

# The State of Religious Freedom in: Nicaragua



Country Factsheet

Fall 2023

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

- Under the dictatorship of Daniel Ortega, violations of human rights, including religious freedom, has become institutionalized in Nicaragua.
- Any religious leader seen as critical of the government is harassed or pressured to the point of violence. Those affected do not have legitimate access to recourse or mechanism to denounce illegal actions against them.
- In 2018 the Catholic Church in Nicaragua strongly criticized the Ortega regime for its violent repression of citizens protesting for social reforms. Priests opened their churches to peaceful protesters, including students, creating safe havens from violent police and paramilitaries.
- Since then, the Catholic Church has become a defiant voice for Nicaraguans' demands for justice and human rights, denouncing illegality, abuses of power, and violations of the rights and dignity of Nicaraguans.
- The Ortega regime has responded with a policy of relentless hostility toward the Catholic Church. In March of this year it closed the Vatican's embassy in Managua, making Nicaragua the first country in the Americas to suspend relations with the Vatican in more than 162 years.
- The Ortega regime, including at times Ortega himself and his wife Rosario Murillo, the vice president, have called Catholic priests "terrorists" and accused them of being traitors and "coup plotters."
- From April 2018 to March of this year, the Catholic Church has been the target of 529 attacks, including the burning of the Managua Cathedral in 2020.

- The Ortega regime has unjustly jailed more than a dozen Catholic clergy. This includes Monsignor Rolando Álvarez, the Bishop of the Diocese of Matagalpa, who managed several Catholic radio stations, which authorities shut down, and has been critical of the regime's human rights abuses.
- In February this year Bishop Álvarez was sentenced, without trial, to 26 years in prison after he refused to be exiled with more than 200 other political prisoners. He has been charged with treason, undermining national integrity, and spreading false news.
- The Ortega regime has 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.
- Since 2018 the Ortega regime has shut down 3,394 civil society organizations, including many Catholic and Evangelical ministries, charities, and educational institutions, many of which have had a long presence in the country and served vulnerable communities.
- In August this year, the Ortega regime confiscated the Central American University in Managua, a prestigious university run by the Jesuits, accusing it of being a “center of terrorism.” Authorities seized its assets and suspended classes, leaving thousands of students in limbo.
- The practice of Catholicism has been effectively criminalized for Nicaraguans. State authorities have repeatedly prohibited traditional celebrations and processions from taking place and maintain constant surveillance of parishes and churches. Just in Holy Week 2023, more than 3,000 processions were prohibited throughout Nicaragua.
- The Ortega regime has taken various measures to co-opt or enlist the support of evangelical leaders and churches, including providing economic benefits and privileges, such as the use of public spaces and buildings for religious events. However, churches that criticize or challenge the regime face cancellation.



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