



THE DEVIL ON THE LOOSE IN NICARAGUA:

**AN ACCOUNT OF THE
VIOLATIONS OF RELIGIOUS
FREEDOM BY THE ORTEGA
MURILLO REGIME**

EXPEDIENTE ABIERTO

JANUARY 2024



“Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked.
“I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting,”
he replied.
Acts 9:5 NIV

INDEX

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	4
INTRODUCTION	8
1. RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND FREEDOM OF WORSHIP IN NICARAGUA	13
2. THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN NICARAGUA	20
2.1. THE CLERGY IN NICARAGUA	23
2.2. THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE FSLN PRIOR TO THE 2018 CRISIS	24
2.2.1 THE 2014 PASTORAL LETTER.....	26
2.3. POSITION OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN 2018 AND CONSEQUENCES.....	27
3. THE FSLN AND RELIGION	30
3.1. LIBERATION THEOLOGY	35
4. THE EVANGELICAL CHURCH	37
4.1. EVANGELICALS AND THE ORTEGA-MURILLO REGIME	42
5. MAJOR VIOLATIONS OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM	48
5.1. PERSECUTION, HARASSMENT AND DISCRIMINATION ON RELIGIOUS GROUNDS.....	51
5.2. FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE, THOUGHT AND WHETHER OR NOT TO PROFESS A RELIGION.	55
5.3. RIGHT OF ASSOCIATION AND TO FORM ORGANIZATIONS.....	58
5.4. THE RIGHT TO MANIFEST RELIGIOUS BELIEFS IN PRIVATE OR IN PUBLIC, THROUGH WORSHIP, PRACTICES AND TEACHING.....	60
5.5. EMPLOYMENT DISCRIMINATION ON RELIGIOUS GROUNDS.....	62
5.6. RELIGIOUSLY ORIENTED PRIVATE OR FAMILY EDUCATION	63
5.7. RELIGIOUS PRESERVATION OF THE COMMUNITIES OF THE CARIBBEAN COAST.	65
5.8. ADVOCACY OF RELIGIOUS HATRED AND INCITEMENT TO DISCRIMINATION, HOSTILITY OR VIOLENCE.....	66
5.9. EXPULSION OF ANY ALIEN FOR RELIGIOUS REASONS.....	68
6. CONCLUSIONS	70
BIBLIOGRAPHY	73

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the outbreak of the Nicaraguan socio-political crisis in 2018, the exercise of religious freedom in Nicaragua has been threatened by the growing authoritarianism of Daniel Ortega and his party, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). The Catholic Church, in particular, has suffered systematic attacks, the most recent being the banishment of 19 clergymen in January 2024, including two bishops, to the Vatican.

This report exposes, in detail, the violations of religious freedom in Nicaragua, thus showing the general failure of the government of Daniel Ortega to comply with the commitments acquired in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the American Convention on Human Rights, the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, and other international conventions on religious matters. This paper also considers important historical background to ponder the relevance of the religious phenomenon among Nicaraguans.

Prior to the worsening of Ortega's authoritarianism in 2018, the Episcopal Conference of Nicaragua (CEN), the highest body of the Catholic Church in Nicaragua, had several crises with the government. For example, criticism of electoral fraud in the 2008 municipal elections, vigorous opposition to the regime by Bishop Silvio Báez since he arrived as auxiliary bishop of Managua in 2009,

dissatisfaction with the police investigation of the brutal murder of Father Marlon Pupiro in August 2011, and the bishops' letter delivered to Ortega in 2014 calling for democratic reforms, among others.

Amid the crisis of the protests, priests and nuns took critical positions and belligerent actions against the rampant repression of these mobilizations. The CEN, for its part, was invited to the 2018 National Dialogue. In these negotiations, the bishops became mediators and witnesses, seeking to resolve the emerging socio-political crisis. Since then, most of the bishops of the CEN have adopted a critical stance towards human rights violations and provided refuge to victims of the repressive actions of the Ortega-Murillo regime.

However, this tension with the FSLN, led by Daniel Ortega, has historical origins. For instance, the FSLN's 1969 program initially called for the confiscation of Catholic schools; however, the party later indicated that it would guarantee and respect the freedom of the believing population to profess and practice any religion. Despite these initial ideological differences, in the context of the 1979 insurrection, bishops and priests supported the Sandinistas and urged the departure of the Somozas from power.

Conciliation was evident in the 1980s when some priests were public officials, resulting in sanctions from the Vatican. However, over time, tensions grew between the Sandinistas and the Catholic Church, leading to cases of expulsions, media scandals against priests, and limitations on ecclesiastical actions.

Meanwhile, the Evangelical Churches in Nicaragua have a more recent history than the Catholic ones. By nature, they are fragmented communities, making them more vulnerable to attacks by the state apparatus. For instance, legally, they are categorized as civil organizations, not religious ones. In the 2018 mobilization, many evangelical leaders promoted days of prayer for peace. Still, others explicitly provided humanitarian aid to protesters, and as a result, they, too, have been targets of attacks and subsequent repression.

Major Violations of Religious Freedom

From April 2018 to mid-December 2023, there have been 740 attacks on churches in Nicaragua, mostly against Catholic churches. In addition, at least 416 faith-based civil society organizations were canceled.

Many actions violate religious freedom. For example, the Government of Nicaragua, through the Police, has banned holding processions since February 2023. Twelve church-related media outlets have been canceled through the Nicaraguan Institute of Telecommunications and Mail (TELCOR).

Additionally, in the educational field, Catholic and evangelical universities have been closed and confiscated. The Ministry of Education (MINED) has also prohibited public schools from holding high school graduation ceremonies in churches.

The situation is quite particular in the Caribbean Coast, as there is an ongoing conflict over the provincial board of the Moravian

Church, which the FSLN has taken over. The government continues to impose a series of restrictions on foreign religious missionaries.

In general, it is observed that the Catholic Church, along with other Christian denominations, has suffered physical violence and institutional weakening since 2018 due to the cancellation of their ecclesiastical structures. The relationship between the government and religious groups is mediated by the utility that these groups represent for the governing party and its authoritarian political interests.

INTRODUCTION

The banishment of 19 religious Catholics in Nicaragua on January 14, 2024, including two bishops, twelve priests, and three seminarians who were imprisoned, is not an isolated event, but part of a series of systematic attacks against the clergy within the framework of a totalitarian state policy, whose objective is to reduce any expression of criticism or dissent to the family-party project that has been installed since 2007.



For this reason, this report summarizes reports of violations of religious freedom in Nicaragua as a failure of the Ortega-Murillo regime to comply with its commitments in the Universal

Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and other international conventions.

In 2018, when the Nicaraguan socio-political crisis erupted, first due to the protests against the pension system reforms and almost immediately because of the repressive response to them by the administration of President Daniel Ortega and his wife Vice President Rosario Murillo, the Catholic Church has suffered constant attacks and threats.

The critical position of the majority of the bishops of the Episcopal Conference of Nicaragua (CEN, according to its Spanish acronym) towards the Ortega-Murillo regime since 2018, as well as the proposal to leave power through early elections submitted in that context, created an unprecedented rupture between political power and the Catholic leadership in the country.

Furthermore, without a doubt, the Catholic Church as an institution in Nicaragua has not been neutral, but rather denounces the human rights crisis and welcomes the victims.

From April 2018 to mid-December 2023, the Catholic Church received most of the 740 attacks on religious freedom committed by the regime¹.

Nicaragua is not only a country where religious exercise is violated, but it is considered one of the countries in the world where there is persecution for reasons of creed, according to the “Religious Freedom in the World Report” by Aid to the Church in Need (ACN), an international papal foundation.²

Likewise, the 2024 World Report on Persecution by the organization Open Doors places Nicaragua in 30th place among the countries

¹ <https://www.articulo66.com/2023/12/18/record-ataques-iglesia-catolica-nicaragua-2023/>

² <https://acninternational.org/religiousfreedomreport/reports/country/2023/nicaragua>

where it is most dangerous to be a Christian; a year earlier, it was in 50th place³.

Violations of religious freedom include multiple repressive tools ranging from attacks, death threats, espionage, surveillance, closures, confiscations, imprisonment, banishment, denationalization, impediments to the migratory entry or return of religious foreigners, media hate campaigns, defamation, and/or disinformation, among others.

Although a large part of the population regularly attends temples and religious services, there are ongoing violations of freedom of worship, with the cancellation or prohibition of traditional religious processions and activities, including masses, as well as public celebrations of the Day of the Bible.

In addition, the general deterioration of human and civil rights means that restrictions on the observance of the practice of faith, especially in the public space, are confused in the network of violations of individual rights or are intended to be mixed or disguised, through official propaganda, as political issues related to the clergy and the State, or as a matter of public security.

It should be noted that Nicaragua is a remarkably religious country, so violations in this regard are alarming to the population and penetrate the depths of their convictions.

With an estimated population of 6.8 million people, more than 84% define themselves as believers; 44.9% are Catholic, and 39.8% are Protestant⁴.

³ <https://www.puertasabiertas.org/es-ES/persecucion/lmp/nicaragua/>

⁴ <https://www.laprensani.com/2022/11/15/editorial/3067359-religion-catolicos-y-cristianos-en-nicaragua>

The Catholic Church is the most credible institution in the country with a 48% rating, above the Presidency, which has a 28% credibility rating⁵, and any other public or private entity.

Additionally, the evangelical churches of Nicaragua are not exempt from the repressive actions of the regime, even though there is frequent manipulative use of certain pastors affiliated with the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), images of specific activities - which leaders cannot refuse due to fear of reprisals - and permits for massive evangelistic activities to feign normalcy or collaboration.

Basically, given their fragmented structure and the particularities of their creed, Protestants are being controlled differently than Catholics, but they have equally suffered from the cancellation of legal status, confiscation, and surveillance, as well as financial suffocation and administrative harassment.

On the other hand, there is a particular doctrine of ideological-religious syncretism in the State policy promoted particularly by Rosario Murillo, where Marxism, esotericism, and Christianity are mixed.

Murillo personifies herself as a priestess or spiritual guide of all Nicaraguans, with a constant narrative of “Christian and socialist” government, which is a way of confronting the management of the faith with priests and pastors.

⁵ <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/254778/catholic-church-is-most-credible-institution-in-nicaragua-cid-gallup-poll-finds>

THE BISHOPS OF MATAGALPA, ROLANDO ALVAREZ, AND ISIDORO MORA, OF SIUNA, PLUS 17 PRIESTS WERE BANISHED TO THE VATICAN, ON JANUARY 14, 2024.



ROLANDO JOSÉ ÁLVAREZ



ISIDORO DEL CARMEN MORA



ÓSCAR ESCOTO SALGADO



JÁDER GUIDO ACOSTA



PABLO ANTONIO VILLAFRANCA



CARLOS JOSÉ AVILÉS



HÉCTOR DEL CARMEN TREMINIO



MARCOS DÍAZ PRADO



FERNANDO CALERO RODRÍGUEZ



SILVIO FONSECA MARTÍNEZ



MIKEL MONTERREY ARIAS



RAÚL ZAMORA GUERRA



MIGUEL MÁNTICA CUADRA



JHADER HERNÁNDEZ URBINA



GERARDO RODRÍGUEZ PÉREZ



ISMAEL REINERIO SERRANO



JOSÉ SANDINO OCHOA



ALESTER SÁENZ



TONNY PALACIO

1. RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND FREEDOM OF WORSHIP IN NICARAGUA

Christianity in Nicaragua turns 500 years old in 2024. The Spaniards brought this faith in a period of colonial expansion. Since 1524, with the first expeditions to the territory and the founding of the cities of Granada and León de Imabite, what would become the future Central American country was evangelized, and on November 3, 1534, Monsignor Diego Álvarez de Osorio was appointed as the first bishop.

Catholicism was the official religion during the colony and after the independence of Central America in 1821, and also after the departure of Nicaragua from said regional federation in 1838, although the exercise of other religions was not prohibited with emancipation. However, the evangelical presence began in the twentieth century.

The Concordat between the Holy See and Nicaragua of November 2, 1861 established the Catholic religion as official, as well as the State's payment to priests, the right to veto schoolbooks, among other benefits⁶.

Despite the tolerance of other denominations, in practice, only Catholicism existed. Evangelical churches dared to come to Nicaragua after the state adopted secularism in 1893 with a new Constitution that states that “no legislation may be made

⁶ <http://legislacion.asamblea.gob.ni/Instrumentos.nsf/550cbe82091cc613062578b80075d823/3207b4937ad3bb45062587ac006f840c>

establishing or protecting any religion or prohibiting its free exercise.”

On the other hand, the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua owes its Protestant majority, particularly Moravian and Anglican, to its character as a protectorate of the United Kingdom from 1633, until it was annexed to the rest of the territory in 1894.

The current constitution has notable religious connotations, thanks to the reforms applied by the FSLN since 2014, which in the same preamble appropriates in the name of “Christians who, from their faith in God, have committed themselves and joined in the struggle for the liberation of the oppressed.” The Magna Carta also mentions “Christian values” three times⁷.

However, one of these constitutional reforms establishes a repressive double standard that allows for the control and regulation of religious practice in Nicaragua beyond international law, using anti-interventionist argumentation.

Article 6: Therefore, all types of political, military, economic, cultural, and religious aggression and intervention in the internal affairs of other States, are inhibited and outlawed.

It is not very subtle to limit religious activity that could be described very broadly as aggressive with any unfavorable criticism. Besides, the Catholic Church has a global character and a superior authority in the Vatican; likewise, the work of Protestant congregations and, indeed, of every religious denomination, are linked to supranational structures and international exchanges.

On the other hand, article 69 of the Constitution – although it establishes its own limits for the churches – is ambiguous, especially when the application of the law is particularly repressive

⁷ <http://legislacion.asamblea.gob.ni/normaweb.nsf/09cf45d6fc893868062572650059911e/94bcca76eb625bd062588e90054d69d>

and authoritarian, so that fundamental principles of the Christian faith and values proper to the exercise of conscience may clash with State practice.

Art. 69. 2nd Paragraph: No one may evade the observance of the law, nor prevent others from exercising their rights and fulfilling their duties, by invoking religious beliefs or dispositions.

This provision is reminiscent of the difficulty Nicaraguan conscientious objectors faced in the 1980s, when the Military Service Law imposed an obligation to enlist in the Army under penalties of two years in detention if they refused. So, many were imprisoned or went into exile, to avoid carrying weapons or going to prison.

Similarly, despite the reforms and violations of freedom of religion and worship in Nicaragua, the Constitution protects the exercise of faith in different articles:

Article 14: The State has no official religion.

Article 27: All persons are equal before the law and are entitled to equal protection. There shall be no discrimination on grounds of birth, nationality, political belief, race, sex, language, religion, opinion, origin, economic status, or social status.

Article 29: Everyone has the right to freedom of conscience, thought, and whether or not to profess a religion. No one may be subjected to coercive measures that may undermine these rights or be forced to declare his or her creed, ideology, or belief.

Article 49: In Nicaragua, urban and rural workers, women, young people, agricultural producers, artisans, professionals, technicians, intellectuals, artists, religious people, communities on the Caribbean Coast, and the inhabitants in general have the right to form organizations, without any discrimination.

Article 69: All persons, individually or in association with others, have the right to manifest their religious beliefs in private or in public, through worship, practice, and teaching.

Article 82: Workers have the right to working conditions that ensure in particular: 1) equal pay for equal work under identical conditions, appropriate to their social responsibility, without discrimination for political, religious, social, gender, or any other reason, which ensures their well-being compatible with human dignity.

Article 124: Education in Nicaragua is secular. The State recognizes the right of religiously oriented private educational establishments to teach religion as an extracurricular subject.

Article 180: The Communities of the Caribbean Coast: The State...guarantees the preservation of their cultures and languages, religions and customs.

Nicaragua is also a signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, which includes specific protection for religious or other reasons in articles 2, 16, 18, and 26⁸.

Article 2: Rights and freedoms without religious discrimination.

Article 16: Marriage and family without religious discrimination.

Article 18: “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

Article 26: Education for interreligious understanding, tolerance, and friendship.

⁸ <https://www.un.org/es/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

At the same time, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1966⁹, ratified by Nicaragua in 1980, provides for religious protection in articles 2, 4, 24, 26 and 27, but in particular articles 18 and 20.

Article 18: Freedom of religion, to adopt the religion or belief of one's choice, freedom to manifest one's religion or belief, individually or in association with others, both in public and in private, through worship, observance, practice and teaching. No one shall be subjected to coercive measures which may impair his or her freedom to have or adopt the religion or belief of his or her choice.

The Covenant also sets limitations only to protect public safety, order, health or morals, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others and guarantees on religious and moral education to children in accordance with parents' or guardians' own convictions.

Article 20, paragraph 2, states that “any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law.”

In addition, the American Convention on Human Rights of 1969, ratified by Nicaragua in 1980, reiterates the freedoms and guarantees in religious matters. An article of great importance is the protection of the exercise of faith, even in circumstances of war or emergency.¹⁰

Article 27, suspension of guarantees: “In time of war, public danger, or other emergency that threatens the independence or security of a State Party, it may take measures derogating from its obligations under the present Convention to the extent and for the period of

⁹ <https://www.ohchr.org/es/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>

¹⁰ https://www.oas.org/dil/esp/1969_Convenci%C3%B3n_Americana_sobre_Derechos_Humanos.pdf

time strictly required by the exigencies of the situation, provided that such measures are not inconsistent with its other obligations under international law and do not involve discrimination on the ground of race, color, sex, language, religion, or social origin.”

Articles 1 and 12 recognize rights and freedoms in religious matters, while article 13, paragraph 5, prohibits advocacy, incitement to hatred on religious reasons or motivating violence against a religious or other group; article 15 also establishes the right to association for religious reasons, while article 20, paragraph 8 prohibits the expulsion of any foreigner for religious or political reasons or other discriminatory opinions.

Nicaragua also supported the 1981 Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief¹¹.

¹¹ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/declaration-elimination-all-forms-intolerance-and-discrimination>

WORLD LIST OF CHRISTIAN PERSECUTION 2024



50 COUNTRIES WHERE CHRISTIANS ARE MOST PERSECUTED

● EXTREME PERSECUTION
● SEVERE PERSECUTION

- | | | | | |
|---------------|-----------------|-----------------------------|---------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1 North Korea | 11 India | 21 Laos | 31 Oman | 41 Democratic Republic of the Congo |
| 2 Somalia | 12 Syria | 22 Cuba | 32 Ethiopia | 42 Indonesia |
| 3 Libya | 13 Saudi Arabia | 23 Mauritania | 33 Tunisia | 43 Cameroon |
| 4 Eritrea | 14 Malí | 24 Morocco | 34 Colombia | 44 Brunei |
| 5 Yemen | 15 Argelia | 25 Uzbekistán | 35 Vietnam | 45 Comoros |
| 6 Nigeria | 16 Iraq | 26 Bangladesh | 36 Bhutan | 46 Tajikistan |
| 7 Pakistán | 17 Myanmar | 27 Níger | 37 México | 47 Kazakistán |
| 8 Sudán | 18 Maldivas | 28 Central African Republic | 38 Egipto | 48 Jordania |
| 9 Irán | 19 China | 29 Turkmenistán | 39 Mozambique | 49 Malasia |
| 10 Afganistán | 20 Burkina Faso | 30 Nicaragua | 40 Qatar | 50 Turquía |

NICARAGUA

IS ITS SECOND YEAR ON THE LIST, RISING FROM 50TH TO 30TH PLACE DUE TO THE GOVERNMENT'S OPEN HOSTILITY AGAINST THE CHURCH.

THE NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS FACING HIGH LEVELS OF PERSECUTION AND DISCRIMINATION BECAUSE OF THEIR FAITH EXCEEDED 365 MILLION. THAT IS, **1 IN 7 CHRISTIANS IS PERSECUTED**

2. THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN NICARAGUA

The Catholic Church is the oldest institution that survives in Nicaragua, due to its colonial origin it even precedes the Nation-State, with five centuries of history.

In 1913, the Ecclesiastical Province of Nicaragua was created, the administrative form that exists until now. The first archbishop was Monsignor José Antonio Lezcano y Ortega, a fervent opponent of secularism as rector of the Seminary of León since 1890, for which the liberal government of José Santos Zelaya exiled him in 1893. In 1909, the priest became a member of parliament to oppose the anti-clerical movement¹².



¹² <https://franciscobautista.com/2013/10/04/monsenor-lezcano-presidente-del-congreso/>

After Monsignor Lezcano there have been only three more archbishops: Alejandro Gonzalez y Robleto (1952-1968), Miguel Obando y Bravo (1968-2005) and Leopoldo Brenes (since 2005).

The figure of Archbishop of Managua Miguel Obando y Bravo was central in Nicaragua for five decades (1968-2018). During his long career, he mediated between the Somoza dictatorship and the FSLN guerrillas and in the peace agreements between the Sandinistas and the Contras, as well as anointing all the presidential candidates who won the elections: Violeta Chamorro in 1990, Arnoldo Alemán in 1996, Enrique Bolaños in 2001, and Daniel Ortega in 2006.

Obando was the first Central American to be named a cardinal by John Paul II in 1985, but Nicaragua is also the only country on the isthmus to have had two cardinals, with Monsignor Leopoldo Brenes, appointed by Francis in 2014.



Despite 131 years of secularism, the Catholic Church is transcendental in the national construction of the country, both for the roots of theological thought and because of its cultural legacy.

In Nicaragua, in addition to traditional Christian celebrations such as Holy Week and Christmas, the cult of the Mary's Immaculate Conception is a national holiday and, as in much of Latin America, each municipality has its own festivities in homage to a venerated image.

Many of its churches are part of the architectural heritage, its schools are formative of the elite in the twentieth century, such as the Colegio Centro América, but in the same way, the Central American University (UCA).

It is difficult to know the current structure of the Catholic Church given the closures, banishments, and de facto expulsion of priests. The systematized numbers of known cases made by Martha Molina, recognized with the State Department's International Religious Freedom Award, range from 151 to 203¹³. The data from the 2020 Pontifical Yearbook indicate that there were 375 parishes led by 591 priests, as well as 724 nuns and 208 consecrated religious men

The Ecclesiastical Province administers some 724 educational institutions, 200 charitable institutions,¹⁴ and 1,408 pastoral centers throughout the country, and five universities – three of them confiscated (Central American University, John Paul II, and the Catholic University of Dry Tropics) and one “voluntarily” dissolved (Immaculate Conception Catholic University¹⁵ to avoid the same fate.

¹³ <https://confidencial.digital/nacion/mas-de-200-religiosos-y-religiosas-perseguidas-desterrados-o-encarcelados-por-la-dictadura/>

¹⁴ <https://es.catholic.net/op/articulos/32263/cat/952/la-iglesia-en-america-latina-nicaragua.html#modal>

¹⁵ <https://www.consolataamerica.org/es/la-iglesia-catolica-en-nicaragua/>

MILESTONES OF SANDINISTA VIOLENCE AGAINST THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

THE HISTORICAL RELATIONSHIP OF THE FSLN WITH THE CLERGY HAS HAD THREE STAGES OF GREAT AGGRESSION.

THE 80'S WAR CONTEXT	90S AND 2000S TRANSITION CONTEXT	2018-2023 AUTHORITARIAN CONTEXT
ANTI-CLERICAL NARRATIVE		
ESPIONAGE AND DISCREDIT OPERATIONS	TERRORIST ACTS AGAINST TEMPLES	SURVEILLANCE, IMPRISONMENT AND TRIALS FOR COMMON CRIMES
EXPULSIONS AND EXPATRIATION	FREE EXPRESSION	POLICE SIEGES, ARMED ATTACKS, BOMBINGS, LOOTING AND DESECRATION.
MEDIA CENSORSHIP	CARDINAL OBANDO'S BELLIGERENT OPPOSITION	EXPULSIONS, BANISHMENT AND EXILE
CARDINAL OBANDO'S BELLIGERENT OPPOSITION		MEDIA CLOSURE
LIBERATION THEOLOGY AND INTERVENTION OF POPE JOHN PAUL II		WITHOUT BELLIGERENCE FROM CARDINAL BRENES
		SILENCE OF POPE FRANCIS AND REFUGE FOR BANISHED PRIESTS IN THE HOLY SEE

SOURCE: SELF MADE / EXPEDIENTE ABIERTO

2.1. The Clergy in Nicaragua

The organization of the Ecclesiastical Province of Nicaragua has its headquarters in the Archdiocese of Managua, headed by Cardinal Brenes, to which Monsignor Silvio Báez, auxiliary bishop, currently in exile, also belongs.

There are 8 regional dioceses with their respective bishops who, in turn, form the Episcopal Conference of Nicaragua (CEN). It should be noted that the president of the CEN, Carlos Herrera, bishop of the Diocese of Jinotega, turned 75 years old in December 2023 and should retire, according to Canon Law. In turn, Cardinal Brenes will meet the limit for ministering in March 2024.

Two bishops were banished in January 2024: Rolando Álvarez and Isidoro Mora. Therefore, the composition of the CEN would change fundamentally this year. If Brenes and Herrera retire, as expected, only four bishops would remain active: Jorge Solórzano (Granada), René Sándigo (León), Francisco Tijerino (Bluefields), and Marcial Guzmán (Juigalpa).

Since 2018, the CEN has gone through radical changes, beyond the political climate. On June 3, 2018, Cardinal Emeritus Obando died, at a time when the country was in turmoil, although, due to age limit, he had been retired since 2005. However, he was completely subjected to the Ortega-Murillo family's circle of influence.

The bishop of Siuna, David Albin Zywiec, died in office on January 5, 2020, and Bosco Vivas, bishop of León, who died on June 23, 2020, retired due to age; Abelardo Mata, bishop of Estelí; and Paul Schmitz Simon, bishop of Bluefields also retired due to age.

On March 6, 2022, the apostolic nuncio Waldemar Stanisław Sommertag was also expelled and since then there is no representative of the Vatican. Monsignor Marcel Diouf was the chargé d'affaires, but Nicaragua broke relations with the Vatican unilaterally in 2023, after the Pope called the regime a "gross dictatorship."

On March 18, 2023, the Holy See closed the Apostolic Nunciature to Managua.

2.2. The Catholic Church and the FSLN prior to the 2018 crisis

The CEN's opposition to the Sandinista model and discourse in 1980 gave rise to the FSLN's dislike of the clergy, coupled with the fact that the bishops openly backed liberal-conservative candidates as Ortega sought his return to power.

Ortega's coming to power also precedes a conciliatory narrative and the criminalization of abortion, including therapeutic abortion, which had been in force in the penal code since 1893. The measure was adopted with the support of Sandinista parliamentarians prior to the 2006 elections and was intended to soften the clergy during the electoral period.

Between 2007 and 2018 [there was a widespread perception of agreement](#) between the Sandinista Front and the clergy because [of the close relationship of Cardinal Emeritus Obando and the Ortega-Murillo family](#), as well as the conventional style of Archbishop Brenes.

Added to this were the constant invitations to the Vatican's apostolic nuncios for official events, particularly Monsignor Fortunatus Nwachukwu who was there between 2012 and 2017 and maintained a close relationship with the regime¹⁶.

Despite this and the religious propaganda led by Rosario Murillo, president of the Citizen Power Councils (CPC), now the Family Cabinets, and current vice president, there was no dialogue with the bishops. For seven years, the regime did not receive the CEN as the three previous presidents did, although the bishops asked for a meeting with the president.

Ortega limited himself to maintaining his closeness to Cardinal Obando, and particularly to Nuncio Nwachukwu, who was replaced by Waldemar Stanisław Sommertag in 2018.

The CEN [had several serious crises with the Ortega-Murillo regime before 2018](#); among the most important are: 1) the one provoked by the electoral fraud in the municipal elections of 2008, 2) the one

¹⁶<https://www.expedientepublico.org/la-iglesia-catolica-antes-de-abril-2018-entre-recompensas-resignacion-y-el-boicot-del-regimen/>

provoked by the belligerence of Bishop Silvio Báez since he arrived as auxiliary bishop of Managua in 2009, 3) the disagreement with the police investigation of the brutal murder of Father Marlon Pupiro in August 2011, and 4) the letter from the bishops delivered to Ortega in 2014 calling for democratic reforms¹⁷.

2.2.1 The 2014 pastoral letter

On May 21, 2014, Ortega ended a seven-year boycott of the Catholic hierarchy and held a meeting with the CEN. Four years later, almost on the same date, on May 16, 2018, they would meet again as part of the dialogue after the massive protests against the regime.

All the bishops refer to this first meeting with Ortega and Murillo at the Apostolic Nunciature because it generated a crisis between the regime and the bishops. The CEN, in a four-hour closed-door meeting, delivered a letter with 28 relevant points on the country's situation, including the need for free and transparent elections; the 14-page document was called "In Search of New Horizons for a Better Nicaragua."¹⁸

The bishops made an x-ray of the reality and proposals "in the face of the magma of dissatisfaction that we perceived within the people," the emeritus bishop of Estelí Abelardo Mata told **Expediente Público** in 2020.¹⁹

¹⁷ <https://www.expedientepublico.org/el-regimen-y-la-religion-habla-como-cordero-pero-actua-como-dragon/>

¹⁸ https://www.fides.org/es/news/37486-AMERICA_NICARAGUA_En_busqueda_de_nuevos_horizontes_para_una_nicaragua_mejor_inicia_el_dialogo_entre_la_iglesia_y_el_gobierno

¹⁹ <https://www.expedientepublico.org/la-iglesia-catolica-antes-de-abril-2018-entre-recompensas-resignacion-y-el-boicot-del-regimen/>

“Since before 2018 we have been denouncing the lack of employment, education, health. We always maintained our presence in the neighborhoods and the last homesteads, as well as denouncing injustices,” said Monsignor Carlos Avilés, who was banished in January 2024.

2.3. Position of the Catholic Church in 2018 and consequences

The Cathedral of Managua and almost all the temples opened their doors to anti-government demonstrators in order to protect them from the aggressions of the regime’s paramilitaries, mobs, and police; the images of these events were widely disseminated.

The protests were repressed by the government and it is estimated that more than 300 people were killed, thousands were injured, and hundreds were arrested and prosecuted, according to various national and international organizations²⁰.

The CEN was invited to the 2018 National Dialogue that sought to resolve the socio-political crisis triggered by the repression of protests against pension reforms. At that time, the bishops took over as mediators and witnesses.

On May 23, 2018, the third session of the National Dialogue was held, where the bishop of Matagalpa, Rolando Álvarez, read a document called the Democratic Route, where Ortega’s departure was proposed. This was the last session of dialogue in which the Episcopal Conference participated, practically stopping the process of dialogue for almost a year.

²⁰ <https://www.ohchr.org/es/hr-bodies/hrc/ghre-nicaragua/index>

On July 19, 2018, Ortega expressed in his speech his annoyance against the bishops because he considered that they had not assumed their role as mediators and accused them of supporting an attempted coup d'état, of which the regime has believed itself to be a victim. Following these statements, the harassment and persecution of priests increased.

In the course of the crisis, there was an attempt on the life of the Monsignor [Abelardo Mata](#) on July 15, 2018²¹; the police siege of father [Eliar Pineda](#), in July 2018²²; death threats against the priest [Edwin Román](#) in July 2019²³; the acid attack on the vicar of the Metropolitan Cathedral, [Mario Guevara](#), in December 2018²⁴; and in July 2019, the bishop [Rolando Álvarez](#)²⁵ was warned of a possible ambush.

After the dialogue resumed on February 27, 2019, the opposition, through the Civic Alliance for Justice and Democracy, asked for the mediation of the bishops, but they accepted only as companions of the new process.

In April, the Vatican transferred the main critic of the Ortega-Murillo regime, the auxiliary bishop of Managua, Monsignor Silvio Báez, who is currently residing in the United States, to Rome; it was later learned that this was due to death threats.

On October 7, 2019, Monsignor Abelardo Mata, bishop of Estelí, denounced the harassment suffered in churches by Ortega supporters, according to a video by 100% Noticias²⁶.

²¹<https://www.laprensani.com/2018/07/15/nacionales/2449245-atacan-vehiculo-de-monsenor-abelardo-mata-en-nindiri-masaya>

²²<https://100noticias.com.ni/nacionales/91821-eliar-pineda-ortega-diablo-personificado/>

²³<https://www.elnuevoherald.com/noticias/america-latina/article232345742.html>

²⁴<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uKeY5UTTXJY&themeRefresh=1>

²⁵<https://www.vaticannews.va/es/iglesia/news/2019-07/fieles-nicaragua-defienden-a-monsenor-alvarez-ataque-paramilitar.html>

²⁶ <https://youtu.be/HONCrMgzG-M?si=dR7jq51Nzpv-rWxB>

The Catholic Church has worked with its own human rights organizations to identify victims of state violence since 2018, in order to provide assistance and relocate people who are persecuted. For example, in the city of Matagalpa, the Catholic Church had a human rights commission that worked with lawyers to support the families of political prisoners and provide accompaniment to those prisoners.



3. THE FSLN AND RELIGION

The Marxist section of the FSLN's historic 1969 program called for the confiscation of Catholic schools "immorally converted into industries by merchants who hypocritically invoke religious principles," but many pro-government sites have eliminated this part and left the text indicating that this party "will guarantee and respect the believing population the freedom to profess and practice any religion."²⁷

The first historical stage of the FSLN is complex in relation to the Catholic Church, in principle, because the clergy mostly shares the criticism of the Somoza dynasty, without tacitly supporting the guerrillas. In addition, the mediation of Archbishop Obando in historical moments, such as the seizure of the National Palace in 1978 and the assault on the house of official José "Chema" Castillo in 1974, was fundamental.

²⁷ <https://www.diariobarricada.com/2022/07/23/dossier-programa-historico-orientacion-y-guia-de-las-transformaciones-revolucionarias/>

80S

CHRONOLOGY OF SANDINISTA ATTACKS ON THE CATHOLIC CHURCH



Conflict between traditional clergy and popular church priests who support the government.

Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo's Critical Opposition to the Marxist Model of Sandinismo.

Direct espionage of the Church by State Security.

Permanent Anti-Religious Narrative.

12/08/1982

Sexual scandal mounted against spokesman of the Archbishop's Curia of Managua, Bismarck Carballo.

04/03/1983

Sandinistas boycott Pope John Paul II's mass in Managua with shouts and slogans.

10/07/1984

10 foreign priests cancelled residency.

04/07/1986

Expatriation of Monsignor Pablo Vega, Bishop of Juigalpa.

Policia aborta atentado terrorista

A pocas horas de haber tomado posesión el presidente Arnoldo Alemán, la Policía Nacional descubrió un atentado contra el nuevo mandatario. Un exoficial de la Policía y un exmilitar fueron capturados luego que se les decomisó 800 gramos de TNT que usarian para atentar contra el presidente Alemán.

ROSALBA IBARRA
GILBERTO CRUZ ROJAS
LA TRIBUNA



El subcomisionado Eduardo Cuadra Ferrey, muestra a la prensa nacional el explosivo con el que pretendian atentar contra el presidente Alemán.



Este es el ex oficial de la Policía, Néstor Moncada Lau, que fue arrestado por estar presuntamente implicado en el atentado.

La Policía Nacional reveló el viernes el arresto de un ex oficial de la Policía y un ex militar luego de

descubrirseles posesión de 800 gramos de Trinitotolueno (TNT), que las autoridades sospechan estaba destinado a

atentar contra el presidente Arnoldo Alemán.

PASA A PAGINA 10A

1995

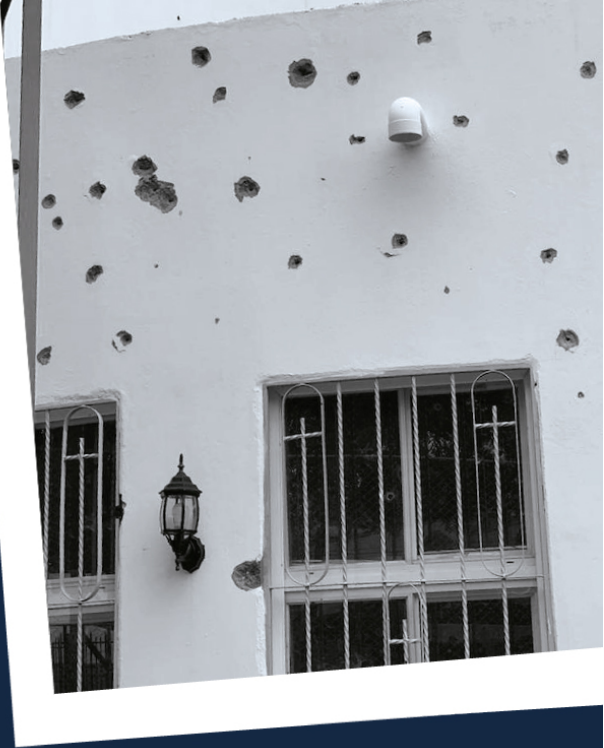
Dynamite attacks on churches in Managua, Masaya and León. Suspect was Néstor Moncada Lau, Daniel Ortega's current personal secretary.

1997

Ortega called Cardinal Obando a "red sepulchre," a "Somoza chaplain" and a "Pharisee." Obando replied: "From a pacified heart come words of love and from a turbulent and violent heart always come strong expressions."

2018-2022

CHRONOLOGY OF SANDINISTA ATTACKS ON THE CATHOLIC CHURCH



2018

Attacks against churches in Jinotepe, Diriamba, Masaya, Managua. The capital's Divine Mercy church was shot at.



2019

Attacks and looting. Exile of Bishop Báez and Parish Priest Pedro Obando, 9-Day Police Siege of San Miguel de Masaya Parish.

31/07/2020

Arson attack in the cathedral of Managua

2021

Exile of Edwin Román

2022

Imprisonment of two priests, cancellation of foundations and media outlets. Harassment, siege and police siege of Matagalpa bishop Rolando Alvarez.

However, the main friction between the FSLN and the clergy was related to the Popular Church, which openly supported the guerrillas. With the recording of the Misa Campesina (Peasants' Mass) in 1975, the CEN issued a pastoral letter disavowing its use.

However, the greater evil for the bishops was the dictatorship, and in 1979, they ended up supporting the insurrection and the departure of the Somozas from power. Together, three pastoral letters were sent on June 2, July 30, and November 17 of that year.

The last of these letters mentions a “socialism compatible with Christian and pastoral teachings,” and also expresses that, although “we are all pained and affected by the extremes of revolutionary insurrections, their moral and juridical legitimacy cannot be denied in the case of evident and prolonged tyranny.”²⁸

However, the Marxist-Castro route and anti-clerical rhetoric ended the relationship between the FSLN and the clergy, despite the support of prominent priests such as Brothers Ernesto and Fernando Cardenal, who embraced liberation theology and contradicted the bishops.

The struggle between Sandinismo and the Catholic hierarchy involved State Security in the 1980s, in one of the most controversial acts in the country's history, when Father Bismarck Carballo – Cardinal Obando's right-hand man, CEN spokesman, and director of Catholic Radio – was the victim of a set-up.

On August 12, 1982, the official of the Ministry of the Interior (MINT) Maritza Castillo Mendieta invited the priest to a luncheon, an opportunity that the agents took advantage of to undress him at the point of threats and beatings, while the media and mobs waited outside to mount an alleged sex scandal.

²⁸ <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/0b7d/d354cca45271c3471f47942dd246b3ea3e36.pdf>

In 1985, Pope John Paul II, in his worldwide crusade against communism, named Archbishop Obando, the first cardinal born in Central America and an ardent critic of Sandinismo, a cardinal.

In spite of everything, the FSLN agreed to let Cardinal Obando be the mediator in the ceasefire negotiations with the Contras that ended in the Sapoa Accords of March 23, 1988, which set the tone for national elections in 1990 to allow for the political transition in Nicaragua.

3.1. Liberation theology

In the 1960s and 1970s, some religious leaders participated in revolutionary struggles in the universities and neighborhoods of Managua, forming grassroots ecclesial communities and organizations such as the Revolutionary Christian Movement.

The ideological commitment of these religious leaders was Liberation Theology and the establishment of a popular church. The leader of this proposal was Uriel Molina Oliú, who chaired the controversial Truth, Justice and Peace Commission that created the National Assembly, controlled by the FSLN, in April 2018 to respond to the demands for clarification of state violence during the demonstrations.

In the 1980s, there were some priests among the officials; in addition to Ernesto Cardenal as Minister of Culture and Fernando Cardenal, Minister of Education, there were Edgard Parrales, Nicaraguan ambassador to the Organization of American States (OAS) and Miguel d'Escoto, Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Pope John Paul II's visit to Nicaragua in 1983 triggered tensions, first because of the public humiliation of Trappist Father Ernesto

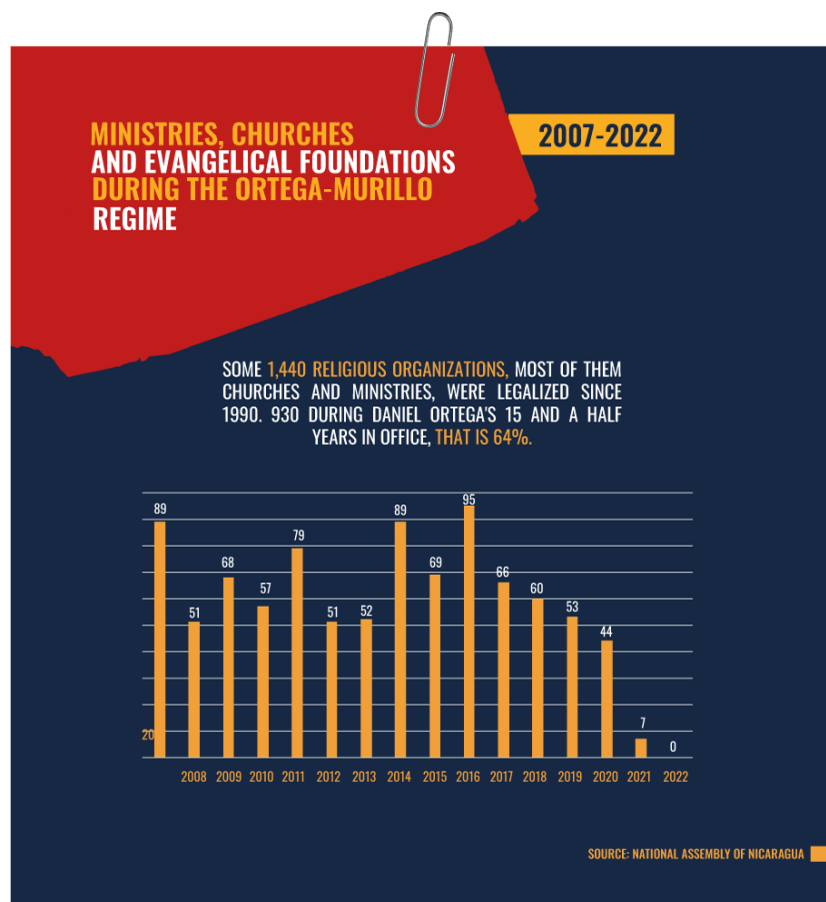
Cardenal, an ally of the Sandinistas, and finally, because of the Sandinista politicization of the peasant mass by the world representative of Catholicism.

After much wrangling between the Sandinista government and the Catholic Church, the Vatican dismissed the priests who were civil servants in 1984. The Sandinistas also expelled ten foreign priests that year and in 1986, also expelled the then-president of the CEN, Monsignor Pablo Antonio Vega Mantilla.

4. THE EVANGELICAL CHURCH

The relevance of the evangelical church has increased in the 21st century. The 2005 census indicates that 25.8% then recognized themselves as Protestant.²⁹

The National Assembly's registry of such religious associations show that these number 1,440 from 1990 to 2022.³⁰



Evangelical churches in Nicaragua have been criticized for remaining silent in the face of a climate of widespread persecution,

²⁹ <https://www.inide.gob.ni/docu/censos2005/VolPoblacion/Volumen%20Poblacion%201-4/Vol.I%20Poblacion-Characteristicas%20Generales.pdf>

³⁰ <https://www.expedientepublico.org/el-silencio-de-los-lideres-de-las-iglesias-evangelicas-a-los-abusos-en-la-represion-en-nicaragua/>

and likewise, the relationship of some pastors with the FSLN suggests that it could be a collaborationist entity.³¹

Nor have they spoken out against the repression against Catholics; however, under the climate of repression in Nicaragua, it is even prudent that they do not expose themselves to imprisonment, which is why organizations such as the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America (OLIRE, according to its acronym in Spanish), ask for prudence when demanding statements from people who work inside Nicaragua under an absolutely authoritarian system.

OLIRE explains that the relationships of the churches with the government are not uniform because they do not have a single structure. They are religious communities with diverse political and religious positions – there are neutral groups, others that support and receive benefits, and there are groups that disagree with the repressive actions, but do not declare it publicly.

The leaders of the evangelical church acknowledge that because of this misperception, many of the protesters from the 2018 protests did not attend their churches, the Observatory says. Their churches also did not serve as a refuge, because they are unstaffed, but many young people who attended evangelical churches went to the homes of members of their congregation in a more interpersonal environment.

Although during the crisis of April 2018, and to date, the work of the Catholic Church in defense of those who went out to protest against the government is highlighted, it is important to mention

³¹ <https://nicaraguainvestiga.com/nacion/9601-67-iglesias-evangelicas-aliadas-de-ortega-reciben-titulos-de-propiedad/>

that the evangelical churches that provided humanitarian assistance to the population were also the target of attacks and repression.³²

In 2019, the FSLN-dominated parliament awarded the superintendent and deputy superintendent of the Assemblies of God, Roberto Rojas and Rafael Arista; as well as Augusto Marengo, from the Apostolic Christian Center Ministry; Guillermo Osorno, of the Family Worship Center; and Omar Duarte, from Ríos de Agua Viva (Rivers of Living Water).³³

There are also prominent evangelicals in the Ortega regime in Nicaragua. Among them, the professional boxing champion, Román “Chocolatito” González, a member of the Ríos de Agua church or the former mayor of Managua, Daisy Torres.

Pastor Jorge Rivera, who was called for the 2019 dialogue, representative of the Central American Mission, appeared in April 2020 as pastor of the Light of the Nations church, in a [virtual service with common prisoners](#) from the facilities of the National Police.³⁴

There are also groups that collaborate in social areas, usually politically distant.³⁵

The regime publishes the legalizations of hundreds of ecclesiastical properties, many of them arbitrarily taken in spontaneous urban settlements, especially in Managua. The last titling was in May 2022 with 78 properties.

³² <https://olire.org/es/monitorear/informes-del-pais/nicaragua/>

³³ <https://www.el19digital.com/articulos/ver/titulo:94755-asamblea-nacional-reconoce-labor-por-la-paz-de-pastores-evangelicos>

³⁴ <https://www.el19digital.com/articulos/ver/titulo:102351-realizan-culto-por-videoconferencia-en-centros-penales-de-nicaragua>

³⁵ <https://noticias.laiglesiadejesucristo.org/articulo/la-iglesia-fortalece-los-servicios-de-salud-del-hospital-carlos-roberto-huembes-de-la-ciudad-de-managua-nicaragua>

According to the official website [el19digital](http://el19digital.com), as of September 2020, the Ortega regime had titled a total of 575 churches of different denominations since it returned to power in 2007, although in 2018 ³⁶ there was talk of [835 properties and 2,000 pending applications](#)³⁷.

Unlike the Catholic Church, evangelical pastors are not public figures; they are fragmented communities and are more vulnerable to attacks by the state apparatus because legally they are under the category of civil organizations. So, the parliament, previously, and now the Ministry of the Interior, can simply cancel them through arbitrary resolutions.

There is also the dogmatic aspect: the Protestant church complies with its greatest principle, which is the separation of church and state, so political issues such as institution or preaching are basically frowned upon in the community, without implying a lack of social commitment.

Saturnino Cerrato, former superintendent of the Assemblies of God and former president of the Democratic Restoration Party (PRD), cancelled by the regime in 2021, [told Expediente Abierto](#) that “politics is not a topic of discussion within the local church, nor a topic of discussion during preaching, that is left for life with the rest of society.”³⁸

The interests of the evangelical church are broad, from the properties of temples, social projects, hospitals or clinics,

³⁶ <https://www.el19digital.com/articulos/ver/titulo:74814-gobierno-entrega-mas-de-800-titulos-de-propiedad-a-iglesias-evangelicas>

³⁷ <https://www.el19digital.com/articulos/ver/titulo:74814-gobierno-entrega-mas-de-800-titulos-de-propiedad-a-iglesias-evangelicas>

³⁸ <https://www.expedientepublico.org/de-protestantes-casi-nada-dogmas-y-miedo-dominan-a-la-comunidad-evangelica-de-nicaragua/>

foundations, buildings, more than 70 radio stations, three universities. The [Assemblies of God](#) alone, probably the largest denomination among Nicaragua's evangelicals, has 1,378 churches and 1,805 pastors for more than 287,000 members, according to its website.

In different statements to the media, the pastors estimate that there are between 7,000 and 12,000 Protestant places of worship in the country.

In the field of education, the evangelical church is particularly sensitive, the Ministry of Education (Mined) registered 9,105 public schools and 1,466 private schools in 2021. Of the latter, 307 were Protestant Christian. Although they are three percent of the total, the political operator of the regime, Fidel Moreno, recognized in 2016 that the total enrollment of evangelical schools was 200,000³⁹ students; that is, 11.7% of the total for that year, calculated at 1.7 million students in primary and secondary school. In 2023, school enrollment was 1.79 million.

³⁹ <https://www.el19digital.com/articulos/ver/titulo:47674-iglesias-evangelicas-trabajara-junto-a-gobierno-sandinista-para-fortalecer-programas-en-salud-y-educacion>

4.1. Evangelicals and the Ortega-Murillo regime

From 1990 to 2022, a total of 1,440 evangelical organizations received legal status – most of them denominational, congregations, churches, or ministries, but also foundations and guilds. Of these, 930 were given in 15 years of Daniel Ortega’s government, 64%, according to the digital registry of the National Assembly (parliament).

In real terms, more than two million Nicaraguans are evangelicals, so some pastors have tried to politically capitalize on this segment. The first denominational party to emerge was the Nicaraguan Party of the Christian Path (*Partido Camino Cristiano Nicaragüense*, CCN) of Reverend Guillermo Osorno, which obtained four percent of the vote in its first election in 1996, but made a pact with the then liberal president Arnoldo Alemán, and later with Daniel Ortega.

Soon CCN split to create the Christian Unity Party (PUC) in 2000, led by Reverend Guillermo Ortega Reyes. The “micro-party” currently has a deputy in the Central American Parliament, Daniel Ortega Reyes, because of his alliance with the FSLN.



A last attempt to create a pro-evangelical party was the Democratic Restoration Party (PRD), which was to serve as an electoral platform for an opposition sector in 2021, but was cancelled by the Supreme Electoral Council (CSE), favorable to the interests of the Sandinista Front.

Ortega has also wanted to capitalize on the evangelical population segment. In 2009, he inaugurated the Plaza de la Biblia in Managua, a space that the pastors had requested from the mayor's office for their activities. However, he has denied them access since 2016, prior to the national elections that led to his fourth consecutive re-election.

Evangelicals also didn't like the 2014 constitutional reform. The pastors of the Nicaraguan Evangelical Alliance (AENIC) [issued a statement at the end of 2013](#), while discussing the changes to be approved in the following legislative year, arguing that being a Christian cannot be established by decree and that the country was multi-denominational.⁴⁰

In addition, they were concerned about esoteric and pagan concepts such as "mother earth," and mentioned that the slogan "Christian, socialist, and solidarity" was from the FSLN party. On the other hand, they asked to eliminate the family cabinets and add the revocation of mandate and put a limit on re-election.

In response to the pastors, the regime cancelled subsidies to AENIC, which received a total of 1.85 million córdobas until 2014, about 77,000 dollars at the average exchange rate of the date. The official

⁴⁰ <https://contralaapostasia.com/2013/11/23/alianza-evangelica-nicaraguense-acusa-al-regimen-de-intentar-sustituir-a-dios/>

media did not publish the criticisms of the pastors, only the arguments of those who were in favor of the measure, such as Pastor Neftalí Cortés, of the National Council of Evangelical Churches, the largest beneficiary of subsidies among Protestants, with 5.1 million córdobas between 2007 and 2016, which would currently be 212,000 dollars.⁴¹

⁴¹ <https://www.expedientepublico.org/de-protestantes-casi-nada-dogmas-y-miedo-dominan-a-la-comunidad-evangelica-de-nicaragua/>

HOW THE REGIME KEEPS EVANGELICALS SILENT

INTERNAL FACTORS

EXTERNAL FACTORS

1. ORGANIZATION

- CLARGE, BUT FRAGMENTED COMMUNITY
- DIVERSITY OF INTERESTS AND IDEOLOGIES: AFFILIATED PASTORS AND SANDINISTA MILITANTS IN THE CONGREGATIONS
- LOCAL LEADERSHIP, WEAK AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL

2. DOGMA

- SECULAR INFLUENCE: STRICT SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE
- SÃO PAULO INFLUENCE: SUBMISSION TO THE STATE AND LAWS
- TRANSCENDENT THEOLOGY: PREPARATION FOR THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

(REPRESSION)

- CONTROL OVER PROPERTY OF UNTITLED TEMPLES
- FEAR OF LOSING LEGAL PERSONALITY AND CONFISCATION OF ASSETS
- PURIFICATION OF OPPONENTS ON BOARDS OF DIRECTORS AND LEGAL REPRESENTATION
- BLOCKADE OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, INCLUDING ENTRY OF MISSIONARIES
- GOVERNMENT'S REFUSAL TO CERTIFY OPERATIONS
- ACCOUNT FREEZING FINANCIAL AND RECORDS CONTROL EVERY THREE MONTHS
- FEAR OF REPRISALS, PRISON, TORTURE OR EXILE



In 2018, the year of the uprising of thousands of Nicaraguans that left at least 355 dead at the hands of the government, the evangelical church did not participate as an institution and dedicated itself to days of prayer.

Meanwhile, the lack of resistance to abuses is experienced not only in the face of national events, but also in the flesh. The Baptist Convention of Nicaragua (CBN) was stripped of its alma mater, the Polytechnic University of Nicaragua (Upoli), the only private higher education center that opened its doors to shelter students and protesters in 2018, on February 2, 2022, so it was de facto confiscated by the Nicaraguan regime, thus collecting this outstanding account.

The fear is so great that Baptist pastors remained silent, and to this day there is not a single pronouncement on the confiscation of Upoli. But a week later, they received the authorities of the Ministry of Health at the Baptist Hospital of Managua for the inauguration of a new ward, one of the centers that treated demonstrators injured during the 2018 protests, as public hospitals closed their doors.⁴²

The hospital has a pension program of the Nicaraguan Institute of Social Security (INSS) and has five subsidiaries, which, according to the INSS 2020 Statistical Yearbook, had an annual average of 32,048 affiliates. That is 6.8 percent of the total in the private service, calculated at 466,766 people, who, together with those assigned to the public pension service of Minsa, totaled 653,034 insured.

⁴² <https://www.el19digital.com/articulos/ver/titulo:125189-hospital-bautista-amplia-sus-instalaciones>

The Baptist Convention not only owns the hospital, but it also has a radio station, dozens of schools, the Bible Institute, and a seminary.

All denominations are under the same fear of cancellations, confiscations, and even imprisonment, however, many particular situations of these churches do not transcend, because they are framed in small community spaces.

Expediente Abierto explains that [State intervention in the survival of evangelical churches](#) is seen in the Moravian community of the North Caribbean, to which the vast majority of the Miskito indigenous people belong.

The regime took advantage of an internal conflict to impose ecclesiastical authorities in 2016, as each denomination has a legal representative before the Ministry of the Interior, but the lack of recognition of the elected authorities in the ecclesiastical council froze the financial activities of the community for five years.

Nicaragua's five Moravian districts have 128,000 registered members. Both the association and the large churches had their bank accounts frozen, and the regime only released them when it managed to impose an FSLN-allied faction on the church's boards.

Since 2016, the state has stopped paying the Church for the \$3,500 monthly rent for the building of the former Moravian Hospital in Bilwi, which now serves as the Social Security Provisional Medical Clinic.

5. MAJOR VIOLATIONS OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

As mentioned in the introduction, from April 2018 to mid-December 2023, 740 attacks on churches in Nicaragua, especially Catholic ones, are recognized, according to the report by Martha Molina, the U.S. Department of State's 2024 International Religious Freedom Award recipient.

The report "Nicaragua: A Persecuted Church?" is the most detailed follow-up on attacks on religious freedom, which has four updates, the last of which was in August of 2023.⁴³

Given the number of attacks, the continuity of the attacks, the difficulty of collecting evidence, and the fear of denunciation, as well as the lack of bodies that systematize them internally, the number of attacks on religious freedom is probably much higher.

Molina systematizes seven types of attacks on religious freedom in the country, ranging from attacks, boycotts and attacks, confiscations, threats, and prohibitions.

⁴³ <https://iglesiaperseguidani.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Nicaragua-Iglesia-Perseguida-IV-Entrega.pdf>

TYOLOGIES OF VIOLATIONS OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN NICARAGUA.

CATEGORY	DESCRIPTION
PHYSICAL ATTACKS AND REPRESSION	Attacks on property and people, attacks, damage to infrastructure. Exile, expulsions, banishment, statelessness, kidnappings, imprisonments, judicial processes.
ARBITRARY CLOSURES AND CONFISCATIONS	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Non-profit organizations / Non-governmental organizations. 2) Universities and colleges 3) Media 4) Projects and social works
DEATH THREATS AND DEFAMATION, OR VERBAL ATTACKS.	Death threats, public defamations, verbal attacks.
HATE MESSAGES	Paints on the walls of religious house with offensive and hate messages
THEFT AND DESECRATION	Illegal theft of valuable items from temples and religious buildings, offenses to symbols of the Catholic faith
THREATS AND HARASSMENT	Verbal threats, harassment, surveillance, cuts to basic services, alteration of utility bills, immobilization of bank accounts.
PROHIBITIONS ON RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES, IMPEDIMENT TO FREEDOM OF WORSHIP	Processions, acts of popular piety, masses, preaching, community activities and evangelization

On the other hand, attacks on religious freedom include unquantified aspects such as espionage, imposition or veto of people on ecclesiastical boards of evangelical churches, excessive regulatory controls, for example, of financial statements and records.

In December of 2023, 16 clergymen were kidnapped, including Bishop Isidoro Mora, a member of the CEN; finally, on January 14, they were banished to Rome, along with Monsignor Rolando Álvarez who had been serving prison since August 19, 2022 and was tried for “treason;” the vicars of Matagalpa Óscar Escoto, who was under surveillance, and Jader Guido were also expelled, after being detained for a few hours in the days leading up to Christmas.⁴⁴

Without attempting a list of all the violations, and noting the probable omission of some relevant facts, the following are facts related to the systematic violations of Nicaragua’s constitutional and international commitments in the area of religious freedom.

⁴⁴ <https://www.laprensani.com/2024/01/15/politica/3265515-dos-vicarios-de-la-diocesis-de-matagalpa-que-no-estaban-en-prision-tambien-fueron-desterrados>

5.1. Persecution, harassment and discrimination on religious grounds.

Since November 30, 2022, pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, Nicaragua has been designated by the United States as a country of particular concern for incurring or tolerating particularly serious violations of religious freedom.⁴⁵

The GHREN noted that since April 2018, there have been attacks and criminalization of members of the Catholic ecclesiastical institution, which continued throughout the period of the group's investigation, with a sharp escalation in 2022.

On the first anniversary of the protests, in April 2019, 11 churches and 19 pastors and leaders were attacked by police and Sandinista sympathizers. That same year, there were 17 evangelical ministers exiled in Costa Rica for their support of the protesters in 2018, from the departments of Carazo and Nueva Segovia alone.⁴⁶

Starting in May 2021, many of the country's main opposition political leaders, including clergy, were arrested.⁴⁷

In April 2021, the church of San Miguel in Masaya celebrated the mass in memory of Álvaro Gómez, a pro-democracy protester killed by an unidentified shooter in 2018; the same happened during a hunger strike at the church in September 2022.

In May 2021, in Estelí, Catholic clergy closed the cathedral after police harassed and intimidated worshippers trying to celebrate

⁴⁵ <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/nicaragua/>

⁴⁶ <https://www.expedientepublico.org/el-silencio-de-los-lideres-de-las-iglesias-evangelicas-a-los-abusos-en-la-represion-en-nicaragua/>

⁴⁷ <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session52/A-HRC-52-CRP-5-ES.pdf>

mass in commemoration of Franco Valdivia, allegedly killed by an unidentified sniper during civic protests in 2018.⁴⁸

In three expulsions, a total of 34 Catholic clergy were banished. The first on February 9, 2023, the second on October 19 of that year, and the most recent in January 2024.⁴⁹

GHREN received information on 62 incidents against the Catholic Church in 2018, 88 in 2019, 85 in 2020, 54 in 2021, and 103 until the end of September 2022.

Another confidential report by a civil society organization submitted to GHREN reports 429 incidents or attacks against religious institutions during the period from April 2018 to September 2022.

According to the information received, 392 of the incidents were attacks against the Catholic Church, and the remaining 37 involved evangelical churches.

For example, on July 9, 2018, Cardinal Leonardo Brenes, Monsignor Silvio Báez, and Apostolic Nuncio Waldemar Sommertag were assaulted by members of pro-government groups while visiting the city of Diriamba, in the department of Carazo.

GHREN also investigated the July 13, 2018, attack on the Divine Mercy Church in Managua, which caused two deaths and was vandalized by bullets, both outside and inside the church.

When the 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

⁴⁸ <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/nicaragua/>

⁴⁹ <https://confidencial.digital/nacion/lista-de-sacerdotes-de-nicaragua-desterrados-por-el-regimen-orteguista/>

the Archdiocese of Managua. On December 26, however, the Ortega administration blocked Taiwan's donation and handed the property over to the People's Republic of China.

The GHREN referred to the expulsion of a group of nuns from the Order of Mother Teresa of Calcutta on July 5, 2022. That day, the 18 nuns were escorted to the southern border by two patrols of the Nicaraguan immigration authority, four civilian vehicles, two large minibuses, one small one, and a white jeep that, according to witnesses, belonged to "paramilitaries."

On September 16, 2022, La Prensa reported that Honduran Bishop José Canales had spoken to about 50 priests seeking to leave the country due to harassment, requesting reassignment to Honduras or Costa Rica.

As of August 2022, the Telecommunications and Postal Regulatory Body (TELCOR) closed 12 media outlets related to the Church. There was also the raid and occupation with excessive use of force of the Church of the Divine Child in Sébaco by the National Police.

Twelve members and workers of the Church, including Monsignor Rolando Álvarez, bishop of Matagalpa, seven priests, two seminarians, a dean and a cameraman, were locked up in the Church premises from August 4 to 19.

At the end of the siege, eight people were arrested; seven of them were transferred to the facilities of the Directorate of Judicial Assistance, while Bishop Álvarez was held under house arrest.

In January 2023, the seven priests were sentenced to ten years in prison for the crimes of undermining national integrity and spreading false news. Monsignor Álvarez was charged in December 2022 with the crime of undermining national security and

sentenced in February to 26 years in prison, for refusing to be banished. Bishop Silvio Báez, Father Edwin Román, and other priests remained in exile.

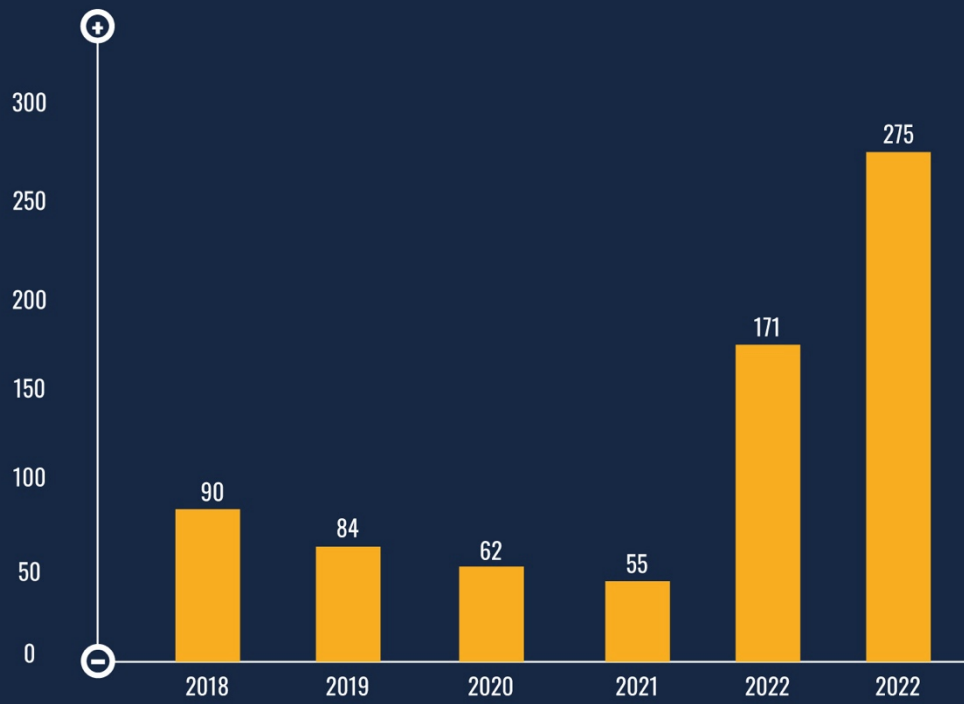
Following the release of 19 Catholic clergy members in Nicaragua in January 2024, human rights organizations began a campaign for the release of 11 evangelical missionaries from the *Puerta de la Montaña* church, who are accused of different crimes against sovereignty and security and have been detained since December 2023, VOA reported⁵⁰.

The justice system, co-opted by the Ortega-Murillo family, justifies religious persecution on national security grounds, but the American Convention on Human Rights is clear that religious discrimination, among other forms of discrimination, cannot be justified on grounds of emergency or war.

⁵⁰ <https://www.vozdeamerica.com/a/acusan-a-11-misioneros-evangelicos-de-atentar-contr-la-soberania-en-nicaragua/7445971.html>

HOSTILITIES AGAINST THE CHURCH BY YEAR

THE INVESTIGATION "NICARAGUA:
A PERSECUTED CHURCH?"
REVEALS **737 ATTACKS BETWEEN
2018 AND 2023.**



SOURCE: NICARAGUA, A PERSECUTED CHURCH?

5.2. Freedom of conscience, thought and whether or not to profess a religion.

According to media reports, the police maintained a long-standing vigilance against the Archbishop of Managua Brenes, justifying that it was for his safety.

The police also reportedly photographed all the individuals who entered the cardinals' home, including the priests, set up a permanent guard house outside their residence, and designated two police vehicles to follow Brenes wherever he went. An anonymous source told the media that Brenes had been under police surveillance for several years but that the relationship between the cardinal and the government had become more hostile since the pro-democracy protests in 2018, the State Department's 2022 International Religious Freedom Report details.

Government surveillance, harassment, and threats extended to the evangelical community as well. Protestant pastors also received threats that limited their religious freedom, including their ability to speak freely in sermons, police limited the ability to gather for certain church events, but many leaders said they lacked support networks and were reluctant to denounce the government crackdown.⁵¹

The regime denied political prisoners access to Bibles. After a family visit, the mother of a political prisoner told the media that prison

⁵¹ <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/nicaragua/>

authorities ordered inmates to remain silent when they tried to pray, the same report said.

In the context of the pandemic, affiliates of the Evangelical Alliance of Nicaragua (AEN) were forced to reopen churches for fear of reprisals, despite the fact that between 44 and 66 pastors in their congregations had died from COVID-19, noticiacristiana.com reported. Even though virtual worship and job losses meant a decrease in finances for congregations, they were also pressured to return to in-person attendance.

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 Santo Domingo in Managua and the pilgrimage to Rivas.

Despite the pandemic, the government once again organized and sponsored local religious activities through FSLN-controlled municipal governments, for example, in Managua in honor of Santo Domingo, or in Rivas, the annual celebration of San Lázaro in Masaya, and the Stations of the Cross in Granada.

During the celebration of Santo Domingo in 2021, the government used a replica of the statue of Santo Domingo normally carried in a Catholic procession, and individuals carrying the replica image wore the official colors of the ruling Sandinista party.

On December 7, La Gritería is celebrated in honor of the Conception of Mary, a tradition that arose in the eighteenth century, where the image of the Virgin goes in procession through the streets and altars are placed in temples and devotional homes so that the inhabitants come to sing in exchange for sweets, fruits and even toys, which are given as promises of faith by the hosts.

The regime's police threatened priests with jail if the Catholic celebration took place outside the temples as had been the custom.⁵²

5.3. Right of association and to form organizations.

The Ortega-Murillo regime has cancelled 3,390 civil society organizations in Nicaragua, between April 18 and August 31, 2023, according to the report "Closure of Civic Space in Nicaragua" by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR).⁵³ Of these, 416 are of a religious nature.

On February 2, 2023, the National Assembly revoked the operating licenses of several organizations associated with the Catholic Church, including the chapter in the northern city of Estelí.

NGOs affiliated with churches, like all others, must submit their reports to the Ministry of Government (currently the Ministry of the Interior). There, the General Directorate of Control and Registration of Non-Profit Organizations has imposed fines and excessive administrative payments, requires monthly financial reports to be submitted and the renewal of tax exemption certifications and banking services, and restricted direct funds from international donors.

The State Department's 2022 religious freedom report specifies that the government denied and delayed legally required permits and tax-exempt approvals to certain faith-based NGOs.

⁵² <https://www.expedientepublico.org/ortega-y-murillo-encarcelan-hasta-la-celebracion-mariana-en-nicaragua/>

Some reported a decline in donations, because parishioners feared being accused by the government of financing terrorism. Administrative burdens forced several evangelical Protestant churches to close or merge with other evangelical churches to continue operating, the report said.

An example of the modality of prohibition and confiscation is the case of the missionaries of the Order of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, whose foundation was cancelled and its 18 nuns expelled, allegedly for money laundering and financing of terrorism.

In September 2022, the government expelled the nuns of the Cross of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, who served the Diocese of Matagalpa. A State Department source said the nuns experienced months of harassment and pressure from the government regarding the congregation's financial contributions and the arbitrary denial of applications to renew residency permits for foreign women in the order.

In the case of Caritas, since 2018 tax exemptions were denied, the organization was unable to recover donations from Customs and did not receive the renewal of its permit.

Expediente Abierto published that [pressure on evangelical churches in Nicaragua](#) is the same for organizations that have hundreds of congregations to those with only one. The regime vetoes members of the boards of directors of associations, missions, and even local bodies, leaders, and lay opponents or critics of Sandinismo; there is a process of purging.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ <https://www.expedientepublico.org/el-silencio-de-los-lideres-de-las-iglesias-evangelicas-a-los-abusos-en-la-represion-en-nicaragua/>

5.4. The right to manifest religious beliefs in private or in public, through worship, practices and teaching.

The Government of Nicaragua, through the Police, has prohibited the Church from taking the saints out onto the streets since February 2023, when it did not authorize them to hold the processions during Lent and Holy Week.

During Holy Week 2023, 3,176 processions were banned, GHREN reported. UN experts continued to note that religious leaders were monitored by members of the police and other government agencies, including in churches and during the celebration of Masses.

A witness interviewed by GHREN said that several members of her church told her that “I don’t go to Mass anymore because pro-government people come and take photos and videos to see who is going.” Another witness said that “that is happening in the churches is that the priests are being intimidated, visited by the police, and state personnel arrive at the Masses to find out if something is being said against the government.”

Catholic clergy reported that the government continued to deny them access to prisons, a practice that began shortly after the 2018 protests, except for a small number of priests allegedly aligned with the government who were allowed entry. Catholic clergy said that prior to 2018, they had regularly entered prisons to celebrate Mass and provide communion and confession to detainees, the GHREN report details.

Religious media outlets have also been cancelled. In 2022, TELCOR ordered, without justification, the closure of 10 radio stations in the

Diocese of Matagalpa and three Catholic television channels because they allegedly did not meet the technical requirements to be on the air or have licenses, and cancelled the operating license of television Channel 21; the country's only evangelical channel. The government also revoked the operating license of Protestant radio station Nexo 89.5 FM.

Channel 21 and Nexo 89.5 FM were owned by relatives of evangelical pastor Guillermo Osorno, who ran as a presidential candidate in the November elections and who, for many years, was an ally of the Ortega-Murillo regime. The closure of the channel and the radio station came the day after Osorno held a press conference in which he denounced irregularities in the 2021 electoral process.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/nicaragua/>

THE PERSECUTION — OF THE CATHOLIC — CHURCH

The prohibition of religious acts in public spaces, impediments to the celebration of masses and surveillance up to exile and imprisonment are repressive measures of the regime in Nicaragua against religious people.



Since 2018, more than 200 members of the Catholic Church, laymen and priests, were forced to flee the country.



At least 40 nuns and 44 nuns were arbitrarily expelled.

18 nuns from the order of the Missionaries of Charity of Nicaragua included.



On March 11, 2022, the regime announced the withdrawal of approval and the request for the departure of Apostolic Nuncio Waldemar Stanisław Sommertag from Nicaragua.



On May 26, 2023, they ordered the freezing of the bank accounts of three of the nine dioceses of the Catholic Church.



Bishop Rolando Álvarez was arrested in August 2022 and sentenced to 26 years in prison for “treason.”

5.5. Employment Discrimination on Religious Grounds.

The Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America (OLIRE) reports that there are countless public workers who “are pressured to participate in missions aimed at [spying](#) on those considered opponents⁵⁶ or to actively participate in public meetings and/or celebrations that [exalt](#) the regime” or to pose as Sandinistas to avoid reprisals⁵⁷.

Public employees fear losing their jobs or being prosecuted and are forced to participate in these pro-government activities; sometimes, church members are warned to attend such celebrations, even if they are not related to their convictions.

OLIRE reports that Christian health professionals also said they were forced not to treat patients who participated in the protests, despite going against their conscience. Even today, it is frowned upon in public hospitals to treat any religious leader openly critical of the regime.⁵⁸

5.6. Religiously oriented private or family education.

The Catholic higher education institutions Central American University (UCA), John Paul II University, Catholic University of

⁵⁶ <https://nicaraguainvestiga.com/politica/113730-ortega-impone-una-especie-de-servicio-paramilitar-en-municipios/>

⁵⁷ <https://republica18.com/en-voz-alta/32104-salarios-pauperrimos-e-imposiciones-del-regimen-la-dificil-realidad-de-los-docentes-en-nicaragua/>

⁵⁸ <https://olire.org/es/monitorear/informes-del-pais/nicaragua/>

the Dry Tropics have been cancelled and confiscated, and the Immaculate Conception Catholic University was cancelled by its own decision, as well as the Thomas More Universitas, which belonged to businessmen and academics with a Catholic orientation.

The highest centers of evangelical denominations were cancelled and confiscated: Polytechnic University (Upoli), Martin Luther King Jr. Evangelical University, Christian Autonomous University of Nicaragua, and the Adventist University of Nicaragua.

OLIRE notes that the government has at times banned schools and/or students from participating in religious activities, such as Mass. Dissident teachers or students whose parents are known opponents, including Christians who openly criticize or are associated with ministries critical of the government, experience retaliation.⁵⁹

The textbooks also exalt and adore the personalities of Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo, among others.⁶⁰

The government, through the Ministry of Education (MINED), [prohibited](#) public schools from carrying out baccalaureate promotions in Catholic and Evangelical churches.⁶¹

The cancellation of Catholic and evangelical universities has sparked fears among teachers and parents that this will affect private religious primary and secondary schools in the future.⁶²

⁵⁹ <https://olire.org/es/monitorear/informes-del-pais/nicaragua/>

⁶⁰ <https://www.connectas.org/daniel-ortega-vuelve-a-la-escuela/>

⁶¹ <https://100noticias.com.ni/nacionales/119883-mined-prohibe-promociones-bachillerato-iglesia/>

⁶² <https://heyzine.com/flip-book/ee9b2ce212.html#page/1>

5.7. Religious Preservation of the Communities of the Caribbean Coast

In the Caribbean, the situation is very particular, as a conflict persists over the provincial board of directors of the Moravian Church that has been captured by the FSLN.

The now Ministry of the Interior gave the official certification of the Church to people close to the government, despite the fact that a large majority of parishioners and pastors reject them, explained an indigenous activist from the Northern Caribbean, who preferred not to be named.

In August 2018, the regime [removed congregations with fewer than 500 members from the national council with a reform](#), after church Superintendent Joseph Rivera participated in the national dialogue supporting the Civic Alliance that represented anti-government protesters.

The statutes were allegedly manipulated so that of the 245 ecclesial communities, only about 30 could participate in the synod, a reverend told **Expediente Público**.

In 2019, a new board of directors was appointed with Ofelia Álvarez as provincial superintendent of the church, deepening the conflict in the administration of some institutions such as the Moravo College (secondary school) and the Moravian Seminary of Bilwi (521 km northeast of Managua), for which the police intervened.

In 2021 this pro-regime group appointed a new board of directors chaired by Evenor Fedrick, in Bilwi, but again there were protests, until in January 2022, Michael Dixon was appointed as superintendent, also pro-regime.

The Moravian Church celebrates 175 years of presence in Nicaragua in 2024, “we consider that the regime wants to remove its social base to prevent people from organizing for the issue of invasions, the imposition of authorities, abuses, and in the face of this year’s regional elections,” said the indigenous leader.

The level of co-optation has reached the point of imposing members of the Sandinista Leadership Committee (CLS) on the boards of directors of local churches, with which the regime is also replacing religious authorities, after imposing community authorities on them.

5.8. Advocacy of religious hatred and incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence.

The State Department indicates that in June 2022, Edwin Suárez, a well-known Sandinista social media activist, questioned the conclusion of a report documenting 190 attacks on the Catholic Church between April 2018 and May 2022, calling them instead, “190 attacks against the Nicaraguan people directed and orchestrated from the pulpits.” He also accused Catholic priests of hiding weapons in their churches.

In August, a comment on a pro-regime Facebook page suggested that Nicaraguans should beat Bishop Alvarez and banish him from his parish.⁶³

In multiple speeches, Ortega and Murillo have accused the priests of inciting violence and backing an alleged coup against the government in 2018, referring to the protests.

⁶³ <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/nicaragua/>

Murillo called Catholic leaders “disgusting wolves” after their banishment⁶⁴ and has accused them of being “spiritual terrorists.”⁶⁵

On May 22, 2022, Juan Carlos Ortega, son of Ortega and Murillo, tweeted, “Under every cassock is an ordinary man, full of cruelty, greed, and evil thoughts.”⁶⁶ In his August 5th press conference, Murillo called for those who committed crimes against spirituality to be imprisoned, in an apparent reference to Bishop Alvarez. The next day he attacked him directly, referring to him as a “manipulator of religious symbols.”

On September 28, 2022, Ortega called the Catholic Church a perfect dictatorship during the police’s 43rd anniversary.⁶⁷

In May 2022, commentator William Grigsby said there was evidence to prove the involvement of priests and bishops in terrorist acts in the country; he mentioned prominent clerics, including Father Harving Padilla, pastor of the San Juan Bautista de Masaya church, Bishops Álvarez, Mata, and Báez and Cardinal Brenes, arguing that they were all involved in various criminal acts.⁶⁸

In August 2021, Grigsby, a notorious regime propagandist and disinformant, accused the Catholic bishops of conspiring with the US and Spanish ambassadors to Nicaragua to overthrow the Ortega-Murillo government.

FSLN Deputy Wilfredo Navarro also gave an extensive interview to a local television program in which he singled out Cardinal Brenes

⁶⁴ <https://100noticias.com.ni/nacionales/96762-nicaragua-iglesia-catolica-obispos-rosario-murillo/>

⁶⁵ <https://100noticias.com.ni/nacionales/128836-rosario-murillo-intensifica-ataques-iglesia/>

⁶⁶ https://x.com/JC_OrtMu/status/1528407818864402435?s=20

⁶⁷ <https://www.france24.com/es/minuto-a-minuto/20220929-daniel-ortega-dice-que-la-iglesia-cat%C3%B3lica-es-una-dictadura-perfecta>

⁶⁸ <https://nicaraguaactual.tv/william-grigsby-pide-prision-obispos-sacerdotes/>

and several bishops, calling them servants of the devil, the State Department reported in its 2022 annual religious freedom report.

Navarro said he believed the Catholic Church could face criminal charges for a statement that the Archdiocese of Managua's Peace and Justice Commission issued on August 10, 2021. The deputy considered the CEN to have committed an electoral crime by encouraging voter abstention in November's national elections.⁶⁹

5.9. Expulsion of any foreigner for religious reasons.

In 2023, some 227 religious leaders (151 priests and 76 nuns) were expelled, banished, or prevented from entering Nicaragua, according to the Human Rights Collective "Nicaragua Nunca+."⁷⁰

Since 2016, foreign missionaries from evangelical churches have been restricted for security reasons, through the "mechanism to facilitate the organized and safe entry and exit to Nicaragua of churches, denominations and congregations."

The government continued its selective restriction on some foreign religious visitors to the country on the basis of the perceived political affiliation of the local sponsoring visitor.

Churches have to send a letter to the Ministry of the Interior along with a form with the details of the missionary: name, age, occupation, nationality, religious denomination, date and time of entry, date and time of departure, itinerary in Nicaragua, purpose

⁶⁹ <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/nicaragua/>

⁷⁰ <https://confidencial.digital/nacion/regimen-saca-de-nicaragua-a-mas-de-220-sacerdotes-y-monjas-en-2023/>

of their visit, and other details. Then, wait seven days for the government to authorize or deny the request.⁷¹

⁷¹ <https://protestantedigital.com/internacional/40213/Nicaragua-suaviza-pero-no-retira-la-norma-contr-a-los-misioneros-evangelicos>

6. CONCLUSIONS

Since 2018, the Nicaraguan regime has applied a systematic policy of aggression against the Catholic Church, with contingency measures against Protestant communities.

The violent repressive phase of 2018 that ended with 355 deaths followed a phase of attacks and sabotage of priests and temples, particularly due to the influence of the Nicaraguan bishops and the degree of institutional reliability they enjoy.

Physical violence was followed by a period of institutional weakening with the cancellation of the ecclesiastical structure and the active persecution of Catholic leaders, even leading to imprisonment.

Aggression against bishops is not a broken taboo, but is part of the nature of the FSLN, which, since the 1980s, has had an ideological struggle with the clergy. The opportunity to imprison and banish clergy members in a broad way is a worrying example of the level of impunity with which these abuses are committed.

With leadership banished, control over public space, and the annihilation of spaces of dissent, it is worth asking what is next or what is the future of the Church in Nicaragua.

OLIRE believes that, in practice, the relationship between the government and religious groups has depended on the usefulness that these groups could represent for the FSLN party.

Returning to the background of the Sandinista revolution, the FSLN developed a Christianity with like-minded communities, but not with the ecclesiastical hierarchies.

For this reason, the FSLN considered that it was possible to be a believer (Christian) and at the same time a revolutionary, “although it did not promote adherence to a traditional religious doctrine, but a popular religiosity in which the revolution and Sandinista ideology were exalted above all else.”

At present, the mayor’s offices or the Nicaraguan Institute of Tourism use celebrations as tools of political propaganda and social control, at the same time they try to instrumentalize their symbols and popular representations.

“They promote the faith as a popular religion, which they try to disguise as if religious activities continue to be carried out (by the Catholic Church) and are nothing more than propaganda activities,” human rights promoter Yader Valdivia told *Confidencial*.

Valdivia stressed that this usurpation by the State of religious activities “is accompanied by the financial and operational suffocation of the Church.”⁷²

The banishment of 34 priests is not random. It focused on the leaders of the Church, including three bishops of the CEN, knowing that Cardinal Brenes and Monsignor Herrera are retiring. This could mark the regime’s interest in negotiating with the Vatican names that replace these critical clergy with individuals more detached from Nicaraguan affairs, something that China achieved with the Holy See in 2018.

The Honduran bishop, Monsignor José Antonio Canales, of the Episcopal Secretariat of Central America, [told Expediente Público](#) that “the regime (Ortega Murillo) wants to put an end to

⁷² <https://confidencial.digital/nacion/regimen-saca-de-nicaragua-a-mas-de-220-sacerdotes-y-monjas-en-2023/>

the Church,” because “it has been the only institution that has resisted (...) They have put an end to all outside influence, eliminating NGOs and everything that implies that Nicaraguans have an opening to an outside world.”⁷³

In a totalitarian political system, where civil liberties have been cancelled, religion and Christian worship represent a real and relevant threat to the Ortega-Murillo regime, given the social and mobilizing potential of the churches.

The particularity of religion is that it touches very deep nerves of Nicaraguan society, where there are values rooted in tradition, culture, idiosyncrasy, the deepest emotions, and the human sense in search of transcendentalism.

It is also necessary to consider the regime’s attempt to incorporate the government’s postulates in the different governmental instances, not only state institutions, but also schools.

All in all, Nicaragua is not a denominational state, but its anti-religious tendency alters the historical and cultural order at very deep roots; on the other hand, and in short, it is anticlerical, and seeks to use religion or confiscate its values for the benefit of the dictatorial political project.

⁷³ <https://www.expedientepublico.org/desafios-de-la-conferencia-episcopal-someterse-o-desaparecer-bajo-el-regimen-de-ortega/>

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ACN Religious Freedom report*. (2023).
<https://acninternational.org/religiousfreedomreport>
- Altemeyer, F. (2020, November 14). *The Catholic Church in Nicaragua*. Consolata America.
<https://www.consolataamerica.org/es/la-iglesia-catolica-en-nicaragua/>
- Pontifical Yearbook 2020*. Ciudad del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana.
- Article 66. (2023, December 18). *Record number of attacks against the Catholic Church in Nicaragua: it suffered more than 270 repressive acts in 2023*.
<https://www.articulo66.com/2023/12/18/record-ataques-iglesia-catolica-nicaragua-2023/>
- National Assembly. Concordat concluded between His Holiness and the Republic of Nicaragua, signed in Rome on November 2, 1861*. (n.d.).
<http://legislacion.asamblea.gob.ni/Instrumentos.nsf/550cbe82091cc613062578b80075d823/3207b4937ad3bb45062587ac006f840c>
- Assemblies of God*. (n.d.).
<https://www.asambleasdediosnicaragua.com/>
- Bonino, J. C. (2022, September 20). Dossier – The Historical Program, Orientation and Guide of Revolutionary Transformations - Barricade. *Dossier*.
<https://www.diariobarricada.com/2022/07/23/dossier-programa-historico-orientacion-y-guia-de-las-transformaciones-revolucionarias/>
- Catholic.net. (n.d.). *The Church in Latin America: NICARAGUA*.
<https://es.catholic.net/op/articulos/32263/cat/952/la-iglesia-en-america-latina-nicaragua.html#modal>
- Population Census 2005*. INIDE. Retrieved January 21, 2024,
<https://www.inide.gob.ni/docu/censos2005/VolPoblacio>

n/Volumen%20Poblacion%201-4/Vol.I%20Poblacion-
Caracteristicas%20Generales.pdf

UN Human Rights Council. (2023, March 7). *Detailed conclusions of the Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua*. Retrieved January 21, 2024, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hr_bodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session52/A-HRC-52-CRP-5-ES.pdf

Confidential. (2023, December 8). *Regime takes more than 220 priests and nuns out of Nicaragua in 2023*. Confidential. <https://confidencial.digital/nacion/regimen-saca-de-nicaragua-a-mas-de-220-sacerdotes-y-monjas-en-2023/>

Confidential. (2024, January 11). *More than 200 religious men and women persecuted, exiled or imprisoned by the dictatorship*. Confidential. <https://confidencial.digital/nacion/mas-de-200-religiosos-y-religiosas-perseguidas-desterrados-o-encarcelados-por-la-dictadura/>

Confidential. (2024, January 21). *List of Nicaraguan priests exiled by the Ortega regime*. Confidential. <https://confidencial.digital/nacion/lista-de-sacerdotes-de-nicaragua-desterrados-por-el-regimen-orteguista/>

Political Constitution of the Republic of Nicaragua. (n.d.). <http://legislacion.asamblea.gob.ni/normaweb.nsf/09cf45d6fc893868062572650059911e/94bccaa76eb625bd062588e90054d69d>

American Convention on Human Rights. (1969). OAS. Retrieved January 21, 2024, https://www.oas.org/dil/esp/1969_Convenci%C3%B3n_Americana_sobre_Derechos_Humanos.pdf

El Nuevo Diario. (2018, December 5). *Woman burns Managua Cathedral priest with sulfuric acid* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uKeY5UTTXJY>

The19digital. (2016, October 12). *Evangelical churches will work hand in hand with the Sandinista government to strengthen health and education programs*. Retrieved

January 21, 2024,
<https://www.el19digital.com/articulos/ver/titulo:47674-iglesias-evangelicas-trabajara-junto-a-gobierno-sandinista-para-fortalecer-programas-en-salud-y-educacion>

The19digital. (2018, March 9). *Government grants more than 800 property titles to evangelical churches*. Retrieved January 21, 2024, from
<https://www.el19digital.com/articulos/ver/titulo:74814-gobierno-entrega-mas-de-800-titulos-de-propiedad-a-iglesias-evangelicas>

The19digital. (2019). *National Assembly recognizes the work of evangelical pastors for peace*. (September 30). Retrieved January 21, 2024, from
<https://www.el19digital.com/articulos/ver/titulo:94755-asamblea-nacional-reconoce-labor-por-la-paz-de-pastores-evangelicos>

The19digital. (2020, April 16). *They hold worship by videoconference in Nicaraguan prisons*. Retrieved January 21, 2024,
<https://www.el19digital.com/articulos/ver/titulo:102351-realizan-culto-por-videoconferencia-en-centros-penales-de-nicaragua>

The19digital. (2022, February). *Baptist Hospital expands its facilities*. Retrieved January 9, 2024,
<https://www.el19digital.com/articulos/ver/titulo:125189-hospital-bautista-amplia-sus-instalaciones>

Central American Studies. (1979). *Christian Commitment for a New Nicaragua*. Vol. 34, No. 374: 1069-1074.

Public Record. (2021a, January 4). *The regime and religion: it speaks like a lamb, but acts like a dragon*. Public Record - Investigative Journalism.
<https://www.expedientepublico.org/el-regimen-y-la-religion-habla-como-cordero-pero-actua-como-dragon/>

Public Record. (2021b, January 4). *The Catholic Church before April 2018: between rewards, resignation and the boycott of the regime*. Public Record - Investigative Journalism.

<https://www.expedientepublico.org/la-iglesia-catolica-antes-de-abril-2018-entre-recompensas-resignacion-y-el-boicot-del-regimen/>

Public Record. (2022a, August 23). *Of Protestants, almost nothing: dogmas and fear dominate the evangelical community of Nicaragua*. Public Record - Investigative Journalism. <https://www.expedientepublico.org/de-protestantes-casi-nada-dogmas-y-miedo-dominan-a-la-comunidad-evangelica-de-nicaragua/>

Public Record. (2022b, August 23). *The silence of evangelical church leaders to abuses in Nicaragua's repression*. Public Record - Investigative Journalism. <https://www.expedientepublico.org/el-silencio-de-los-lideres-de-las-iglesias-evangelicas-a-los-abusos-en-la-represion-en-nicaragua/>

Public Record. (2023, December 6). *Ortega and Murillo even imprison the Marian celebration in Nicaragua*. Public Record - Investigative Journalism. <https://www.expedientepublico.org/ortega-y-murillo-encarcelan-hasta-la-celebracion-mariana-en-nicaragua/>

Public Record. (2024, January 9). *Challenges of the Episcopal Conference: submit or disappear under the Ortega regime*. Public Record - Investigative Journalism. <https://www.expedientepublico.org/desafios-de-la-conferencia-episcopal-someterse-o-desaparecer-bajo-el-regimen-de-ortega/>

Fides, A. (n.d.). *AMERICA/NICARAGUA - "In search of new horizons for a better Nicaragua" begins the dialogue between the Church and the Government* - Agenzia Fides. <https://www.fides.org/es/news/37486>

France24. (2022, September 29). Daniel Ortega says the Catholic Church is "a perfect dictatorship." *France 24*. <https://www.france24.com/es/minuto-a-minuto/20220929-daniel-ortega-dice-que-la-iglesia-cat%C3%B3lica-es-una-dictadura-perfecta>

Gonzalez, Y. M. (2018, July 16). Bishop Abelardo Mata's vehicle is attacked in Nindirí, Masaya. *The Press*.

<https://www.laprensani.com/2018/07/15/nacionales/2449245-atacan-vehiculo-de-monsenor-abelardo-mata-en-nindiri-masaya>

Hernandez, D. (2024, January 18). *11 evangelical missionaries accused of attacking Nicaragua's sovereignty* [Video]. Voice of America.
<https://www.vozdeamerica.com/a/acusan-a-11-misioneros-evangelicos-de-atentar-contr-la-soberania-en-nicaragua/7445971.html>

Church of Jesus Christ. (2022, April 29). *The Church donated oxygen breathing equipment*.
noticias.laiglesiadejesucristo.org.
<https://noticias.laiglesiadejesucristo.org/articulo/la-iglesia-fortalece-los-servicios-de-salud-del-hospital-carlos-roberto-huembes-de-la-ciudad-de-managua-nicaragua>

Lara, F. J. B. (2017, December 4). *Monsignor Lezcano, President of the Congress - Francisco Javier Bautista Lara*.
Francisco Javier Bautista Lara.
<https://franciscobautista.com/2013/10/04/monsenor-lezcano-presidente-del-congreso/>

Molina, M. (2023). *Nicaragua: ¿una iglesia perseguida? Nicaragua: ¿una iglesia perseguida?, IV*.
<https://iglesiaperseguidani.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Nicaragua-Iglesia-Perseguida-IV-Entrega.pdf>

Moreno, S. (2019, November 18). 'We're going to give you lead', Ortega police threaten to kill priest. *El Nuevo Herald*.
<https://www.elnuevoherald.com/noticias/america-latina/article232345742.html>

Navarrete, J. (2020, October 5). *Daniel Ortega goes back to school*. CONNECTAS.
<https://www.connectas.org/daniel-ortega-vuelve-a-la-escuela/>

Nicaragua Today. (2022, May 25). *William Grigsby Calls for Imprisonment for Bishops and Priests He Accuses of Criminals*. Nicaragua Today.

<https://nicaraguaactual.tv/william-grigsby-pide-prision-obispos-sacerdotes/>

Nicaragua investigates. (2019, October 29). *67 evangelical churches allied with Ortega receive land titles.*

<https://nicaraguainvestiga.com/nacion/9601-67-iglesias-evangelicas-aliadas-de-ortega-reciben-titulos-de-propiedad/>

Nicaragua investigates. (2023, March 23). *Ortega imposes a kind of "paramilitary service" in municipalities.*

<https://nicaraguainvestiga.com/politica/113730-ortega-impone-una-especie-de-servicio-paramilitar-en-municipios/>

Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America. (n.d.-a).

<https://olire.org/es/monitorear/informes-del-pais/nicaragua/>

OAS - IACHR :: Civil Society Organizations Cancelled. (n.d.).

Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR).

https://www.oas.org/es/CIDH/jsForm/?File=/es/cidh/meseni/osc_canceladas.asp

OHCHR. (s. f.-a). *Declaration on the elimination of all forms of intolerance and of discrimination based on religion or belief.* <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/declaration-elimination-all-forms-intolerance-and-discrimination>

OHCHR. (n.d.-b). *Group of Human Rights Experts on*

Nicaragua. <https://www.ohchr.org/es/hr-bodies/hrc/ghre-nicaragua/index>

OHCHR. (n.d.-c). *International Covenant on Civil and Political*

Rights. <https://www.ohchr.org/es/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>

Online Flipbook. (s. f.). <https://heyzine.com/flip-book/ee9b2ce212.html#page/1>

Ortega Murillo. (2022, May). @JC_OrtMu. X. Retrieved January 22, 2024,

https://x.com/JC_OrtMu/status/1528407818864402435?s=20

- Press, The. (2022, November 15). Religion, Catholics and Christians in Nicaragua. *The Press*.
<https://www.laprensani.com/2022/11/15/editorial/3067359-religion-catolicos-y-cristianos-en-nicaragua>
- Press, The. (2024, January 16). Two vicars of Matagalpa who were not in prison were also banished. *The Press*.
<https://www.laprensani.com/2024/01/15/politica/3265515-dos-vicarios-de-la-diocesis-de-matagalpa-que-no-estaban-en-prision-tambien-fueron-desterrados>
- Protestant Digital. (n.d.). *Nicaragua softens, but maintains, the rule against evangelical missionaries*.
<https://protestantedigital.com/internacional/40213/Nicaragua-suaviza-pero-no-retira-la-norma-contralos-misioneros-evangelicos>
- Open Doors. (n.d.). *Nicaragua · Open doors*.
<https://www.puertasabiertas.org/ES/persecucion/lmp/nicaragua/>
- Republic18. (2023, December 11). Poor salaries and impositions of the regime: the difficult reality of teachers in Nicaragua - Republic 18. *Republic 18 - Nicaragua*.
<https://republica18.com/en-voz-alta/32104-salarios-pauperrimos-e-imposiciones-del-regimen-la-dificil-realidad-de-los-docentes-en-nicaragua/>
- Silva, W. S. (2024, 21 enero). Catholic Church is most credible institution in Nicaragua, CID Gallup poll finds. *Catholic News Agency*.
<https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/254778/catholic-church-is-most-credible-institution-in-nicaragua-cid-gallup-poll-finds>
- United Against Apostasy. (2013, November 29). Nicaraguan Evangelical Alliance accuses the regime of trying to substitute God. United Against Apostasy.
<https://contralaapostasia.com/2013/11/23/alianza-evangelica-nicaraguense-acusa-al-regimen-de-intentar-sustituir-a-dios/>

- United Nations. (n.d.). *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* | United Nations. <https://www.un.org/es/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>
- United States Department of State. (2023a, diciembre 7). United States Department of State. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/nicaragua/>
- United States Department of State. (2023b, diciembre 7). United States Department of State. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/nicaragua/>
- Vatican News. (2019, July 19). Nicaragua: Faithful warn Mgr. Álvarez of a possible aggression by paramilitaries. *Vatican News*. <https://www.vaticannews.va/es/iglesia/news/2019-07/fieles-nicaragua-defienden-a-monsenor-alvarez-ataque-paramilitar.html>
- 100% News. (2019, October 7). *Monsignor Abelardo Mata confirms the presence of paramilitaries inside the temple* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H0NCrMgzG-M>
- 100% Noticias. (s. f.-a). *Ministry of Education prohibits high school promotions in Catholic and Evangelical churches*. 100noticias.com.ni. <https://100noticias.com.ni/nacionales/119883-mined-prohibe-promociones-bachillerato-iglesia/>
- 100% Noticias. (s. f.-b). *Father Eliar Pineda: "Daniel Ortega is the devil personified"*. 100noticias.com.ni. <https://100noticias.com.ni/nacionales/91821-eliar-pineda-ortega-diablo-personificado/>
- 100% Noticias. (s. f.-c). *Rosario Murillo Accuses Priests of Being "Spiritual Terrorists," Tries to Justify Kidnappings*. 100noticias.com.ni. <https://100noticias.com.ni/nacionales/128836-rosario-murillo-intensifica-ataques-iglesia/>

100% Noticias. (s. f.-d). *Rosario Murillo plays the victim, calls the bishops "disgusting wolves" and accuses them "of manipulating the word of God"*. 100noticias.com.ni.
<https://100noticias.com.ni/nacionales/96762-nicaragua-iglesia-catolica-obispos-rosario-murillo/>



Expediente Abierto is an emerging Central American think tank focused on research and the promotion of dialogue on security and defense, international affairs, transparency, and human rights. We bring together researchers and practitioners from the hemisphere to generate politically unbiased analysis aimed at contributing to the discussion of general interest topics in society such as security, public sector efficiency, institutional opacity, organized crime, corruption, and the scrutiny of public resources.





EXPEDIENTE
ABIERTO