



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

COUNTRY UPDATE: NICARAGUA

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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.

Nicaragua's Unrelenting Campaign to Eliminate Religious Freedom

Introduction

Nicaragua has been embroiled in a sociopolitical crisis for eight years, during which the government has waged an all-out assault against religious freedom. Self-declared "co-presidents" Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo and their Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) party exercise autocratic control over the government and have made religious repression a pillar of the regime's survival. Within a continued climate of authoritarianism and human rights violations, the Ortega-Murillo administration has intimidated, harassed, arrested, and forced into exile religious leaders and adherents. Over the past year, the government has wielded a legal structure enabling the criminalization of religious groups and activity, arbitrarily imprisoned religious leaders, and otherwise pursued a campaign of near elimination of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB).

Expert monitoring of FoRB conditions in Nicaragua recorded fewer attacks on the Catholic Church over the past couple of years. However, civil society actors attribute this decline not to any improvements in policy but rather to the extreme repression of religious life over the last decade along with widespread fear of reporting abuses and the decimation of independent media. Having closed roughly 80 percent of the nongovernmental organizations that previously operated in Nicaragua, shuttered at least 61 Nicaraguan media outlets, and forced several hundred journalists into exile, the government continues to impede accurate documentation of, and accountability for, its religious repression.

This country update provides an overview of recent key developments relating to religious freedom in Nicaragua and the international response, including from the U.S. government, to Nicaragua's FoRB and related human rights violations.



Background

Legal Framework

Nicaragua uses a draconian legal structure to persecute religious adherents. As USCIRF has previously reported, [laws](#) on cybercrime, financial crimes, nonprofit organizations, and treason, most of which international human rights experts have [criticized](#), provide broad grounds to punish worshipers and arbitrarily dissolve religious organizations. The country's restrictive legislation effectively nullifies its constitutional [guarantees](#) of freedom of belief, religion, and worship.

Nicaragua perfected its repressive legal arsenal in 2025 with a constitutional overhaul that the United Nations Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua (UNGHREN) [called](#) the culmination of “the total erosion of human rights and the rule of law” in-country. In addition to consolidating virtually unlimited authority under newly anointed Co-Presidents Ortega and Murillo, the constitutional changes offer two prongs for enhanced FoRB repression. One is the elimination of dual citizenship, adopted in January 2026. The government has weaponized mass denationalizations against perceived political enemies, including a number of Catholics and evangelical Christians forced into exile. The new provision reinforces the trend of the regime toward rendering religious leaders or adherents stateless. Second, the constitutional reforms mandate that religious organizations be kept free of all foreign control, potentially expanding the legal grounds for the government to cut the national Catholic Church's ties to the Vatican.

Continued Crackdown on Religious Freedom

Arbitrary Detention

Nicaragua continues to arbitrarily detain and incarcerate religious leaders and worshipers, including recent cases in which detainees have died in custody. In July 2025, police arrested prominent Protestant pastor [Rudy Palacios Vargas](#)—who had denounced the government's violence against pro-democracy demonstrators in 2018—alongside his sister, two brothers-in-law, and a family friend. The same raid also detained another friend of the pastor, Mauricio Alonso Petri; Alonso Petri's wife; and his son, who was a worship leader at the pastor's church. In August, Alonso Petri's family received a call confirming that he had died in custody. Also in August, Roman Catholic lay leader Carlos Cárdenas Zepeda died in custody after his own detention earlier in the month. He had faced years of harassment by the government in alleged retaliation for his work advising the Roman Catholic Episcopal Conference of Nicaragua (CEM) during the short-lived 2018 National Dialogue between the government and protesters it had repressed. In both [cases](#), the families of the deceased were not informed of the causes of death and were forced to bury their loved ones immediately.

Authorities released the remaining victims of the July raid in January 2026 after nearly six months of detention (except for Alonso Petri's wife, released shortly after her arrest). They remain under house arrest, subject to surveillance and restrictions on their movements, or under precautionary measures, requiring them to report regularly to police.

The Nicaraguan government has a record of applying dubious or weaponized charges to religious leaders, including treason, undermining national integrity, spreading false news, and money laundering. Authorities have in several cases used sexual assault allegations, specifically without providing due process at trial, against religious leaders who criticize state actions. [Pastor Efrén Antonio Vilchez López](#), for example, is currently imprisoned on a 23-year sentence on such charges.

Many religious groups remain under threat of retaliatory imprisonment, a risk reinforced by near-constant surveillance. Nicaraguans in exile and human rights activists report that priests are obligated to seek police authorization before traveling to other municipalities, and pastors are warned by authorities not to include any content critical of the government in their sermons.

Closures and Dissolutions of Religious Organizations

Throughout 2025, the Ortega-Murillo regime maintained a campaign to shut down and dissolve at least 18 religious organizations. Authorities justified the closures and expropriations with arbitrary accusations such as participation in “crimes” in the 2018 protests that, as USCIRF has previously [reported](#), sparked Ortega and Murillo’s crackdown on religion.

Bans on Religious Activities and Expression

The government prohibited a wide range of religious activity and expression. As of October 2025, more than 16,500 religious processions and activities had been banned since 2018; by spring 2026, up to 27,286 processions and acts of piety had been prohibited since 2019. Ortega and Murillo enforce a policy of restricting religious activity to private premises. In January 2026, Nicaragua prohibited a Catholic diocese from conducting pastoral missions by mandating that all church activities be confined to parish property. On the first Friday of Lent in 2026, the regime reportedly forbade over 400 Stations of the Cross processions, ordering the practice to occur inside churches rather than on public streets, as was historically the case in Nicaraguan neighborhoods during Lent.

The government restricted Holy Week celebrations in 2026 for the fourth consecutive year, with worshipers reporting heavy 24-hour surveillance to prevent public processions. FSLN-controlled municipal governments reportedly, as in years past, [organized](#) and sponsored parallel religious activities without church participation during Holy Week. Independent religious leaders and

religious freedom advocates have condemned these parallel festivities as efforts to co-opt symbols of faith and obfuscate the scale of religious repression.

In 2026, the government also placed pressure on communities whose religious leaders it has forced abroad through state persecution. In March, the regime prohibited priestly and diaconal ordinations in four Catholic dioceses (Jinotega, Siuna, Matagalpa, and Estelí) from which many clergy have been expelled from the country, preventing understaffed parishes from replenishing their pastoral activity. In late 2025, reports also emerged that for several months, travelers to Nicaragua had been prohibited from bringing Bibles into the country.

Weaponized Denationalization

In tandem with efforts to repress religious communities at home, Nicaragua continues to drive their members into exile abroad. In February 2026, the government denied Father José Concepción Reyes Mairena entry back into the country, bringing the total number of religious figures forced to leave Nicaragua to 309.

As USCIRF has previously [reported](#), Nicaragua frequently uses the arbitrary stripping of citizenship, simultaneous with expulsion from the country, to push religious individuals it deems problematic or adversarial into exile. In the last two years, Nicaragua has arbitrarily expelled and denationalized some [450](#) individuals, including dozens of Catholic clergy, Catholic laypeople, and evangelical pastors. Through forced exile and citizenship revocation, the government ensures that expelled individuals cannot return to religious life in their home country and punishes religious practitioners by arbitrarily depriving them of the human right to a [nationality](#).

Transnational Repression

The Ortega-Murillo government has recently escalated its use of transnational repression against Nicaraguans abroad, hundreds of whom are religious individuals in de jure or de facto exile. In March 2026, UNGHREN [condemned](#) the Ortega-Murillo regime’s expansion of transnational human rights violations as a pillar of the government’s effort to eliminate dissent and guarantee its own impunity. The report confirmed the group’s findings from September 2025, when UNGHREN [outlined](#) the regime’s expanding repression of perceived adversaries internationally, including systematic surveillance of exiled Nicaraguans physically and online through military intelligence, national police, and an

informant network. Relatives who remain in Nicaragua face retaliation, isolation, and government intimidation. Priests in exile, for instance, report pervasive fear of reprisals befalling loved ones still in-country if they openly criticize Nicaragua's FoRB violations. Also in 2025, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) [condemned](#) Nicaragua's abuse of INTERPOL red notices—meant to facilitate the arrest of individuals wanted for extradition—to restrict exiled critics' freedom of movement and criminalize their speech, including potential religious speech critical of the government.

Targeting Spiritual Practices of Indigenous Communities

Indigenous individuals, many of whom are concentrated in the north and south autonomous regions on Nicaragua's Caribbean coast, face infringements upon their [traditional spiritual practices](#). Indigenous peoples, such as the Mayangna and Miskito communities, as well as Afro-descendant communities, predominantly [belonged](#) to the Moravian Church, at least until the Ortega regime canceled the Protestant denomination's legal status in August 2024. Some dozen small Catholic and evangelical churches have reportedly been left without priests or pastors in the past several years due to displacement and repression along the Caribbean coast, aided by government approval or inaction.

Officials particularly target indigenous practitioners held in the Nicaraguan [penitentiary system](#). These individuals are often detained for arbitrary or political reasons amid intensified [efforts](#) under Ortega and Murillo to violently occupy the ancestral lands that underpin indigenous spirituality. Last year, reports emerged that authorities had labeled indigenous leaders in two Nicaraguan prisons "sorcerers" for attempting to consume traditional food and medicines, which were frequently confiscated despite their spiritual importance.

Because indigenous communities blend ancestral beliefs—such as close ties to spirits residing throughout nature—with Protestant or other faiths, other egregious violations of religious freedom target their connection to their land. In 2025, one of the many independent news outlets previously forced out of Nicaragua reported the experience of a Mayangna man whom police subjected to a simulated drowning by repeatedly forcing his head into the local river before taking him to a prison in Managua. The officers thus inverted the river, considered a sacred source of life by the Mayangna community, into a site of torture.

International Accountability

The Ortega-Murillo government's lack of cooperation with international and regional human rights mechanisms continues to stymie efforts to hold Nicaragua accountable for its FoRB and other human rights abuses. The regime withdrew from the United Nations Human Rights Council in February 2025 in response to UNGHREN's [report](#) on Nicaragua's human rights abuses, including against religious leaders and organizations. Nicaragua also refused to participate in the Human Rights Council's spring 2025 Universal Periodic Review process for assessing the human rights records of member states. Further seeking isolation from international accountability, the government announced its withdrawal from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR); the International Organization for Migration (IOM); the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO); and several other international bodies in 2025 in response to perceived disparagement of its human rights and governance record.

The United States government pursued several efforts to deny impunity to Nicaragua's leadership. In addition to the [imposed](#) visa restrictions on more than 250 Nicaraguan regime officials last year, the U.S. Department of State also moved in February 2026 to [designate](#) the director of Nicaragua's La Modelo prison under Section 7031(c) visa restrictions for involvement in gross violations of human rights. La Modelo is known for inhumane conditions and has held a number of FoRB prisoners, including [Bishop Rolando Álvarez](#); [Bishop Isidro Mora](#), detained for offering prayers for Álvarez during Mass until the exile of both men to the Vatican; and 13 members of the evangelical Mountain Gateway ministry.

In December 2025, under Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974, to address Nicaragua's acts, policies, and practices related to abuses of labor rights, abuses of human rights and fundamental freedoms, and dismantling of the rule of law, the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) [announced](#) the imposition of a tariff, effective January 1, 2026, on all imported Nicaraguan goods not originating under the main existing free trade agreement between the United States and Central America.

In February 2026, the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) [sanctioned](#) five Nicaraguan government officials leading the primary financial, communications, and military agencies enabling repression of the populace. The action blocked



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all property of the individuals in the United States or in control of U.S. persons, and it prohibited all transactions by U.S. persons or within the United States involving the property or property interests of the sanctioned officials. OFAC's announcement referenced the same property confiscation from religious institutions cited by the USTR. It also criticized the weaponization of financial crime laws and the country's surveillance apparatus to crush dissent, two mechanisms Nicaragua has deployed against religious communities.

In the U.S. Congress, the [*Restoring Sovereignty and Human Rights Act in Nicaragua Act of 2026*](#) (H.R. 7055) was introduced in January. The bill, which would expand legal grounds for sanctions against religious freedom violators in Nicaragua, echoes prior bipartisan legislation and refers to religious leaders and faith-based organizations persecuted by the Nicaraguan government.

Conclusion

The Ortega-Murillo government's FoRB violations have continued despite pressure from international bodies, regional actors, and the United States. Nicaraguan authorities arbitrarily detained and surveilled religious adherents, closed and dissolved religious organizations, expelled religious leaders and worshippers from the country, and extended their religious freedom violations across international boundaries. In its [*2026 Annual Report*](#), USCIRF recommended that the U.S. Department of State redesignate Nicaragua as a Country of Particular Concern for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

Professional Staff

Michael Ardovino
Policy Analyst

Gretchen Birkle
Senior Advisor

Susan Bishai
Supervisory Policy Analyst

Mollie Blum
Policy Analyst

Guillermo Cantor
Director of Research and Policy

Serena Doan
Supervisory Policy Analyst

Kaylee Fisher
Public Affairs Specialist

Andrew Hamm
Victims List Database Specialist

Sema Hasan
Senior Policy Analyst

Thomas Kraemer
Chief Administrative Officer

Kirsten Lavery
Supervisory Policy Analyst and International Legal Specialist

Veronica McCarthy
Government Affairs Specialist

Hilary Miller
Policy Analyst

Nora Morton
Operations Specialist

Molly Naylor-Komyatte
Policy Analyst

Dylan Schexnaydre
Policy Analyst

Katherine Todd
Policy Analyst

Ross Tokola
Policy Analyst

Brett Warner
Administrative Specialist

Scott Weiner
Supervisory Policy Analyst

Kurt Werthmuller
Supervisory Policy Analyst

Nathan Wineinger
Chief of Public Affairs

Jean Wu
Policy Analyst

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