

POLICY BRIEF



Nicaragua

Targeted repression of Christians and Church-affiliated organizations

Nicaragua is in the midst of a deepening human rights crisis, with growing limits on freedom of religion or belief, free speech, and the right to dissent. Ruled by President Daniel Ortega since 2007, Nicaragua's government is tightly controlled by his party, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), which holds power in the National Assembly.¹ In 2014, the FSLN made a reform to Article 147 of the constitution and abolished presidential term limits, cementing Ortega's power.²

In 2018, nationwide protests broke out over pension reforms brought by the government. The Roman Catholic Church tried to mediate, but efforts failed after some clergy showed support for protesters and continued offering aid to those in need. As a result, the government launched a media campaign against the Roman Catholic Church and shut down places of worship. Protestant Christian leaders who spoke out faced swift retaliation. Since then, the government has passed several laws intending to legitimize repressive

¹ Total Control: The Eradication of Independent Voices in Nicaragua, report by CSW, March 2025. Available at: csw.org.uk/nicaraguareport.htm

² cornellilij.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/N.-Cherry-Nicaraguan-Term-Limits.pdf

actions that are contrary to international human rights standards. These include, but are not limited to, laws related to restricting international funding for organizations (Law 1040); criminalizing speech alleged to cause public fear (Law 1042); branding critics as “traitors” (Law 1055); and revoking Nicaraguan nationality (Law 1145).³

These laws have strengthened the authority of the National Police and paramilitary forces who are using this power to suppress dissenting voices. This includes largely Christian leaders – many of whom have faced arrest, harassment, and the closure of their churches for expressing their views. Additionally, Christians perceived as opposing the government face daily harassment.⁴ Christian radio channels that share religious messages have been shut down if they are seen as linked to groups critical of the president.⁵ Churches are also under surveillance and must exercise caution in what they say.⁶ Nicaragua withdrew from the Organization of American States and from the Human Rights Council, claiming that human rights oversight threatened its sovereignty. These withdrawals further limit international mechanisms for reporting and exposing human rights and religious freedom violations.⁷

In January 2025, the National Assembly passed a significant constitutional reform amending Article 133, increasing the president’s authority over all branches of government. The reform removed the separation and independence between the branches of government and created two “Co-Presidents”. As a result, the judiciary, legislature, and electoral bodies lost their autonomy and are under the direct control of the presidency. Daniel Ortega and his wife Rosario Murillo now serve together as Co-Presidents.⁸ The constitutional amendment also created the *Polici a Voluntaria* (volunteer police), a legally sanctioned armed group that supports the National Police. This force, composed of FSLN members, ex-convicts, and paramilitary personnel, is widely feared for its potential to carry out highly oppressive measures aimed at silencing opposition.⁹

Arbitrary detention and unfair trials of faith leaders

The National Police along with the Judicial Assistance Directorate, the Public Prosecutor’s Office, the judiciary and the National Prison Service, aided by a wide surveillance and intelligence network – work together to detain and prosecute real or perceived opponents, committing grievous human rights violations along the way. In addition, amendments made to the Code of Criminal Procedure (Law 1060) give authorities more power to arrest and hold people for up to 90 days without formal charges.¹⁰ Consequently, both Protestant and Roman Catholic religious leaders are frequently detained, either in prisons or under house arrest. Some are held incommunicado, with no proof of life provided to their families. In all cases, they face inhuman treatment, and there are reports of Christian female detainees being subjected to sexual torture. Even simple acts of prayer for the country or imprisoned individuals can lead to detention.¹¹ As a result, many Christian leaders have fled the country, were exiled, found guilty of treason, or lost their citizenship. The government withholds passports from anyone it sees as critical of the regime, including religious leaders, journalists, and human rights defenders.¹²



Local Christians attending a training workshop, Nicaragua

³ [amnesty.org/es/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/AMR4388342024ENGLISH.pdf](https://www.amnesty.org/es/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/AMR4388342024ENGLISH.pdf)

⁴ “Nicaragua: Country Dossier”, World Watch Research, September 2024, pp. 12. Available at [WWL Background Information Nicaragua 2024](https://www.wwl-background.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-background), [opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-background](https://www.opendoorsof.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-background)

⁵ [cpj.org/2022/09/nicaraguan-government-suspends-at-least-17-local-radio-and-tv-stations/#:~:text=Nicaraguan%20government%20suspends%20at%20least,Case](https://www.cpj.org/2022/09/nicaraguan-government-suspends-at-least-17-local-radio-and-tv-stations/#:~:text=Nicaraguan%20government%20suspends%20at%20least,Case)

⁶ “United States Department of State 2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Nicaragua”, US State Department (IRFR 2023), pp. 9. Available at [state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/547499_NICARAGUA-2023-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf](https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/547499_NICARAGUA-2023-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf)

⁷ [ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/04/nicaragua-un-experts-publish-groundbreaking-report-naming-54-officials#:~:text=On%2027%20February%202025%20%E2%80%93%20the,all%20its%20subsidiary%20mechanisms](https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/04/nicaragua-un-experts-publish-groundbreaking-report-naming-54-officials#:~:text=On%2027%20February%202025%20%E2%80%93%20the,all%20its%20subsidiary%20mechanisms). Also see: [ictj.org/latest-news/ortega-regime-has-officially-withdrawn-nicaragua-oas](https://www.ictj.org/latest-news/ortega-regime-has-officially-withdrawn-nicaragua-oas)

⁸ [ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/grhe-nicaragua/a-hrc-58-26-auv-en.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/grhe-nicaragua/a-hrc-58-26-auv-en.pdf)

⁹ [divergentes.com/behind-the-hood-the-faces-of-rosario-murillos-volunteer-police](https://www.divergentes.com/behind-the-hood-the-faces-of-rosario-murillos-volunteer-police)

¹⁰ [amnesty.org/es/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/AMR4388342024ENGLISH.pdf](https://www.amnesty.org/es/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/AMR4388342024ENGLISH.pdf)

¹¹ [csw.org.uk/nicaraguareport.htm](https://www.csw.org.uk/nicaraguareport.htm)

¹² [infobae.com/en/2022/04/10/ten-actions-by-daniel-ortegas-regime-that-isolated-nicaragua-as-north-korea-from-latin-america](https://www.infobae.com/en/2022/04/10/ten-actions-by-daniel-ortegas-regime-that-isolated-nicaragua-as-north-korea-from-latin-america)

The police and the Public Prosecutor's Office routinely violate the right of due process by failing to inform detainees of the grounds for their arrest and by delaying bringing them before a judge within the legal timeframe. Defense lawyers are consistently denied access to their clients and to case files, while the police and Public Prosecutor's office often fabricate evidence, all of which restricts access to a fair trial.¹³

Forced closure of faith-based organizations

In Nicaragua, religious groups must register under the same rules as Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). The Catholic Church is exempt due to a special agreement with the government called a concordat.¹⁴ However, in 2022, Law No. 1115 General Law on Regulation and Control of Non-Profit Organizations¹⁵ was enacted giving the government, through the Interior Ministry, the power to cancel legal registration of NGOs for promoting ideas seen as a threat to the country's stability. The law allows authorities to seize an NGO's assets if its registration is canceled for committing "unlawful acts," disrupting "public order," or obstructing the Interior Ministry's "control and surveillance." It also limits foreign members of any organization to 25%.¹⁶

Consequently, a number of Catholic and evangelical Protestant NGOs, international and domestic, have lost their legal status to operate. These include major international aid groups such as Caritas, a global network of Catholic organizations that provide humanitarian and development support. Two of Nicaragua's oldest Protestant denominations, the Episcopal Church (est. 1612) and the Moravian Church (est. 1847), had their legal status canceled, affecting churches affiliated with both. In addition, the authorities shut down several smaller, religiously affiliated NGOs such as the Ebenezer Christian Missionary Foundation, the Fundamental Baptist Church Association of Matagalpa, and the Help for Nicaragua Foundation, for allegedly "failing to meet their obligations."¹⁷ Additionally, the regime revoked the legal status of the Insurance Fund for Priests, confiscating

a retirement fund for elderly Catholic clergy.¹⁸ In many cases, once an NGO's accounts are suspended, its assets and property are seized by the state.¹⁹

Furthermore, under Article 5 of Executive Decree 3-95 on Real Estate Tax, NGOs were previously granted tax exemptions. However, the enactment of Law 1212 in 2024 repealed these exemptions for Catholic and Evangelical churches, thereby imposing financial burdens that have significantly restricted their activities.²⁰

Heavy monitoring of churches and restriction on Freedom of assembly

The government uses paramilitary forces, members of the Citizen Power Councils (local neighborhood groups connected to FSLN), and covert police officers to surveil churches and secretly attend religious services, with the clear intent to intimidate worshippers and identify those critical of the regime.²¹ In both Catholic and Protestant communities, Christians have faced limits on the duration, location, and frequency of worship services, raids by masked men in the church, and theft or vandalism of religious items. Church leaders must speak cautiously, as any remark considered critical of the government can lead to arrest, church closure, or both. Many Christians, afraid of being attacked in churches, now either gather in makeshift house churches or read their Bibles alone in private.²²

One of the most common freedom of religion or belief violations is the government's arbitrary cancellation of religious events and services. The National Police forcibly ban public religious processions held outside the church buildings.²³ Peaceful Holy Week and Christmas processions by churches seen as opposing the government were cancelled or disrupted, and individual pilgrimages to holy sites were banned.²⁴

¹³ ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/grhe-nicaragua/a-hrc-58-26-auv-en.pdf

¹⁴ US State Department (IRFR 2023), Ibid, pp.4

¹⁵ Ley General de Regulación y Control de Organismos Sin Fines de Lucro

¹⁶ hrw.org/news/2022/07/19/nicaragua-government-dismantles-civil-society Note: Laws like the Law for the Regulation of Foreign Agents (Law 1040) and the Tax Concentration Law (Law 822) claim to regulate how non-profit organisations run their programs and projects in Nicaragua, but have also been used to force the shutting down of NGOs

¹⁷ international.la-croix.com/world/nicaragua-shuts-down-15-ngos-targeting-religious-groups-amid-growing-crackdown

¹⁸ nregister.com/cna/dictatorship-in-nicaragua-eliminates-priests-retirement-fund

¹⁹ Political repression of religious leaders' manifestations of faith in Nicaragua: a report by Rossana Muga and Teresa Flores, International Journal for Religious Freedom, Vol 15:1/2 2022 (25–37)

²⁰ ewtn.no/nicaraguan-dictatorship-eliminates-tax-exemptions-for-catholic-and-evangelical-churches

²¹ csis.org/analysis/deteriorating-religious-freedom-conditions-nicaragua

²² independent.co.uk/news/ap-daniel-ortega-costa-rica-catholic-americans-b2618722.html

²³ csis.org/analysis/deteriorating-religious-freedom-conditions-nicaragua#:~:text=In%202023%20and%202024%2C%20the,money%20laundering%20charges.%5B16%5D

²⁴ Nicaragua's Full-Scale Crackdown on Catholic and Protestant Communities, a report by Luke Wilson, USCIRF, June 2024. Available at uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2024-06/2024%20Nicaragua%20Country%20Update.pdf

Recommendations:

To stop the continuous and severe violations of fundamental rights of Nicaraguans, Open Doors makes the following recommendations:

- 1** To abolish grievous infringement of fundamental rights, and to ensure the respect of freedom of religion or belief, the Nicaraguan Government should:
 - Immediately and unconditionally release all imprisoned faith leaders;
 - Provide a full account of all faith leaders held incommunicado, including their identities, whereabouts, legal status, and access to due process, and ensure contact with their families and lawyers;
 - Ensure strict accountability for members of the police, paramilitary forces, and affiliated volunteer groups responsible for violence, including arbitrary arrests and detention, and conduct fair and thorough investigations to bring them to justice in accordance with Nicaragua's obligations under international human rights law;
 - Unfreeze the accounts of faith-based organizations and reinstate their legal status, recognizing their essential role in serving local communities and promoting Christian values, and the right to form organizations to pursue their legitimate interests without discrimination, in line with the constitutional guarantees under Articles 5 and 49;
 - Return expropriated properties, such as churches and aid centres, to restore essential community services and social support;
 - Promptly return passports unlawfully withheld from religious leaders, journalists, and human rights defenders, and respect and uphold the right to freedom of movement for all citizens.

- 2** To ensure the respect of the inherent rights to manifest one's religion and the right to peaceful assembly, the Nicaraguan Government should repeal laws and executive orders that unduly restrict peaceful assemblies, and ensure that security forces do not use excessive force against participants in religious processions, in accordance with international human rights standards.
- 3** To prevent impunity, ensure institutional accountability, and end the government's crackdown on religious leaders and organizations, the International Community should support the work of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the UN Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua (GHREN), and other relevant international monitoring bodies. The International Community should urge the Nicaraguan government to uphold the human rights of its citizens.
- 4** To support freedom of religion or belief and the protection of human rights in Nicaragua, the Global Church should raise awareness of the continuing repression and call on governments to use all diplomatic routes with the Nicaraguan authorities.