# No Respite: Another Year of Increasing Repression in Nicaragua

**March 2026**

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***CSW expresses deep gratitude to the Nicaraguans inside the country and those who have been forced into exile who, despite great risk, carried out the firsthand documentation on which much of this report is based.***

## Executive Summary

In 2025, violations of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in Nicaragua, under the leadership of co-Presidents Daniel Ortega and his wife Rosario Murillo, and the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), remained egregious and numerous. Leaders of different religious groups were subjected to harassment and surveillance by security forces. 'Precautionary measures' were increasingly imposed on religious leaders, forcing those targeted to make weekly in person reports to local police stations, to share details of planned activities, and requiring that they obtain government authorisation in order to go outside their municipality of residence.

Many public religious activities, including traditional Roman Catholic processions and some associated with the Day of the Bible, observed by both Roman Catholics and Protestants, remained prohibited. Religious activities that previously took place outside in public spaces were confined to within the walls of the church building and often required prior authorisation from the National Police (PN). Some religious groups, in particular those aligned with and supportive of the government, were exempt from prohibitions on religious activities in public, with permits granted for large scale events. The government co-opted some religious festivals and traditions in an attempt to create an illusion of general respect for FoRB.

Inside religious buildings, religious activities were subject to overt and covert government monitoring; religious leaders know not to speak or pray about specific topics. Preaching about unity or justice or praying for imprisoned religious leaders or even the general situation in the country or internationally, for example, can be considered as criticism of the government and treated as a crime. Religious leaders who openly defend human rights, including FoRB, face the possibility of being arbitrarily detained in inhumane conditions and or forced into exile.

CSW recorded 309 separate FoRB cases during the period covered by this report (1 January 2025 to 31 December 2025). In 200 of the cases the victims were Roman Catholic, while Protestant Christians, including Seventh Day Adventists, made up 108. An additional case involved a non-religious journalist who was targeted because of their coverage of religious issues. Most cases involved multiple FoRB violations and many affected large numbers of people.[1] Members of religion or belief communities and religious leaders, including both Nicaraguan nationals and individuals holding foreign citizenship, were forcibly exiled by either being forced to leave the country, or prevented from re-entering the country after travel abroad. Religious leaders and members of religion or belief communities were subjected to short- and long-term arbitrary detention in inhumane conditions, in some cases incommunicado. Political prisoners are not allowed to receive or have a Bible or other religious literature in prison in violation of the Nelson Mandela Rules (the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners).

The government continued to forcibly shut down independent civil society organisations (iCSOs), including religious institutions, arbitrarily stripping them of their legal status, bringing the total number of iCSOs that have been made illegal to upwards of 5,600. The government froze the bank accounts of some groups. In some cases, this led to the closure of the targeted institution, inability to pay staff, or was accompanied by the confiscation of property by the government or the forced exile of members.

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

## Recommendations

***To the government of Nicaragua:***

- Release without condition imprisoned religious leaders, including Efrén Antonio Vílchez López, and all political prisoners unjustly detained in the country.
- Restore Nicaraguan citizenship to all those, in and outside the country, from whom it has been arbitrarily 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.
- Cease the collection of taxes from religious institutions previously exempt under Article 5 of Executive Decree 3-95 on Real Estate Tax.
- Cease all interference with all religious activities, including those with a public aspect.
- Eliminate the imposition of precautionary measures applied arbitrarily on religious leaders and others.
- Guarantee the right to travel in and out of Nicaragua in the possession of Bibles and other religious literature.
- Allow international human rights bodies, including the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the UN Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua (GHREN) and relevant Special Procedures unhindered access to Nicaragua.

1 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.

- Uphold, in law and in practice, guarantees to fundamental human rights, including FoRB for all, in line with the constitution and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) to which the State is party.

***To the United Nations and Member States:***

- Refer Nicaragua to the International Court of Justice for breaches of the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness and the Convention against Torture, and seek measures before the Court to immediately halt the of arbitrary deprivation of citizenship;
- Support the OHCHR and GHREN in monitoring and reporting on the situation of human rights in Nicaragua, including by ensuring the GHREN's mandate is fully resourced, 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 Special Procedures and Treaty Bodies, to include the right to FoRB in their reporting on Nicaragua, addressing the vulnerabilities and violations faced by religion or belief communities and those seeking to defend them.
- 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.

***To the European Union and Member States:***

- In keeping with the European Parliament's resolution of 13 February 2025, consider adding new individuals to the EU sanctions list already imposed on human rights violators in Nicaragua, and to include Daniel Ortega, Rosario Murillo, and their inner circle.
- Facilitate and ease mobility (including visas) for human rights defenders and other persons at risk, and support countries in the region hosting significant numbers of migrants, including Costa Rica, in keeping with the European Parliament's resolution of 15 June 2023.
- Following Nicaragua's unilateral decision to sever diplomatic relations with the Netherlands, remaining European diplomats should continue to raise human rights issues in the country, to monitor trials, and to visit political prisoners, including religious leaders.
- As provided for in Article 56(3b) of the EU-Central America Political Dialogue and Cooperation Agreement (PDCA), and in Article 355 of the EU-Central America Association Agreement, call for an urgent meeting with the Nicaraguan authorities concerning their violations of essential elements of the agreements (detailed in Article 1 of both). The EU's representation at this forum should include the EU Special Representative for Human Rights, and the EU Special Envoy for FoRB outside the EU - who may also consider, separately, formally requesting a visit to the country.

***To the government of the United Kingdom:***

- Ensure that FoRB considerations are systematically integrated into its bilateral engagement with Nicaragua, including through the implementation and future development of the UK–Central America Association Agreement (in force since 2021), to ensure that trade and cooperation are aligned with the UK's human rights commitments.
- Urge Nicaragua to immediately release all religious leaders and political prisoners held without due process, including Pastor Efren Vilchez López, and demand full transparency on their welfare and whereabouts in line with international human rights obligations.
- Advocate for reinstating the legal status of arbitrarily closed civil society and religious institutions, and restore citizenship from whom it has been arbitrarily and illegally removed.
- Call on Nicaragua to cease the practice of arbitrary detentions and forced exile, and ensure safe return for those exiled due to their beliefs.
- Support civil society and religious institutions by calling on the government of Nicaragua to cease freezing bank accounts and illegal tax collections from religious organisations and support their work.
- Engage with international human rights bodies to urge Nicaragua to allow access to international human rights organisations, like the IACHR, to monitor violations.
- Publicly condemn Nicaragua's practice of imposing precautionary reporting measures and state surveillance on religious leaders. Raise this issue in bilateral and multilateral fora, 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.

***To the government of the United States of America:***

- The State Department should continue to closely monitor FoRB in Nicaragua and maintain the country as a Country of Particular Concern, setting benchmarks for the country to meet before being removed from the list.
- The Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, when appointed and confirmed, and the US Commission for International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), should request invitations to visit Nicaragua to meet freely with independent civil society and with unhindered access to all parts of the country.
- Identify Nicaraguans, including government officials, members of paramilitary groups and others including members of neighbourhood Citizen Power Councils and

pro-government activists directly responsible for FoRB violations and include them on a visa ban list.

- Ensure that cases of Nicaraguans seeking asylum in the United States are fairly and carefully evaluated and that officers responsible for reviewing these are fully informed of the human rights situation in the country.

## Background

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 is permitted to fail to observe the laws or prevent others from exercising their rights and fulfilling their duties by invoking religious beliefs or provisions.

Daniel Ortega has held power in Nicaragua since 2007. He was re-elected president in 2021 and inaugurated on 10 January 2022; Rosario Murillo, Ortega's wife, served as vice-president from 2017-2025, before being made co-president in February 2025 following a constitutional reform. The FSLN controls the country's legislative body, the National Assembly. Ortega first held presidency between 1985 and 1990. He won the presidential election in 2006 and since taking office in 2007, power has been consolidated around the presidency. Members of the opposition have been barred from participating in the political process, and have been threatened, arbitrarily detained, and forced into exile. In 2014 the FSLN abolished presidential term limits. The February 2025 constitutional amendment, ratified by the legislature, consolidated the couple's power even further by providing them with unchecked executive authority. The reform also extended the presidential term from five to six years.

In 2018 protests took place across the country in reaction to government modifications to the pension system for the elderly. Roman Catholic Church leaders attempted to mediate between the government and protesters, but, after the church leaders' refusal to deny aid to demonstrators in need and because some clergy had expressed support for the protesters, these efforts broke down. Around this time, the government initiated a media campaign against the Roman Catholic Church and its leadership, attacking churches and other places of worship, including the main cathedral in Managua, the country's capital. Hundreds of protesters were killed by state forces. Many more were wounded or imprisoned.

Protestant churches in general were less likely to publicly voice support for the protesters, likely out of fear. However, many individual Protestants were involved in the protests, including students at the Polytechnic University of Nicaragua, which is affiliated with the Baptist Convention of Nicaragua. Protestant leaders who voiced messages the authorities considered to be critical experienced swift retaliation at the hands of the government.

In 2020 a Special Cybercrime Law introduced penalties of up to ten years' imprisonment for anyone posting news online deemed by the government to be 'false'. This followed measures taken against the independent media, including a customs limit on ink and paper in 2018, which led to the 2019 closure of the 40-year-old *El Nuevo Diario*, one of the newspapers most critical of the government. In a post on X (formerly Twitter) on 16 October 2023, the Centre for Inter-American Legal Assistance in Human Rights (CALIDH) alleged that individuals were being harassed by the PN, with agents identifying themselves as part of the 'intelligence'.[2] Those affected, who were likely targeted because they had been deemed by the government to be critical and therefore dangerous, told CALIDH that they were offered prison or exile.

In November 2021 Ortega was elected to a fourth consecutive term in an election process marred by months of government repression and the arrest of political opponents. International condemnation was swift. On 12 November 2021 a resolution was adopted at the 51st regular session of the General Assembly of the Organisation of American States (OAS) stating that the presidential elections had 'no democratic legitimacy.' In response, on 19 November 2021, the Nicaraguan government announced its withdrawal from the OAS.

The Permanent Council of the OAS adopted a second resolution on the human rights situation in Nicaragua in a special meeting held on 8 December 2021, which recalled all previous resolutions made since 2018 expressing grave concern about the deterioration of democratic conditions and urged the government 'to urgently and as a first step, release all political prisoners.' It also called for 'the immediate return of international human rights bodies, such as the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights,' which were expelled from the country in 2018.

In 2021 the United States (US) State Department announced the designation of Nicaragua as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) in regard to FoRB. This designation was renewed in 2022 and 2023. The World Justice Project's 2025 Rule of Law Index ranked Nicaragua as one of the countries with the most corruption, the least respect for fundamental human rights and the least effective criminal justice systems globally.[3]

Over the past few years thousands of iCSOs have been stripped of their legal status and seen their associated properties confiscated. In October 2023 the government reformed Article 165 of the Political Constitution of Nicaragua, removing powers held by the Supreme Court of Justice (CSJ) to supervise the administrative functioning of the Public Registries of Real Estate and Commercial Property,

2 X, Calidh @Calidhorg, 16 October 2023 https://x.com/Calidhorg/status/1714021008263270545
3 World Justice Project, Rule of Law Index 2025 https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/factors/2025/Nicaragua/

to appoint public registrars, as well as to sanction them for disciplinary offenses. The law now mandates that all public records held by the National Registry System (SINARE) be transferred to the Attorney General's Office (PGR). These reforms and the new law streamlined the ability of the government to confiscate property.

A 2023 study[4] by the AmericasBarometer[5] noted a 20% jump in the number of Nicaraguan adults reporting emigration plans and estimated that approximately one in four (23%) Nicaraguans were considering emigration in the near future. While it is difficult to obtain exact figures, at the end of September 2024 US Border Control reported authorising travel for 96,000 Nicaraguans under a humanitarian parole programme introduced by the US in January 2023.[6] Nicaraguans have also fled to other countries including Canada, Costa Rica, Honduras and Mexico, and several countries in Europe.

There have been a series of forced deportations of political prisoners who were freed on the condition they go into exile. In February 2023, 222 political prisoners were deported to the US. Subsequent large-scale deportations of political prisoners including imprisoned religious leaders took place in October 2023, January 2024 (in which Bishop Rolando José Álvarez Lagos was released and sent to Rome), August 2024 and September 2024.

In 2025 the Nicaraguan government expanded its use of what it refers to as 'precautionary measures' on religious leaders and human rights defenders, whereby individuals are ordered to present themselves to the local police station, sign in, and have their photograph taken, at a frequency determined by local police officers. Many religious leaders reported being forced to report on planned travel or religious activities on a weekly basis as well as the content of their sermons and the details of church donations, tithes and offerings.

On 24 February 2025 the United Nations (UN) GHREN, a group tasked with conducting thorough and independent investigations into all alleged human rights violations and abuses committed in Nicaragua since April 2018, published a report to the UN Human Rights Council (HRC).[7] The report focused on the institutions and individuals responsible for violations in Nicaragua and drew attention to the four-phase strategy of the Ortega-Murillo regime designed to gain absolute control of the country. In response, Nicaragua withdrew from the UNHRC, all related activities and mechanisms, employing a combination of tactics to denounce the HRC and the work of the GHREN. By removing itself from the HRC, it also failed to participate in the UPR outcome which was due to take place in March 2025, in de facto recognition of its rejection of all 279 recommendations it received in November 2024 as part of the process to improve its human rights record.

## Threats and Harassment

Religious communities and individuals continued to report threats and harassment at the hands of government officials or their surrogates, in the form of pro-government activists and paramilitaries, with 228 of the cases documented in 2025 including one or both of these violations. Religious leaders were questioned about the content of their sermons, prayers and other teaching. Threats were regularly reported in retaliation for statements or other forms of expression perceived as critical of the government.

CSW documented dozens of instances of PN officers establishing a visible and intimidating presence in and outside religious buildings during services. In most of these cases, the officers openly took photos and recorded those present. The presence of individuals dressed in civilian clothing was also reported. In one example, on 2 November during the Roman Catholic celebration of All Souls Day, as San Martín de Porras Parish, in Nueva Guinea Municipality in the South Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region (SCCAR), held a series of religious services throughout the day in remembrance of the deceased, riot police surrounded the church building. Over 30 uniformed police officials were stationed outside while several plainclothes officers entered the parish church, appearing to monitor the content of prayers and the priest's remarks. The officers remained in and outside the church until the conclusion of services at 5pm.

Children were not exempt from such treatment. In May, three 16-year-old girls in Madriz Department were intercepted by a police patrol as they walked their neighbourhood to their parish church to support the priest in the celebration of Mass. The girls became distraught after being informed by a high ranking PN officer that they were being arrested for spreading hatred and inciting violence. The girls were released a few hours later, after their parents presented their identification documents at the station. A source said to CSW:

> *This incident frightened the community because there was no apparent justification for the detention other than that [the girls] are Catholic and are active in service in their parish.*

The infiltration and use of informants in congregations of all types in order to monitor and report on the content of sermons, prayers and other activities was reported frequently by both Protestants and Roman Catholics, indicating that the government views religion or belief communities with

4 'Pulse of Democracy', LAPOP Lab - Vanderbilt University, 2023 https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/ab2023/AB2023-Pulse-of-Democracy-final-20231127.pdf

5 The AmericasBarometer is a periodic study run by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) at Vanderbilt University, which gathers data on trends and opinions in 34 countries in the Western Hemisphere.

6 'CBP Releases September 2023 Monthly Update', U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 21 October 2023 https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/national-media-release/cbp-releases-september-2023-monthly-update

7 United Nations Human Rights Council, Report of the Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua, 26 May 2025 https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/58/26

increasing suspicion and is actively and systematically monitoring them. Religious leaders of all types reported regularly receiving verbal orders from security officers not to mention specific subjects including political prisoners, Israel, and the general situation in Nicaragua in any of their public discourse and not to use the combination of the colours blue and white (the colours of the Nicaraguan flag) in any decorations or other materials.

In May a lay leader in Jinotega Department was arrested at his home and taken to the municipal PN station, where he was informed by the PN chief that his detention had been ordered based on reports from informants that the leader had prayed for 'the freedom of Nicaragua'. The leader was stripped naked before he was taken to a cell where he was permitted only to wear underwear. Over the night, he was removed from the cell three times for interrogation and was held until 1pm the following day.

Similarly in the first half of the year, a Protestant pastoral couple travelling by car were stopped and detained by a high ranking PN official accompanied by six officers. The couple was informed that an order for their arrest had been issued based on a report from an informant that they had mentioned the 'situation in the country' during the previous Sunday sermon and prayers. They were finally released after eight hours in detention but warned:

> *There are people in your church watching, and in a few days all the churches will be notified of new measures, and if you don't follow instructions, your church will be expropriated.*

## Precautionary Measures

Over the year, CSW documented 36 reports of individuals being subjected to precautionary measures, more than triple the number reported in 2024. In the majority of cases, the religious leader was first detained and interrogated by the PN. Following their release from detention individuals were 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. Restrictions on their freedom of movement were also imposed, with prohibitions placed on their ability to leave their municipality without obtaining prior permission from the authorities. Some reported that they were warned that if they did not obey the terms of the precautionary measures, they would be detained or forcibly exiled.

Twenty-eight of the cases involved Roman Catholic Church priests and lay leaders and were documented in 11 different departments. In addition to the above requirements, some reported that they were ordered to make regular financial reports on donations and expenditure. Many were expressly forbidden from engaging in any public religious activities, for example, on or around holy days, or sharing live or recorded activities on social media. Some were prohibited from visiting members of their congregations unable to get to church, including the sick, to offer them the Eucharist. One was reportedly forced to strip in a prison cell, in front of PN officers.

The demand that those under precautionary measures submit all activities for approval in advance was enforced. A priest in Chinandega Department was reprimanded after PN learned that he had overseen an ordination without permission. The priest's church was put under 24-hour surveillance during Holy Week, and halfway through the week PN officers entered the church to question the priest about the ordination. The officers told the priest that the infraction had been added to his case file and warned him that he should provide 'every detail of his work' to the authorities, including who he plans to see as well as their license plate number if they have a vehicle, noting that any future 'forgetfulness' on his part would not be tolerated.

Eight of the cases involved Protestant pastors and church leaders in five different departments. Of these, five individuals reported being strip searched following their detention. In July a high ranking PN officer arrived at 6am at the home of a pastoral couple who lead a Pentecostal church and entered the home by force, despite not being in possession of an arrest warrant, in front of the couple's children. An hour after their arrest, the same officer detained the church youth leader at his home. All three were taken to a police station where they were threatened before being separated. The youth leader was stripped naked and interrogated about his relationship with the pastor and where the church sourced its funding, and the purpose of the events it held by the church in different neighbourhoods. The youth leader explained that members of the church donated, often at great sacrifice to support the work of the church, and that the purpose of the events was to share their faith with the idea that this would lead to a decrease in crime. He was placed in an open-air prison cell for 24 hours. The pastoral couple were each ordered to strip and perform 10 squats. They were held for three days and family members, who were looking for them, were not provided any information as to their whereabouts. All three individuals were released under precautionary measures and all church events are now required to have advance authorisation from the police.

## Freedom of Assembly

Over the period covered by this report, 33 cases involved violations of freedom of assembly, in 10 different departments. This included the arbitrary cancellation of religious events, activities or services, including vigils, youth retreats, and prayer breakfasts. The PN regularly prevented 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.

The authorities also targeted religious buildings, effectively stripping faith communities of their property and place of assembly. In January permits for the building of a new Protestant church were rescinded mid-construction. When the pastor requested more information, he was told that the orders had come 'from above' and could not be appealed,

**Departments in which the authorities restricted or prevented the celebration of La Purísima.**




leaving the congregation without a place of worship. In another case, in September, PN officers surrounded a large Protestant church mid-Sunday service and asked those present to leave, with the PN chief stating that the building would be well-suited for their police station.

The PN continued to forcibly prohibit public religious processions outside religious buildings. In 2025 particular interest was taken to restrict and or prevent the celebration of La Purísima, one of the most significant religious celebrations in Nicaragua which takes place over nine days from the end of November through the first week of December. On 1 December a PN officer visited a Roman Catholic parish church in Madriz Department and informed the priest that the use of white and blue colours on altars was prohibited, ordering him to inform all the small communities and other churches in the department.[8] The PN officer demanded that the priest provide him with a list of people planning to take part in the religious activities and indicated that the PN would have veto power over who would be allowed to attend. Similar reports came from the departments of Boaco, Masaya, Carazo, Chontales and the SCCAR. In some cases PN officers forbade churches and individuals from observing the religious celebration altogether. In one case, a woman was visited by PN officers in her home and warned her that she was prohibited from using the blue and white colours as part of La Purísima celebrations. She was informed that the Sandinista Youth Activists would be visiting her house to make sure she was following these orders and that if she failed to do so, she would be prohibited from celebrating altogether. Sources told CSW that due to threats and intimidation, many people observed the festivities in private, behind closed doors, with only family members in attendance, while others chose to opt out of the activities altogether.

The government targeted public activities held by religious groups, even when the activity in question was not religious in nature. On two occasions in September and in two separate municipalities, PN officers arrived at churches in Madriz Department to shut down birthday parties. In both cases, the church leader was warned that they were prohibited from holding any activities in the church without prior authorisation from the PN and that any violation would result in their detention, adding that similar activities should take place elsewhere and with fewer people.

The government continued its practice of co-opting religious festivals, demonstrating its increased control at the local level. After three years of prohibiting people from publicly celebrating the San Jerónimo festival, which takes place on 27 September, in 2025 the Bluefields City Hall organised the celebration, including the music, fireworks and crowd management, presenting it as a non-religious cultural event. Priests and church staff were blocked from any involvement and were only permitted to celebrate inside their respective church buildings.

On Sunday 2 November, the Roman Catholic All Souls Day, Ministry of Health officials set up a flu vaccination post in

8 The authorities were especially concerned about the use of the colours blue and white, which are strongly associated with the religious celebration but which are also the colours of the Nicaraguan flag. The combination of blue and white has also become a symbol of opposition to the Ortega-Murillo government.

a cemetery in the SCCAR. Sandinista Youth militants, the Ministry of Health and the PN prevented a widowed woman, her son and members of her church, from entering the graveyard where her husband is buried. The woman had intended to pay tribute to her husband, who died in the April 2018 protests, by placing a floral arrangement on his grave.

## Arbitrary Cancellation of Legal Status

The government continued its targeting of iCSOs. Among the groups that were stripped of legal status in 2025, CSW was able to confirm that at least 18 were of a religious nature or affiliated with a religious group - 15 Protestant and three Roman Catholic. Those affected included religious orders, churches, and entire Protestant denominations - for example, the Association of Independent Fundamentalist Baptists, which was stripped of its legal status in February. Other affected institutions were schools, religious radio and television outlets, and faith-based charities, including Lutheran World Relief and Food for the Hungry.

As in some other cases in recent years, the government took advantage of some groups' loss of legal status to take over their property. In February a non-fee paying religiously affiliated school which also provided meals to students in Chinandega Department was stripped of its legal status. The school was permitted to continue operating for around nine months and school administrators were told in meetings with the municipal council that it would be converted to a state-run school. Instead, on 2 November, the local PN moved into the premises and began to use it as a police station. In another case, in April in Leon Department, a Protestant linked non-profit organisation was notified that the Ministry of the Interior had issued an order revoking its legal status. PN officers used yellow tape to impose a perimeter around the property and did not permit those affiliated with the group, including the pastor, to enter or to remove anything, stating that the buildings and all their contents now belonged to the attorney general. The pastor was warned that from that point on, she is prohibited from organising any meetings or activities.

## Forced Expulsion

The government continued its drive in 2025 to arbitrarily expel individuals and groups, especially those deemed critical of the regime. In most cases the victims were also stripped of their Nicaraguan citizenship. Some individuals discovered they had been exiled while travelling abroad only when they attempted to return to the country. In April 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.

The government continued to aggressively target orders of Roman Catholic nuns across the country. On 28 January, 30 nuns from the Franciscan Poor Clare Sisters Monastery in



*Father Jalder Hernández. Credit: infobae*

Managua Department, the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary Monastery in Chinandega Department, and the Santa Clara 'Las Clarisas' Convent in Matagalpa Department were forced to leave Nicaragua. In August a school associated with 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.

On 29 June, another school was targeted when Sister Martha Cecilia Ruíz Calero, the director of the Nuestra Señora del Rosario Elementary School was given 30 days to leave the country by the Chief Police of Estelí. Sister Ruíz Calero, age 78 and a Nicaraguan citizen, is a member of the Order of the Franciscan Sisters of the Sacred Hearts. The previous director of the school, a Mexican national, was forced into exile in 2018 after nuns in the order went out into the streets during the protests to care for wounded civilians and to attempt to protect protestors.

## Arbitrary Detention

CSW documented 55 cases of short – from a few hours to a few days - and long-term – from months to years - arbitrary detention of religious leaders over the year. Some of the cases involved the detention of multiple individuals. Women involved in multiple cases reported being stripped and searched by male officers. In prison, the Nelson Mandela Rules (The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners) were systematically violated in multiple ways, including in regard to FoRB. Political prisoners were denied the right to keep a Bible or other religious literature, were not permitted to receive religious visits, and were not allowed to congregate with others of their religion or belief.

Pretexts for the arrests were varied. In March a man was detained and held for three days in Estelí Department

after spending two days preparing flower arrangements for his local Roman Catholic church's celebration of Ash Wednesday. The man was arrested in public and taken by the PN to another city in another department where he was interrogated about how he had paid for the flower arrangements. In another case, in August, a Protestant pastor in the SCCAR was also transferred to another city in another department where he was held for three days. The pastor reported that during his detention he was interrogated five times daily about a church he had established eight years earlier in a particular neighbourhood which the authorities claimed 'belonged to the Nicaraguan Resistance'. Upon his release he was ordered to shut down the church and informed the ownership of the property would be reviewed by the government and the pastor would be placed under precautionary measures.

Both Protestant and Roman Catholic leaders were subjected to short-term detention, in some cases as punishment for the content of their preaching or prayers. This included praying for or mentioning those in prison, or for the situation in Nicaragua, Israel or Venezuela. In one case in autumn, a high ranking PN officer detained a Protestant married couple, both pastors. They were taken to a maximum-security prison where they were separated and interrogated. Both were subjected to inhumane treatment, including mistreatment of a sexual nature in the case of the wife. They were told by the PN that their detention was the consequence of having prayed for Nicaragua and for Israel in their religious services. Following their release, their church was forcibly closed, and they have been prohibited from engaging in any activities of a religious nature.

## Emblematic Cases

***Pastor Rudy Palacios Vargas***

Pastor Rudy Palacios Vargas, the founder of La Roca de Nicaragua Church Association in Jinotepe, Carazo Department, has been a target of the government since 2018 when he spoke out about the authorities' use of violence against peaceful protesters and affirmed that he was praying for students involved in the demonstrations. On 17 July 2025 he was arbitrarily detained along with his sister, two brothers-in-law, a member of the church worship team and a family friend, who also served as a deacon in the church. Armed, uniformed police officers and 'volunteer' officers wearing masks and dressed in black or blue forced their way into the homes of Pastor Palacios Vargas, his sister Jéssica Palacios Vargas, and his brothers-in-law Pedro José López and Armando José Bermúdez Mojica. Mauricio Alonso Petri, a political activist, friend of the pastor and church deacon, and his adult son Mauricio Alonso Estrada, who is a part of the worship team at Pastor Palacios Vargas' church, were detained as well. Family friend Olga María Lara Rojas, a retired political councillor who is a Protestant Christian but not a member of Pastor Palacios Vargas' church, was also arrested at her home.



*Pastor Rudy Palacios Vargas.*

No arrest warrants were shown but all of those listed above were arrested and detained and reportedly taken to the 3rd Police District. The detainees' mobile phones and other electronic devices were confiscated. 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 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, Jéssica Palacios and Armando Bermúdez were released into house arrest. CSW sources report that they are under surveillance and their movements are restricted. Olga Lara Rojas, Mauricio Alonso Estrada and Pedro José López were released under precautionary measures which require them to report to their local police stations to sign in on a regular basis.

***Carmen María Sáenz Martinez and Lesbia del Socorro Gutiérrez Poveda***

On 29 November Carmen María Sáenz Martinez and Lesbia del Socorro Gutiérrez Poveda were released into house arrest. The two women were detained on 10 August 2024. Ms Gutiérrez Poveda, who was 58 years old at the time, was arrested by at least 15 police officers wearing ski masks and carrying AK-47s who raided her home in Lomas de Santo Tomas in Matagalpa City at approximately 6am. Ms Sáenz Martínez, then age 49, was detained two hours later at the Guadalupana Farm in Samulali in the San Ramón Municipality by police in two patrol cars.


*Carmen Sáenz Martínez (L) and Lesbia Gutiérrez Poveda (R).*

Both women worked with the Roman Catholic Diocese of Matagalpa, formerly led by the now exiled Bishop Rolando José Álvarez Lagos. The two were held in La Esperanza

women's prison, but were denied any contact with their families or lawyers – including proof of life – for the duration of their detention. They were never charged, tried or sentenced for any crime.

***Reverend Efrén Antonio Vílchez López***

Efrén Antonio Vílchez López is a Protestant Christian pastor affiliated with the Chapel of the Spirit Ministries Association (MECE) at the International Missionary Centre Chapel of the Spirit who also managed a family run funeral home. He was well known for his cross-denominational work with over 100 different churches and was frequently sought out by foreign Christian groups to help organise large scale public events. During the 2018 demonstrations the pastor published statements condemning the use of violence against protesters. In 2019, after he verbally confronted police officers who routinely surrounded his home, he was severely beaten, resulting in fractures to his hand.

On 15 May 2022 the pastor was beaten and detained by police officers. He was not informed of any charges against him and his family members were not provided with any information as to his whereabout for three days. On 18 May Pastor Vílchez López was brought to a preliminary hearing at the First District Court for Adolescents and Violence in Managua, presided over by Judge Roger Antonio Sánchez Báez. At this point the pastor was informed that he was being charged with the sexual assault of a minor. He was held at the San Rafael del Sur National Police Station for 15 days before being transferred to La Modelo Maximum Security Prison. Throughout this period, the authorities did not provide the pastor, who is diabetic and hypertensive, with his required daily insulin, leading to a health crisis that resulted in his being sent to a clinic for treatment.



*Pastor Efrén Antonio Vílchez López in court in 2022. Credit: La Prensa Nicaragua.*

Trial hearings took place at the Third Specialised District Court for Violence in Managua between 21 July and 20 September 2022, presided over by Judge Edén Enrique Aguilar Castro, who issued a guilty verdict on 20 September. The courts refused to consider evidence supporting the pastor's innocence, including CCTV footage proving that the pastor's alibi that he was not present at the time or location that the crime was alleged to have taken place. On 21 September 2022 the court sentenced Pastor Vílchez López to 23 years in prison. The decision was confirmed by the court of appeals on 21 April 2023.[9]

Pastor Vílchez López was treated as a 'common' prisoner until July 2024, when he was transferred to a maximum-security cell in 'Gallery 300', a wing of La Modelo prison, in a de facto recognition of his status as a political prisoner. On 12 November 2024 the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) requested information from the government of Nicaragua. No response was provided, and on 16 December 2024 the IACHR issued a request for urgent precautionary measures on behalf of the pastor.

He was initially held in solitary confinement but was later placed in a cell with two other men. The conditions in which he is being held are poor and unsanitary. He is rarely allowed to go outside, depriving him of natural light and fresh air, and he is given one small container of water daily. Pastor Vílchez López is regularly subjected to verbal abuse on the part of the prison director, and his Bible and glasses have been confiscated. Prison officials have refused to pass on packages of food and basic supplies, including soap, and medicine for hypertension, blood circulation and other health issues brought by his relatives to the prison every 15 days.

## Restrictions on Religious Literature

During the summer, the Nicaraguan government informed transit companies entering the country by land that Bibles and other religious literature were to be added to a list of banned items alongside sharp objects, perishable food, and drones. CSW confirmed this information in December with representatives from Tica Bus in four Central American countries.[10] Sources told CSW that upon entering the country, vehicles were searched by the police who confiscated any restricted items, however, they also said that searches were often limited to what travellers were carrying in their seat and not extended to checked luggage. The same general restriction seems not to have been applied to travellers arriving by air.

Shortly after the news of the restrictions on Bibles and other religious literature was shared publicly by CSW, signs with restricted items were removed from bus terminals in neighbouring countries. Later in December, many Nicaraguan religious leaders posted a statement on their websites and social media sites from by The National Council of Evangelical Pastors of Nicaragua (CNPEN) claiming that there were no restrictions on Bibles and that religious communities had freely celebrated the Day of the Bible in September. Some of those who published the statement,

9 The Nicaraguan government has a record of using dubious sexual assault cases to charge religious leaders who have been critical of its actions, including in the case of Bishop José Leonardo Urbina Rodríguez, who in 2022 was sentenced to 30 years in prison on notably similar charges. The bishop was freed and sent into forced exile in October 2023.

10 El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala and Costa Rica.

based in different parts of the country, told CSW that they had resisted publishing the statement and did so only after receiving direct threats from the CNPEN president, Pastor Mario Espinoza González, and high ranking PN officers, by telephone and in person, respectively. Threats included a warning that their churches would be forcibly closed and that they could be imprisoned if they refused to post the statement.




*A notice prohibiting the entry of Bibles into Nicaragua in a bus station in Costa Rica. Credit: CentroAmérica360*

CSW's queries to Tica Bus representatives in subsequent weeks up until the end of the year as to whether the ban on Bibles and religious literature had been lifted went unanswered. A representative from a bus company inside Nicaragua told CSW that there was 'no longer a ban, but rather a tax' on Bibles on religious literature but could not provide additional information. Interviews with people who had crossed the border during this time, however, indicated that signs with the restricted items had been removed from bus stations. Multiple individuals said that they were questioned by Nicaraguan officials as they entered the country, including about whether or not they were carrying Bibles or religious literature, and in some cases these items were confiscated.

## Conclusion

There were no improvements in FoRB in Nicaragua in 2025. On the contrary, the Ortega-Murrillo government continued to expand its attempt to control, coopt, or eliminate religious groups and their leaders through increased restrictions on the right to assemble, freedom of movement, freedom of expression, and FoRB. This is exemplified by the increased imposition of precautionary measures on religious leaders from diverse religion or belief groups and all across the country.

Intrusive monitoring, surveillance and intimidation tactics targeting individuals and groups, including religious groups, is systematic. While in previous years, the government reduced numbers of political prisoners including religious leaders by sending them out of the country, in 2025, this shifted to releasing many of them into house arrest. At the same time, the authorities forced members and leaders of numerous religious communities into exile, either through expulsion or blocking their return from travel abroad.

The government remains unresponsive to UN and OAS communications, going so far as to leave the UN HRC. It has strengthened its relationships with major human rights violators, including China and Russia. Members of the international community, especially Nicaragua's regional neighbours in Latin America, must seek creative and effective ways to support and strengthen independent Nicaraguan voices, including religion and belief groups, identifying ways to reinforce the links between those in exile and those who remain in the country, so that they can work together for the restoration of democracy and respect for fundamental rights. The government must be held to account for its crimes including its draconian efforts to silence its own people through repression and intimidation, restricting the freedoms of those within the country, or denying these freedoms altogether by stripping them of their citizenship and forcing them into exile.

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