

INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM



USCCB Fact Sheet

Politico-Religious Oppression in Nicaragua

The increasing authoritarianism of the government of President Daniel Ortega is threatening human rights and the preservation of religious freedom in Nicaragua. Religious discrimination is prohibited by the Constitution, but the current regime has given preferential treatment to religious institutions that espouse a pro-government stance. This is a major concern for the country's 2.6 million Catholics.

Covering a total of over 50,000 square miles, Nicaragua is the largest country in Central America with a population of approximately six million people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, including a Mestizo majority as well as white, black, and indigenous minorities. In 1987, the Constitution of Nicaragua was drafted and approved by the Sandinista National Liberation Front, the dominant socialist political party in the country. The Constitution was revised in 1995 in an attempt to reinforce the power of the legislative branch in the face of overwhelming executive power.

However, the current administration of President Ortega has taken radical measures to ensure his own political power at the expense of the civil liberties that are supposed to be guaranteed by the Constitution. A system of checks and balances no longer exists in Nicaragua due to Ortega's actions. Ortega has also taken complete control of the country's military, police, and security forces. Anti-government protests within the past year have been met with severe backlash and government-sanctioned violence to repress dissent.

Politico-religious dissent has been on the rise in Nicaragua, especially as Catholic bishops and other religious leaders (i.e. Evangelical Protestants) have criticized the Ortega regime's human rights record. Religious leaders who have opposed the regime have been retaliated against through smear campaigns and disinformation disseminated by pro-government press and media. Churches sheltering protesters from violence have been attacked by pro-government mobs. Bishop Silvio Jose Baez of the Archdiocese of Managua has been threatened with assassination for speaking up against the government in support of human rights and religious freedom. Threats against Bishop Baez have been so severe that Pope Francis recalled him to Rome to serve the Church remotely for a temporary period until the political turmoil ceases.

Public employees have been forced to attend government-sponsored religious festivals. These festivals have been used in an attempt by the Nicaraguan government to co-opt Catholic rhetoric and traditions to promote its own agenda. The veil of religion is being used to justify the regime's authoritarianism. The Ortega administration has incentivized pro-government religious institutions while simultaneously hindering the activities of anti-government institutions (who support human rights) through bureaucratic and financial restrictions. Both Catholic and Evangelical Protestant leaders confirm that travel restrictions have been placed on individuals based on their politico-religious affiliation. This has limited their ministerial and clerical activities and hindered collaboration with other religious bodies, both domestically and internationally.

This sort of manipulation harkens back to the persecution of the 1980s, when there were many violations of human rights and dissenters were subjected to political violence. Today, there is renewed tension between religious leaders and the Nicaraguan government as the Catholic Church has resisted government manipulation. In a climate of renewed frustration with the Church, the regime may seek to take increasingly severe actions against Catholic bishops and their flocks. The potential for widespread violence rooted in politico-religious identity is palpable and growing.

The Ortega regime has also sought to co-opt the symbols of Evangelical Protestantism to weaponize religious rhetoric in order to garner support for the government and foment resistance to the attempts of Catholic leaders to resist authoritarianism. This demonstrates the willingness of the Ortega regime to violate the religious freedom of both Catholics and Protestants – with little regard for faith and all the more emphasis on coercive political action. Leaders of the Catholic Church and Evangelical Protestantism in Nicaragua have united in solidarity to oppose the government's manipulation. These religious organizations intend to work for the attainment of peace in the country – rather than be used as proxies in the Ortega regime's ideological game. However, without free and fair election prior to the currently scheduled 2021 presidential election, peace will be difficult to attain unless the Ortega administration takes measures to improve human rights and lessen its own executive power.



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