



**Statement before the U.S. Commission on International
Religious Freedom**

***“Hearing on Deteriorating Religious
Freedom Conditions in Nicaragua”***

A Testimony by:

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Chairman Stephen Schneck, Commissioner Maureen Ferguson of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), thank you for inviting me to participate in today's hearing. It's an honor to be here. I commend USCIRF for focusing on this urgent, important, and evolving challenge.

My comments today are my own and should not be attributed to the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

The deteriorating conditions for religious freedom in Nicaragua are having a profound effect on Nicaraguan society, and the persecution of members of the clergy of different faiths along with severe limits to the ability of the faithful to worship are only getting worse as the Ortega-Murillo dictatorship descends into totalitarianism.

Nicaragua did not become a dictatorship overnight. It was a slow and deliberate process by the Ortega government to weaken and co-opt political institutions, first through de facto actions, then under the pretense of law. This process accelerated considerably after the May 2018 protests which were met with the full, blinding force of a regime determined to cling to power no matter the cost to democracy, to human rights or to the very lives of its people. There are no longer any meaningful protections for the human rights of the Nicaragua people. The rule of law no longer exists and power is wielded for the personal gain of the President, his wife and their inner circle. Nepotism and cronyism characterize government institutions which have been co-opted (or like the judicial branch, completely taken over)¹, and no longer maintain any separation of powers. The independence of the security forces, that had been a hallmark of Nicaragua's transition to democracy, has been eliminated and they now directly serve as tools for the maintenance of the regime in power. Daniel Ortega, Rosario Murillo and the FSLN have returned Nicaragua to the once disavowed era of familial dictatorship that Ortega once fought to free his country from.

In their pursuit of absolute control, the Ortega-Murillo dictatorship has made every effort to close all civic space in Nicaragua. They do this through the persecution and criminalization of any persons or organizations identified or perceived as opponents of the government, the prohibition of protests and social demonstrations, the dismantling of social movements and the media, the massive closure of organizations, banishment, the stripping of citizenship, confiscation of property, and of course, through the persecution of religious leaders and limiting the opportunities for the faithful to exercise their religion.²

Religious organizations provide a key social scaffolding in Nicaragua. Religious institutions and their leaders are deeply entrenched within the communities they serve, a feature which makes them a threat to the Ortega-Murillo regime's authoritarian political project. Yet this is not new. President Ortega has deep and long-held grievances against the Catholic Church in particular, for which he has gleefully sought retribution. Until 1978 the Sandinistas were but a small group of rebels and

¹ "Report of the Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua", Fifty-fifth session of the Human Rights Council, March 15, 2024, P.4,

<https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g24/033/27/pdf/g2403327.pdf?token=HbESyTztBWTGSMnGCB&fe=true>

² "Closure of civic space in Nicaragua", Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, September 23, 2023, https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/reports/pdfs/2023/Cierre_espacio_civico_Nicaragua_ENG.pdf

that it was really the students and Christian-based communities in working-class neighborhoods of Managua that powered the revolution that overthrew President Anastasio Somoza in 1979. At the time, the Episcopal conference of Nicaragua supported the revolution but this was short-lived as within a year they warned about the dangers of authoritarianism. In 1985 Pope John Paul II made Miguel Obando y Bravo a cardinal (he had been the archbishop of Managua since 1970) and his sermons played an influential role in the lead-up to the elections of 1990 where Ortega lost to Violeta Chamorro.³ In the 2000s Ortega made efforts to reconcile with the church, he officially converted to Catholicism, had Cardinal Obando y Bravo officiate his marriage to Rosario Murillo, and also supported a ban on abortion. He likely hoped to win Catholic voters and was returned to the presidency in 2006.⁴ When the protests erupted in 2018, the church hid and sheltered protesters and Nicaragua's bishops demanded an end to police and paramilitary attacks on unarmed demonstrators. Later they convened a National Dialogue to attempt to resolve the conflict.⁵ Ortega sees and understands the church as a rival political actor and has experienced its power going back decades. He is intent on dismantling it through a relentless and intense cycle of harassment and persecution as part of his plan to consolidate a dynastic dictatorship within Nicaragua that brooks no rival.

In response to criticism of the human rights situation in the country by the Episcopal Conference of Nicaragua and the Archdiocese of Managua following the 2018 protests, authorities began using hate speech and labelling priests as “coup plotters,” “terrorists” or “agents of evil.” Several Catholic priests were arrested during the 2018 protests and from August 2022 onwards, additional members of the clergy were detained and convicted of offences such as conspiracy and spreading false news. This included the arrest, on August 4, 2022 of Bishop Rolando Alvarez and his subsequent sentencing to 26 years in prison for “treason.”⁶ The United Nations Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua has documented two cases of mass arrests of religious figures, one in October 2023 and the other between December 2023 and January 2024.⁷ Ortega's paramilitaries, members of the “Citizen Power Councils” (neighborhood groups organized by the Sandinista regime) and plainclothes police surveil churches and clandestinely attend masses to intimidate and identify those who speak out against the regime.⁸ The government's repression is not limited to clergy members; it also targets religious institutions and organizations. For instance, in August 2023, the government confiscated a prestigious Jesuit-run University of Central America, alleging

³ “Democracy and the Catholic Church in Nicaragua”, Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 1, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/events/democracy-and-catholic-church-nicaragua>

⁴ Hendricks, Michael, “Nicaragua and the Catholic Church”, Canopy Forum, May 17, 2023, <https://canopyforum.org/2023/05/17/nicaragua-and-the-catholic-church/>

⁵ Agren, David, “Church mediates Nicaraguan talks; bishop urges Ortega to change tactics”, National Catholic Reporter, May 17, 2018, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/church-mediates-nicaraguan-talks-bishop-urges-ortega-change-tactics>

⁶ Miranda Aburto, Wilfredo, “Isolation and retaliation: Bishop Rolando Álvarez marks one year in prison for standing up to Ortega and Murillo”, El Pais, August 5, 2023, <https://english.elpais.com/international/2023-08-05/isolation-and-retaliation-bishop-rolando-alvarez-marks-one-year-in-prison-for-standing-up-to-ortega-and-murillo.html>

⁷ “Report of the Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua”, Fifty-fifth session of the Human Rights Council, March 15, 2024, P.12, <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g24/033/27/pdf/g2403327.pdf?token=HbESyTztBWTGSMnGCB&fe=true>

⁸ “Police and paramilitary infiltrate Nicaraguan churches”, *Confidencial*, August 3, 2023, <https://confidencial.digital/english/police-and-paramilitary-infiltrate-nicaraguan-churches/>

it was a “center of terrorism.”⁹ It has also confiscated the property of other religious orders, including from foreign missionaries whose legal status in the country was not renewed, forcing them to leave.¹⁰ This is part of a broader crackdown of civil society organizations under a series of purposely designed laws.¹¹ According to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), as of August 31 of 2023, 3,390 organizations out of a total of 7,227 registered in the country in 2018 have had their legal status cancelled, many of which are faith-based institutions.¹²

In recent years, the regime has also pursued an increasingly hardline approach to religious gatherings, demonstrating how Ortega has come to view any unsanctioned assembly as a potential threat to his domination of Nicaraguan civil society. In 2023 and 2024, the regime banned processions in celebration of Catholic Holy Week, arresting those members of the clergy and lay people alike who dared to celebrate.¹³ Patron saint celebrations have been either banned or appropriated by the Government and masses held outside churches have also been prohibited.¹⁴ In late November and early December 2023, the regime began a systematic campaign of religious repression around Christmas celebrations. The dragnet swept up figures like Bishop Isidro Mora, who was arrested on December 20 after reportedly calling for prayers in support of Bishop Álvarez.¹⁵ On Christmas Eve, the government sentenced six former employees of the Catholic charity Caritas, to six years’ imprisonment on trumped-up money laundering charges.¹⁶

In a form of house-cleaning for the regime, President Ortega released 222 political prisoners in February 2023, and summarily stripped the citizenship from those it “freed” alongside 94 other Nicaraguan dissidents living abroad.¹⁷ It is telling that Bishop Rolando Álvarez was among the few prisoners who chose to remain until all prisoners were freed, his choice a profile in courage as he confronted the denial of basic rights and liberties as well as the inhumane and abusive conditions

⁹ “Nicaraguan government seizes highly regarded university from Jesuits”, The Associated Press, August 17, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/nicaragua-jesuits-university-seizure-ad18d55bc08a9ab2b9aaf4de54899c51>

¹⁰ Guidos, Rhina, “Another group of sisters leaves Nicaragua, where church faces increasing persecution”, Global Sisters Report, July 6, 2023, <https://www.globalsistersreport.org/news/another-group-sisters-leaves-nicaragua-where-church-faces-increasing-persecution>

¹¹ These include, Law 1115, “General Law on Regulation and Control of Not-for-Profit Organizations” (and amendments); Law 1042, “Special Law on Cybercrimes”; Law 977, “Law Against Money Laundering, Financing Terrorism and Financing the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction” (and amendments); and Law 1055, “Law for the Defense of the Rights of the People to Independence, Sovereignty and Self-determination for Peace”.

¹² “Closure of civic space in Nicaragua”, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, September 23, 2023, p.8, https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/reports/pdfs/2023/Cierre_espacio_civico_Nicaragua_ENG.pdf

¹³ Luke Wilson, “Nicaragua’s Full-Scale Crackdown on Catholic and Protestant Communities”, USCIRF, June 2024, <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2024-06/2024%20Nicaragua%20Country%20Update.pdf>.

¹⁴ “Report of the Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua”, Fifty-fifth session of the Human Rights Council, March 15, 2024, P.12,

<https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g24/033/27/pdf/g2403327.pdf?token=HbESyTztBWTGSMnGCB&fe=true>

¹⁵ “Nicaragua jails second Catholic bishop as crackdown intensifies,” *Reuters*, December 20, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/nicaraguan-police-arrest-second-catholic-bishop-local-media-2023-12-21/>.

¹⁶ Dr. Ochab, Ewelina U., “Nicaraguan Government Expels Arbitrarily Detained Priests”, *Forbes*, January 6, 2024, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ewelinaochab/2024/01/06/nicaraguan-government-expels-arbitrarily-detained-priests/#>

¹⁷ Alan Yuhas, “Nicaragua Strips Citizenship From Hundreds Days After Prisoner Release,” *The New York Times*, February 17, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/17/world/americas/nicaragua-strips-citizenship-dissidents.html>.

characteristic of Nicaragua's prison system.¹⁸ Then, on January 14, 2024, Bishop Álvarez was released from prison and exiled to the Vatican, an incident which underscores how the Ortega-Murillo regime has employed selective detentions and expulsions to shape domestic conditions in Nicaragua to its favor.¹⁹ By imprisoning members of the clergy and subsequently exiling them, the regime is able to remove some of its most outspoken critics without needing to host an ever-increasing population of political prisoners. The exile of prominent religious leaders also leaves their communities unable to heal from the collective tragedy of government repression, leaves them devoid of any font of hope given religion's role in Nicaragua, and enforces a chilling effect which leaves others reluctant to stand up in the place of those exiled. Today, several Nicaraguan citizens and members of congregations remain incarcerated.²⁰

The Ortega-Murillo regime's religious persecution has not just targeted Nicaragua's Catholic population either. At least 240 Evangelical Christian churches, one of the fastest-growing denominations in Nicaragua, have been shuttered under the regime.²¹ Evangelical congregations and pastors routinely face violence and intimidation, with a 2022 report from USCIRF finding a 70 percent increase in acts of aggression towards Evangelical churches since the 2018 mass protests gripped the country. Evangelical aid organizations similarly face mounting barriers to operation within Nicaragua under the country's 2022 General Law on Regulation and Control of Not-for-Profit Organizations which has been wielded to strip many faith-based NGOs of their legal status within Nicaragua.²² Indeed, just two days after the exile of Bishop Álvarez and fellow priests, the regime stripped 16 civil society organizations of their juridical status, ten of which were Catholic or Evangelical.²³

Finally, religious repression has had a compounding effect on Nicaragua's indigenous communities, who already face disproportionate challenges obtaining effective political representation and protection of their human rights.²⁴ Under the Ortega-Murillo regime, indigenous groups, particularly along the country's Miskito Coast, have suffered land invasions and violence from pro-government militias. As of this month Father Rodolfo French Naar, a Catholic priest and member of the Miskito indigenous group, was banned from returning to

¹⁸ Sánchez Silva, Walter, "Why did Bishop Alvarez refuse to leave Nicaragua? A former political prisoner explains", Catholic News Agency, April 11, 2023, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/254067/why-did-bishop-alvarez-refuse-to-leave-nicaragua-a-former-political-prisoner-explains>

¹⁹ "Nicaragua expulsa del país al obispo Rolando Álvarez y a 15 sacerdotes, que van al Vaticano," *BBC News Mundo*, January 15, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articles/cw4kzxp4pwo>.

²⁰ Associated Press, "Bishop Álvarez and 18 priests released from prison, handed to Vatican, Nicaragua says," *PBS News*, January 14, 2024, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/bishop-alvarez-and-18-priests-released-from-prison-handed-to-vatican-nicaragua-says>.

²¹ "Religious persecution in Nicaragua "subtly" reaches the Evangelical Church," *Divergentes*, December 9, 2023, <https://www.divergentes.com/religious-persecution-in-nicaragua-subtly-reaches-evangelical-church/>.

²² "Iglesias evangélicas de Nicaragua son "obligadas" a pagar multas injustificadas," *Confidencial*, June 13, 2024, <https://confidencial.digital/nacion/iglesias-evangelicas-de-nicaragua-son-obligadas-a-pagar-multas-injustificadas/>.

²³ "Nicaragua cancels legal status of 16 NGOs, some Catholic", *Vatican News*, January 17, 2024, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/world/news/2024-01/nicaragua-government-outlaws-catholic-evangelical-ngos.html>.

²⁴ "As democracy continues to deteriorate in Nicaragua, Indigenous peoples pay the price", *Global Witness*, March 24, 2022, <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/blog/democracy-continues-deteriorate-nicaragua-indigenous-peoples-pay-price/>.

Nicaragua following a trip to the United States.²⁵ Deteriorating conditions for democracy and human rights within Nicaragua will almost certainly spell even worse depredations for the country's most vulnerable populations.

Policy Recommendations

Religious repression in Nicaragua is intimately bound up in the Ortega-Murillo regime's broader strategy of regime survival and efforts to strangle civil society within the country. To strike back, the United States needs a comprehensive theory of change which effectively targets the tools the regime uses to repress its people. Such a strategy will also require more international cooperation to disentangle and defang the networks Ortega draws upon to preserve his legitimacy and funding streams.

Target the Instruments and Agents of Repression: A more muscular sanctions strategy towards Nicaragua is sorely needed. At the same time, indiscriminate sectoral sanctions may do more harm than good, and exacerbate humanitarian struggles within the country as well as mass outmigration. A U.S. sanctions strategy should set its sights on actors like the Nicaraguan National Police and Nicaraguan Army that have been directly implicated in human rights abuses. In particular, the Nicaraguan Army's *Instituto de Previsión Social Militar* (IPSM) which acts as a valuable pension fund for the armed forces should be brought under a microscope, and banned from investing in and drawing profits from U.S. capital markets.²⁶ The United States could also conduct an investigation into local mayors and police chiefs who have been complicit with religious and political repression to build out a more comprehensive network of targeted individual sanctions.

Dismantle Ortega's Authoritarian Networks: In order to insulate himself from international pressure, Ortega has come to depend more and more on relationships with anti-U.S. authoritarian governments like Russia, China, Iran, and Venezuela. China for instance has pledged hundreds of millions in loans to support infrastructure development in Nicaragua as other sources of international financing for the regime have dried up. The United States should designate the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) under the Treasury Department as lead in an investigation into potential PRC firms which may be subject to sanctions.²⁷ Similarly, on the heels of OFAC's recent sanctions against the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs Training Center in Managua, the United States should encourage like-minded allies in organizations such as the G7 to adopt similar sanctions to demonstrate a unified front against Ortega's authoritarian allies. UK parliamentarians have already encouraged the uptake of sanctions in coordination with other states, including the United States.²⁸

²⁵ Eduardo Campos Lima, "Nicaragua blocks indigenous priest from returning to the country," *Crux*, July 8, 2024, <https://cruxnow.com/church-in-the-americas/2024/07/nicaragua-blocks-indigenous-priest-from-returning-to-the-country>.

²⁶ Daniel F. Runde, Ryan C. Berg, Sofia Williamson-Garcia, and Sophia Skaff, "Mapping the Escalation Ladder against the Ortega-Murillo Regime in Nicaragua," CSIS, October 3, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/mapping-escalation-ladder-against-ortega-murillo-regime-nicaragua>.

²⁷ "Treasury Sanctions Nicaragua-Based Russian Institution and Gold Companies," U.S. Department of the Treasury, May 15, 2024, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy2339>.

²⁸ Collins, Charles, "British parliamentarians urge more action against Nicaragua regime," *Crux*, April 4, 2024, <https://cruxnow.com/church-in-the-americas/2024/04/british-parliamentarians-urge-more-action-against-nicaragua-regime>

Coordinate with Multilateral Banks: The NICA and RENACER Act have given the United States powerful tools to restrict Ortega's access to multilateral lending, at least from institutions where Washington has a seat at the table. Then, in late 2023, the departure of Dante Mossi from the Central American Bank for Economic Integration (CABEI) has created a new window of opportunity to choke off one of the regime's last remaining sources of major investment. CABEI's new Executive Director Gisela Sanchez has indicated her desire to diversify the bank's lending portfolio.²⁹ While this is surely a welcome move, CABEI can do more to instill stricter human rights protections in its lending strategy. While the United States does not hold shares in CABEI, it should work with like-minded governments like Taiwan and Japan, as well as other regional shareholders like the Arevalo government in Guatemala to put pressure on the bank to curtail any lending to Nicaragua until conditions in the country improve.³⁰

Uplift Voices from Exile: The regime's strategy of imprisoning and subsequently expelling political dissidents is aimed at silencing any criticism of the regime within Nicaragua itself. However, as seen with the exile of the 222, it can also backfire by allowing individuals subjected to political repression and detention to speak openly of their experiences and the conditions within Nicaragua.³¹ While many individuals remain silent for fear of family and relations still in the country, others have been outspoken about raising awareness on the global stage. The United States should work with these individuals to amplify their voices, and especially with the Vatican to identify religious leaders who can speak to their experiences defending religious freedom in Nicaragua. The Pope should also more forcefully speak-out on the abysmal human-rights conditions in Nicaragua and on the persecution of the church. The United States should also encourage the gathering of testimony from exiled individuals to help build the basis for a potential international criminal case against the Ortega-Murillo regime.

Establish a Rapporteurship on Religious Freedom in the IACHR: The State Department should seek to establish a dedicated rapporteurship on religious freedom within the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, an autonomous body of the Organization of American States, of which the United States is a member and is the largest funder. This could be modelled on the UN's Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, but with a mandate specifically on the Americas, leveraging the IACHR's deep knowledge of the human rights issues in region.

Consider Further Economic Measures: Nicaragua's economy is overwhelmingly dependent on access to U.S. markets, provided through the Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR); in fact Nicaragua is the only Central American country to have a trade surplus with the U.S.³² It is unclear whether United States has the ability to partially, or completely

²⁹ Iván Olivares, "Central American Bank to Limit New Loans to Ortega Regime," *Confidencial*, March 10, 2024, <https://confidencial.digital/english/central-american-bank-to-limit-new-loans-to-ortega-regime/>.

³⁰ Ryan C. Berg, "Why Is CABEI Funding Nicaragua's Dictatorship and What Can the United States Do about It?" CSIS, February 6, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/why-cabei-funding-nicaraguas-dictatorship-and-what-can-united-states-do-about-it>.

³¹ "Political Prisoners and the Future of Nicaragua", CSIS, May 11, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/events/political-prisoners-and-future-nicaragua>.

³² Mismash, Eden, "U.S.-Nicaragua trade grows 67% in two years despite sanctions", Universidad de Navarra, February 11, 2023, <https://en.unav.edu/web/global-affairs/el-comercio-entre-eeuu-y-nicaragua-aumenta-un-67-en-dos-anos-a-pesar-de-las-sanciones>

suspend Nicaragua from the CAFTA-DR free trade agreement, which if it could, might provide the system shock to the country's business elites needed to convince them that Ortega's dictatorial model is no longer sustainable. As an alternative, the U.S. could however gradually take additional sector by sector trade privileges away, or ban the importation of Nicaraguan products, slowly turning up the temperature on Nicaragua's economy. The potential second-order consequences on migration means any measures must be carefully calibrated.