

Context and legal framework

The Constitution of the Republic of Nicaragua stipulates in Article 69 of Chapter III on Social Rights, in Title IV Rights and Guarantees of the Nicaraguan people, that all people, individually or collectively, have the rights to express their religious beliefs in private or in public, through worship, practices and teaching. No one can evade the observance of the laws or prevent others from exercising their rights and fulfilling their duties, invoking religious beliefs or provisions.

Daniel Ortega and the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) have held power in Nicaragua since 2007. Ortega was inaugurated as president, and his wife, Rosario Murillo as then vice-president, of Nicaragua on 10 January 2022, following his re-election on 7 November 2021. The process was marred by months of government repression and the arrest of opposition candidates. International condemnation was swift. A series of constitutional amendments approved on 30 January 2025 further consolidated the Ortega-Murillo dictatorship by extending the presidential term from five years to six, making the couple co-presidents, and reinforcing their influence over all branches of the state.

In 2020 the Nicaraguan government approved the Special Cyber Crimes Law, introducing penalties of up to ten years' imprisonment for using social media platforms for sharing 'false information' or 'information that could raise alarm among the people'.

Under the leadership of co-presidents Ortega and Murillo, and the FSLN, the situation of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) has deteriorated significantly. Religious leaders who defend human rights or speak critically about the government face harassment, threats, and the possibility of physical violence and arbitrary detention. The government monitors religious activities, putting pressure on leaders to practice self-censorship. Preaching about unity or justice or praying for the general situation in the country, for example, can be considered criticism of the government and treated as a crime. Roman Catholic leaders have been a particular target with many imprisoned and/or sent into forced exile. Hundreds of Protestant Christian churches have also reportedly been confiscated or forced to close by the government.¹

CSW recorded 309 separate FoRB cases in 2025, an increase from 222 recorded in 2024. Most cases involved multiple FoRB violations; some affected thousands of people.²

Arbitrary detention

Religious leaders, including Roman Catholic priests and lay leaders, and pastors, as well as members of religion

or belief communities, are routinely subjected to short- and long-term arbitrary detention. The total number of religious leaders in prison at any one time fluctuates due to the forced exile of numerous political prisoners. Political prisoners are not allowed to receive or have a Bible or other religious literature in prison, and many are held in isolation in inhumane conditions, in violation of the Nelson Mandela Rules (the United Nations' Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners).

Members of religion or belief communities and religious leaders, including both Nicaraguan nationals and individuals holding foreign citizenship, have been forcibly exiled, forced to leave, or prevented from re-entering the country.

On 15 May 2022 Protestant Christian Pastor Efrén Antonio Vílchez López was beaten and detained as he was leaving the funeral home where he worked in San Rafael del Sur, a town and municipality 50km south-west of Managua. He was not told on what charges he was being arrested, and his family were kept unaware of his whereabouts for three days. On 21 September Pastor Vílchez López was sentenced by a court in Managua to 23 years in prison on trumped up charges for the crime of raping a vulnerable person. The court refused to consider any evidence that would have supported his acquittal.³

Pastor Vílchez López has a history of criticising President Ortega and the actions of his government. During nationwide demonstrations in 2018 he published statements on social media condemning the use of violence against protesters and was swiftly visited by a police officer who threatened him. A year later he was severely beaten for verbally confronting police officers who routinely surrounded his home, resulting in several fractures to his hand.

Pastor Vílchez López, who is diabetic, is currently being held in 'La Modelo' Jorge Navarro National Penitentiary System. He is not permitted any books and since August 2024 he has been provided with only one small container of water a day. His Bible and glasses have been confiscated, he is rarely permitted to go outside, and he is regularly subjected to verbal abuse by the prison director. Prison officials have also refused to pass on packages of food and basic supplies, including medicine for hypertension, blood circulation and other health issues, brought by his relatives to the prison.

On 10 August 2024 Roman Catholic lay leaders Carmen María Sáenz Martínez and Lesbia del Socorro Gutiérrez Poveda were detained. Both women worked with the Roman Catholic Diocese of Matagalpa, formerly led by the now exiled Bishop Rolando José Álvarez Lagos. They spent nearly 16 months in incommunicado detention before being

1 Molina Montenegro, Martha Patricia, 'Nicaragua: A Persecuted Church (2018-2022)', June 2022 <https://iglesiaperseguidani.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/000-PERSECUTION-TO-THE-CHURCH-REPORT-ENGLISH-FINAL-VERSION-8-28-2022-1.pdf>

2 CSW's documentation work relies on the willingness of those affected to share the details of their experiences. In the current climate of fear, a significant percentage of violations goes unreported.

3 The Nicaraguan government has previously used fictitious sexual assault cases to target religious leaders who have been critical of its actions. In May 2022, Bishop José Leonardo Urbina Rodríguez was sentenced to 30 years in prison on similar charges, though he was ultimately released and sent into forced exile in October 2023.

released into house arrest in Matagalpa on 29 November 2025.

On 17 July 2025 Protestant Pastor Rudy Palacios Vargas, the founder of La Roca de Nicaragua Church Association in Jinotepe, Carazo Department, was arbitrarily detained along with his sister, two brothers-in-law, a member of the church worship team and two family friends. Armed, uniformed police officers and 'volunteer' officers wearing masks and dressed in black or blue forced their way into the group's homes and proceeded to arrest the seven individuals without warrants.

No information as to their whereabouts was provided to the victims' family members for all six months of their detention, in what amounted to enforced disappearance. Mauricio Alonso Petri, who also served as a deacon at Pastor Palacios Vargas' church, died in detention in August 2025 and his family was not provided with an explanation as to how he had died, nor were they permitted to hold an autopsy.

In January 2026 Pastor Palacios Vargas and two others were released into house arrest. CSW sources report that they are under surveillance and their movements are restricted. The three others were released at the same time under precautionary measures which require them to report to their local police stations to sign in on a regular basis.

On 29 June Bishop Juan Abelardo Mata Guevara, the 80-year-old Bishop Emeritus of the Diocese of Estelí, was detained by the National Police (PN) at the San Juan Clinic, one day after he referred to religious persecution in prayers he led at a Mass at La Cruz del Calvario Church. Bishop Mata Guevara was sent to the El Chipote Maximum Security Prison in Managua and released at 6.45pm the same evening, but was then detained again daily for between eight and 10 hours each time through 4 July. He is since believed to have been put under house arrest with a heavy, 24-hour police guard outside. To date he has been held incommunicado and no-one has been permitted to visit him despite a statement issued on 13 July from the Episcopal Secretariat of Central America (SEDAC) requesting that the government permit visits from the bishop's physician. No response was received.

On 30 June Deacon Wilfred Aráuz Rodríguez and Father Francisco Morales, of La Cruz del Calvario Church at which Bishop Mata Guevara had led prayers, and Father Rigoberto Delgadillo Sánchez of the Santuario Divino Niño Parish were detained and held for 12 hours.

The Inter American Human Rights Commission has issued recommendations for precautionary measures in the cases of Pastor Vílchez López, Bishop Mata Guevara and four individuals in the bishop's inner circle, with no response from the Nicaraguan government.

Forced closure of civil society organisations

The government continues to suppress opponents. It has forcibly shut down more than 5,600 independent civil society organisations (iCSOs),⁴ including over 1,300 organisations of a religious nature,⁵ since April 2018, arbitrarily stripping them of their legal status. The legal cancellations have had a devastating effect on the ability of both domestic and international organisations of a religious nature, or with historical links to a religious group, to operate in the country. Forcibly closed iCSOs include religiously affiliated and internationally known and respected organisations such as Caritas and the Society of Jesus (also known as the Jesuit Order). Several domestic organisations were also stripped of their legal status and forced to close. The government has frozen the bank accounts of some groups and began to collect property tax from religious institutions and iCSOs of a religious nature or linked to a religious group or institution in contravention of domestic law exempting them from such taxes.⁶ In some cases, this has led to the closure of the targeted institution, inability to pay staff, or has been accompanied by the confiscation of property by the government or the forced exile of members.

The arbitrary cancellation of legal status also extends to institutions of higher learning. In 2023 several universities and technical institutes linked to both Roman Catholic and Protestant religious groups, including the Autonomous Christian University of Nicaragua, the John Paul II Catholic University, the Adventist University of Nicaragua (UNADENIC), the Martin Luther King Jr Evangelical University of Nicaragua (UENIC-MLK), and the Jesuit-run Central American University (UCA) were stripped of their legal status, had their property confiscated, or were forced to close due to the government freezing their bank accounts.

Prohibitions on religious activities and manifestation

Since 2023 the government has become more aggressive in its prohibitions on public manifestations of a religious nature including outdoor worship services and religious processions. The PN routinely and arbitrarily cancels religious events, activities or services, including vigils, youth retreats, and prayer breakfasts, and regularly prevents individuals from attending religious services, in some cases demanding access to attendance rolls in order to designate who might or might not be permitted to attend.

Some religious groups, particularly those aligned with and supportive of the government, are exempt from prohibitions, with permits granted for large-scale public events, and the government has co-opted some religious festivals and traditions in an attempt to create an illusion of general respect for FoRB.

⁴ While all organisations whose legal status had been cancelled were previously listed in the Official Gazette, as of this year, notice of cancellation of legal status is now being provided verbally to the affected organisation, making documentation of such cases extremely challenging.

⁵ Confidential, 'Cruelty against religious NGOs: More than 1,300 cancelled since 2022', 11 January 2025 (Spanish) <https://confidencial.digital/nacion/sana-contra-oeneges-religiosas-anulan-a-mas-de-1300-desde-2022/>

⁶ This exemption was repealed in August 2024 following an amendment to Article 32 of the Tax Concertation Law.

Pro-democracy activists, human rights defenders (HRDs), members of the political opposition, and others considered by the government to be critical of its policies have also reported harassment and warnings from government security agents to separate themselves from religion or belief communities and to refrain from participation in religious activities.

In 2025 CSW documented 36 reports of religious leaders being subjected to what the Nicaraguan government refers to as 'precautionary measures', more than triple the number reported in 2024. Under these measures, religious leaders are assigned a specific local police officer and ordered to report to the officer on a weekly basis to have their photo taken and to submit plans for their weekly activities. Religious leaders subjected to these measures also face restrictions on their freedom of movement, and some report that they have been warned they will be detained or exiled if they do not obey the terms of the measures.

Priests and parishioners report that plainclothes intelligence officers tasked with investigating violations of the Special Cyber Crimes Law regularly visit Roman Catholic parishes and Protestant Christian churches to ask about and monitor church social media channels. Several individuals reported their religious organisation being visited by intelligence police officers requesting that those responsible for the church's social media accounts submit all posts made on those accounts for review.

Forced exile

Since 2018 hundreds of thousands of Nicaraguans have fled the country. The majority have headed to neighbouring Costa Rica or transited by land north through Mexico to seek refuge in the United States. While many have fled due to the economic situation and general political repression, some have been sent into forced exile by the government.

2023 and 2024 saw multiple mass releases of political prisoners on the condition that they immediately entered into exile, including prominent Roman Catholic bishops Rolando José Álvarez Lagos and Isidoro del Carmen Mora Ortega and 15 Roman Catholic priests and two seminarians in January 2024. All were subsequently stripped of their Nicaraguan citizenship.

In some cases, entire religious orders have been targeted. On 28 January 2025, 30 nuns from the Franciscan Poor Clare Sisters Monastery in Managua Department, the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary Monastery in the Las Gracias region, Chinandega Department, and the Santa Clara 'Las Clarisas' Convent in Ciudad Darío, Matagalpa Department, were forcibly expelled from Nicaragua. The nuns were from the Order of St Clare of the Franciscan Poor Clare Sisters Association, which had its legal status dissolved by the Ministry of the Interior (MIGOB) in May 2023.

In August 2025 a school associated with the Congregation of Sisters Josefinas and led by Sister Haydalina Castillo Poveda was forced to close and the foreign and Nicaraguan

nationals living and working there were given 30 days to leave the country. In December eight women belonging to the Capuchin Tertiary Religious Sisters of the Holy Family in Madriz Department were ordered to leave the country immediately. The women, who again included both foreign and Nicaraguan nationals, were not permitted to say goodbye to friends or family members and made to pack up their belongings within minutes of receiving the order. They were taken to the border with Honduras to the El Espino border crossing.

Some religious leaders found themselves forcibly exiled when they were refused entry onto return flights to Nicaragua after traveling abroad. In April 2025 Father Jalder Hernández was preparing to return to Nicaragua from a religious visit to the US when he received an email notification from the airline informing him that he would not be permitted to board and that any questions should be directed to the Nicaraguan government. A Protestant pastor and a journalist who regularly covered religious issues experienced similar treatment in the second half of the year

Recommendations

To the government of Nicaragua:

- Uphold the right to FoRB, without exception, as guaranteed in the Nicaraguan constitution.
- Release without condition all imprisoned religious leaders and political prisoners.
- Restore Nicaraguan citizenship to all those, in and outside the country, from whom it has been arbitrarily and illegally removed.
- Reinstate the legal status of all civil society organisations which have been arbitrarily made illegal; and unfreeze the bank accounts of universities, non-governmental organisations and religious groups throughout the country.
- Stop all harassment against religious groups, by ending the practice of cancelling religious services, processions and events, and the practice of disrupting religious services with the use of police patrol cars and music on loudspeakers outside places of worship.
- End all intimidation and monitoring tactics, by preventing the application of precautionary measures to religious leaders, and by ceasing to monitor church social media channels.
- Cease the illegal collection of taxes from religious institutions that are exempt under Article 5 of Executive Decree 3-95 on Real Estate Tax.
- Allow international human rights bodies, including the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), unhindered access to Nicaragua.

To the government of the United Kingdom:

- Use targeted sanctions against individuals and entities responsible for serious human rights violations,

including those involved in the persecution of religious leaders, the suppression of civil society and arbitrary detention.

- Work with international partners to strengthen monitoring and accountability for human rights violations in Nicaragua, including through the United Nations and regional human rights mechanisms.
- Ensure that FoRB is a central component of the UK's engagement with Nicaragua, including by supporting independent civil society, documenting violations and protecting those at risk of persecution.
- Urge Nicaragua to immediately release Pastor Efrén Vélchez López and all other religious leaders and political prisoners held without due process, as well as all those being held under house arrest including Bishop Juan Abelardo Mata Guevara, and demand full transparency regarding their welfare and whereabouts in line with international human rights obligations.
- Publicly condemn Nicaragua's practice of imposing precautionary reporting measures and state surveillance on religious leaders. Raise this issue in bilateral and multilateral for a and advocate for the protection of religious communities' privacy and right to worship without state harassment or digital censorship.
- Work with Costa Rica, the US, and other regional partners to provide support for Nicaraguan exiles and refugees, especially religious leaders and FoRB defenders. The UK should also ensure that exiled individuals arbitrarily stripped of their citizenship can access international protection and documentation through UK diplomatic posts where appropriate.
- Urge the government of Nicaragua, at every appropriate opportunity, to make the reforms highlighted in the recommendation section above 'To the government of Nicaragua'.

To the United Nations and Member States:

- Urge Nicaragua to re-engage and co-operate with the United Nations Human Rights Council and other UN bodies it has withdrawn from, to complete the fourth cycle of the Universal Periodic Review Process.
- Support the OHCHR and the Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua (GHREN) in monitoring and reporting on the situation of human rights in Nicaragua, ensuring they are fully resourced to fulfil their mandates, and maintain pressure on the government to promote and protect human rights, including the right to FoRB, in accordance with the ICCPR.
- Urge all relevant UN mechanisms, including the GHREN, Special Procedures and Treaty Bodies, to include the

right to FoRB in their reporting on Nicaragua, addressing the specific vulnerabilities and violations faced by religion or belief communities and those seeking to defend them.

- Where possible, provide financial support for human rights organisations working on the situation of human rights in Nicaragua, provide platforms for Nicaraguan human rights defenders to share their experiences, including by facilitating their participation during key UN dialogues, and condemn all reprisals against members of civil society who engage with the UN.
- Monitor reports of arbitrary detention and call on Nicaragua to protect all persons from arbitrary detention and guarantee the right to a fair trial.
- Ensure fair and efficient access to identification, referral, and status determination procedures to those deprived of their nationality or forced to leave Nicaragua.
- Urge the government of Nicaragua, at every appropriate opportunity, to make the reforms highlighted in the recommendation section above 'To the government of Nicaragua'.

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free to believe**