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## **Nicaragua's crackdown on the Catholic Church is worsening, exiles and rights advocates say**

See a **[report](#)** by **European Center for Law & Justice**

[AP](#) (09.04.2025) - Preparations for popular, often daylong Lent and [Holy Week processions](#) are underway across Latin America — but not in Nicaragua.

They've been largely banned for a second year, one of many concerns for the faithful in a country that human rights advocates, exiled priests and the U.S. government say is pursuing one of the world's most flagrant [persecutions of religion](#).

The Associated Press spoke with several priests who are in exile in different countries, some after being [imprisoned in inhumane conditions](#) in Nicaragua. All requested their names, current locations and circumstances of departure from the Central American country be withheld for fear of repercussions against their families there.

More than 200 religious figures are in exile, making it difficult to hold Mass or hear confessions in Nicaragua, especially in small villages.

Many pastors still in Nicaragua are under near-constant surveillance, obliged to inform the police if they want to visit someone who's ill and to submit drafts of their sermons for approval, according to those in exile and human rights activists.

With their bank accounts often frozen or stolen, some face shortages of food and medicine. One Catholic priest said his fellow clergy are trying to serve their flock while feeling constrained by constant threat.

### ***U.S. denounces Nicaragua's crackdown on religion***

The U.S. government has condemned the Nicaraguan government — led by co-presidents Daniel Ortega and his wife, Rosario Murillo — for the crackdown that seems to have intensified in recent years.

On his [February trip](#) to the region, Secretary of State Marco Rubio singled out the Nicaraguan government's effort "to eliminate the Catholic Church and the religious community, and anyone who tries to take power from that regime is punished."

In its annual report published in March, the U.S. government's Commission on International Religious Freedom denounced conditions in Nicaragua as "abysmal." More

than 80% of the population is Christian, about evenly divided between Catholics and evangelicals.

“Religious freedom is kind of the canary in the coal mine for the jeopardy of all human rights,” said the commission’s chair, Stephen Schneck.

The commission found that over the last year, the Nicaraguan government harassed and deported Catholic clergy, used “intimidation and manipulation” to force leaders of the Indigenous [Moravian Church](#) into exile, arrested members of the evangelical Mountain Gateway ministry and allowed attacks on sanctuaries, including arson that destroyed a 400-year-old crucifix in the capital, Managua.

The commission denounced the “arbitrary” cancellation of legal status of most faith-based organizations, which often leads to property seizures. All nuns were ordered to leave the country.

“These are the nuns that really care for the poorest of the poor,” said Maureen Ferguson, one of the U.S. commissioners. “What happens to them when these religious institutions, people motivated by faith, are exiled?”

### ***Government tries to ‘co-opt’ faith, critics say***

To prevent last year’s Easter-time processions, thousands of police were deployed, according to the report. Only clergy “aligned” with the government are allowed outdoor worship.

Local governments often create parallel festivities to give the impression that popular piety is still free, advocacy groups like British-based Christian Solidarity Worldwide say.

That’s part of the strategy to try to co-opt the clergy and the faithful, said Félix Maradiaga, a Nicaraguan opposition leader and practicing Catholic who was jailed, then [exiled to the United States](#) in 2023.

The Sandinista government “has a long history of trying to create a parallel church, of wanting to take possession of the symbols of faith,” said Maradiaga, who wasn’t allowed to pray publicly or to have a Bible while imprisoned. “The model that Sandinistas want to implement is very similar to that of China. ... They will not stop their pressure on the Catholic Church until they obtain a bishops’ conference in some way aligned with the dictatorship’s ideology. They will not succeed.”

### ***Tensions between Nicaragua and faith leaders***

Like several Latin American governments tracing their roots back to socialist revolutions, Nicaragua’s Sandinista National Liberation Front has had an uneven relationship with faith leaders for decades.

The Catholic Church drew the [current government’s ire](#) when priests and nuns provided shelter and first aid to those injured when the Ortega government violently repressed civic protests in 2018.

The government has blamed “terrorist” clergy for supporting unrest. Clergy and lay observers say the church has been an increasingly rare voice opposing state violence.

A college professor when the protests started, Maradiaga said students called him saying “They’re killing us” — and clergy opened their churches’ doors.

“What the church did was put itself on the side of those who were being persecuted,” Maradiaga recalled.

Several priests in exile said they witnessed youth being shot during the protests and tended to them, seeing it as an essential part of their ministry to help those hurting.

### ***New forms of repression, but lingering hope***

Martha Patricia Molina, a Nicaraguan lawyer who fled to the United States, has recorded nearly 1,000 instances of church persecution in Nicaragua from 2018 through 2024. Among those in the past year are arrests and deportations of clergy and the prohibition of a public Via Crucis procession — the Lent devotion commemorating Jesus’ path to the cross.

“The repression in the past few months has a new face. The people who are under attack now no longer speak out and denounce the abuses, because if they do that, the repression only grows,” she said.

Out of eight bishops and one cardinal in Nicaragua’s Catholic conference, four are in exile — along with more than 150 clergy and seminarians as well as nearly 100 nuns and religious sisters who were exiled, fled for their safety or haven’t been allowed back to Nicaragua, per Molina’s count.

According to the Vatican, Nicaragua has exiled five groups of priests since 2022, [most to the United States](#) and Rome — including Bishop Rolando Álvarez, who was jailed for more than a year before being released and sent overseas in early 2024 after negotiations with the Holy See.

For the December solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, to whom Nicaraguans are particularly devout, [Pope Francis](#) wrote a letter exhorting them not to doubt God’s “care and mercy.”

The faithful continue to attend Mass — although some have also taken to gathering in secret to avoid suspected government spies who record those in the pews, Molina and some clergy said.

The fear is palpable, and personal. Molina’s father died recently in the United States, so she asked a few priests in Nicaragua if they would be willing to say a Mass over his ashes.

None was, fearing repercussions for their congregations. She hopes she might one day be able to return to grant her father burial in their homeland.

Several of the clergy in exile said the ability to believe in a different future for their country is one thing they haven’t been forced to leave behind.

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## Deterioration of religious freedom, says a new report of Christians Solidarity Worldwide

**CSW (03.03.2025) - CSW has today published a new report ([Click here to download CSW's new report on Nicaragua as a PDF](#)) which finds that the situation of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) and related human rights in Nicaragua has continued to deteriorate.**

The report, titled 'Total Control: The Eradication of Independent Voices in Nicaragua', states that CSW recorded 222 separate FoRB cases from 1 January 2024 through 31 December 2024, with most cases involving multiple FoRB violations and some affecting thousands of people.

As in [the previous year](#), one of the most commonly reported FoRB violations in the period covered by the report was the arbitrary cancellation of religious events, activities or services. The National Police (PN) continued to forcibly prohibit public religious processions outside their respective physical buildings, which included maintaining a moratorium on traditional public marches by Roman Catholics and Protestants in celebration of the Spanish Bible Translation Day in September.

The [report](#) finds that one of the most concerning developments of 2024 was the imposition of what the Nicaraguan government refers to as 'precautionary measures' on religious leaders, in which they 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 faced restrictions on their freedom of movement, and some reported that they were warned they would be detained or exiled if they did not obey the terms of the measures.

The report specifically highlights the case of Protestant Pastor Efrén Antonio Vílchez López, a political prisoner who is serving a 23-year sentence on trumped up charges and is experiencing serious health challenges due to complications from inadequately managed diabetes. It also focuses on Catholic lay leaders [Carmen María Sáenz Martínez and Lesbia del Socorro Gutiérrez Poveda](#), who were [detained](#) on 10 August 2024 and have now spent over six months in incommunicado detention with no proof of life provided to their families. The Inter American Human Rights Commission has issued a recommendation for precautionary measures in all three cases with no response from the Nicaraguan government. The three are among 46 cases of short- and long-term arbitrary detention of religious leaders documented by CSW in 2024.

The government also maintained its policies of the forcible cancellation of legal status of hundreds of independent civil society organisations, including churches and, in some cases, entire denominations, and of forcibly exiling hundreds of political prisoners.

CSW's Director of Advocacy Anna Lee Stangl said: '*Co-Presidents Daniel Ortega and his wife Rosario Murillo, and the Sandinista National Liberation Front, remain set on the eradication of independent civil society and anyone the regime perceives as a critic in Nicaragua. Given that the government remains unresponsive to communications from the*

*Organization of American States and the United Nations, members of the international community must seek creative ways to support and strengthen independent Nicaraguan voices both inside the country and in exile. We thank all those who continue to bravely stand up for human rights and freedom of religion or belief in Nicaragua and reiterate our continued solidarity with all those working for justice, freedom and democracy in the country.'*

#### **Notes to Editors:**

1. [Click here to download CSW's new report on Nicaragua as a PDF.](#)
2. [Click here to download the report in Spanish.](#)
3. [Click here to join CSW's campaign calling on the Nicaraguan government to provide answers as to the whereabouts of Carmen María Sáenz Martínez and Lesbia del Socorro Gutiérrez Poveda.](#)

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## **Nicaraguan reformed Constitution: an assault against religious liberty**

**The National Assembly grants total power to President Daniel Ortega and his wife, including over creeds and beliefs, under the "clear ambiguity" of Article 14 of the fundamental law of the land.**

*by Marco Respinti*

[Bitter Winter](#) (07.02.2025) - On January 30, 2025, the National Assembly of Nicaragua approved, on second reading, the announced final reform of the Constitution. The National Assembly is the unicameral parliament of the country, presently dominated by the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN). This is a Communist party that tyrannically ruled Nicaragua from 1979 to 1990 under the leadership of Daniel Ortega, leading it into a bloody civil war, and is now in power again.

The reform (the final step after twelve previous amendments during the years) grants President Ortega—who returned to power in 2007, through elections, again at the head of FSLN—a virtual free hand on all legislative, judicial, and electoral levels; in other words, total power. In addition, it establishes the surrealistic title of "co-president" for his wife, Rosario Murillo, on whom Ortega seems to be seriously dependent. It is worth noting that many people in Nicaragua—a country where at least half of the population is made of practicing and active Roman Catholics—regard Doña Murillo with highly worried suspicion because of her connections with occultism (that she openly publicizes, even in kitsch and clumsy ways). This obtained her the popular nicknames "chamuca," or "she-devil," and "bruja," or "witch".

Several articles of the reformed Nicaraguan Constitution can be singled out to demonstrate the totalitarian characteristics of Ortega's legal crackdown on the country, as many commentators underlined. "Bitter Winter" focuses on liberty of religion, creed, and belief, and thus it concentrates its attention on Art. 14 of the reformed fundamental law of the land.

Art.14 grants in fact religious liberty in a way that a superficial look could take for satisfactory. But the devil hides in the details, and the ambiguity of the formulation of Art.14 is so evident that it makes it an easy tool of repression-at-will in the hands of the government. [Legal observers](#) and organizations dedicated to [defend religious liberty in Latin America](#) have been pointing out this since the reform of that article was announced months ago.

"The State is secular," Art.14 affirms, "and ensures freedom of worship, faith, and religious practices in strict separation between the State and the churches." If this seems to establish unbounded equal freedom for all, on the contrary the following sentence introduces limitations that makes that article the opposite of what it may seem: "Under the protection of religion," it reads, "no person or organization may engage in activities that undermine public order. Religious organizations must be kept free from all foreign control."

This de facto means that (a) religion, creeds and beliefs are suspected of serving as masks for non-religious activities of seditious nature; (b) the free exercise of religion, creed, or belief must be limited when the security of society and state reasons come in; and (c) the international dimension of religious groups can be constructed as posing problems to the state even amounting to treason.

While all this can also refer to legitimate concerns, on the practical side it all depends on the limits that divide licit religious activities and what are instead judged to be illicit. If this seems to be quite evident in theory, in practice it is not. It is instead the problem of the problems: who, in fact, draws the line between the licit expression of religious beliefs and its opposite? Who has the right to do it and by using what criteria?

The easy answer is "the law"—but it isn't easy at all. In neo-Sandinista Nicaragua, where the reformed Constitution gives total power to President Ortega, judicial power included, "the law" means what Ortega incontestably decides and has the power to impose. The principle would be unacceptable in all democratic countries. In Nicaragua, it would be unacceptable even if Ortega was not, as he is, a persecutor of religion. Under the new Nicaraguan Constitution, this means that the law grants the state the legal power to persecute religions.

It is a "legal"—between brackets—overturn of the rule of law and justice.

Freedom of religion was even proclaimed by the Soviet government through a decree of January 23, 1918, recorded in Art. 124 of the Constitution of the USSR, and religious liberty is granted even by Art. 36 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China. In both cases, these Communist regimes (like several other despotic or totalitarian governments) invariably repressed and repress the free exercise of religion, creed, or belief under the same logic of state's unquestionable supremacy now delivered as a blank check to President Ortega by the reformed Constitution of Nicaragua.

This deliberate twist of the law is easily demonstrated by the constant and indeed increasing persecution waged against the Catholic Church by the neo-Sandinista government of Nicaragua since Ortega's return to power, once more underlined by serious recent events. Just a handful of days before the approval of the reform of the Constitution, the Nicaragua regime confiscated the property of several religious orders and expropriated the Poor Clare nuns of three monasteries, after the police raided the curia in the city of Matagalpa, on the Rio Grande, and the Franciscans' Nazareth clinic in San Rafael del Norte, in the department of Jinotega.

The threats posed by Nicaraguan Constitution's Art.14 to religious liberty are moreover concretely supported by Art. 97, which establishes a new voluntary citizen police to serve as an auxiliary support to national police. While this is reminiscent of the "citizen militias" that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has instituted to allegedly maintain public order in cities and villages, in Nicaragua, the initiative serves only to legalize the violent paramilitary squads that, at the Ortegas' order, bloodily repress protests and dissidents. And of course religious activities.

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## A 50-page report about the persecution of Christians in Nicaragua

A [report](#) by *European Center for Law & Justice*

[ECLJ](#) (07.01.2025) - Since 2018, Nicaragua, under President Daniel Ortega, has been conducting a systematic campaign of repression against Christians, particularly Catholics, in retaliation for their peaceful opposition to the regime.

These actions include: physical attacks, arbitrary arrests, bans on religious demonstrations, the closure of churches, the confiscation of religious property, and the expulsion of clergy. More than 870 attacks against the Catholic Church have been recorded, while evangelical churches, initially spared, are now also being targeted.

This repression aims to silence critics of the regime and eradicate the spiritual influence of Christian churches in favour of a political ideology centred on the cult of the Sandinista regime.

According to UN human rights experts, some of these repressive actions can be classified as crimes against humanity. Such actions comprise: murder, torture, prolonged arbitrary detention in inhumane conditions, as well as deportations of members of the clergy and critical religious leaders. These crimes, characterized by their systematic nature and targeting of specific religious groups, aim to destroy any form of moral or social opposition to the regime.

Among the most emblematic cases is that of Monsignor Rolando Álvarez, who was subjected to inhumane imprisonment and later stripped of his nationality. At the same time, the international community has condemned these actions, but the responses remain largely symbolic and insufficient to counter the regime's impunity.

Although targeted sanctions have been imposed by the United States and the European Union, their impact remains limited, and the Ortega government continues to strengthen its strategic alliances with authoritarian powers such as Russia and China.

These alliances allow the regime to circumvent international pressure while consolidating its internal repression. In the face of these challenges, Nicaraguan Christians continue to resist, embodying one of the last critical voices in a country where civic space is now virtually closed.

Persecution is not limited to physical or institutional attacks: it also aims to erase spiritual traditions by banning religious processions and celebrations that are integral to local culture.

In this context, the urgency of mobilizing international efforts to support persecuted Christian communities is more crucial than ever. This includes increased protection for exiles and human rights defenders, as well as support for the reconstruction of destroyed religious and civic institutions.

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