



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

# COUNTRY UPDATE: NICARAGUA

August 2022

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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.*

## Religious Freedom in Nicaragua in 2022

*By Zack Udin, Researcher*

### Overview

In the first half of 2022, the Nicaraguan government has continued its pattern of harassment against the Catholic Church. Catholic clergy have come under direct persecution. In March, the government expelled the papal nuncio, the Vatican's chief diplomat in the country, for unexplained reasons. Most recently, a judge sentenced a priest to over four years in prison on spurious charges. Additionally, the government has gone after Catholic-affiliated organizations, shutting down charities and expelling their workers, stripping universities of funding and legal status, shutting down news media, and eliminating non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

This Country Update provides an overview of recent key developments relating to religious freedom in Nicaragua and highlights U.S. policy efforts to advance democracy and human rights there.

### Background

President Daniel Ortega is the head of state and government of Nicaragua. He and his party, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), exercise authoritarian control over the government and electoral process. Roman Catholics *account* for about 50 percent of Nicaragua's population, followed by Evangelical Christians at 33.2 percent; followers of unspecified religions at 13.2 percent; Jews, Muslims, and others at 2.9 percent; and 0.7 percent adhering to no religion. The country's *constitution* states that there is no official religion and includes language protecting religious freedom and prohibiting religious discrimination. The constitution lists Christian values among the nation's principles, and government-controlled groups *promote* these values at the community level.

Nicaragua is embroiled in a social and political crisis that started after the government's repression of peaceful protests in April 2018. The Ortega administration began lashing out at the Catholic Church after it aided demonstrators and individual clergy voiced opposition to the government. In the beginning stages, the Church attempted to mediate a national dialogue between the protestors and the government. Talks were underway in May 2018, but with the Church's insistence on not turning away demonstrators in need of aid and some clergy's support of the protesters, the Ortega



administration turned on the Church and the [dialogue dissolved](#). Catholic leaders have been vocal against the government's accelerating democratic backsliding and numerous human rights violations ever since.

As a result, since 2018 government actors and citizens sympathetic to the regime have routinely intimidated and harassed worshippers; violently targeted churches; and harassed clergy with tactics including defamatory accusations, arbitrary arrests, death threats on social media, deportations, and violent attacks. Managua's auxiliary bishop Silvio Báez relocated to Rome in 2019 and later settled in Miami, FL following sustained harassment by the government and its supporters, including an [assassination plot](#). In 2020, an unknown assailant set off an incendiary device in a chapel attached to the Cathedral of Managua in what Catholic officials [called](#) a premeditated assault. The arson attack resulted in extensive damage to the interior of the building, including the charring of a 400-year-old wooden crucifix in the center of the room.

Leading up to the November 2021 election, President Ortega's government [arrested](#) or disqualified numerous opposition candidates, imprisoned other critical figures such as journalists and human rights defenders, and [raided](#) the last remaining printed newspaper, *La Prensa*. Clergy denounced the government's tactics, expressed their support for free and fair elections and human rights, and called for the release of the political prisoners. The government continues to [hold](#) over 180 political prisoners. USCIRF received reports that prison authorities have deprived prisoners of their religious rights by prohibiting [access](#) to bibles, [consultations](#) with clergy, or communal prayer services with their fellow prisoners.

In March, Nicaragua's ambassador to the Organization of American States (OAS) Arturo McFields [resigned](#) his post and lambasted the Ortega regime for its authoritarian repression of political opposition, human rights abuses, and crackdown on freedom of speech. A few weeks later, Nicaragua [signaled](#) its intention to withdraw from the OAS amid the organization's criticisms of the recent election.

## Religious Freedom Conditions and Violations in 2022

### Persecution of Clergy

Nicaraguan authorities continue to actively persecute Catholic clergy in what observers say is an attempt to put pressure on the Catholic Church, both in Nicaragua and at the Vatican. In several cases, the religious leaders targeted are those who have spoken out against the Ortega regime.

Monsignor Waldemar Stanislaw Sommertag served as the papal nuncio in Nicaragua's capital, Managua, since 2018. In March of this year, the Nicaraguan government abruptly withdrew Sommertag's credentials and [expelled](#) him from the country. His expulsion came a few months after President Ortega [stripped](#) Monsignor Sommertag of his title as "dean of the diplomatic corps," a title traditionally held by the papal nuncio in Catholic majority countries. In the four years he lived in Nicaragua, Sommertag [assisted](#) in the national dialogue between the government and the political opposition following the 2018 protests and sought the release of political prisoners. As the Ortega regime's campaign against the Catholic Church unfolded, and Sommertag's

advocacy on behalf of political prisoners increased, [tensions](#) began to rise in the relationship between Sommertag and the government.

In May, police [trailed](#) Rolando Álvarez, bishop of the Diocese of Matagalpa and Estelí, and surrounded his family's home. As a result, Álvarez took refuge in a church in Managua—which the police then surrounded—and started a hunger strike to protest his treatment by the government. Police eventually [withdrew](#) their perimeter around the church, allowing the bishop to leave Managua and return to his own diocese in Matagalpa, but escorted his vehicle for the two-hour journey.

However, on August 5 Nicaragua's national police [announced](#) an investigation into Álvarez for allegedly "organizing violent groups" and encouraging them "to carry out acts of hate against the population." Since then, he has been under de facto house arrest at his residence with police in riot gear setting up a cordon outside and preventing him from leaving to conduct Mass at the cathedral. Álvarez, like Monsignor Sommertag, served as a mediator in the national dialogue and was critical of the government's human rights record.

Father Harvin Padilla of the Diocese of Masaya also came under intense surveillance by police and paramilitary in May. Police threatened to arrest the priest and [imposed](#) a cordon around his church for ten days, preventing worshippers or cars from entering the area and not allowing any food or medicine to reach the priest. Since 2018, Father Padilla has been the [subject](#) of a smear campaign in pro-government media and has contended with mobs [attacking](#) his church and an [accusation](#) of inciting hatred in 2018. Like Monsignors Sommertag and Álvarez, Father Padilla has been critical of the Ortega regime and views it as [responsible](#) for the deaths of protestors in 2018.

Despite the high level of persecution against Catholic leaders since 2018, the government did not imprison any members of the clergy until June. In May, a crowd of locals arrived at Father Manuel Salvador García of Nandíame's church to confront the priest about an alleged assault on a woman named Martha Candelaria Rivas. Father García sought to defend himself with a machete while trying to keep the locals from entering the church grounds. Father García was [sentenced](#) in June to two years in prison for threatening the crowd with a weapon, and later [sentenced](#) to another two years and eight months for the assault against Rivas. However, at a preliminary hearing, Rivas said the alleged assault was an accident

and [refused](#) to sign the statement prepared by government prosecutors, leading her to be arrested for the crime of "false testimony." A second priest, [José Leonardo Urbina](#), was [reportedly](#) arrested for abuse of a minor. However, parishioners and fellow clergy [maintain](#) his innocence. USCIRF will continue to monitor Urbina's case.

Father García's imprisonment came only a few weeks after the National Assembly, controlled by President Ortega and the FSLN, [approved](#) a report which accuses Nicaraguan clergy of actively participating in the 2018 protests and expressing "hatred and viciousness" toward government supporters. The report also recommends reforming the penal code to [toughen](#) sentences for people convicted of "undermining national integrity," which could open the door for the prosecution of clergy who supported the 2018 protests or "instilled hatred" among the population in their sermons and confiscate the assets of the Church.

#### Elimination of Church-affiliated Organizations

Another way the Ortega regime pressures the Catholic Church is by hindering, or outright preventing, the operations of Church-affiliated organizations and services. This happens in the context of a larger crackdown on civil society organizations perceived to oppose the government; so far in 2022, the Nicaraguan government has [shut down](#) over 1,000 NGOs, often citing legislation meant to consolidate government control over civil society such as the "[foreign agents](#)" law.

Early in the year, the National Assembly ordered the [revocation](#) of the legal status of a Catholic university and multiple Catholic educational and charitable projects in the city of Estelí. *Universidad Católica del Trópico Seco* (Catholic University of the Dry Tropics) was targeted for allegedly [failing](#) to disclose financial details and not identifying their directors. The multiple Church-affiliated projects—including an "association of parochial schools, an agricultural institute, a Catholic cultural association, the diocesan justice and peace commission and the diocesan Caritas chapter"—were [accused](#) of those same indiscretions and for illegally profiting from their legal status. The Diocese of Estelí has been [critical](#) of the Ortega regime in the [past](#) for human rights abuses and threats against the Church.

Later, the National Assembly [approved](#) a law that would strengthen its control over educational institutions and strip funding from *Universidad Centroamericana* (Central American University – UCA) in Managua, a school run by the Society of Jesus. Some believe that the funding cut is in retaliation for the university's role in the 2018

protests, when the school opened its doors for students seeking protection from security forces.

In May, amidst Monsignor Álvarez's hunger strike, the Nicaraguan Institute of Telecommunications and Postal Services (TELCOR) [ordered](#) the removal of the Episcopal Conference of Nicaragua's (CEN) *Canal Católico* (Catholic Channel). Soon after, the regime took control of the channel and began airing "Nicarao TV," which has been [described](#) as a propaganda network. Monsignor Álvarez works in communications for the CEN and oversaw *Canal Católico*. USCIRF [reported](#) on a similar situation in 2021 involving the closure of *Enlace Canal 21*, a Christian television channel, after its leader, evangelical Pastor Guillermo Osorno, challenged the results of the presidential election and denounced electoral irregularities.

In June, the government [canceled](#) the legal status of Missionaries of Charity, an order established by Mother Teresa, for allegedly failing to declare the origins of its funding in line with Law No. 977, Law Against Money Laundering, Financing of Terrorism and Financing of the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction. The government also forced the nuns to leave the country, with migration officials and police officers escorting them by bus to the Costa Rica border. Missionaries of Charity had operated in Nicaragua since 1988, [running](#) a "children's nursery, a home for abused and abandoned girls and a nursing home." After the expulsion of the nuns, the government [targeted](#) employees of *La Prensa* for reporting on the incident. Other Catholic organizations the government ordered closed [include](#) Spirituality Foundation for Children of Nicaragua, the Catholic Foundation for Human Development Assistance for Nicaraguans, the My Childhood Mothers Foundation, and the Diriomito Children's Care Home Association.

In August, TELCOR ordered the [closure](#) of at least seven radio stations operated by the Catholic Church. Police in Sébaco [forcibly](#) entered the [chapel](#) where *Radio Católica* operated in order to seize broadcast equipment and fired shots and tear gas towards parishioners who were protesting the police action against the church. As of August 3, the priest Uriel Vallejos and several parishioners were [locked](#) in the parish house in Sébaco as police continued to occupy the church facilities. The police [cut off](#) the electricity to the church and the priest and parishioners have access to very little food or water. USCIRF will continue to monitor the closures of the radio stations and the police situation in Sébaco.

## U.S. Policy

The U.S. government continued to enact robust sanctions against Nicaraguan officials, though none referred to religious freedom violations. On March 9, the State Department, acting on a new mandate provided by the [RENACER Act](#), which expands the Corrupt and Undemocratic Actors list to include Nicaragua, [added](#) nine Nicaraguan officials to the list for "undermining the democratic processes or institutions of Nicaragua" during last year's sham election, making those individuals ineligible for visas and admission to the United States. Another round of visa restrictions came in June, when the Department imposed restrictions on an [additional](#) 93 individuals "believed to have undermined democracy following Daniel Ortega's illegitimate November 2021 reelection, including judges, prosecutors, National Assembly Members, and Interior Ministry officials."

In June, the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control [designated](#) the state-owned Nicaraguan mining company *Empresa Nicaraguense de Minas* (ENIMINAS) and one official in the government pursuant to Executive Order 13851. The Nicaraguan government created ENIMINAS to consolidate control over the country's mining sector and has used it to extract "significant revenue" from the Nicaraguan gold sector. This revenue has been linked to the oppression of the Nicaraguan people and actions that "pose a threat to the security of the hemisphere."

Though there is little discernible evidence that the several years of sanctions have caused the Ortega regime to change its authoritarian ways, [one report](#) suggests that the son of President Daniel Ortega, Laureano Ortega, approached Biden administration officials for sanctions relief in exchange for the release of political prisoners.

On November 15, 2021, the State Department again [placed](#) Nicaragua on its Special Watch List for severe violations of religious freedom. In April 2022, USCIRF [recommended](#) that the State Department maintain Nicaragua on its Special Watch List in the designations expected later this year.



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### Conclusion

In addition to the sanctions focused on human rights and democracy, the Biden administration should also consider imposing targeted sanctions on Nicaraguan government agencies and officials responsible for violence and other punitive actions against houses of worship, religious leaders, and organizations, especially if more priests are detained on specious charges. Additionally, the U.S. government should increase collaboration with

and encouragement to multilateral organizations, such as the Organization of American States, to monitor and investigate religious freedom violations that occur in Nicaragua, work to identify perpetrators and tolerators of religious freedom violations, and seek the repeal of problematic laws such as the Foreign Agents Regulation Law.

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity 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.