

# NICARAGUA

## USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2025, religious freedom conditions in Nicaragua continued to deteriorate. The government of President Daniel Ortega and self-appointed Co-President Rosario Murillo sustained its total crackdown on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) by arresting, imprisoning, and exiling religious leaders and adherents, arbitrarily canceling the legal status of religious organizations, and consolidating its power to harass and intimidate worshipers. The Ortega-Murillo government deployed arbitrary shutdowns and seizures against religious institutions it deemed adversaries. In January, the regime dissolved 15 nonprofit organizations, including the Ebenezer Christian Missionary Foundation, the Pentecostal Ministry Foundation Christ Is Coming, and the Dominican Nuns Foundation of Nicaragua. For the third consecutive year, the government dramatically restricted Holy Week celebrations. Worshipers reported heavy surveillance and restriction of activity to church premises, and up to 14,000 police were deployed nationally to prevent processions. In late 2025, reports emerged that for several months, the Nicaraguan government had prohibited travelers entering the country from carrying Bibles.

The government of Nicaragua employed state power to persecute religious groups throughout the year. For example, in July, a Catholic priest previously targeted by national police after calling for a day of prayer on behalf of Catholic [Bishop Rolando Álvarez](#) was detained and held incommunicado with his driver for over a week. Civil society actors have documented the banning of more than 16,500 religious processions and activities since 2018, as well as over 1,000 acts of repression against the Catholic Church, including property confiscation, arbitrary closures, and public threats. While recorded attacks in 2025 were lower in number than previous years, religious freedom advocates attribute this decline to pervasive fear of reporting and a lack of independent media coverage rather than an actual reprieve.

The government continued to arbitrarily detain and incarcerate religious leaders, which escalated into the unexplained deaths of two detainees during 2025. In July, outspoken government critic Pastor Rudy Palacios Vargas was arrested in a raid where authorities also detained his sister, two of his brothers-in-law, and a family friend. The pastor's friend Mauricio Alonso Petri was also arrested, alongside Alonso's wife and son, who is a member of the Pastor's worship team. Alonso died in state custody one month after his arrest, and the government ordered his family to bury him immediately under police guard. Days after Alonso's death, Carlos Cárdenas Zepeda, an attorney who previously endured years of state harassment in alleged retaliation for his work as a legal advisor to the Episcopal Conference of Nicaragua (CEN), also died in state custody following his own detention in August. Nicaraguan authorities similarly returned his body in an already sealed coffin, refused to provide information on the cause of death, and prevented his family from holding a funeral. Additional victims detained in Nicaragua for their faith include Catholic lay leaders [Lesbia Gutiérrez](#) and [Carmen María Sáenz Martínez](#), who were released into house arrest in late November after nearly 16 months of incommunicado detention.

Nicaragua also adopted wide-reaching constitutional changes in 2025, further centralizing power under "co-presidents" Ortega and Murillo and buttressing the state's ability to repress FoRB through forced denationalization and restricting "foreign" religious influence. The United Nations Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua (UNGHREN) [assessed](#) in October 2025 that the "total erosion of human rights and the rule of law culminated in early 2025" with the major constitutional overhaul. This followed the UNGHREN's [observation](#) in February that the regime has "further developed and amplified its patterns of victimization" of anyone perceived as disloyal to the government, including Catholic and other Christian groups, and has "finetuned its mechanisms of repression" since 2024.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Nicaragua as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Impose targeted financial sanctions, including those pursuant to Executive Order 13851 and Section 203 of the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA), against Nicaraguan officials responsible for

exiling or otherwise violating the human rights of religious adherents; and

- Fund foreign assistance programs that support Nicaraguan civil society to document religious freedom violations and use that documentation to promote accountability.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Reintroduce and pass legislation to advance religious freedom in Nicaragua,

such as the Restoring Sovereignty and Human Rights in Nicaragua Act of 2024 ([H.R. 6954/S. 1881](#)), which would expand legal grounds for sanctions against religious freedom violators and mandate that the U.S. government oppose international financial institutions' assistance to Nicaragua except under limited conditions.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Spotlight Podcast:** [Cuba and Nicaragua's Escalating Crackdown on Religious Communities](#)
- **Issue Update:** [Repression of Religious Freedom in Latin America's Authoritarian Triad - Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief** [Victims List](#) and [Appendix 2](#)

## Background

Across Nicaragua, Roman Catholics [account](#) for approximately 43 percent of the population of about 6.6 million; Evangelical Protestants comprise 41 percent; religious believers without any affiliation comprise 14 percent; and Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Muslims, non-believers, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and Moravian Lutherans together comprise two percent.

President Daniel Ortega is head of state and government alongside his wife, Rosario Murillo; since February 2025, they have appointed themselves "co-presidents." They and their party, the Sandinista National Liberation Front, exercise authoritarian control over the government. The Ortega-Murillo administration began persecuting the Catholic Church after it provided sanctuary to demonstrators amid the government's repression of peaceful protests in April 2018. The crackdown has since expanded across essentially all faiths and [amounts](#) to crimes against humanity, according to the UNGHREN. Nicaragua withdrew from the United Nations Human Rights Council in February in response to the UNGHREN report on its human rights violations, including against religious bodies.

## Persecution of Clergy and Laypeople

The Ortega-Murillo government systematically harassed, intimidated, detained, and otherwise oppressed religious leaders and worshipers throughout 2025. Churches across the country reported 24-hour surveillance during Holy Week 2025, and police routinely imposed an intimidating presence on worship services. Authorities publicly vilified religious leaders, with the Nicaraguan Foreign Ministry condemning the Vatican in February as a "depraved, pedophile" ally of "darkness, barbarism, genocide and evil."

In May, a lay leader of a Catholic chapel was detained and told he was arrested based on informants reporting that he was praying for the freedom of Nicaragua. Police stripped him and took him to a cell in his underwear, then interrogated him three times before his release the next day. In February, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights [requested](#) an extension of provisional measures, used to attempt to protect individuals in urgent situations at risk of irreparable harm, for [Lesbia Gutiérrez](#) and [Carmen María Sáenz Martínez](#). The government's lack of transparency or accountability around the deaths in state custody of Alonso Petri and Cárdenas Zepeda demonstrates the lethal consequences of the Sandinista administration's forced disappearance of religious leaders.

The UNGHREN [warned](#) in September that the government is expanding its use of transnational repression to target Nicaraguans abroad, hundreds of whom are exiled religious figures, through digital surveillance, threats, and intimidation of relatives in Nicaragua.

## Government Closure and Seizure of Religious Organizations

The Ortega-Murillo government arbitrarily shut down or took possession of multiple religious entities. The regime's dissolution of religious organizations in January further extended the list of some 5,000 civil society organizations shuttered by the government since 2018. Also in January, authorities expelled about 30 nuns belonging to the Order of St. Clare from their monasteries overnight. In July, authorities expropriated the San José School in Jinotepe, levying allegations that the

iconic religious school had been the site of crimes against Sandinista supporters during the 2018 protests.

Human rights researchers reported a complex web of government extortion and punishment targeting religious organizations, such as freezing bank accounts, confiscating buildings, and forcing purchases of compliance certifications.

## Legal Weaponization

Nicaraguan officials continued to weaponize laws ostensibly punishing cyber and financial crime to justify the closure of religious organizations. The national constitutional changes adopted in early 2025 further empowered Ortega and Murillo to repress FoRB rights. The constitution provides for the stripping of nationality from anyone deemed a "traitor to the homeland." The government has aggressively used this penalty to expel opposition figures from the country. For instance, in April 2025, authorities prohibited priest [Jalder Hernández](#), exiled in 2024, from entering Nicaragua when he attempted to return from pastoral work in the United States. In 2025, the National Assembly also approved an amendment to [eliminate dual citizenship](#), another method of denying disfavored worshipers the fundamental [right to a nationality](#) and thus the ability to participate in Nicaraguan society. The constitutional reforms further mandate that "religious organizations must be kept free of all foreign control," potentially providing a legally enforceable basis to force the Catholic Church in Nicaragua to cut ties to the Vatican.

## Key U.S. Policy

The U.S. government continued to pursue sanctions against the government of Nicaragua for human rights violations, including violations of religious freedom. On U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio's first international trip, undertaken to Latin America, he condemned the Nicaraguan regime's attempts to "eliminate the Catholic Church" and punish "everything religious or anyone who could threaten that regime's power." The U.S. Department of State also publicly lambasted the seizure of the San José School as an attack on religious freedom.

In April, the United States [imposed](#) visa restrictions on more than 250 regime officials under Presidential Proclamation 10309, which suspends entry into the United States for Nicaraguan government members and other individuals undermining democratic institutions. The action brought the number of U.S.-sanctioned Ortega-Murillo officials to over 2,000. In November, the State Department also [imposed](#) visa restrictions on individuals in Nicaragua knowingly facilitating illegal immigration to the United States.

In October, the U.S. Trade Representative [determined](#) that under Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974, Nicaragua's abuses of human rights, specifically including attacks on religious freedom, constitute an unreasonable burden on U.S. commerce. In 2025, U.S. officials were weighing corresponding new tariffs on imports from Nicaragua or depriving the country of free trade benefits.

The U.S. Department of State last redesignated Nicaragua as a CPC under IRFA for particularly severe violations of religious freedom on December 29, 2023. Any presidential action taken as a result of this designation terminates by the end of 2025 unless expressly reauthorized by law.