UN, standards for freedom of religion or belief and human rights. These elements are important for developing a strategy for unifying faith leaders, strengthening religious organizations as effective members of civil society, and advocating for religious freedom as a foundational human right.

In addition to providing humanitarian relief and development assistance, OAA's mission is to promote religious freedom and related human rights in Latin America and the Caribbean. OAA does this through supporting projects that promote human rights and build civil society, focusing on authoritarian countries with egregious rights violations, such as Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela.



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