



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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USCIRF's Mission

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

Repression of Religious Freedom in Latin America's Authoritarian Triad – Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela

Overview

Authoritarian governments in Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela have repressed religious freedom for years or decades. All three governments violate freedom of religion and belief (FoRB), often to quell perceived threats to the regime's power. This issue update outlines the parallel strategies used by the governments of Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela to restrict religious freedom, with a focus on: (1) harassment of religious groups; (2) legal obstacles to religious practice, often under more neutral auspices of regulation; (3) favoritism and co-optation of some religious groups; and (4) persecution and imprisonment of individuals for their religious beliefs or practices.

Background

In all three countries, the ruling party fully controls government functions and violates human rights to subdue opposition. In [Nicaragua](#) and [Venezuela](#), the politically motivated persecution is so widespread that international observers note the violations amount to crimes against humanity.

Each country applies pressure to religious entities and leaders perceived as politically threatening or otherwise misaligned with state interests. This persecution often occurs in response to religiously motivated activity, such as public calls for the protection of human dignity or the provision of community services and support. In Cuba, the governing Communist Party severely restricts religious practice, particularly by groups that resist state regulation and control. In Nicaragua, President Daniel Ortega Saavedra, his wife and co-President Rosario Murillo Zambrana, and the ruling Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) party have orchestrated a systematic crackdown on religious groups considered opponents of their government. While the Nicolas Maduro government in Venezuela has not escalated its persecution of religious groups to the same severity as Cuba and Nicaragua, it engages in similar patterns of repression.

Patterns of Religious Repression

Persistent Harassment of Religious Communities

In 2025, all three authoritarian states continued to threaten and harass religious groups and their leaders to deter them from undermining the government. The government targeting entailed arbitrary summons for questioning, warnings against aggravating the regime, and official public attacks or insults. At times, Cuba and Nicaragua escalated these threats by arbitrarily arresting and imprisoning religious practitioners and leaders.

Threats and Summons

In Cuba, religious leaders, particularly those from independent Christian and syncretic Santería groups, receive repeated summons to appear at police or state security stations, regular threats of imprisonment or other consequences for attending religious services, and official written warnings of possible punishments for religious affiliation. Authorities also routinely detain members of the Ladies in White protest group to prevent their attendance of Mass. In July 2025, a babalao (a high priest in Santería) was summoned to the police station, where an officer demanded he dissolve ongoing religious celebrations at his home and warned that the next celebration of rites would result in the participants' arrest.

Nicaraguan religious leaders regularly report receiving orders from security officers not to mention specific subjects, including the economic and political situation in Nicaragua. National police officers establish a visible and intimidating presence around religious buildings, often photographing and recording those present. Civil society reported that in February 2025, police entered a church and began recording the Sunday sermon; they approached the pastor at his home the next day to threaten him to be careful about the content of his preaching, as they were displeased by his message.

In Venezuela, religious leaders whom intelligence services do not consider pro-Maduro face intimidation, including threats both anonymously and from state agents. In January 2025, Carlos José Correa Barros, a Christian journalist for Fe y Alegría radio (owned by the Society of Jesus) and director of the human rights NGO Espacio Público, was detained by hooded state security authorities; his whereabouts were unknown for over a week before his release nine days later.

Surveillance of Religious Groups

In 2025, all three regimes continued to conduct surveillance on religious groups, which authorities incorporated into threats against religious leaders and members. Informants are known to be embedded in religious associations and seminaries. In Cuba, state

security officials frequently visit Catholic and Protestant churches and surveil homes to intimidate parishioners and leaders. Nicaraguan priests and bishops describe being followed 24 hours a day. Venezuelan religious leaders are similarly pushed to practice self-censorship on any subject perceived as critical of Maduro.

Public Attacks

State officials in Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela also launch public attacks on religious groups. The Catholic Church is particularly maligned in Nicaragua and Venezuela due to its significant influence in popular and civil society. President Ortega has [called](#) the Nicaraguan Catholic Church “bishops of Satan,” and in August 2025 his regime seized an iconic Catholic school in Jinotepe under claims it was a location where “coup-plotters tortured and murdered.” Although the number of recorded public attacks on the Catholic Church fell in 2025, Nicaraguan civil society groups attribute this trend to pervasive fear of reporting abuses.

Venezuelan leaders, in particular, deploy public antisemitic rhetoric that threatens Jewish communities. For example, Maduro [claimed](#) in August 2024 that “international Zionism” controlled “all media networks, satellites, and power” and was financing a purported coup to depose him.

Arbitrary Detention and FoRB Victims

Religious leaders remained at high risk of retaliation for perceived links to political opposition, including arbitrary detention, in 2025. For example, [Loreto Hernandez Garcia](#) and [Donaida Perez Paseiro](#) are currently detained in Cuba. The pair are married leaders of the Association of Free Yorubas, an independent Afro-Cuban religious group. The couple were originally detained in 2021 amid the government crackdown on peaceful protests that swept the island that July. Paseiro was re-imprisoned in June 2025 after being released in January alongside hundreds of other prisoners under a Vatican-mediated arrangement between the United States and Cuba.

In July 2025, Nicaraguan police arrested Pastor Rudy Palacios Vargas and seven of his friends and family—one of whom later died in state custody from unknown causes—in Jinotepe Municipality. Palacios Vargas, a target of the Ortega-Murillo regime since 2018 when he offered prayer and first aid to student protesters against the government, was last reported to be held in a maximum-security facility on charges of treason. Earlier in the month, a Roman Catholic priest and open government critic was released after authorities held him and his driver incommunicado for over a week.

Altogether, Nicaragua and Cuba have imprisoned more individuals based on their religion or belief than Venezuela. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)'s [Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List](#), though not necessarily exhaustive of all similarly persecuted individuals in each country, includes 11 FoRB victims in Cuba and 84 in Nicaragua.

Administrative Lawfare

Each country continues to use legal strategies to burden, restrict, or outright criminalize religious groups. These activities may be grouped under the notion of lawfare, or the weaponization of facially neutral laws to exert power and control over opponents. Laws with ostensible politically and religiously neutral purposes, often addressing treason, terrorism, or financial wrongdoing, become vehicles for religious repression.

The Impact of Closing Civic Space on Religious Organizations

All three countries have laws granting the government extensive influence over the activity of civil society organizations. Complex and myriad restrictions on NGOs provide justifications for each government to surveil and punish faith-based civil society groups.

In addition to mandatory registration for religious organizations in Cuba, receiving funding from foreign organizations or financing activities considered to be directed against the state carries a sentence of up to 10 years. The government thus can arbitrarily increase bureaucratic enforcement based on the perceived threat posed by a church or worshippers.

Nicaragua exerts control over any civil society activity it deems threatening. The state governmental registration for both civil society and religious groups mandates any groups receiving funding from abroad to register as “foreign agents,” and permits the government to cancel registrations and seize the assets of organizations it contends are destabilizing the country. The United Nations (UN) condemned a Nicaraguan law in 2022 that imposed new reporting, staffing, and activity constraints on NGOs under the guise of preventing money laundering and terrorism financing. The law has since been wielded to strip thousands of NGOs of their legal status within Nicaragua, including at least 11 faith-based organizations in 2025, and to level spurious allegations of money laundering or other noncompliance with financial transparency requirements. Constitutional reforms adopted in early 2025 buttress the state’s ability to restrict faith organizations. By mandating that

religious organizations remain “free of foreign control” the reforms also appear to particularly interfere with Catholic entities’ ties to the Vatican.

In Venezuela, the 2024 Law on Oversight, Regularization, Operation, and Financing of Non-Governmental and Non-Profit Social Organizations similarly requires NGOs to obtain government authorization to operate, allowing state suspension of organizations deemed to promote fascism or incite hatred (charges regularly leveled by Maduro against political opponents). The law drew [consternation](#) from the [Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela](#) for placing onerous, suppressive requirements on NGOs. Maduro has called for the use of a law prohibiting the spread of violent or discriminatory messages, the so-called Law Against Hate, to punish Catholic priests who criticized political corruption during homilies, and religious leaders report that in 2025 they remain under constant risk of its arbitrary application.

Legal Status of Religious Organizations

Cuba and Nicaragua manipulate the status of religious entities to marginalize disfavored groups. In Cuba, the Ministry of Justice, where the Office of Religious Affairs of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (ORA) is housed, arbitrarily denies or ignores requests for registration by religious groups. For unregistered groups, the lack of legal recognition becomes the basis for sustained harassment as membership in an unregistered religious group is a crime. For instance, the pastor of an unregistered religious association reported being warned in April 2025 by state authorities that the premises where he held services would be demolished and that he would be prosecuted for illegal and counterrevolutionary activity. He responded that he lacked the authorization to hold services only because the same authorities had denied it. Some groups, such as the Free Yoruba Association based in Cuba, do not register out of a desire to remain independent from government influence.

Nicaragua similarly relies on arbitrary legal designations to justify persecution of religious groups. In January 2025, the Ortega government announced the closure of 15 organizations, including the Foundation of Contemplative Dominican Nuns and a Baptist association. Since 2018, the Nicaraguan government has [canceled](#) the legal status of over 5,400 organizations, many affiliated with the Catholic Church but also some belonging to Evangelical, Pentecostal, and Baptist traditions. Targeted groups lose all legal claims to their property, which historically has been transferred to the government.

While Venezuela did not escalate in 2025 to the level of Cuba and Nicaragua in systematically abusing legal registration, it maintains a requirement that religious groups register with the Directorate of Justice and Religion. Deliberate bureaucratic hinderances already prolong the registration process for up to a decade for churches that fail to display loyalty.

Abuse of Citizenship Laws

Nicaragua and Cuba weaponize citizenship status to strip religious practitioners or leaders of national membership. The practice is particularly pronounced in Nicaragua, with Cuba appearing to follow suit. As the [right to a nationality](#) is fundamental to all human rights, denationalization ensures that targeted faith leaders cannot return to their communities and livelihoods.

Nicaragua has systematically forced the expulsion of perceived opponents, including through mass stripping of citizenship totaling at least 450 cases since early 2023. This number has included several Catholic laypeople, individuals affiliated with the evangelical Mountain Gateway ministry, and other faith leaders. Nicaragua formalized the rationale for its forced denationalizations with Law No. 1190 in early 2024, which reformed the constitution to state that “traitors to the homeland” would lose their status as Nicaraguan nationals.

In July 2024, Cuba, believed to be inspired by the Nicaraguan model, approved a new Citizenship Law. The legislation allows the government to revoke the citizenship of Cubans who engage in acts “contrary to the political, economic, or social interest” of Cuba. As in Nicaragua, religious freedom and human rights advocates fear that “traitors” may come to describe any individual the government finds problematic.

Favoritism and Co-Optation

All three countries attempt to manipulate and co-opt religious groups, although Nicaragua’s systematic crackdown on religion has overshadowed most meaningful favoritism in 2025. Religious groups willing to support the regime receive preferential treatment.

The Cuban government maintains a three-tiered system of religious groups. The most privileged tier consists of the Cuban Council of Churches (CCC), an umbrella group with over 30 member organizations enjoying a mutually supportive relationship with the national government. State alignment allows CCC members latitude to carry out religious activity, but occasionally even CCC denominations report being subject to

warnings and fines over the content of religious services. The middle tier of privilege consists of non-CCC but registered denominations, such as the Catholic Church, which are subject to more scrutiny than CCC members. Most persecuted are non-CCC, unregistered groups, all considered illegal by the Cuban government. Syncretic [Santeria](#) faiths and non-Christian faiths report particularly severe and frequent FoRB violations.

Venezuela has followed Cuba’s model of cultivating relationships with religious groups willing to publicly back the regime in exchange for favorable treatment. In advance of July 2024 elections—in which Maduro claimed a disputed victory despite [evidence](#) he lost by a significant margin—the government launched an aggressive strategy to secure evangelical support, including the “My Well-Equipped Church” refurbishment program and cash stipends to 13,000 pastors. Religious groups and media outlets [report](#) Maduro’s pattern of offering some evangelical pro-Maduro denominations benefits during electoral periods.

The government of Nicaragua treats essentially all organized faiths as competitors for power. It has made allowances, however, for religious actors it considers susceptible to co-optation. Today, Nicaraguan police prevent outdoor worship proceedings by all but those clergy aligned with the state, banning an estimated 16,500 religious processions since 2018. Instead, FSLN-controlled municipal governments [organize](#) and sponsor parallel festivities. In 2025, independent Evangelical pastors denounced events supported by the regime-linked Federation of Nicaraguan Evangelical Churches (FIENIC) as efforts to leverage churches as instruments of propaganda.

Denial of Religious Freedom to Prisoners

All three countries routinely violate the religious rights of political prisoners as defined under the UN Standard Minimum [Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners](#), such as the right to access religious literature and the right to receive religious visits. In Cuba, political prisoners face denials of their religious rights. The government frequently responds to requests for religious visits by declaring that the detained individuals are not allowed any benefits. In spring 2024, officials at Nicaragua’s Establecimiento Penitenciario Integral de Mujeres (La Esperanza women’s prison) were reported to have harshly restricted the outdoor access of inmates who prayed out loud. In Venezuela, authorities frequently deny or impede entry to detention centers by priests and pastors.



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Conclusion

Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela all commit substantial religious freedom violations and sustained these campaigns through 2025, although the former two execute more sustained and systematic attacks. In line with the authoritarian governance models of the three regimes, religious entities face persecution for any activity deemed to undermine state power and influence.

Since 2022, the U.S. Department of State has designated Cuba and Nicaragua as Countries of Particular Concern (CPCs) for engaging in or tolerating systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. While Venezuela is not designated as a CPC or placed on the Special Watch List, the Maduro regime exhibits similar strategies to repress religious freedom. In its [2025 Annual Report](#), USCIRF recommends several strategies the U.S. government can utilize to address religious freedom violations in Cuba and Nicaragua, including sanctioning officials involved in gross violations of human rights.

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan legislative branch agency established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.