

# NICARAGUA 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion; provides for freedom of belief, religion, and worship; and states no one “shall be obligated by coercive measures to declare his or her ideology or beliefs.” In June, the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) approved the resolution “Promotion and Protection of Human Rights in Nicaragua” in which the organization expressed concern regarding government restrictions on public spaces and repression of civil society, human rights defenders, and religious leaders, among others expressing critical views of the government. In an August report, the Nicaraguan Center for Human Rights (CENIDH) wrote, “In 2020 the government’s hatred of the Catholic Church has not stopped; on the contrary, it worsens every day, having reached critical levels.” There were numerous reports that the Nicaraguan National Police (NNP), along with progovernment groups and ruling party (Sandinista National Liberation Front, or FSLN) members routinely harassed and intimidated religious leaders and damaged religious spaces, including a July arson attack on the Immaculate Conception Cathedral in Managua that destroyed a 382-year-old image of Jesus Christ. Catholic leaders reported verbal insults, death threats, and institutional harassment by the NNP and groups associated with President Daniel Ortega and Vice President Rosario Murillo. According to clergy, the NNP and progovernment groups on several occasions harassed Catholic worshippers after they attended church services in which they prayed for political prisoners, and they blocked parishioners’ efforts to raise funds for families of political prisoners. Progovernment supporters disrupted religious services by staging motorcycle races outside of churches during Sunday services. Catholic and evangelical Protestant leaders who provided shelter and medical assistance to peaceful protesters in 2018 continued to experience government retribution, including slander, arbitrary investigations by government agencies, charges they said were unfounded, withholding of tax exemptions, reduction in budget appropriations, and denying religious services for political prisoners, according to local media. The government ordered electric and water companies to cut services to Catholic churches led by priests opposed to the government, revoked the visas of at least two foreign priests after they criticized the government, and denied or revoked the permits of schools and clinics run by antigovernment Catholic bishops. Government supporters interrupted funerals and desecrated gravesites of prodemocracy protesters. In June, Italian media reported that the Russian woman arrested, sentenced, and imprisoned for throwing sulfuric acid in 2018 on a priest of the Immaculate Conception Cathedral in Managua was living in Italy as a

refugee. CENIDH wrote in a report on attacks on Catholic churches in 2019 and 2020, “This case reflects the corrupt and fallacious way in which the Ortega Murillo regime permits impunity against those they consider ‘their political or public enemies,’ crimes that they themselves perversely orchestrate.”

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

Senior U.S. government officials repeatedly called upon the Ortega government to cease violence against and attacks on Catholic clergy, worshippers, and churches. U.S. embassy officials continued to raise concerns with Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials regarding restrictions on religious freedom in the context of broader repression. Following the arson attack on the Managua cathedral, the Ambassador condemned the attack in a public statement posted on social media and said attacks on the Church and worshippers should cease immediately and the culprits punished. Embassy officials met regularly with a wide variety of religious leaders from the Catholic Church, evangelical Protestant groups, the Moravian Lutheran Church, Muslim groups, and the Jewish community to discuss restrictions on religious freedom and to foster religious tolerance.

On December 2, 2020, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State again placed Nicaragua on the Special Watch List for having engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom.

### **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 6.2 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the 2005 census (the most recent available), conducted by the Nicaraguan Institute of Statistics and Census, 59 percent of the population is Catholic and 22 percent evangelical Protestant, including Pentecostals, Mennonites, Moravian Lutherans, and Baptists. According to a survey conducted in July 2019 by Borge and Associates, the percentage of evangelical Protestants is increasing and the percentage of Catholics decreasing. Borge and Associates found Catholics make up 43 percent of the population, evangelical Protestants 41 percent, and religious believers without affiliation 14 percent. According to the Borge survey, groups that together constitute less than 2 percent of the population include Jehovah’s Witnesses, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Moravian Lutheran Church, Jews, Muslims, and nonbelievers.

The Moravian Lutheran Church is largely concentrated in the country's North and South Caribbean Coast Autonomous Regions. A majority of its members are of indigenous or Afro-Caribbean descent.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion. It provides for freedom of belief, religion, and worship, and it states no one "shall be obligated by coercive measures to declare his or her ideology or beliefs." The constitution states there is no official religion; however, the law entrusts government-controlled, community-level action groups, known as Family Committees, with the responsibility for promoting "Christian values" at the community level.

The requirements for registration of religious groups – except for the Catholic Church, which has a concordat with the government – are similar to those for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Registration requires an application, articles of association, and designation of officers. The National Assembly must approve a group's application for registration or legal standing. Following approval, the group must register with the Ministry of Government as an association or NGO, which allows it to incur legal obligations, enter into contracts, and benefit from tax and customs exemptions. Following registration, religious groups are subject to the same regulations as other NGOs or associations, regardless of their religious nature. The Catholic Church is not required to register as a religious group because its presence in the country predates the legislation; however, the government requires organizations dedicated to charity or other social work affiliated with the Catholic Church to register.

According to the Foreign Agents Law, passed in October, organizations and persons receiving resources of foreign origin must not participate in internal politics. If the government finds any person or entity in violation of the law, the person or entity could be fined, imprisoned, or have their assets frozen or confiscated. The law excludes accredited religious organizations from the requirement to register with the Ministry of Interior. By law, those receiving exemptions may not participate in activities that would interfere in the country's affairs.

Ministry of Education regulations for primary school education establish that the basis for the methodology and curriculum for elementary grade levels are the

“Christian, Socialist, Solidarity” principles and “Human Development” policy. The government’s 2018-2021 Human Development policy establishes the promotion of religious and faith-based festivities as a key component of all government policy. The law establishes education in the country as secular but recognizes the right of private schools to be religiously oriented.

Missionaries must obtain religious worker visas and provide information regarding the nature of their missionary work before the Ministry of Interior will authorize entry into the country. A locally based religious organization must provide documentation and request travel authorization from the Ministry of Government seven days prior to the arrival of the visiting person or religious group. The process generally takes several weeks to complete.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

### **Government Practices**

In June, the UNHRC approved the resolution entitled “Promotion and Protection of Human Rights in Nicaragua,” in which the organization expressed concern regarding government restrictions on public spaces and repression of civil society, human rights defenders, and religious leaders, among others expressing critical views of the government. In her February remarks to the UNHRC, UN High Commissioner for Refugees Michelle Bachelet said that protests held during religious celebrations had been met with state-sponsored violence, and “members of the Catholic Church continue to suffer repeated acts of intimidation and harassment by police or pro-government elements, including stigmatizing statements by government authorities.” In a report released in July, CENIDH wrote, “In 2020 the government’s hatred of the Catholic Church has not stopped; on the contrary, it worsens every day, having reached critical levels.” According to the report, the Catholic Church had positioned itself firmly on the side of prodemocracy groups since the 2018 protest against the government and the government’s subsequent repression that killed more than 300 persons.

Witnesses told independent media that on July 31, an unidentified man threw a gasoline bomb inside a side chapel in the Immaculate Conception Cathedral in Managua after examining the perimeter closely for 20 minutes. The bomb caused an extensive fire that damaged the chapel and burned a 382-year-old image of Jesus Christ revered by the Catholic community. Cardinal Leopoldo Brenes, the Archbishop of Managua, publicly called the act a premeditated terrorist attack. Hours after the attack, Vice President Murillo told media the fire had been an

accident caused by candle fire inside the chapel. Cardinal Brenes publicly stated there were no curtains or candles inside the chapel. Pope Francis also referred to the fire as an attack, stating, “I am thinking about the people of Nicaragua who are suffering due to the attack on the cathedral of Managua.” Days later, police closed the investigation and concluded the fire started as a result of vapor from disinfectant alcohol ignited by a candle. Police made no arrests. Clergy said they suspected the government directed attacks on churches and priests, but they believed the government was able to claim plausible deniability because the attacks were carried out by individuals not directly affiliated with it.

Clergy also said they believed the government directed or encouraged the vandalism and desecration of churches by individuals not directly affiliated with it. According to local media, unidentified individuals on July 29 broke into the Church of Saint Ana in Nindirí, entering the church after hours, stealing religious items, breaking sacred images, stepping on communion wafers, damaging furniture, and defecating in several places inside the church. On July 30, similar actions occurred in Nindirí at the Church of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. On July 24, unidentified individuals broke into the Church of Our Lady of Veracruz and damaged sacred items and stole audio equipment. CENIDH recorded several desecrations of Catholic churches following a similar modus operandi. On January 2, unidentified perpetrators destroyed sacred images in Our Lord of Esquipulas Church in Tipitapa; on July 12, an unidentified man entered a chapel inside the Saint John the Baptist Cathedral in Jinotega and stole a sacred image. According to media, desecrations of churches also occurred in Managua in April and in Boaco in August.

According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, police officers and patrol vehicles surrounded the Saint John the Baptist Church in Masaya on January 23, after parishioners organized a drive to collect school supplies for children of political prisoners. Police then prevented individuals with donations from accessing the church.

According to clergy, Father Edwing Roman, a priest granted precautionary (protective) measures by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights since 2018, continued to be a victim of harassment and received multiple death threats during the year. The government cut electricity and water supplies to his church in Masaya during a November 2019 hunger strike inside the church by relatives of political prisoners. Although the government restored electricity and water services in January, Roman reported continual struggles throughout the year with government authorities threatening to cut off his utilities despite being current on

his payments. On October 23, Cardinal Brenes told media that Catholic churches around the country struggled to pay “exaggerated charges” in their electric and water bills. Brenes questioned the charges, particularly considering churches did not conduct services or activities for many months during COVID-19 pandemic restrictions.

According to media, on December 20, police blocked a group of relatives of political prisoners from attending Mass at the Saint Joseph Church in Tipitapa. The Mass was for political prisoners and in memory of citizens killed during the civil protests of April 2018 in that city.

According to media reports, police on December 12-13 closed all access streets to Saint Joseph’s Church in Managua to prevent churchgoers and others from bringing donations for the communities on the Caribbean coast, which suffered two hurricanes within weeks of each other.

The Catholic Church continued to speak out against violence perpetrated by the government and progovernment groups and the lack of democratic institutions through clergy homilies and pastoral letters, calling for respect of human rights and the release of political prisoners, especially amid the COVID-19 pandemic. According to social media reports, on December 10, the Managua Archdiocese’s Peace and Justice Commission issued a message that “Nicaraguans’ struggles for peace, justice, freedom, and joy are infringed upon due to corruption, repression, and the violation of human rights.” On June 30, the Archdiocese of Managua issued a letter in which it condemned the government’s persecution of medical professionals, including firing medical staff for sharing information on COVID-19 contrary to the government’s claims of low transmission and death rates.

When the Catholic Church announced the suspension of all religious activities in March due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the government organized and sponsored the annual pilgrimage to Rivas and the annual celebration of Saint Lazarus in Masaya in March, both of which garnered massive crowds. The Diocese of Granada, which traditionally sponsored the pilgrimage to Rivas, issued a statement through its Facebook page, stating the March 26 processions were not sponsored by any of the churches in the diocese.

According to news reports, Monsignor Rolando Alvarez announced in April the opening of medical clinics in Matagalpa for COVID-19 patients and a call center to provide medical information to the public. Days after Alvarez’s announcement, the Ministry of Health announced it did not authorize the initiative. Alvarez

reported constant government harassment throughout the year. In September, Bishop Abelardo Mata of Esteli reported the government shut down an agricultural school for low-income students sponsored by his diocese. Mata, an outspoken critic of the Ortega government for years, stated the government had tried to harass students and school management and disrupt the school's operations since 2013. Mata said the Esteli Diocese had been considering opening a second technical school, but the government also thwarted those efforts. Monsignor Silvio Fonseca reported in October that the government refused to renew operational permits requested by several priest-directed NGOs, despite the NGOs meeting all legal requirements for renewal.

During the year, sources provided different estimates regarding how many clergy remained in exile and how many returned. They did not provide details, stating fear that the government could retaliate against returning clergy. In April, a news outlet interviewed three priests who went into exile in 2018 after receiving death threats from government supporters. One of the priests interviewed returned from exile and said he remained in hiding due to fear for his life. The other two priests continued in exile. The news report stated there were five priests who were forced to leave the country after 2018. In September, the Nicaraguan Immigration Office (NIO) revoked the permanent resident status of two foreign priests: Father Julio Melgar of El Salvador, who had served in the country for 40 years, and Father Luis Carrillo, of Colombia, who had served in the country for nine years. Melgar's residence permit was due for renewal in 2024 and Carrillo's in 2022. The NIO verbally notified both priests their residence permits had been revoked and the priests would need to reapply frequently: Carrillo every six months and Melgar every month. Bishop Mata told media that the government's actions toward Carrillo and Melgar were designed to put pressure on the priests to either leave the country or cease denouncing the government's human rights abuses during their homilies. Carrillo said the measure also imposed a financial burden because renewal processing fees ranged between 7,000 to 17,500 cordobas (\$200 to \$500), up from 5,000 cordobas (\$140) in 2019.

In speeches during the year, President Ortega criticized Catholic clergy, typically linking clergy to what he characterized as U.S. intervention in the country's sovereignty. In a September speech, Ortega cited U.S. citizen William Walker, who usurped the presidency of Nicaragua from July 1856 until May 1, 1857, to criticize the United States and the Catholic Church. Ortega identified Walker's ambassador to the United States as a Catholic priest.

Religious groups said the government continued to politicize religious beliefs, language, and traditions, including by coopting religion for its own political purposes. Auxiliary Bishop of Managua Silvio Baez, termed by multiple press outlets, including *La Prensa* and Reuters, as one of the most outspoken critics of government human rights abuses, told Deutsche Welle in September that “what exists in Nicaragua is a crude manipulation of religion by the regime. It empties religion of all ethical content, of all content that demands personal conviction and social justice.” Baez continued to live abroad in exile due to constant harassment and death threats against him since April 2018. Religious groups also said that as a form of retaliation stemming from the country’s sociopolitical crisis that began in April 2018, the government continued to infringe on religious leaders’ rights to practice faith-based activities, including providing safe spaces in churches to students and others fleeing violence. Catholic clergy and media reported cases of government officials slandering, stigmatizing, and urging supporters to retaliate against houses of worship and clergy for their perceived opposition to the government.

In August, a well-known government social media coordinator posted a video from his personal account in which he stated the U.S. Ambassador had made a pact with the country’s Catholic Church to oust the ruling FSLN from government. The man named several bishops, calling them “trash” and “Satanists that only seek chaos in the country.” He urged progovernment supporters to prepare to retaliate for any attempts made by the Catholic Church in the country and the U.S. government to overthrow the government. Another government supporter and son of FSLN National Assembly member Gladys Baez used social media to threaten Catholic Church bishops, posting, “Patience has its limits,” and, “We don’t depend on a church, we are a secular country, not subordinate to a church, you coup-mongering priests are the primary promoters of the destruction of Nicaragua.”

With an economic crisis that sources stated was precipitated by the government’s violent suppression of prodemocracy protests in 2018, the national budget continued to shrink substantially. Although the constitution established the country as a secular state, the national budget since the 1990s included funding for Catholic and Protestant churches. Following dramatically decreased funding in 2019, the government’s 2020 and 2021 budgets omitted entirely funding for both Catholic and Protestant churches and religious groups. Local media viewed this as retribution for religious leaders’ outspoken opposition to the government, particularly among Catholic clergy.

In September, during the religious service for the burial of a young man, Bryan Coronado, a woman identified as a government supporter attended the burial uninvited and shouted obscenities at the deceased for not being a government supporter and chanted pro-Ortega slogans. During the March 3 funeral of renowned poet and priest Ernesto Cardenal in the Immaculate Conception Cathedral in Managua, a group of progovernment supporters with FSLN kerchiefs interrupted the service with banners and slogans that local human rights organizations said were used regularly by the government and its supporters against those they perceived as enemies.

Catholic clergy continued to report the government denied them access to prisons following the 2018 prodemocracy uprising. Prior to April 2018, clergy said they regularly entered prisons to celebrate Mass and provide communion and confession to detainees. Religious sources reported a large presence of NNP officers and police vehicles frequently surrounded Immaculate Conception Cathedral in Managua. Sources stated the officers intimidated worshippers and searched vehicles entering the cathedral grounds without cause, including vehicles driven by clergy.

According to press, human rights organizations, and social media reports, Catholic Church leaders throughout the country continued to experience harassment from government supporters, who often acted in tandem with police. Other Catholic leaders privately said they felt fear and intimidation when celebrating Mass. Priests said they often saw progovernment civilians attempt to intimidate them into public silence on political issues by recording their Sunday homilies. In October, a group of motorcyclists started a race in front of the Saint Peter's Cathedral in Matagalpa, interrupting the regular Sunday service. The activity received authorization from the Matagalpa City Hall and police. In July, a similar group of motorcyclists intimidated worshippers at the same cathedral during a Sunday Mass. On the same day, a group of individuals in the city of Leon intimidated worshippers at the Basilica of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, stopping the Mass. The group chanted loudly and placed FSLN flags in the church atrium.

Catholic and evangelical Protestant leaders said the government continued to restrict travel selectively for some visa applicants intending to visit the country for religious purposes based on the perceived political affiliation of the applicant's local sponsor. According to Catholic clergy, a 2016 regulation instructing all churches to request entry authorization for their missionaries or religious authorities continued in effect.

In October, Monsignor Carlos Mantica told Voice of America prior to the approval of the law on registering foreign agents that the Catholic Church worried the law could endanger donations that Caritas, a Catholic NGO, received. He said that since 2018, Caritas had experienced delays in its operations due to the government's refusal to issue Caritas's annual operation permits and tax exemption approvals, which enabled it to receive items donated from abroad.

Bishop Carlos Herrera, President of Caritas of Nicaragua, told media in April that the government continued to deny Caritas its legally entitled tax exemptions. Herrera said the organization informed donors to stop sending donations because Caritas was unable to retrieve them from Customs. In December 2019, Customs released one of Caritas' 13 containers retained since April 2018 with no explanation for the delay. Customs officials said the remaining 12 containers were lost without explanation. Caritas said the containers held donations of medical equipment and educational and health material intended for its social work. Caritas continued to report that the organization, accredited in the country since 1965, had since March 2018 not received its annually renewable certificate from the Ministry of Interior, which technically gave it permission to operate in the country. Caritas representatives continued to say the failure to renew the certificate impeded it from receiving tax exemptions, prohibited the importation of its materials, and hindered its ability to bring in medical missions as part of its social services. They stated they continued to reduce their social services because of harassment from government supporters in the communities where they worked.

According to Italian media, the Russian female national who fled Nicaragua in 2019 after a court found her guilty of throwing sulfuric acid at a priest of the Immaculate Conception Cathedral in Managua in 2018 was living in Italy as a refugee. The Sixth Criminal Court of Justice sentenced the woman to eight years in prison in May 2019, but in August 2019, media reported witnesses seeing the woman on a flight to Panama. In the same month, the Supreme Court of Justice's spokesperson denied to a newspaper reporter that the attacker had been freed and said the testimony of witnesses stating to have seen her on a flight to Panama was false. CENIDH wrote in its report *Attack on the Catholic Church in Nicaragua 2019-2020*, released in July, that "this case reflects the corrupt and fallacious way in which the Ortega Murillo regime permits impunity [when acts are committed] against those they consider 'their political or public enemies,' crimes that they themselves perversely orchestrate."

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

Through public statements and official social media accounts, senior U.S. government leaders and embassy officials repeatedly called on the government to cease violence and attacks on the Catholic Church and expressed the U.S. government's support for faith communities in their fight for human rights, democracy, and freedom. For example, in the aftermath of the arson attack on the Immaculate Conception Cathedral in Managua, the Ambassador condemned the attack in a public statement posted on social media and urged all attacks against the Catholic Church and worshippers to cease immediately. Embassy officials continued to raise concerns over restrictions on religious freedom in the context of broader repression with Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials.

The Ambassador and his staff met regularly with senior religious leaders of the Catholic Church, evangelical Protestant groups, the Moravian Lutheran Church, the Nicaraguan Islamic Association, and the Jewish community. At these meetings, embassy representatives discussed concerns about the politicization of religion, governmental retaliation against politically active religious groups, and limitations on the freedom of religion and fostering diversity and tolerance.

On December 2, 2020, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State again placed Nicaragua on the Special Watch List for having engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom.