

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**50**

## Nicaragua



### LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).

## Key findings

Churches, especially the Roman Catholic Church, are labeled as destabilizing agents under the increasingly dictatorial government of President Daniel Ortega. They are a frequent target for intimidation, surveillance, harassment, attack, arrest, abduction, legal prosecution and forced displacement. As churches speak out against the government for committing injustices, human rights violations, and interference with the country's democratic processes, harassment against them, including their charity work, has progressively intensified since the mediating and humanitarian work of the Church in the protests of April 2018.

## Quick facts

### LEADER

President Daniel Ortega Saavedra

### POPULATION

6,779,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

6,437,000<sup>1</sup>

### MAIN RELIGION

Christianity

### GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic



## Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	6,437,000	95.0
Agnostics	182,000	2.7
Others	102,800	1.5

*OTHERS include Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian. Source<sup>2</sup>*

Nicaragua emerged from a four-decade dictatorship in 1979. Daniel Ortega became the country's president in 1984, leaving office in 1990. He came back into the presidency in 2006 and has remained in power ever since. Over the years, Ortega has become increasingly dictatorial. Ortega's party is the country's ruling party, the socialist Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN). It has centralized all power, taking control

of the entire state apparatus. The last presidential election in 2021 took place under inhospitable conditions for a democratic electoral process.

Although for many years Nicaragua appeared to be one of the safest and most stable countries in the region, since 2018 it has seen a weakening of the rule of law, as well as worsening corruption and repression. As a result of a centralized socialist economy, already plagued by a [brain drain](#) and inflation, the country suffers from high levels of [poverty](#), unemployment, and [malnutrition](#).

Regime dissidents and journalists have been monitored, targeted, and killed by state actors. The government has tightened control over charities and non-profit organizations, before closing many down. Churches and universities have lost funding or run into legal troubles, at times as a retaliation for criticism against the government. The government has used intermittent [internet outages](#) to inhibit protesters and regime opponents. Christians find themselves monitored, harassed, sanctioned, and prosecuted for their use of media and social media. Zoom meetings organized by churches have been monitored by informers and, on occasion, church leaders have been met with police officers outside their homes. Around fifteen priests have recently been arrested, prosecuted, and sentenced. The government has recently taken to [closing](#) Catholic radio stations and ordering cable companies to [stop transmitting](#) Catholic channels. These developments have prompted the United States, Canada, and the EU to impose sanctions on Nicaragua in an attempt to put pressure on the Ortega administration. Nicaragua has recently damaged [diplomatic relations](#) with the United States, the EU, and the Netherlands.

There is no protection or [recourse to justice](#) for regime dissidents, including Christians. Recent laws criminalize acts that are deemed disloyal to the regime.

## How the situation varies by region

Persecution is present nationwide and at all levels. The cities with the highest number of incidents of persecution against Christians are Granada, Jinotega, Managua, Masaya, Jinotepe, Matagalpa, Estelí, and León.

<sup>1</sup> Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

<sup>2</sup> Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

## Who is affected?

### Communities of expatriate Christians

Expatriate Christians are not forced into isolation and are therefore not treated as a separate category for WWL analysis.

### Historical Christian communities

The largest group, the Roman Catholic Church, has seen multi-faceted forms of aggression and persecution by government actors and advocates in favor of the most vulnerable, especially when the Church voices opposition to the government's dictatorial measures. Other historical Christian denominations have also noted an increase in regime hostility towards them during the WWL 2023 reporting period, mainly through administrative reprisals for refusal to align with government propaganda.

### Converts to Christianity

Converts in Nicaragua are mainly former regime sympathizers or government officers who have experienced a religious conversion to the faith. They are now considered part of the opposition, and similarly experience hostility from the regime.

### Non-traditional Christian communities

This category includes Baptists and Pentecostals. While a minority, they also experience hostility when expressing opposition to the regime (especially if they had previously been receiving support from it), with the main threat being loss of legal status to operate in the country.



## Main sources of persecution and discrimination

### Dictatorial paranoia:

President Ortega has filled state institutions with loyal supporters, banned leading opposition parties, and changed the legal framework (including the Constitution) to allow for indefinite re-elections and violations of civil rights. Government officials at all levels support the regime. The whole state apparatus functions to keep the president and his political elite, including members of his family, in power. Church leaders and Christian groups, especially Roman Catholics, face retaliation when they call out the regime and call for human rights and democratic principles to be respected. Church leaders have been mistreated, threatened, harassed, accused as traitors and enemies of the state, arrested, prosecuted, and sentenced. Churches have also been vandalized and services disrupted, creating a climate of fear.

### Communist and post-Communist oppression:

Socialist-Communist ideology is taught in schools and imposed on citizens through state institutions, sometimes violently. Along with repression, censorship, and harassment, Christians face aspects of their religion (religious festivals, Biblical references) being deliberately distorted in support of the regime's interests. This is a practice that is carried out in Communist neighbors Cuba and Venezuela, with which Nicaragua has a close relationship.

### Organized corruption and crime:

Corruption is a deepening problem in the country, along with illicit drug trafficking. The judicial system, security forces, and public services operate to keep the ruling party's leaders in power using sundry resources: bribes, manipulation, political influence. Violent paramilitary groups (also known as "Ortega death squads"), criminal groups, and Sandinista mobs act in tandem with the government to repress opponents and dissidents. Christians are an especially vulnerable group since there is nowhere to turn for protection.

# How are men and women differently affected?

## WOMEN

Nicaragua’s legal framework provides for freedom of belief, religion, and worship and promotes equal empowerment of Christian women in all areas of society. Nicaragua ranked seventh in the world for gender equality in the 2022 World Economic Forum Gender Gap Report, and is among the leading countries in terms of female educational attainment and political empowerment. However, the government’s clampdown on political opposition has contributed to increasing challenges to the civil liberties of women who oppose the regime, alongside non-governmental women’s rights organizations being closed.

- Violence – psychological

## MEN

From verbal insults, death threats, and vandalization of religious items, a significant portion of hostilities by government and pro-government groups are targeted at Catholic priests, bishops, and other church leaders (who are primarily male). In a recent speech, the president described the Catholic clergy in Nicaragua as “killers” and “coup plotters” who promulgate “American imperialism”. Church leaders who are critical of the government are either forced into exile or arrested and sentenced to lengthy prison terms

on false charges. Institutions linked to dissenters also face heavy sanctions from the government.

- Abduction
- Denied food or water
- False charges
- Forced to flee town / country
- Incarceration by the government
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – verbal

## WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2023	50	65
2022	61	56
2021	63	51
2020	72	41
2019	73	41

*Nicaragua rose nine points in WWL 2023, indicative of growing repression in the country since April 2018. The dictatorial presidential couple Ortega-Murillo and a coterie of elites supporting the regime has been forceful in silencing dissenting voices, especially the Roman Catholic Church, due to its historic authority and legitimacy in the country.*



## Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **August 2022:** The National Police forcibly entered the Episcopal Curia of Matagalpa and arbitrarily detained Bishop Rolando Álvarez along with seven other religious leaders, who had been locked up for more than 15 days under police siege. The National Police then placed the bishop under residential arrest and transferred the other seven leaders to the Directorate of Judicial Assistance. Elsewhere in Matagalpa, for three days the police besieged a priest, Father Uriel Vallejos, in the parish house, along with a group of six parishioners. A dozen members of the community were reportedly arrested for trying to help the priest and the parishioners inside.
- **August 2022:** The government ordered the [closure](#) of eight Catholic radio stations administered by the Diocese of Matagalpa, under the tutelage of Bishop Rolando Álvarez and other priests frequently harassed by the regime.
- **April 2022:** American pastors Tom and Debbie Guess, arriving in Nicaragua for preaching and missionary work, were detained at the airport for at least six hours. They were denied entry with no explanation and put on a [flight back](#) to Miami.

WWL Year	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians detained	Christians physically or mentally abused	Christians forced to flee their countries
2023	31	23	32	41
2022	28	1	22	11

*This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - for full results see the violence section of the Full Country Dossier. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10\*, 100\* or 1000\*) is given which in reality could be significantly higher.*

### Private life

Christians are targeted and threatened by the regime when they express faith-based political opinions criticizing the government, including on social media. The Special Cybercrime Law penalizes those publishing Internet content opposing the regime, which has led to self-censorship for many. Additionally, when a Christian is known as a regime dissident, his extended family members may find themselves being interrogated by the government. This in turn has led to the practice of family members turning in information to the government about their Christian relatives' activities and meeting places. Meetings with other Christians may be interpreted as conspiring against the regime, especially among Catholic Christians and in Masaya, Matagalpa, and Leon. Christians' meetings have been monitored or disturbed by state actors, and cars photographed.

Nicaraguans may in general own or keep the Bible and other religious materials, but those in government detention are not allowed to do so.

### Family life

Educational programs in schools indoctrinate young

children in regime ideology. Children are forced to carry flags and banners praising the regime and to attend pro-government rallies. If parents try to shield children from state propaganda, they are seen as regime opponents and are at risk of reprisals and community pressure. Their children face discrimination and abuse, labeled as "children of terrorists" or "coup heirs." Dissident Christians are at risk of kidnappings, arbitrary arrest, and imprisonment. Many have been forced to flee their homes, causing long-term separation of families.

### Community life

Christians are under pressure to attend state propaganda events, extolling the ruling party and the semi-messianic figure of the President, along with his wife, who is also the country's vice-president. In such a context, church activism or even association with church leaders are seen as a sign of national betrayal. The regime is also known to organize "religious events" without the involvement of church leadership, with the aim of discrediting church leaders and confusing the flock.

Similarly, Christians in the workplace are pressured to attend pro-government event and spread

misinformation regarding the Church and its leaders. Students associated with Christian dissidents or targeted Church leaders have been harassed by pro-regime academics and administrators: suspended from school, expelled, or handed over to the police on charges of terrorism.

### National life

To be linked with the regime opposition (via statements, pictures) is reason to be targeted. Even political neutrality may be understood as political opposition for its lack of defense of the regime. The only political party operating without obstruction is the regime's ruling party. Christians who have attempted to create a Christian political alliance to participate in democratic elections have been met with restrictions. Christian civil society organizations run up against a new law that registers any regime political opposition as actions against the state, with accusations as extreme as coup-planning with foreign backing being leveled against them. The regime's control of media and social media allows for the portrayal of Christians as terrorists and traitors planning a coup, intended to promote a climate of intolerance towards the Church. Attacks against Christians see no legitimate prosecution or punishment, ensuring impunity for perpetrators and stability for the regime.

### Church life

Churches deemed to be a threat to the regime find state issuance of their permits and authorizations delayed. Church-run institutions of late face strict requirements to declare the origin of each item of international funding, with fines imposed when the government considers the donor to be a danger to the national interest. The government's actions to block distribution of humanitarian and medical aid to those in poverty and disaster increase dependence on the state.



## International obligations & rights violated

**Nicaragua has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights in the following international treaties:**

1. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)
2. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)
3. Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT)
4. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
5. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

**Nicaragua is not fulfilling its international obligations by regularly violating or failing to protect the following rights of Christians:**

- Christians and their activities are monitored by the authorities and surrounding community (ICCPR Art. 17).
- Christian leaders are monitored, and their activities are actively watched (ICCPR Art. 17).
- Perpetrators of violence against Christians are sometimes left unpunished (ICCPR Art. 2).

# Situation of other religious minorities

No information on cases of persecution of non-Christian groups was reported.



## Open Doors in Nicaragua

Open Doors strengthens the persecuted church in Nicaragua through:

- Discipleship of pastors in training centers
- Distribution of Christian literature
- Training in teaching skills
- Emergency aid for the relief of persecution
- Preparation for basic primary and secondary education for pastors who have not completed their studies

#### About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the Full Country Dossier produced annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2023 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2023 reporting period was 01 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- The Full Country Dossier for this country can be accessed [here](#) (password: freedom). The latest update of WWL methodology - as well as the complete WWL 2023 ranking and reports - can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

*Many photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.*

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