

# NICARAGUA 2021 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 media reports, the Nicaraguan National Police (NNP) and progovernment groups on several occasions harassed Catholic worshippers and impeded masses held in commemoration of individuals killed during 2018 prodemocracy protests. Government authorities disrupted religious services by staging vendor fairs and playing loud music outside churches during Sunday services. Throughout the year, President Daniel Ortega and Vice President and First Lady Rosario Murillo verbally harassed priests and bishops, labelled them “terrorists in cassocks” and “coup-plotters,” and accused them of committing crimes. In August, a journalist of independent daily newspaper *La Prensa* said the Ortega-Murillo government had engaged in “open war” against the Catholic Church since April 2018. According to media, starting on October 26, the NNP surrounded the home of Cardinal Leopoldo Jose Brenes, the Archbishop of Managua; in September, police started monitoring Brenes’ home and photographed all individuals who entered, including priests. During the year, there were frequent reports that the NNP – along with progovernment groups (commonly known as parapolice), ruling party (Sandinista National Liberation Front, or FSLN) members, and individuals associated with Ortega and Murillo – conducted widespread, systematic harassment of religious leaders and worshippers. Catholic 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 said were unfounded, withholding of tax exemptions, and denial of religious services for political prisoners, according to Catholic clergy. After the government broke diplomatic ties with Taiwan on December 9 and recognized the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Taiwan donated its former embassy building to the Archdiocese of Managua. On December 26, however, the Ortega administration blocked Taiwan’s donation and gave the property to the PRC, stating it supported a one-China policy. The government also seized the passport of a Nicaraguan priest, revoked the visas of at least two foreign priests after they criticized the government, and drastically reduced public funding to a university run by a Catholic bishop critical of the government. The government revoked the broadcasting licenses of an evangelical Protestant television and radio station after the station owner, also a presidential candidate, denounced election irregularities in November.

Reported antichurch activities included verbal insults, death threats, burglary of Catholic religious items, and unlawful entry into Catholic churches. In January, media reported that a woman stole the keys of the Santissima of the Calvario Church in Masaya, verbally harassed parish priest Alexander Ruiz and threw soda in his face. In May, the Diocese of Esteli reported that unidentified vandals had beheaded the statue of Monsignor Jose del Carmen Suazo, a well-known priest who died in 2015, on the road connecting the Shrine of Our Lady of Caculai and Somoto.

On November 16, the President of the United States proclaimed, “Members of the Nicaraguan National Police (NNP), along with violent mobs of pro-government supporters also controlled by government actors, have attacked religious institutions in retaliation for their support for political and religious leaders.” On October 7, the Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs tweeted, “Ortega’s dangerous criticism of Catholic bishops shows his fear of independent Nicaraguan voices and willingness to attack all dissent. We stand for religious freedom and free expression everywhere and we stand with civil society in Nicaragua.” Early in the year, the U.S. embassy requested meetings with government officials but received no response. The Ambassador and embassy officials met regularly with a wide variety of religious leaders of the Catholic Church, evangelical Protestant groups, the Moravian Lutheran Church, Muslim groups, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), and the Jewish community to discuss restrictions on religious freedom and to foster religious tolerance.

On November 15, 2021 in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State again 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 6.2 million (midyear 2021). 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 2019 by Borge and Associates, the percentage of evangelical Protestants is increasing, and the percentage of Catholics is 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, 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. Most 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 Interior 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 is not required to register as a religious group 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.

According to a 2020 law, organizations and persons receiving resources of foreign origin must not participate in internal politics. If the government finds any person or entity in violation of the law, the person or entity could be fined, imprisoned, or have their assets frozen or confiscated. The law excludes accredited religious organizations from the requirement to register with the Ministry of Interior. By

law, those receiving exemptions may not participate in activities that would interfere in the country's affairs.

Ministry of Education regulations for primary school education establish that the educational goals and curriculum for elementary grade students and teachers follow the government's "Christian, Socialist, and Solidarity" principles. The government's 2021-26 human development policy recognizes the practice of religious activities as part of the country's cultural traditions. The law establishes education in the country as secular but recognizes the right of private schools to be religiously oriented.

Missionaries 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 Interior 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 November, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) granted Bishop Abelardo Mata (who retired in July) precautionary (protective) measures – in which the IACHR requests that a state serve a protective function and protect a person from irreparable harm – after it received reports from human rights organizations that Mata was a victim of constant harassment and had received death threats. Mata had been an outspoken critic of government violations of human rights, including religious freedom, since before 2018. The commission stated in its decision that "the information presented demonstrates prima facie that the persons identified are in a serious and urgent situation, since their rights to life and personal integrity are at risk of irreparable harm."

According to media reports, Father Edwing Roman, a Catholic 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 media, during the voter registration process in July ahead of the November election, a government supporter verbally harassed Father Roman in Masaya at his local voting center. The man shouted at Father Roman, "You are a criminal, a murderer!" On August 3, Roman traveled to Miami and said he had

initially planned to return within 15 days. He delayed his return, however, after Vice President Murillo made statements to local media on August 6 calling him “that priest from Masaya” and a “criminal.” By year’s end, Roman had not returned to the country.

In April, the Church of Saint Michael in Masaya celebrated Mass in memory of Alvaro Gomez, a prodemocracy protester killed by an unidentified shooter in 2018. Reports stated that dozens of police stationed in front of the church intimidated worshippers as they entered the service to dissuade them from attending Mass. In the same month in Esteli, Catholic clergy closed the cathedral after parapolice harassed and intimidated worshippers attempting to hold Mass in commemoration of Franco Valdivia, reportedly killed by an unidentified sniper during the 2018 civic protests. Police prevented worshippers from entering the church and took Valdivia’s relatives to the police station, where reportedly police detained them for a few hours, beat them, ordered them to strip, and verbally threatened them. Also in April, a group of government supporters interrupted Mass in Our Lady of Rosary Church in Chinandega chanting, “Long Live Daniel!” in reference to President Ortega.

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. Other Catholic leaders privately said they felt fear and intimidation when celebrating Mass. Clergy reported police and parapolice forces congregated at the entrance of churches and took pictures to intimidate priests and churchgoers in several cities throughout the country, including Managua, Masaya, Matagalpa, and Esteli. Clergy also reported drones flying over churches and adjacent parking lots. In October, Father Vicente Martinez told media that the Matagalpa police chief visited him the day after a video of his Sunday homily went viral. In his homily, Martinez criticized the electoral process. Martinez said that, although the police chief called it a “courtesy visit,” “the message [threat] was clear.”

In September, local media reported a large vendor fair appeared on the main public road in front of Saint Peter’s Cathedral in Matagalpa. Such fairs require authorization from the FSLN-controlled Matagalpa City Hall and police. The vendors installed tents in front of and around the cathedral, making access to the church difficult. Music played loudly over speakers and interrupted the regularly scheduled church services.

Catholic clergy continued to report that the government denied access to prisons following the 2018 prodemocracy uprising. Reportedly only one priest was allowed access to prisons during the year. Prior to April 2018, clergy said they regularly entered prisons to celebrate Mass and provide communion and confession to detainees. According to human rights organizations, from May to October, police imprisoned 39 citizens, including opposition leaders, journalists, and human rights defenders. Human rights organizations described their detention as arbitrary and categorized them as political prisoners. Several of these prisoners requested Bibles through family visits, but prison authorities denied these requests.

Through clergy homilies and pastoral letters, the Catholic Church, including priests throughout the country, continued to speak out against violence on the part of the government and progovernment groups, also denouncing the lack of democratic institutions. On October 15, the Justice and Peace Commission of the Archdiocese of Managua issued a written statement that said, “A valuable opportunity to correct the country’s course was missed,” referencing the November 7 general election. On August 10, the commission said the Catholic Church had been subject to threats in previous months as well as “insults to priests and bishops, limitations on visas or residence permits of foreign priests, harassment of the lay faithful, and other illegal and intimidating actions.” The commission’s statement said the difficulties faced by the Catholic Church took place amid a lack of conditions for a free and fair election in November. *La Prensa* in August said that the harassment and threats made against the Catholic Church came from FSLN political operatives affiliated with the Ortega-Murillo government. On June 8, the commission wrote that “no one has the authority to deprive individuals of their rights,” referring to the arbitrary arrests of presidential hopefuls, opposition leaders, businesspersons, students, and civil society leaders beginning in May.

According to media, the NNP on October 26 began surrounding the home of Cardinal Brenes, a tactic observers said the government often used to intimidate opposition leaders. In September, police began monitoring Brenes’ home and photographing all individuals who entered, including priests.

According to *La Prensa* on August 11, “The Ortega regime has engaged in an open war against the Catholic Church since April 2018.” In February, a priest quoted in local media said the Ortega administration had increased its persecution of the population and the Catholic Church. He said, “We have our hands up, we are unarmed against these people [the government].”

In multiple speeches during the year, President Ortega and Vice President Murillo criticized Catholic clergy and accused the Catholic Church of having backed an alleged “coup” against the Ortega-Murillo government in 2018. On October 5, Ortega called Catholic bishops “terrorists” during his campaign launch speech ahead of the November general election. On September 6, Ortega again referred to Catholic priests as “terrorists in cassocks.” In a July 30 speech, Ortega spoke of colonization, stating, “Along with the cross, the sword; along with the cross, robbery; along with the cross, the most brutal crimes against our ancestors.” He added, “Pharisees have not disappeared, they are still there and go around talking as if they were saints, and all you have to do is look and what you find is filth, where there is no respect for God.” Local media interpreted Ortega’s remarks as a clear attack on Catholic clergy.

On June 10, Murillo said during a radio address that Catholic clergy spread “death” and approved of “robbery and theft.” In August, radio commentator William Grigsby, commonly considered an unofficial spokesperson for the government, accused Catholic bishops of conspiring with the U.S. and Spanish ambassadors in Nicaragua to overthrow the Ortega-Murillo government. On June 9, Grigsby said during his radio program that “cassock wearers were next,” alluding to the government’s wave of arbitrary detentions of opposition leaders, journalists, and human rights defenders that began in late May.

In June, Edwin Suarez, a well-known progovernment social media activist with 16,000 Twitter followers, tweeted, “In Nicaragua the Catholic hierarchy is not only a participant in the attempted coup, it is also an actor and director of events of serious violations of the rights of the people since 2015, blackmailing Ortega so that he would hand over power to them.”

On August 11, FSLN National Assembly member Wilfredo Navarro gave an extensive interview to a local televised program in which he singled out Cardinal Brenes and several bishops, calling them “servants of the devil.” Navarro also indirectly accused Father Roman (calling him “that priest from Masaya”) of covering up the alleged killing of a policeman in 2018 by prodemocracy protesters. During the same interview, Navarro said he believed the Catholic Church could face criminal charges for a statement the Archdiocese of Managua Peace and Justice Commission issued on August 10. Navarro said he believed the commission had committed an electoral crime by encouraging voter abstention in the November national election. Catholic leaders stated that the government denied citizens their right to choose their leader because potential opposition candidates had been disqualified or imprisoned.

According to news reports, when the government broke diplomatic ties with Taiwan on December 9 and recognized the People's Republic of China (PRC), Taiwan attempted to donate its former embassy building to the Managua Archdiocese. On December 26, however, the Ortega administration blocked Taiwan's donation and gave the property to the PRC, stating it supported a one-China policy. The Attorney General's Office issued a statement saying all of Taiwan's properties belonged to the PRC and invalidated the donation to the Managua Archdiocese. Taiwan's Foreign Relations Ministry condemned the confiscation of the property and the "arbitrary obstruction by the Nicaraguan government of the symbolic sale of its property to the Nicaraguan Catholic Church."

On November 17, the government abolished the position of the Dean of the Diplomatic Corps, designated exclusively to the Holy See representative by presidential decree since 2000. The government said the decision to remove this position would foster equal treatment among chiefs of mission. Some international relations experts said they believed the change was a political move reflecting the growing tension between the Catholic Church and the government.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Catholic Church continued to suspend all religious activities that traditionally generated large crowds such as the celebration of Saint Dominic in Managua and the pilgrimage to Rivas. Notwithstanding the pandemic, the government once again organized and sponsored local religious activities through FSLN-controlled municipal governments, including an August festival in Managua honoring Saint Dominic, the annual pilgrimage to Rivas, the annual celebration of Saint Lazarus in Masaya in March, and the Stations of the Cross in Granada, all of which reportedly garnered hundreds of participants. Vice President Murillo promoted the large gatherings in her daily radio remarks. During the Saint Dominic celebration, the government used a replica image of the statue of Saint Dominic normally carried in a Catholic procession, and the individuals carrying the replica image wore the official colors of the ruling Sandinista party. Catholic clergy said the government manipulated religious traditions and symbols to coopt powerful religious imagery and portray normalcy in a country ravaged by COVID-19 and sociopolitical upheaval. According to a clerical source, the government sought to confuse a segment of the Catholic population and dilute the Catholic Church's authority by ignoring the Catholic leadership's recommendations to suspend large activities and prevent the spread of COVID-19.

According to press reports, on November 9, the government cancelled the operating license of evangelical Protestant television Channel 21, the only channel



in the country that since 1991 exclusively broadcast local and foreign evangelical programs. Telecommunications regulator TELCOR cited alleged irregularities in Channel 21's operations after TELCOR officials made an unannounced visit to the television station. TELCOR revoked Channel 21's broadcasting license and took the channel off the air the same day. Channel 21 denounced what it called the government's arbitrary decision to revoke its license. TELCOR also revoked the operating license of evangelical Protestant radio station Nexo 89.5 FM the same day. Channel 21 and Nexo 89.5 FM were owned by family members of evangelical pastor Guillermo Osorno, who ran as presidential candidate in the November election. The closure of the channel and radio station occurred the day after Osorno gave a press conference in which he denounced irregularities in the electoral process.

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.

On March 8, the Justice and Peace Commission of the Archdiocese of Managua issued a statement expressing concern regarding new government limitations on residence permits for missionaries. Local media reported that immigration authorities denied entry to two Franciscan friars, Santos Fabian Mejia Sagastume and Javier Lemus, who had resided in the country as missionaries for many years and were citizens of El Salvador. Immigration authorities denied entry to Mejia Sagastume on January 31. They notified him that he was "not eligible for entry" and suspended his residency. On February 16, immigration authorities also denied Lemus entry into the country.

On April 30, immigration authorities notified Friar Damian de Cosme Muratori, originally from Italy and who had lived and served in Nicaragua for 45 years, that his residence permit would not be renewed and that he was only authorized a 90-day stay in the country. Muratori told media he had renewed his residence permit on an annual basis without problems since 1976. Muratori received two 90-day extensions to stay in the country. In both instances, his resident status remained uncertain until the day before his extensions expired, at which point immigration authorities would inform him of a decision to renew his residency, grant an extended 90-day stay, or deport him from the country. He remained in the country at year's end.

In November, local media reported that immigration authorities at Managua International Airport had seized Monsignor Silvio Fonseca's passport and did not allow him to leave the country. Immigration authorities reportedly told Fonseca that his passport failed to scan properly, but Fonseca said he had used the same passport without any problems when he traveled to the United States four months prior.

Religiously affiliated NGOs continued to face operational limitations. The Interior Ministry continued to deny or delay legally required annual operations permits and tax exemption approvals. Sources reported that the Interior Ministry continued to deny Caritas, an international Catholic NGO accredited to the country since 1965, its legally entitled tax exemptions, a practice since 2018. Since 2019, Caritas informed donors to stop sending donations because it was unable to retrieve them from Customs. Caritas continued to report that since 2018, it had not received its annually renewable certificate from the Ministry of Interior, which technically authorized it to operate in the country. Caritas sources continued to say the failure to renew the certificate impeded it from receiving tax exemptions, prohibited the importation of materials, and hindered its ability to bring in medical missions as part of its social services. Caritas further reduced its social services because of harassment from government supporters in the communities where it worked.

Bishop Mata told press in January that the government had reduced by 20 million cordobas (\$563,000) the allocated budget for the Universidad Catolica del Tropicico Seco, a private university run by Mata. Mata stated that the government had reduced the funds, representing more than a 50 percent decrease, in retaliation for his public criticism of the Ortega-Murillo administration. Mata said the stark reduction in funds left the university unable to grant new scholarships for the academic year, and it was struggling to maintain existing scholarships.

Catholic clergy continued to say they believed the government directed or encouraged vandalism and desecration of churches by individuals not directly affiliated with it. According to local media, on May 25, unidentified individuals broke into a Catholic church in the community of San Andres in Boaco and destroyed sacred images. Media reported that on April 11, unidentified individuals broke into Our Lady of Candelaria Church in Chinandega, broke sacred images, and stole money designated for the construction of church buildings.

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

In January, media reported that a woman stole the keys of the Santissima of the Calvario Church in Masaya, verbally harassed parish priest Alexander Ruiz, and threw soda in his face. In May, the Diocese of Esteli reported that unidentified vandals had beheaded the statue of Monsignor Jose del Carmen Suazo, a well-known priest who died in 2015, on the road connecting the Shrine of Our Lady of Cacula and Somoto. In October, Catholic priest Father Bismarck Conde told local media that a thief broke into Our Lady of the Assumption Church in Masaya and stole money from it.

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

On November 16, the President of the United States proclaimed, “Members of the Nicaraguan National Police (NNP), along with violent mobs of progovernment supporters also controlled by government actors, have attacked religious institutions in retaliation for their support for political and religious leaders.” On October 7, the Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs tweeted, “Ortega’s dangerous criticism of Catholic bishops shows his fear of independent Nicaraguan voices and willingness to attack all dissent. We stand for religious freedom and free expression everywhere and we stand with civil society in Nicaragua.” Early in the year, the embassy requested meetings with government officials but received no response.

The Ambassador and embassy officials met regularly with senior religious leaders of the Catholic Church, evangelical Protestant groups, the Moravian Lutheran Church, the Nicaraguan Islamic Association, the Church of Jesus Christ, and the Jewish community. At these meetings, embassy representatives discussed concerns regarding the politicization of religion, governmental retaliation against politically active religious groups, and limitations on the freedom of religion and fostering diversity and tolerance.

On November 15, 2021 in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State again placed Nicaragua on the Special Watch List for having engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom.