



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

# COUNTRY UPDATE: NICARAGUA

June 2024

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### USCIRF's Mission

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*To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.*

By Luke Wilson, Researcher

## Nicaragua's Full-Scale Crackdown on Catholic and Protestant Communities

### Introduction

Nicaragua's social and political crisis, which began in April 2018 with the government's violent repression of peaceful protests, has had devastating ramifications for Catholics and Protestants. President Daniel Ortega, his wife, Vice President Rosario Murillo, and their party, the Sandinista National Liberation Front, continue to exercise authoritarian control over the government. The government initially targeted the Catholic Church because it provided sanctuary to demonstrators, and clergy voiced opposition to the government's human rights abuses. More recently, the government's actions have led to full-scale shuttering of the Church's activities, mass imprisonments, and the targeting of multiple other religious groups.

The Ortega-Murillo regime has engaged in increasingly repressive actions against Protestant communities as it seeks to tighten its grip on power. The regime has threatened members of the Evangelical Church and the Moravian Church, prohibited or conspicuously monitored their religious ceremonies and houses of worship, and vandalized their religious sites. The regime also oversees a repressive legal framework that permits the government to wrongfully arrest and imprison religious leaders and laypeople and arbitrarily cancel the legal status and seize the property of religious organizations.

This country update summarizes Nicaragua's repressive legal framework, the Ortega-Murillo regime's religious freedom violations against the Catholic and Protestant communities, and international efforts to hold violators accountable.

### Nicaragua's Legal Framework

Nicaragua's government uses laws related to cybercrimes, financial crimes, legal registration for not-for-profit organizations, and sovereignty and self-determination to harshly punish religious leaders and laypeople and arbitrarily shutter religious organizations.

[\*Law No. 1042\*](#) on cybercrimes criminalizes spreading "false news." The United Nations (UN) special rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression and other UN human rights experts [\*noted\*](#) that the provision is inconsistent with international human rights law. In February 2023, the Nicaraguan government sentenced Bishop [\*Rolando Álvarez\*](#) to 26 years' imprisonment and stripped him of his citizenship for offenses including



cybercrimes following his criticism of the government’s human rights record and its closure of several Catholic radio stations. In April 2023, the Nicaraguan government arrested journalist [Victor Ticay](#) for recording a banned Easter celebration in Nandaime and posting the footage online. In May 2023, prosecutors charged Ticay with “spreading false news” and “undermining national integrity,” and in August 2023 the court sentenced him to eight years’ imprisonment.

[Law No. 977](#) purports to combat money laundering, financing terrorism, and financing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. However, as the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights [warned](#), the legislation severely restricts the functioning of civil society by imposing onerous registration requirements, requiring government approval for activities, and mandating extensive financial reporting. It also “prohibits NGOs from conducting political proselytizing and party politics, without clearly defining what is meant by such activities.” In June 2023, the Nicaraguan government, as part of its intense crackdown on the Catholic Church, [accused](#) the Estelí branch of the Catholic charity Caritas of money laundering. In December 2023, amid a [wave](#) of arbitrary arrests of religious leaders and laypeople, the government wrongfully sentenced six former Caritas of Estelí employees to six years’ imprisonment on money laundering charges.

[Law No. 1115](#) imposes further registration and reporting requirements on not-for-profit organizations and provides for severe administrative punishments for failure to comply. UN human rights experts [noted](#) with concern that the Nicaraguan government has used the law to “make it difficult for civil society organizations to register and pursue their activities.” In August 2023, the Nicaraguan government used Law No. 1115 to arbitrarily [cancel](#) the legal status of the Order of Jesuits.

[Law No. 1055](#) on independence, sovereignty, and self-determination [prohibits](#) “traitors” from running for public office in Nicaragua. Although Law No. 1055 does not mandate imprisonment for “traitors,” Article 410 of the [Penal Code](#) does, and the Nicaraguan government has used the two laws in tandem to persecute religious leaders and laypeople. In May 2023, the Nicaraguan government [arrested](#) Father [Jamie Iván Montesinos Saucedá](#) for allegedly violating Law No. 1055. In October 2023, he was part of a group of clergymen the Ortega-Murillo regime [exiled](#) to the Vatican.

### Persecution of the Catholic Church

The Nicaraguan government’s intense crackdown against the Catholic Church for its religious freedom and human rights advocacy is ongoing. The Ortega-Murillo regime continues to arbitrarily arrest, imprison, and exile Catholic clergymen and laypeople. The regime also continues to cancel the legal status of Catholic organizations, confiscate their property, and harass and intimidate peaceful worshippers.

## Arrest, Imprisonment, and Exile of Members of the Catholic Church

The Nicaraguan government's campaign to arrest, imprison, and exile Catholic clergy and laypeople, or those perceived to be Catholic, continued throughout 2023 and persisted into 2024. In April 2023, police arrested [Jimmy Antonio Bonilla](#) and [Emmanuel Gutiérrez](#) for participating in a Catholic Holy Week procession. In May, police arrested Father [Eugenio Rodríguez Benavides](#), Father [Leonardo Guevara Gutiérrez](#), and Father [Jaime Iván Montesinos Saucedo](#). In June, authorities arrested [Freylin Axarael Moreno Ponce](#) after he asked for prayers for Bishop Álvarez on social media. In July, the government arrested Father [Fernando Zamora Silva](#). In August, police arrested [Alex Javier Gómez Bustos](#) and [Evelyn Guillén](#) for displaying a poster asking for Bishop Álvarez's freedom during patron saint festivities. Also in August, the police arrested former Catholic university students [Adela Tercero](#) and [Gabriela Morales](#). Between September and October, the government arrested nine more members of the Catholic Church. Those detained include Father [Osman José Amador Guillén](#), who was known to pray for Bishop Rolando Álvarez, Father [Álvaro Toledo](#), who spoke out about the government's wrongful imprisonment of priests, and Father [Yesner Cipriano Pineda Meneses](#), who was arrested alongside laypeople [Salvador Paguaga](#) and [María Asunción Salgado](#) while they were observing the Virgin of the Rosary. On October 18, the Ortega-Murillo government [exiled](#) most of the clergymen detained since May 2023 to the Vatican. The laypeople arrested remain arbitrarily detained.

In the days leading up to and following Christmas 2023, the authorities conducted an additional wave of arbitrary detention, imprisoning many more clergymen and laypeople. On November 29, the authorities arrested [Freddy Quezada](#), a professor who criticized the government's treatment of Bishop Álvarez. On December 20, the police arrested Bishop [Isidro Mora](#) after he reportedly offered prayers for Bishop Álvarez. Two seminarians, [Alester Sáenz](#) and [Tony Palacios](#), were arrested alongside Bishop Mora. On December 24, the government wrongfully sentenced six former Caritas of Estelí employees to six years' imprisonment on dubious money laundering charges. On December 26, the police arrested Father [Pablo Villafranca](#), who was known to pray for Bishop Álvarez. On December 28, police arrested Father [Héctor Treminio](#), Father [Fernando Calero](#), Father [Carlos Avilés](#), and Vicar [Marcos Díaz Prado](#). On or around December 29, the police arrested

Vicar [Silvio Fonseca](#), who criticized the government's religious freedom violations, as well as Father [Mykel Moterrey](#), Father [Raúl Zamora](#), Father [Jader Hernández](#), Father [Ervin López](#), and Father [Miguel Mántica](#). On or around December 30, the police arrested Father [Gerardo Rodríguez](#). On January 1, 2024, the police arrested [Carlos Alberto Bojorge Martínez](#) after he yelled "Long live the Catholic Church!" when the mass he was attending concluded. On January 2, the police arrested seminarian [Francisco Odorico Castilblanco](#). On January 14, some of the clergymen and seminarians arrested during the Christmas crackdown were [exiled](#) to the Vatican. The laypeople remain arbitrarily detained.

In January 2024, Nicaragua exiled Bishop [Rolando Álvarez](#) to the Vatican. Police arrested Bishop Álvarez at his home in August 2022 after he criticized the government's human rights record and its closure of several Catholic radio stations. At the same time, the police arrested Father [Ramiro Tijerino](#), Father [Sadiel Eugarríos](#), Father [José Luis Díaz](#), deacon [Raúl Antonio Vega](#), seminarian [Darvin Leiva](#), seminarian [Melkin Sequeira](#), and cameraman [Sergio Cárdenas](#). In February 2023, those arrested alongside Álvarez were wrongfully convicted of conspiracy to undermine national integrity and spreading false news, sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment, [stripped](#) of their citizenship, and then swiftly [exiled](#) to the United States.

## Closure of Catholic Charitable and Educational Organizations

The Ortega-Murillo regime uses its oppressive legal framework to either shutter Catholic charitable and educational organizations or compel them to close "voluntarily." In March 2023, the Catholic charity Caritas [dissolved](#) its legal status in Nicaragua following [reports](#) that the government made it impossible for the organization to operate. Also in March, the legal statuses of the Catholic University of John Paul II and the Catholic Autonomous Christian University of Nicaragua were [canceled](#) for "non-compliance with laws that regulate them." The Ortega-Murillo regime then seized their assets. In May, Nicaraguan authorities [seized](#) the Santa Luisa de Marillac Technical Institute and expelled the nuns running the school. In the same month, the government [dissolved](#) the Immaculate Conception Catholic University, which trained seminarians. In July, the government [canceled](#) the legal status of the Fraternity of the Poor of Jesus Christ in León, seized its property, and exiled the nuns associated with it. As part of their

missionary work, the nuns would [offer](#) hot meals and assistance to the vulnerable. The government later used the seized property to [open](#) an office for the Directorate of Migration and Immigration. In August, the Nicaraguan government [seized](#) the Jesuit-run University of Central America after baselessly alleging that the institution was involved in terrorism. The Ortega-Murillo regime used the arbitrarily seized property to [establish](#) the Casimiro Sotelo Montenegro National University, which reports indicate teaches government propaganda and led to a [mass exodus](#) of academic and professional staff. In December, police officers [confiscated](#) a pastoral house in San Pedro del Norte. In January 2024, the government [canceled](#) the legal status of a group of Catholic nongovernmental organizations.

### Harassment and Intimidation against Members of the Catholic Church

President Ortega and Vice President Murillo have repeatedly used [disparaging language](#) to demonize the Catholic Church, referring to it as a “mafia” and calling priests “representatives of the devil.” Throughout 2023 and into 2024, uniformed and plainclothes government agents in Nicaragua have also intimidated clergy and parishioners by conspicuously monitoring Catholic [houses of worship](#), [schools](#), and [ceremonies](#). In January 2023, the government [prohibited](#) Jesus of the Sacrament public processions. In February, during the Lenten period, the authorities [banned](#) Way of the Cross public processions. In April, the government [forbade](#) Holy Week processions across the country; in Nindirí, the police [chased](#) away individuals who chose to participate peacefully in such a procession. In November, the national police [ordered](#) the country’s Catholics not to hold masses in cemeteries to mark All Souls’ Day. In March 2024, the Masaya police [canceled](#) a traditional pilgrimage to the Jesús del Rescate National Sanctuary. In the same month, the government [sent](#) approximately 4,000 police officers to Catholic churches around the country to again prevent Holy Week public processions from occurring. In April, the authorities [prevented](#) the traditional parade of saints in San Marcos from taking place publicly. In May, the police [interrogated and searched](#) individuals on pilgrimage to the National Sanctuary of the Virgin of Cuapa; ultimately, the authorities prevented the pilgrims from reaching the sanctuary. Also in May, the Ortega-Murillo regime [prohibited](#) public processions honoring the Virgin of Fátima. Reports from June indicate that government agents permanently [surveil](#) Bishop René Sándigo.

## Persecution of Protestants

### Arrests, Imprisonments, and the Shuttering of Religious Organizations

In December 2023, the Nicaraguan government [arrested](#) 11 pastors affiliated with the Mountain Gateway Ministry. They also [attempted](#) to arrest three U.S. citizens affiliated with the ministry. The Ortega-Murillo regime canceled Mountain Gateway Ministry’s legal status, [falsely alleging](#) that the arrested pastors engaged in money laundering. In March 2024, the 11 arrested pastors were convicted of money laundering, and each was sentenced to either 12 or 15 years’ imprisonment and fined \$80 million. During the pastors’ trials, reports indicate that they were unable to meet with their lawyers and that their lawyers were unable to access case files. The Ortega-Murillo regime has harassed leaders and parishioners of the primarily Indigenous Moravian Church through threats, conspicuous monitoring of their religious services and places of worship, and acts of vandalism.

The Nicaraguan government has also shuttered and seized property from Protestant organizations. In May 2023, the Ortega-Murillo regime [canceled](#) the legal status of the ENLACE Christian Foundation, which was affiliated with Evangelical media outlets. In the same month, the Nicaraguan government [shuttered](#) and [seized](#) the property of Verbo Christian Missionary Association, an Evangelical organization that provided humanitarian relief to local populations. In July, the Evangelical University of Martin Luther King was [ordered](#) to close and its property was seized. In October, the Ortega-Murillo regime [canceled](#) the legal status of multiple Evangelical organizations at once. In June 2024, the government arbitrarily [imposed](#) exorbitant fines on more than 20 Evangelical pastors and [threatened](#) to open criminal investigations against those who did not pay. Throughout 2024, the Nicaraguan government has continued to shutter Protestant organizations in waves of cancelations, including in [January](#), [February](#), [March](#), and [May](#).

### International Accountability

In November 2021, the General Assembly of the Organization of American States (OAS) adopted a [resolution](#) declaring that the elections in Nicaragua were not free, fair, or transparent. The U.S. government voted in favor of the resolution. In the same month, the Nicaraguan government, agitated by scrutiny of its democracy and human rights record, [conveyed](#) its intention to withdraw from the OAS. The withdrawal

*took effect* in November 2023. Between the Nicaraguan government’s announcement of its intent to withdraw from the OAS and the date the withdrawal took effect, the Nicaraguan government *expelled* the OAS from its territory.

Despite the Ortega-Murillo regime’s efforts to stymie the OAS, the organization continues to scrutinize religious freedom conditions in Nicaragua. In June 2023, the OAS General Assembly adopted a *resolution* urging the Nicaraguan government to “refrain from repressing and arbitrarily detaining leaders of the Catholic Church.” The Permanent Council of the OAS adopted multiple *resolutions* on Nicaragua, such as an August 2022 resolution on religious freedom and human rights violations in the country, an October 2023 resolution condemning the repression of the Catholic Church, and a November 2023 resolution denouncing the country’s withdrawal from the OAS. In addition, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has released statements *calling* for an end to the persecution of the Catholic Church and *demanding* the government protect the wrongfully imprisoned pastors affiliated with Mountain Gateway Ministry.

In March 2022, the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) adopted a *resolution* establishing a group of human rights experts on Nicaragua with a mandate to investigate all alleged human rights violations and abuses committed in the country since April 2018. The U.S. government *cosponsored* the resolution. In March 2023, the group of human rights experts released a *report* that *found* “reasonable grounds to believe that ... there has been a widespread and systematic attack against part of

the civilian population in the Republic of Nicaragua ... [that] ... meets all the elements to establish a finding of crimes against humanity,” including against members of the Catholic Church and other religious groups. In the same month, the UNHRC voted to *extend* the mandate of the group of human rights experts for two years. The U.S. government *supported* the mandate extension. In February 2024, the group of human rights experts released a *report* that documents in greater detail the authorities’ human rights violations against members or perceived members of the Catholic Church and other denominations. The Ortega-Murillo regime has not cooperated with the group of human rights experts.

## Conclusion

The Ortega-Murillo regime’s religious freedom violations have continued to increase dramatically since the April 2018 protests. The government uses its repressive legal framework to persecute Catholic and Protestant communities through arrest, imprisonment, and the seizure of property from religious organizations. The Ortega-Murillo regime also harasses and intimidates worshipers. Despite pressure from the U.S. government, the UN, and the OAS, the Ortega-Murillo regime has shown no signs of slowing its restriction of freedom of religion or belief.

In its *2024 Annual Report*, USCIRF recommends that the U.S. Department of State redesignate Nicaragua as a country of particular concern for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. The chapter also outlines a number of steps the U.S. government can take to address religious freedom issues in Nicaragua.



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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