

**Degrading Conditions of Religious Freedom in Nicaragua:
Testimony by Félix Maradiaga, President of the Foundation for the
Freedom of Nicaragua, before the U.S. Commission on International
Religious Freedom.**

Wednesday, July 24, 2024

Thank you for inviting me to testify at this significant hearing and for bringing attention to the dire situation of religious freedom in Nicaragua.

Since its inception decades ago, the Sandinista Front has viewed the Catholic Church as an inconvenient organization, subjecting it to various attacks. During the 1980s, under the influence of liberation theology, Sandinismo focused heavily on challenging the formal authority of the Catholic Church, launching smear campaigns and various forms of repression.

I reference this historical context to establish a fundamental fact: the Sandinista Front has never fully respected the religious freedom of Nicaraguans. With Daniel Ortega's return to power in 2007, and particularly after the 2018 protests, religious repression escalated exponentially to unprecedented levels in Latin America.

Unlike totalitarian regimes such as those in China and Cuba, the Sandinista method of religious repression is unique. The attacks on the Church are not based on a direct attempt to promote atheism but rather on an obsessive attempt to subjugate and manipulate the faith of Nicaraguans.

The hypocritically religious rhetoric of Rosario Murillo and Daniel Ortega has been accompanied by systematic attempts to co-opt the Catholic Church. They have failed, and this is partly why their animosity is so intense. The Ortega-Murillo dictatorship deeply resents the special place the Church holds in the hearts of our people. They resent that the Church, as an institution, and its pastors, like Bishops Rolando Álvarez and Silvio Báez, along with hundreds of priests in communion with Church doctrine, have sided with the people and justice amidst the regime's severe violations. This morally correct stance has led to imprisonment, inhumane treatment, and the exile of nearly ninety Catholic religious figures.

These failed attempts to influence or control the Church constitute a violation of religious freedom and have also been attempted with other religious denominations. The regime, using the principle of "divide and conquer," has tried to create friction between Catholics and Evangelicals. While the persecution of the Catholic Church is particularly severe, our brothers in the Moravian and Evangelical churches also suffer persecution.

In Nicaragua, all Christianity is under attack. Of the nearly 3,600 organizations that have been arbitrarily shut down, with many confiscated, 15% are formally religious organizations, either Catholic or Protestant. Additionally, many other organizations with close ties to faith communities and denominational educational missions have been targeted, demonstrating widespread religious persecution. We estimate that over 600,000 Nicaraguans received some form of health, educational, or humanitarian service from these organizations. The beneficiaries are now vulnerable, as the Nicaraguan state lacks the capacity to provide the altruistic services these organizations offered to the most disadvantaged populations.

To date, the regime has arbitrarily closed 420 religious organizations, most of which were dedicated to aiding the most vulnerable populations through educational, health, and religious activities. During this same period, over 740 direct attacks against the Catholic Church have been documented, according to the study "Nicaragua: A Betrayed Church?" by Nicaraguan researcher Martha Molina.

I am in an interfaith marriage; my wife Berta is a Baptist, and I am a Catholic. Both of our communities have members who have been persecuted, imprisoned, or exiled. Currently, there are approximately 30 individuals arbitrarily detained for their ties to the Catholic Church, including Olessia Muñoz, Víctor Ticay, and Martha Lorena Centeno. Additionally, eleven evangelical pastors from the Ministry Puerto de la Montaña, along with two of their lawyers, have been imprisoned and convicted on fabricated charges. Based on my personal experience, I can testify that religious repression extends into prisons. Those arbitrarily detained for religious reasons are prevented from practicing their faith, such as being denied a Bible, the ability to pray aloud, or receiving communion.

Religious persecution is a gateway to other freedoms. When this liberty is repressed, it severely impacts freedom of thought, expression, and other liberties. On June 9, the Ministry of the Interior of the Ortega-Murillo dictatorship revoked the legal status of the Catholic broadcaster Radio María and confiscated all its assets. No Catholic media outlets can now operate freely and without censorship in Nicaragua. To date, 22 Catholic and evangelical media outlets have been shut down, with most of their assets confiscated.

The dictatorship's paranoia is so extreme that in some parishes, FSLN agents attend homilies or religious services to monitor and spy on the pastoral work of priests. The Church, its priests, and committed laypeople are under constant harassment, not only by the police but also by regime operatives in neighborhoods and communities. This situation is particularly severe in dioceses such as Matagalpa, Estelí, and Jinotega.

Another severe human rights violation stemming from religious persecution is the restriction of academic freedom. Following the closure of the Central American University (UCA) and other educational institutions, faculty members have been prevented from working unless they subordinate themselves to the dictatorship. Some of these academics, like sociologist Melba Damaris Hernández, have been arbitrarily imprisoned since August of last year.

Melba Damaris, along with Olessia Muñoz and Víctor Ticay, is among the more than 65 people who have been subjected to sham trials and fabricated charges for practicing their faith, attending religious events, or simply expressing solidarity with persecuted individuals. Among them, 22 have been stripped of their nationality and condemned to statelessness, a crime against humanity.

At least 84 priests have been expelled from the country, forced into exile, barred from re-entering Nicaragua, and, in the worst cases, imprisoned and then exiled. Complaints must continue regarding the prohibition of several religious orders and the expulsion of at least 70 nuns dedicated to faith activities in Nicaragua, including the well-known Sisters of Charity, the Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and the Carmelite Sisters. All were unjustly expelled from the country by the anti-Christian regime of Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo.

Other forms of attacks on religious freedom include prohibiting many private businesses from offering their services to churches. Religious organizations, including primary and secondary schools, continue to face the closure of their bank accounts and are forced to operate under very difficult conditions as they are not allowed to receive donations. Additionally, there is constant fiscal harassment, imposing onerous and unjust taxes or supposed permits to force them to close. But the most painful part of all this is that the laypeople working in the few organizations still operating in the country are permanently harassed and threatened with imprisonment.

Transnational Repression.

It is crucial not to mistake the silence imposed by the regime for signs of normality. The reality is quite the opposite. The transnational repression employed by the regime, combined with the ongoing intimidation of the families of exiled priests, is a clear indicator of the severity of the situation. Anyone expressing opposition to the regime risks their family in Nicaragua being targeted. The Church has been forced to act with extreme caution and discretion to protect its pastoral function within Nicaragua and safeguard its clergy. In dioceses like Matagalpa, for example, more than 40% of the clergy have been lost to exile or persecution.

Conclusion and Recommendations:

UN Expert Group Report and Possible Legal Actions.

I urge this commission to adopt the recommendations of the UN expert group in Nicaragua. Their comprehensive report, covering events from April 2018 to March 31, 2024, documents systematic and widespread violations and abuses of international human rights law committed against members of the Catholic Church and, more recently, other Christian denominations. The documented violations include rights to personal security and integrity, freedom from arbitrary detention, due process and a fair trial, nationality, freedom of movement, freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, as well as freedom of association and related rights, such as property rights. The report offers recommendations based on international law, emphasizing the urgency for the international community to take stronger measures against the Ortega-Murillo

regime to force an end to widespread repression. These measures should potentially include international legal actions.

Actions by the U.S. Congress and Legislative Branch, Including Reviewing DR-CAFTA.

I also urge this commission to continue working closely with Congress and the Executive Branch to keep Nicaragua on the list of countries of particular concern. It is crucial to seriously evaluate the fact that the United States has a free trade agreement with Nicaragua, known as DR-CAFTA. How can such advantages be granted to a state that violates all basic human rights principles? Many of the attacks on religious freedom in Nicaragua have also been acts of confiscation against international missions, constituting violations of private property rights. Congress must use all legislative tools available to impose more severe and widespread sanctions.

Support for Regularizing the Status of Persecuted Individuals.

From my organization, we estimate that at least 10% of asylum cases in the United States or those seeking refuge in other countries are linked to religious persecution. However, Nicaraguans who are de facto stateless—those who do not have travel documents because they have been denied by the regime—are in a vulnerable and unprotected situation. I respectfully urge this commission to work hand in hand with U.S. immigration authorities to help expedite asylum cases for individuals persecuted for religious reasons.

Political Prisoners.

International pressure for the release of Nicaraguan political prisoners is insufficient. The greatest fear of any political prisoner is being forgotten, and we urge you to ensure that these individuals are not forgotten in the good offices of this commission.

Sanctions and Working with Allies.

Additionally, the United States must work with its allies to impose more sanctions and pressures, including expanding the list of sanctioned individuals and institutions, such as the military. These sanctions, such as the existing Magnitsky laws in various countries, should not only come from the United States but, where possible, be implemented in coordination with its allies.

The world must stand in solidarity with Nicaraguan Christians and support us in our civic struggle.