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**WORLD
WATCH
LIST**
2023

Nicaragua

LANDSINFORMATION
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FÖR MER INFORMATION KONTAKTA:

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Nicaragua: Full Country Dossier

December 2022



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Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

December 2022

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Introduction

World Watch List 2023

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	14.4	98	96	94	94	94
2	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	8.7	92	91	92	92	91
3	Yemen	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	5.9	89	88	87	85	86
4	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.7	12.2	89	88	88	87	86
5	Libya	15.6	15.5	15.9	16.1	16.3	9.1	88	91	92	90	87
6	Nigeria	13.8	13.8	14.6	14.8	14.4	16.7	88	87	85	80	80
7	Pakistan	13.4	13.8	14.8	14.8	12.9	16.7	86	87	88	88	87
8	Iran	14.5	14.6	13.8	15.8	16.5	10.7	86	85	86	85	85
9	Afghanistan	15.4	15.7	15.4	16.1	16.6	4.6	84	98	94	93	94
10	Sudan	14.1	14.2	14.9	14.9	15.5	9.4	83	79	79	85	87
11	India	12.3	13.1	13.0	14.8	13.3	15.7	82	82	83	83	83
12	Syria	13.2	14.1	13.6	14.1	14.1	11.3	80	78	81	82	82
13	Saudi Arabia	15.2	15.3	14.9	15.8	16.7	2.4	80	81	78	79	77
14	Myanmar	12.5	11.6	13.9	13.9	12.9	15.4	80	79	74	73	71
15	Maldives	15.4	15.3	13.8	16.0	16.4	0.2	77	77	77	78	78
16	China	12.9	10.0	12.7	14.5	15.6	11.1	77	76	74	70	65
17	Mali	11.1	10.1	14.7	10.3	15.1	15.0	76	70	67	66	68
18	Iraq	14.1	14.6	14.0	14.8	13.9	4.6	76	78	82	76	79
19	Algeria	14.1	14.1	11.5	13.7	15.1	4.8	73	71	70	73	70
20	Mauritania	14.5	14.2	13.3	14.1	14.2	1.3	72	70	71	68	67
21	Uzbekistan	14.9	12.7	13.9	12.7	15.6	1.5	71	71	71	73	74
22	Colombia	11.8	8.9	13.1	11.3	10.4	15.4	71	68	67	62	58
23	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	12.5	9.6	13.8	15.6	71	68	67	66	48
24	CAR	10.3	8.6	13.9	9.6	12.2	15.6	70	68	66	68	70
25	Vietnam	11.8	9.6	12.8	14.6	14.4	6.9	70	71	72	72	70
26	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.3	13.6	14.1	15.7	0.6	70	69	70	70	69
27	Cuba	13.1	8.3	13.1	13.2	14.9	7.0	70	66	62	52	49
28	Niger	9.4	9.5	14.5	7.7	13.1	15.4	70	68	62	60	52
29	Morocco	13.2	13.8	10.9	12.2	14.5	4.8	69	69	67	66	63
30	Bangladesh	12.6	10.7	12.8	11.3	10.6	10.7	69	68	67	63	58
31	Laos	11.7	10.2	13.3	14.2	14.0	5.0	68	69	71	72	71
32	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	13.9	8.4	12.5	15.6	68	65	63	43	43
33	Indonesia	11.3	12.0	11.6	11.1	9.2	12.8	68	68	63	60	65
34	Qatar	14.2	14.1	10.5	13.2	14.4	1.5	68	74	67	66	62
35	Egypt	12.7	13.5	11.6	12.1	10.8	7.0	68	71	75	76	76
36	Tunisia	12.0	12.8	10.4	12.0	13.5	6.5	67	66	67	64	63
37	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	13.0	15.6	67	66	64	56	55
38	Mexico	10.3	8.3	12.5	11.0	10.5	13.9	67	65	64	60	61
39	Ethiopia	9.9	10.3	13.1	10.4	12.1	10.6	66	66	65	63	65
40	Bhutan	13.2	12.3	11.6	13.9	14.2	1.1	66	67	64	61	64
41	Turkey	12.8	11.5	11.8	13.0	11.5	5.7	66	65	69	63	66
42	Comoros	12.7	14.0	11.2	12.4	14.2	1.5	66	63	62	57	56
43	Malaysia	12.8	14.3	11.4	12.2	11.1	3.9	66	63	63	62	60
44	Tajikistan	13.8	12.2	12.3	12.8	13.4	1.1	66	65	66	65	65
45	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	7.2	13.1	15.9	65	65	64	60	54
46	Brunei	14.8	14.6	10.1	10.9	14.4	0.4	65	64	64	63	63
47	Oman	14.0	14.1	10.3	13.3	12.9	0.6	65	66	63	62	59
48	Kazakhstan	13.2	11.6	11.9	12.7	14.2	1.1	65	64	64	64	63
49	Jordan	13.0	14.0	10.5	12.3	12.7	2.0	65	66	64	64	65
50	Nicaragua	10.8	5.9	11.9	12.8	13.6	9.4	65	56	51	41	41

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019
51	Kenya	10.3	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	13.3	64	63	62	61	61
52	Kuwait	13.5	13.7	9.8	12.3	13.1	1.1	64	64	63	62	60
53	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	15.6	63	61	58	55	52
54	UAE	13.4	13.4	9.9	11.2	12.8	1.1	62	62	62	60	58
55	Nepal	12.0	9.8	9.4	13.0	12.6	4.4	61	64	66	64	64
56	Djibouti	12.3	12.6	12.7	10.1	12.3	0.6	60	59	56	56	56
57	Palestinian Territories	13.0	13.3	9.7	10.3	12.0	2.0	60	59	58	60	57
58	Azerbaijan	13.2	10.0	9.5	12.0	13.6	0.6	59	60	56	57	57
59	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.2	11.0	10.4	12.0	2.0	59	58	58	57	56
60	Chad	11.6	8.2	10.2	10.2	10.3	7.6	58	55	53	56	48
61	Russian Federation	12.3	7.9	10.3	11.8	12.8	2.0	57	56	57	60	60
62	Sri Lanka	12.8	9.1	10.6	11.3	9.5	3.9	57	63	62	65	58
63	Rwanda	9.4	7.7	9.0	10.4	11.7	8.9	57	50	42	42	41
64	Venezuela	6.0	4.6	11.7	10.2	11.4	11.7	56	51	39	42	41
65	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.4	9.8	9.7	11.1	55	52	48	48	43
66	Bahrain	12.7	13.3	8.7	10.7	8.8	0.9	55	57	56	55	55
67	Honduras	7.1	5.0	11.9	7.6	9.8	11.9	53	48	46	39	38
68	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	11.5	11.4	7.2	52	51	46	43	42
69	Uganda	8.1	5.0	7.4	6.7	9.2	14.8	51	48	47	48	47
70	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	11.0	5.4	49	44	43	41	42
71	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	8.3	10.5	3.0	48	43	47	45	46
72	South Sudan	5.7	4.4	7.0	6.3	7.6	15.0	46	43	43	44	44
73	El Salvador	7.7	4.2	10.6	7.4	9.1	6.7	46	45	42	38	30
74	Ivory Coast	12.0	6.5	8.7	5.9	8.0	3.3	44	42	42	42	43
75	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.9	8.8	8.9	1.1	44	44	43	43	43
76	Belarus	9.5	3.8	4.8	9.4	12.1	3.3	43	33	30	28	35

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Sources and definitions

- This country report is a collation of data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and includes statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD).
- Highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”. In order to reduce the length of these reference sections, a table containing links to regularly used sources can be found at the beginning of the “Keys to Understanding” chapter under the heading “Links for general background information”. Where one of these sources has been quoted in the dossier text, a quote reference is supplied as indicated in the second column of the table.
- The WWL 2023 reporting period was 01 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.
- The latest update of WWL Methodology including appendices can be found on the [World Watch List Documentation](#) page of the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).

WWL 2023 Situation in brief / Nicaragua

Brief country details

Nicaragua: Population (UN estimate for 2022)	Christians	Chr%
6,779,000	6,437,000	95.0

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

Map of country



Nicaragua: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2023	65	50
WWL 2022	56	61
WWL 2021	51	63
WWL 2020	41	72
WWL 2019	41	73

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2019-2023 reporting periods

Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Nicaragua: Main Persecution engines	Main drivers
Dictatorial paranoia	Government officials, Political parties, Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups, Ideological pressure groups
Communist and post-Communist oppression	Government officials, Political parties, Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups
Organized corruption and crime	Government officials, Political parties, Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups

Engines and Drivers are listed in order of strength. Only Very strong / Strong / Medium are shown here.

Brief description of the persecution situation

Under President Ortega, churches and Christians are viewed as destabilizing agents, thus making them a target for intimidation, harassment, monitoring and violence. This has progressively intensified since 2018 as church leaders and others continue to denounce the injustices and human rights violations perpetrated by the government. The November 2021 elections and changes to the legal framework have been used for increasing restrictions on the Church and Christian leaders who publicly called for the rule of law to be respected - especially during and after the election period - and who helped those most in need, including those considered opponents by the ruling Sandinista Party.

Summary of international obligations and rights violations

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

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

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

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

Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

- **September 2022:** The Ortega regime [prohibited](#) two Catholic processions (in Managua and Boaco) and the commemoration of the 453rd anniversary of the translation of the Bible into Spanish in some parts of the country organized by the National Council of Evangelical Pastors (Confidencial, 22 September 2022).
- **September 2022:** Father Uriel Vallejos, General Director of Canal y Radio Católica de Sébaco, [fled](#) the country after suffering severe harassment. When the authorities closed down the church radio station located in the Divina Misericordia Parish in Sébaco (Aciprensa, 5 September 2022), the police prevented him and another 6 Christians from leaving the building. During the blockade, 12 members of the community were [arrested](#) for trying to help the priest and the others inside (100 Noticias, 2 August 2022).
- **August 2022, Matagalpa:** During the early hours of 19 August 2022, police entered the Episcopal Curia of Matagalpa by force to [arbitrarily detain](#) Bishop Rolando Álvarez and seven Church leaders with him. They had been blocked from leaving the building for more than 15 days. Hours later, the National Police confirmed that the bishop was now under residential arrest but the other seven leaders were transferred to the Directorate of Judicial Assistance, known as "El Chipote" (USCIRF, August 2022).
- **August 2022, Matagalpa:** The authorities ordered the [closure](#) of another 8 Catholic radio stations administered by the Diocese of Matagalpa and under the tutelage of Bishop Rolando Álvarez and other priests frequently harassed by the regime. The church radio stations affected by the state measure were: "Radio Hermanos", "Radio Nuestra Señora de Lourdes", "Radio Nuestra Señora de Fátima", "Radio Alliens", "Radio Monte Carmelo", "Radio San José", "Radio Católica de Sébaco" y "Radio Santa Lucía" (Vatican News, 5 August 2022).

For more examples, see below: *Religious landscape*.

Specific examples of positive developments

Despite the increase in regime hostility towards Catholic Church leaders in particular (also stemming from government supporters), church leaders are generally respected by the populace for their high level of commitment and identification with the needs of the vulnerable in society. Reports of the treatment many Christians are facing at the hands of the Nicaraguan authorities has [caused concern](#) among regional and international human rights organizations (OAS, 19 August 2022). The European Parliament [approved](#), by a large majority, a resolution demanding the release of Nicaraguan Bishop Rolando Álvarez and denounced the persecution of the Catholic Church by the regime (Infobae, 15 September 2022).

External Links - Situation in brief

- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cescr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cat.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women - <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CEDAW.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Rights of the Child - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: prohibited - <https://www.confidencial.digital/nacion/ortega-y-murillo-prohiben-celebraciones-catolicas-y-evangelicas/>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: fled - <https://www.aciprensa.com/noticias/sacerdote-alerta-desde-el-exilio-no-nos-acomodemos-al-silencio-en-nicaragua-11732>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: arrested - <https://100noticias.com.ni/nacionales/117175-policia-drones-sacerdote-urriel-vallejos-sebaco/>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: arbitrarily detain - <https://www.uscirf.gov/religious-prisoners-conscience/forb-victims-database/rolando-alvarez>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: closure - <https://www.vaticannews.va/es/iglesia/news/2022-08/condena-internacional-ataques-libertad-de-la-iglesia-nicaragua.html>
- Specific examples of positive developments: caused concern - <https://www.oas.org/es/CIDH/jsForm/?File=/es/cidh/prensa/comunicados/2022/184.asp>
- Specific examples of positive developments: approved - <https://www.infobae.com/america/america-latina/2022/09/15/el-parlamento-europeo-aprobo-una-resolucion-que-exige-la-liberacion-del-obispo-nicaraguense-rolando-alvarez/>

WWL 2023: Keys to understanding / Nicaragua

Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
Amnesty International 2021/22 country report – covering 154 countries	AI country report 2021/22 (pp. 272-273)	https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/POL1048702022ENGLISH.pdf	29 June 2022
BBC News country profile	BBC country profile	https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-19735631	29 June 2022
Bertelsmann Transformation Index country report 2022 – covering 137 countries	BTI report 2022	https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-dashboard/NIC	29 June 2022
CIA World Factbook	CIA Factbook	https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/nicaragua/	29 June 2022
Crisis24 country report (Garda World) – covering 193 countries	Crisis24 country report	https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/nicaragua	29 June 2022
Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index 2021 – covering 167 countries	EIU 2021 (pp. 49-50)	https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/eiu-democracy-index-2021.pdf	29 June 2022
FFP's Fragile States Index 2022 – covering 179 countries	FSI 2022	https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/	25 August 2022
Freedom House's 2022 Democracy index – covering 29 countries, Nicaragua not included	Democracy Index 2022	https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores	
Freedom House's 2022 Global Freedom index – covering 210 countries	Global Freedom Index 2022	https://freedomhouse.org/country/nicaragua/freedom-world/2022	29 June 2022
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2021 report – covering 70 countries	Freedom on the Net 2021	https://freedomhouse.org/country/nicaragua/freedom-net/2021	29 June 2022
Human Rights Watch World Report 2022 (country chapter) – covering 100+ countries	HRW 2022 country chapter	https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/nicaragua	29 June 2022
Internet World Stats 2022	IWS 2021	https://www.internetworldstats.com/central.htm#ni	29 June 2022
RSF's 2022 World Press Freedom Index – covering 180 countries	World Press Freedom 2022	https://rsf.org/en/nicaragua	29 June 2022
Transparency International's 2021 Corruption Perceptions Index – covering 180 countries	CPI 2021	https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021/index/nic	29 June 2022
UNDP's Global Human Development Indicators (country profile) – covering 189 countries	HDI profile	https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/NIC	29 June 2022
US State Department's 2021 International Religious Freedom (country profile)	IRFR 2021	https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/nicaragua/	29 June 2022
USCIRF 2022 country reports – covering 15 CPC / 12 SWL	USCIRF 2022	https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2022-05/2022%20Nicaragua.pdf	29 June 2022
World Bank country overview – covering 178 countries	World Bank overview 2022	https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/nicaragua/overview	29 June 2022
World Bank country profile data – covering 222 countries	World Bank profile (2020 data)	https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfileId=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncountry=NIC	29 June 2022
World Bank Macro Poverty Outlook 2022 – covering 147 countries (divided per region)	Macro Poverty Outlook 2022 (pp.42-43)	https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/e408a7e21ba62d843bdd90dc37e61b57-0500032021/related/mpo-lac.pdf	29 June 2022

Recent history

From 1936 to 1979, Nicaragua was a dictatorship ruled by the Somoza family, which was eventually overthrown by the Sandinista National Liberation Front (SNLF). From 1984 to 1990, Daniel Ortega became president of Nicaragua for the first time. Later in 2006, he won the presidential elections again and has held power ever since.

Over the years, Daniel Ortega has become an authoritarian ruler. He has turned his back on his revolutionary ideals and has come to resemble the dictator he deposed. Although for many years the country appeared to be one of the most stable and [safest](#) in the region (El Nuevo Diario, 20 March 2018), since 2018 Nicaragua has seen a weakening of the rule of law, nation-

wide corruption and repression. State and non-state agents endorsed by the government have targeted regime dissidents and their supporters and sometimes killed them.

Efforts to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic were hindered by the government's refusal to impose confinement, social distancing and quarantine measures. Instead, the government even encouraged [street celebrations](#) and other forms of assembly which could have put citizens' health at risk (France 24, 14 September 2020). According to the BBC, the authorities did not provide [reliable](#) information on infections and vaccines related to COVID-19 (BBC News, 21 May 2020). This exacerbated the already existing socio-political chaos.

During the elections held in November 2021, Daniel Ortega and his allies [tightened their grip on power](#) amid allegations of irregularities and serious violations of human rights (BBC News, 9 November 2021). Multilateral organizations and the international community condemned the election process and imposed sanctions on Nicaragua. In April 2022, Nicaragua's government announced the [closure](#) of the offices of the Organization of American States (OAS) operating in the country (DW, 25 April 2022) and its decision to [withdraw](#) from it (France, 25 April 2022).

China [re-established](#) diplomatic ties with Nicaragua and opened an embassy in Managua after Daniel Ortega ended relations with Taiwan (The Guardian, 1 January 2022) (see below: *Political and legal landscape*).

Political and legal landscape

The ruling party, Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN), is Socialist and has centralized all power, taking control of the entire state apparatus. Although the largest opposition bloc since 2018 has been the [National Coalition](#) (Wtop News, 25 June 2020) made up of seven civil and political organizations, there is a distinct [lack of unity](#) among its members (International Crisis Group, 7 May 2021). For the presidential election on 7 November 2021, it was clear that there was no group [strong enough](#) to successfully stand against the Ortega dictatorship at the polls (El País, 13 May 2021).

In the November 2021 presidential election, it was clear that the government did not meet the conditions for a democratic electoral process. The OAS [pointed out](#) in October 2021 that the government had undertaken a process to eliminate all real political competition (OAS, 25 October 2021): Presidential candidates as well as opponents of the government had been arbitrarily detained on charges of conspiracy to undermine national integrity, and political parties were forced to close down. The FSLN government was also in control of the executive branch, the electoral, judicial, and legislative powers, the police, the army, and even some city mayors.

In the WWL 2023 reporting period, four months before the municipal elections (scheduled for November 2022), town councils controlled by the opposition party Ciudadanos por la Libertad (CxL) were arbitrarily [taken over](#) by pro-government councilors, backed by the Nicaraguan Institute of Municipal Development (INIFOM), claiming that these local authorities did not have any party or legal status (El País, 5 July 2022). INIFOM then appointed new FSLN party authorities. These sort of events, together with the anti-democratic precedents of the presidential elections, made sure that in the November 2022 [municipal elections](#) the FSLN con-

solidated its power by taking control of all 153 municipalities (abc News, 8 November 2023).

To make this possible and to keep the FSLN party in power, the regime has introduced a series of new laws:

- i. Law 976 "of the Financial Analysis Unit": To collect information on national or international transactions of natural or legal persons with "terrorism activities";
- ii. Law 977 of August 2019 "against money laundering, the financing of terrorism and the financing of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction": By means of which demonstrations and calling for the respect of human rights would be regarded as terrorist acts;
- iii. Law 996 of June 2019 or Amnesty Law: Leaves crimes committed by state agents in the context of the 2018 repression unpunished;
- iv. Law 1060 of 2021, which modified the Criminal Procedure Code to expand the term of detention from 48 hours to 90 days, in which a "complementary investigation" would be carried out, without prior accusation or link to a formal judicial process;
- v. The Foreign Agents Regulation Law, by which the government could block financing to all civil society organizations which it considers "disruptive" to the country's internal and external affairs;
- vi. Law for the Defense of the Rights of the People to Independence, sovereignty and self-determination for peace, (1055 of 2020): Disqualifies opponents from running for elected office;
- vii. Law on Cybercrimes (Law 1042 of 2020): Includes four types of crimes in relation to damage to systems and data and seeks to sanction certain actions carried out through the Internet or electronic means, affecting freedom of expression;
- viii. Constitutional Reform to Article 37: Allows a shift from the maximum sentence of 30 years to life imprisonment if "hateful, cruel, degrading, humiliating and inhuman circumstances concur, which due to their impact cause shock, rejection, indignation, disgust in the national community";
- ix. The General Law for the Regulation and Control of Non-Profit Organizations: Prohibits political proselytism, as well as actions "to violate public order" or promote destabilization campaigns in the country. Likewise, it allows the state authorities to confiscate property where legal status has been cancelled.

To oversee the impact of these repressive measures, the IACHR set up a Special Follow-up Mechanism for Nicaragua (MESENI) in 2018. However, the Ortega government banned the IACHR from working in Nicaragua, which is why [MESENI](#) has been working from the headquarters of the Commission in Washington DC (OAS, April 2021). Similarly, the Nicaraguan government [withdrew](#) from the Organization of American States (OAS), closed the local OAS office and revoked the credentials of several of its OAS representatives (Swissinfo, 25 April 2022). The General Assembly of the Organization of American States (OAS) [approved](#) the resolution "The Political Crisis and Human Rights in Nicaragua". The document is based on nine points, one of which is the proposal to create a high level commission for offering the Government of Nicaragua the opportunity to discuss all relevant issues (US Mission to the OAS, 17 October 2022).

Various countries have imposed sanctions in an attempt to put pressure on the Ortega administration, halt the violation of human rights and force a return to democracy in the country. Among the countries imposing sanctions are:

- i. The [USA](#) with sanctions relating to the freezing of assets, prohibition of financial transactions and cancellation of visas to more than 100 of those involved in violations of fundamental freedoms, including the members of the Ortega Murillo family (US Department of State, 2 August 2022). In addition, the US Senate unanimously voted for the [RENACER Act](#) for imposing selective sanctions against anyone working against democracy in Nicaragua (US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 22 June 2021);
- ii. [Canada](#), with sanctions relating to the prohibition of transactions and effective freezing of assets of nine key members of the Government of Nicaragua (Government of Canada, 14 November 2021);
- iii. The [European Union](#), with sanctions targeting Nicaraguan officials, including First Lady and Vice-President Rosario Murillo, consisting of a travel ban to the EU and the freezing of assets for individuals and entities (European Council of the European Union, January 2022). In this context, the ambassador of the European Union in Nicaragua was declared *persona non grata* for an alleged "interference in national sovereignty" and was [expelled](#) from the country (El Pais, 29 September 2022).

Additionally, recognized international civil society organizations have been highlighting cases of arbitrary detention, the poor conditions involved, and the persecution of government critics. Among those active are: [Human Rights Watch](#) (HRW, 20 September 2021), [International Crisis Group](#) (ICG, 20 May 2021), Freedom House (Global Freedom Index 2022 - Nicaragua, 2022) and Amnesty International (AI country report Nicaragua 2021/2022).

Through all the maneuvering to stay in power, the ruling party's excesses have been [so evident](#) (La Prensa, 25 February 2021) that they have caused an even greater [decline](#) in popularity and acceptance of the current government (100 Noticias, August 2022). The apparent [negligence](#) in handling the pandemic (Artículo 66, 27 July 2022) - including the harassment of [health professionals](#) (OAS, 28 July 2021) - and the blocking of the distribution of humanitarian aid as a result of the [closure](#) of civil society organizations (France, 20 September 2022), have all served to exacerbate the political [crisis](#) in the country (RFI, 17 April 2022). In contrast, civil society actors such as churches gained wider acceptance a) due to their continued demands that the authorities [respect](#) democratic processes, and b) for being virtually the last space for free expression (France 24, 27 August 2022). Church leaders suffered reprisals for their outspokenness, for their promotion of anti-COVID measures, and for the support given to political prisoners. During the pandemic, the government encouraged citizens to attend [large events](#) (CNN, 31 March 2021), which included the promotion of religious activities not authorized by church authorities.

Although the political and regulatory context affects society as a whole, government measures have been designed to repress opposition voices in particular, which is why church leaders, as the main critics of the government, have become a vulnerable target for reprisals. In 2022, the government attacks on the church have clearly been intended to intimidate Christians. One example can be seen in the work of the Justice and Legal Affairs Commission at the National

Assembly. In April 2022, this commission [reached the conclusion](#) that some church leaders and NGOs were promoting an attempted coup and committing crimes that violated the rights of Nicaraguans (Asamblea Nacional, 27 April 2022). It recommended severe penalties for the Christians involved and an in-depth investigation of their communities and associations. As will be seen below (in *Religious landscape*), these recommendations were put into effect through arbitrary arrests and other types of action against church leaders.

Religious landscape

Nicaragua: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	6,437,000	95.0
Muslim	1,200	0.0
Hindu	0	0.0
Buddhist	7,800	0.1
Ethno-religionist	32,000	0.5
Jewish	220	0.0
Bahai	13,100	0.2
Atheist	3,200	0.0
Agnostic	182,000	2.7
Other	102,800	1.5
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

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

Since the social unrest began in April 2018, church leaders (mainly Roman Catholics) were involved in the official dialogue between opposition groups and the government, first as mediators and later as observers. However, in March 2019, as an act of protest at the regime's lack of commitment and continued violation of human rights, the Catholic Church decided [to cease](#) all active participation in the talks (Havana Times, 8 March 2019). Since then, the Catholic Church's support for the most vulnerable sectors of society has caused it to be regarded as a 'public enemy' by the government and its allies. As a result, church leaders and churches have been [frequent targets](#) for all kinds of retaliation (Cope, 1 July 2022).

One of the Human Rights Council Resolution [reported](#) that the OHCHR has documented attacks in various forms against the Catholic Church (OHCHR, 13 September 2022). The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) has recently [drawn attention](#) to the escalating repression against members of the Roman Catholic Church in Nicaragua. According to the IACHR, these events have happened in a context of systematic persecution, criminalization, harassment, police hounding, stigmatizing comments by state authorities, and other acts of repression

(IACHR, 19 August 2022). Statements by the Episcopal Secretariat of Central America -[SEDAC](#) (Zenit, 21 June 2022), the Latin American and Caribbean Episcopal Council -[CELAM](#) (Confidencial, 27 May 2022) and many [other religious networks](#) have shown solidarity with the Nicaraguan Catholic Church in the face of the regime's hostility (Vida Nueva Digital, 25 August 2022).

In the WWL 2023 reporting period, there has been a serious escalation of hostilities against church leaders (particularly Catholic bishops and priests) and against the churches and faith-based organizations for which they bear responsibility. The restrictions on religious freedom have ceased to be indirect; they now come full-frontal, with legal frameworks tailor-made for this purpose. Some examples are:

- i. **Arrests:** The exercise of the right to freedom of expression has become a cause for the arrest of [representatives](#) of the Catholic Church, especially those most critical of the government (CNN Español, 15 October 2022). But also, arrests have been made of those who have tried to defend priests, of those who refused to fabricate crimes against them and of those who made known the injustices to which they are exposed, among them [journalists](#) (COPE, 15 July 2022) and [parishioners](#) (100 Noticias, 2 August 2022).
- ii. **Seizure of property:** The Ortega police have seized [public Christian properties](#) and media outlets (Article 66, 14 July 2022).
- iii. **Cancellation of legal status:** The government has [canceled](#) the registration and legal status of several organizations linked to the Church, including universities, technical institutes, an association of parochial schools, cultural centers, associations that promote educational programs, justice and peace commissions, and seminars (Asamblea Nacional, 7 February 2022).
- iv. **Expulsion from the country:** Archbishop Waldemar Stanislaw Sommertag acted as the Pope's "[Apostolic Nuncio](#)" in Managua since 2018. In March 2022, the government formally withdrew his residency permit, causing his immediate expulsion from the country (Agenzia Fides, 14 March 2022). In addition, [18 nuns](#) belonging to the order of Mother Theresa of Calcutta (Despacho 505, 6 July 2022) and [5 sisters](#) of the Congregation of Religious of the Cross of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (Onda local, 21 September 2022) were expelled from the country.
- v. **Overt police harassment:** The house blockades carried out by government officials, paramilitaries, and party sympathizers of religious leaders have become common practice. So too has the surveillance and monitoring of church activities. In some cases, it [intensified](#) in the run-up to elections (100 Noticias, 20 October 2021).
- vi. **"Siege" tactics:** Police have sometimes [completely surrounded](#) churches and church grounds (100%Noticias, 22 May 2022). This kind of siege has impeded priests from holding services and sometimes priests had to celebrate mass through fencing to [prevent](#) police from entering the church building (IP Nicaragua, 16 August 2022).
- vii. **Accusations of an attempted coup:** The Legislative Assembly of Nicaragua approved a report in which Roman Catholic priests stand [accused](#) of preparing a coup, and in which it is recommended that church leaders who supported the 2018 demonstrations should be tried in court, along with the confiscation of all assets belonging to their churches (El Espectador, 6 May 2022).

- viii. **Closure of media outlets:** In many areas, Catholic [radio](#) and [television](#) broadcasting outlets have been censored and/or taken off the air, their offices have been taken over and their legal status has been cancelled (ABC News, 2 August 2022 and Article 66, 7 July 2022).
- ix. **Country access denied:** Foreign pastors have been [denied](#) entry into the country (Evangelico Digital, 26 April 2022). Catholic priests have also been [impeded](#) from entering the country (Aciprensa, 28 September 2022).
- x. **Attacks on ordinary Christians:** Ordinary Christians and families of church leaders regarded as regime [opponents](#) have been monitored, attacked and detained - for instance, when they have tried to defend priests or church buildings from government interference (Article 66, 3 June 2022).
- xi. **Infiltration:** Party sympathizers or members of paramilitary groups join church groups to [monitor the content](#) of preaching and catechetical teaching (Article 66, 10 June 2022).
- xii. **Economic pressure:** Through excluding Catholic universities from the National Council of Universities, government financial support has been stopped. Such [economic pressure](#) combined with administrative obstacles is bad enough, but there has also been the forced [closure](#) of colleges run by the Catholic Church (Aleteia, 10 April 2022 and ANF, 11 May 2022).
- xiii. **Vandalism by government forces:** There have been many cases of [illegal entry](#), vandalism and destruction of church property by paramilitary groups and/or the police (Elsalvador, 2 August 2022).
- xiv. **Ban on Christian celebrations:** The Nicaraguan National Police [prohibited](#) two Catholic processions and the commemoration of the 453rd anniversary of the translation of the Bible into Spanish in some parts of the country (Confidencial, 22 September 2022).

Despite facing such hostility, leaders and other representatives of the Catholic Church are determined to continue [serving the country](#) by speaking out about the human rights abuses they cannot pretend not to see (Diocese of Granada, 14 July 2022). During the elections, ecclesiastical authorities continued to [criticize](#) the lack of democratic guarantees and the countless irregularities, including the repression of political dissent (El País, 15 October 2021). In contrast, there is a minority of other churches and leaders who [publicly](#) support Ortega's actions and are well rewarded by the authorities (Infobae, 5 February 2021). These are mainly Evangelicals who - either out of conviction or fear - have been co-opted by the regime to toe the ruling party line. However, some have begun to show concern over the [possible control](#) of the government in their internal affairs, for example, with regard to the delivery of tithes and offerings (La Mesa Redonda, 23 September 2022). The result has been increased division among Protestant/Evangelical groups, especially during the election period.

Economic landscape

According to UNDP's HDI profile:

- **Gross national income (GNI) per capita (2019):** 5, 625
- **GNI per capita for women:** 3, 646
- **GNI per capita for men:** 7, 661
- **Inequality in income:** 30.7%
- **National Poverty Line (2009-2019):** 24.9%

According to the World Bank country overview:

- **Economic growth:** Growth is projected to moderate to 4.1 percent in 2022 and to slow further to 2.0 percent in 2023, consistent with a global economic deceleration.
- **COVID-19:** Despite the general economic recovery, employment rates in 2022 Q2 were lower than in 2019 Q2 (64% vs. 66%), as labor-intensive sectors like construction, hotels and restaurants have not fully recovered from the COVID-19 crisis.

The International Monetary Fund has [stated](#) that Real GDP growth is expected to moderate to 3 percent in 2023, due to weaker external demand and tighter external financial conditions. Over the medium term, real GDP growth is projected to converge to its potential of about 3½ percent, given the cautious recovery in investment and credit to the private sector, and lower labor force participation. Risks to the outlook are on the downside: a more severe global downturn, further external monetary tightening and higher import prices than expected. (IMF, 16 November 2022)

According to the "Report on the State of the Economy and Perspectives" prepared by the Central Bank of Nicaragua, the national economic dynamics are [exposed](#) to multiple risks that have arisen as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the geopolitical conflict in Ukraine, such as high inflation and bottlenecks in supply chains; the tightening of financial conditions due to the world's central banks increasing interest rates in an attempt to curb inflation; the slowdown in China due to the zero COVID-19 policy; and in general, the possible impact of increasing geo-economic fragmentation (BCN, October 2022). Meanwhile, the socio-political instability and government authoritarianism have caused a [fall](#) in foreign investment in the country (Trading Economics, 2022). There has also been a reduction in the labor force due to the fact that many citizens have emigrated, causing a brain drain (Global Economy, 2022).

Christians, as well as the entire population, face the consequences of the economic crisis and the imposition of a socialist economy that only benefits the allies of the regime. Since 2018, the state budget has [prioritized](#) the National Police, the Supreme Court of Justice, the National Assembly, the Ministry of Defense, and the Ministry of Youth (Article 66. 3 December 2021). At the end of 2019, the government [cut all funding](#) for the structural maintenance of Catholic churches considered to be of particular historical interest. Also, as punishment for church representatives publicly denouncing government abuses, government support given to church groups to help finance social programs has been [progressively reduced](#) (Confidential, 19 January 2021). Further, in the WWL 2023 reporting period, a law has been approved which increases government control over educational institutions and has [stripped funds](#) from Jesuit-run Central American University (Crux Now, 4 April 2022). This law also excludes the Central American University from the National Council of Universities, which deprives it of any share in the 6% of the Nicaraguan budget spent on higher education.

Social and cultural landscape

According to the CIA Factbook:

- **Main ethnic groups:** Mestizo (mixed Amerindian and White) 69%, White 17%, Black 9%, Amerindian 5%
- **Main language:** Spanish (official) 95.3%, Miskito 2.2%, Mestizo of the Caribbean coast 2%, other 0.5% (2005)
- **Urban population:** 59.6% of total population (2022)
- **Literacy rate:** 82.6% (2015).

According to the World Bank country profile:

- **People using at least basic drinking water services (% of population):** 82 (2020)
- **School enrollment (gross):** For pre-primary (2019) is 70%; for primary (2010) 121% and for secondary (2010) 73%
- **Compulsory school education:** 7 years
- **School Gender Parity Index (GPI):** 1.04 (2010). This refers to the ratio of girls to boys enrolled at primary and secondary levels in public and private schools (2010)
- **Unemployment:** 6.0% (2021)
- **Refugee population by country of origin:** 11,041 (2021)

According to the UN Global Human Development Indicators (HDI profile):

- **Human Development Index (HDI) score and ranking:** Nicaragua's HDI score is 0.660, which put the country in the medium human development category, positioning it at 128 out of 189 countries and territories. Like all averages, the HDI indicates inequality in the distribution of human development across the population at the country level. Between 1990 and 2019, Nicaragua's HDI value increased from 0.497 to 0.660, an increase of 32.8%.
- **Gender Inequality Index (GII):** Nicaragua has a GI value of 0.428, ranking it 101 out of 162 countries in the 2019 index.

According to the [UNHCR's Global Trends Report 2021](#):

- **Refugees:** 111,600 new asylum applications were registered by Nicaraguans as they fled the growing socio-political crisis and increasing political persecution in their country. This caused Nicaragua to be ranked 2nd of major source countries of new asylum applications in 2021.

Other factors:

- **Undernourishment:** According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), Nicaragua is one of the countries with the [highest](#) prevalence of undernourishment in Latin America and the Caribbean (estimated at 19.3%), after Haiti (46.8 %) and Venezuela (27.4%) (FAO, November 2021). The World Food Program states that Nicaragua has been experiencing economic decline due to constant socio-political crisis, which continues to place it as one of the poorest countries in Latin America. Under-

nourishment has improved, yet the prevalence of chronic undernutrition is 17 percent and rates are [higher](#) in some regions, up to 30 percent. Additionally, obesity and malnutrition are on the rise. (WFP, September 2022).

- **Employment:** The National Institute of Development Information (INIDE) stated in its [report](#) for the II Quarter of 2022 that the open unemployment rate stood at 3.1 percent, at the national level, registering a reduction of 2.0 percentage points with respect to the second quarter of 2021 (5.1%) (INIDE, August 2022). However, experts point out that the state figures make no clear distinction between formal and informal employment. If they did, it would be possible to see that formal employment has [decreased](#) and that only informal employment has increased, without fixed remuneration or social protection (Confidencial, 11 February 2022).
- **NGOs:** Despite the context of poverty, food crisis and unemployment, the government has tightened control over non-profit organizations. Backed by a legislative framework [approved](#) for this purpose (CNN, 1 April 2022), it has closed countless NGOs in the country. The UN confirmed that since 2018 at least [209](#) NGOs had been shut down in Nicaragua, with 137 closures taking place in the period January - April 2022 (UN, 9 May 2022). Other sources report that, as of August 2021, after the annulment of the legal status of 100 NGOs by the National Assembly (at the request of the Executive), there were already [1,268 organizations outlawed](#) since December 2018 (Swissinfo, 9 August 2022). The closures are due to alleged lack of transparency concerning funding.

Another aspect to consider is the degree of regime influence in the education sector, especially universities. The government has sought to [undermine the autonomy](#) of universities, in particular, which are administered by groups or individuals perceived as political opposition. Several universities have had their legal status canceled on the grounds of financial reports missing and violating money-laundering and anti-terrorism laws (Agenda Estado de Derecho, 19 April 2022). The head of the Ministry of Education was also [replaced](#) with a Sandinista sympathizer. The goal of such moves is to ensure a nationwide influence in the classroom which supports the government (Panampost, 19 January 2022). Thus, for instance, school curricula include programs to [promote](#) ruling party ideology and loyalty to the Sandinista movement (Connectas, accessed 26 August 2022).

Public employees are [obliged](#) to participate in state celebrations, to show their support for the regime (Artículo 66, 12 July 2022). They were also [expected](#) to vote for Daniel Ortega in the presidential elections, under threat of dismissal (Confidencial, 6 November 2021).

- **Human rights issues:** Human Rights Watch (2022 country chapter) has denounced the current impunity for human rights violations committed by the police. HRW has also highlighted the severe restrictions on freedom of expression and association, as well as the political discrimination affecting officials who support the opposition. Likewise, the US State Department's Nicaragua 2021 Human Rights Report [states](#) that significant human rights issues included: Unlawful or arbitrary killings (including extrajudicial killings) committed by the government or its agents; forced disappearances by parapolice forces; torture and cases of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment by prison guards and parapolice; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; arbitrary detentions by

police and parapolice; political prisoners and detainees; politically motivated reprisal against individuals located outside the country; a serious lack of independence of the judiciary; and arbitrary and unlawful interference with privacy; punishment of family members for offenses allegedly committed by an individual; serious restrictions on free expression and media, including threats of violence, unjustified arrests, censorship, criminal libel suits against journalists; substantial interference with the rights of peaceful assembly and freedom of association, including overly restrictive laws on the organization, funding, and operation of nongovernmental organizations and civil society organizations; among others.

Through their aid programs delivering basic necessities such as food, health care and education, churches are viewed by the Ortega regime to be weakening its control over the population. As described above, the government has responded by drastically reducing the [funds](#) available to support church initiatives related to education. This has put the continuation of those educational initiatives at risk (Confidencial, 19 January 2021). The [cancellation](#) of the legal status of universities/Institutes/associations run by Catholic leaders/organizations is also of major concern (La Gaceta, 7 February 2022). Such government action, in addition to harming the most vulnerable sectors of society served by the Church, are a method of intimidation with the aim of limiting the influence of Christian leaders within communities.

Technological landscape

According to Internet World Stats (IWS 2022 - no update):

- **Internet usage:** 54.8% penetration - survey date: March 2021
- **Facebook usage:** 54.8 % penetration – survey date: March 2021

According to the World Bank country profile:

- **Mobile phone subscriptions:** 90 per 100 people (2020).

According to Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2022 report:

- "Internet freedom in Nicaragua dropped by three points amid an election in November 2021 that featured a harsh clampdown on opposition leaders, dissidents, and independent journalists. Repressive legislation such as the Cybercrime Law paved the way for increased self-censorship and lengthy prison sentences against critical users."

Even before the introduction of the Cybercrime Law (see above: *Political and legal landscape*), intermittent [internet outages](#) were used by the government to inhibit protesters (NPR, 5 June 2021) and key persons perceived as regime opponents. However, all citizens now live with the [permanent risk](#) of being unable to use the Internet and of being criminalized for comments contradicting the government narrative (AP News, 27 October 2020). Domestic NGOs, Roman Catholic Church representatives, [journalists](#) (Connectas, 21 June 2021) and members of the political opposition all claim that the government has been [monitoring](#) their email and telephone communication (US State Department, Human Rights Report 2021). In Autumn 2022,

the government was accused of installing special receivers in Managua to be used for [electronic surveillance](#), i.e., for intercepting telephone signals and capturing mobile phone traffic. Such surveillance monitors conventional calls, origin/destination of calls, text messages, SIM Card code, phone location and, in some cases, involves direct listening in on phone conversations (Confidencial, 17 October 2022).

According to RSF (World Press Freedom 2022), it is [not safe](#) to practice independent journalism in Nicaragua. Journalists who remain inside the country work very discreetly and do not sign their articles to avoid reprisals. Cameras are often confiscated and there is practically no reporting on the streets any longer (RSF, October 2022). Many journalists have had to flee the country. The Inter-American Press Association states that there is a wave of persecution against journalism in the country - from convictions of reporters to closures of media outlets (Semana, 10 July 2022).

As part of the persecution of independent media during the 2021 electoral process, non-aligned journalists faced difficulties due to the “law regulating foreign agents” which aims to prevent “crimes against state security” and requires any person or entity receiving foreign funds (including journalists working for international media) to register as a “foreign agent” with the Interior Ministry. Thus, [non-authorized voices](#) can be effectively silenced (Article 66 Facebook site, 12 May 2021). Even when reporters mention cases of violence, raids or any government actions targeting the Church, they risk [arrest](#) (Cope, 15 July 2022).

For many Christians, church leaders, and Christian groups in exile, the use of social media networks and independent media are the only means by which they can share and receive information. Due to the government's control over the media and crack-down on non-aligned citizens, they are exposed to the risk of being monitored and publicly accused of plotting a coup. Zoom meetings organized by churches have been monitored by informers and, on occasions when something suspicious was said, police officers have suddenly appeared outside the houses of the church leaders involved. In addition, it has become a recent practice for the Nicaraguan Institute of Telecommunications and Post Office to [close](#) Catholic radio stations (100 Noticias, 1 August 2022), as well as to order cable companies to [stop transmitting](#) Catholic channels (Swissinfo, 29 June 2022).

Security situation

The United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has [expressed](#) concern about the lack of independence and impartiality of the judiciary, especially the Human Rights Ombudsman, as well as the high levels of corruption and impunity that persist in the country (CESCR, 11 November 2021). The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has [reported](#) arbitrary detentions in connection with the political and human rights crisis that erupted in 2018. Detainees endure conditions contrary to the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, and many have been prosecuted and convicted without due process (OHCHR, 16 June 2022). According to the Mechanism for the recognition of political prisoners, as of November 2022 there are [235 political prisoners](#) in the country (Mecanismo para el reconocimiento de personas presas políticas, June 2022). The Committee

against Torture has [urged](#) Nicaragua to guarantee the legal safeguards to all persons from the outset of their detention, to adopt necessary measures to prevent acts of violence, and asked for those arbitrarily detained to be released, as well as asking Nicaragua to carry out an investigation into these acts and provide appropriate redress to victims (UN Geneva, 25 November 2022).

Imprisoned priests suffer particular [mistreatment](#) and abuse from the officers in charge. They are banned from receiving medical care or visitors (Nicaragua Actual, 24 November 2022). It is no better for religious leaders under [house arrest](#) for arbitrary reasons (Despacho 505, 31 October 2022). The degree of insecurity both outside and within the justice system is so high that many religious leaders, especially from the Catholic Church, have been [forced to flee](#) the country (The Debate, 16 November 2022). At the regional level, the IACHR has reported on the context of [repression](#), the limiting of democratic freedom, the prohibition of social protests, the closure and search of independent media outlets, and the arbitrary detention of important opposition leaders, including those who sought to be candidates in the 2021 elections (IACHR, October 2021).

The ruling party relies on the police and other national security entities to ensure it stays in power, despite any violations of human rights committed by them. In addition to the police, the government has a network of paramilitary groups that follow [political directives](#) (Connectas, accessed 26 August 2022). Daniel Ortega has called them “volunteer police officers” despite the fact that they operate as groups of armed civilians. Along with the National Police, shock groups are also used, popularly known as “Sandinista mobs”. Despite all evidence to the contrary, both the president and the army have denied the presence of paramilitary forces or their activities in the country.

According to Human Rights Watch, human rights activists and other critics have been targets of death threats, assaults, intimidation, harassment, surveillance, online defamation campaigns, arbitrary detention and prosecution (HRW 2022 country chapter). Police frequently station themselves outside the houses of government critics, preventing them from leaving, in what amounts to arbitrary house arrest. Such critics include church leaders and other Christians – mainly Catholics. The victims of such actions have no recourse to justice and no protection; the laws passed in the last years empower the government to criminalize any act that is considered disloyal to the regime. Church leaders who are arrested and charged with alleged criminal offences have no [recourse to justice](#) (Nicaragua Actual, 14 July 2022).

Trends analysis

1) A clear distancing from democratic principles has become apparent

The absolute control of state institutions, the embezzlement of funds, the lack of guarantees for the respect of the rule of law and the human rights of citizens and, above all, the abuse of power so that the ruling party can remain in power indefinitely, are substantial indicators that Nicaragua is living under a dictatorship that it no longer even pretends to conceal. The Church is one of the main defenders of human rights and respect for democratic norms and is therefore considered one of the most important enemies of the regime.

2) Opposition voices are being eliminated

Government pressure against any kind of dissent has intensified rapidly since the 2018 protests, and was particularly heavy in the period surrounding the November 2021 elections. Despite the reprisals against opposing voices, opposition has increased and social discontent has spread nationwide. Whereas the regime has lost legitimacy, through their support of the most vulnerable sectors of society, churches and church leaders have become some of the most respected and representative voices in the country, despite all government hostility.

3) International concern has grown

The electoral results that ratified Ortega's fifth term confirmed the lack of respect for democratic norms, the rule of law and human rights. This situation has generated an increase in international sanctions against the country, especially for abuses committed against those who challenge regime interests, including church leaders. Thus, the international community recognizes and denounces the violations of the right to religious freedom in the country, especially due to the more repressive actions (including arrests and prosecution) against Catholic leaders that represent a new level of harassment not previously seen.

External Links - Keys to understanding

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WWL 2023: Church information / Nicaragua

Christian origins

The Roman Catholic Church was the first Christian denomination in the country, aided by the Spanish colonization. The first church was established by the Franciscans in 1524 in Granada, but the largest amount of missionary work during the colonial period was carried out by the Jesuits. Protestant missionary activity (mainly in the eastern part of Nicaragua) began via the Anglican Church in the 1760s, although the influence of the Anglicans dates back to the presence of a few British settlements in the 1620s. Serious efforts to evangelize the Creoles and the Indians in the eastern part of Nicaragua did not begin until the arrival of the United Brethren of Germany (Moravian Church) in Bluefields in 1849.

(Source: [Programa Latinoamericano de Estudios Sociorreligiosos](#) - PROLADES, accessed 30 September 2020)

Church spectrum today

Nicaragua: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	0	0.0
Catholic	5,193,000	80.7
Protestant	1,433,000	22.3
Independent	501,000	7.8
Unaffiliated	39,100	0.6
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-729,000	-11.3
Total	6,437,100	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	1,122,000	17.4
Renewalist movement	1,439,000	22.4

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

Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Renewalist movement:** Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.

The largest denomination in Nicaragua is the Roman Catholic Church, which is found throughout the country. According to WCD 2022 estimates, 80.7% of Nicaraguan Christians are Catholics, a fall of 3.5% in comparison with the previous year. According to internal sources, this apparent reduction could be related to the risk of being publicly recognized as Catholic in a country where this denomination is regularly targeted by the repressive government. Protestants and non-traditional evangelical denominations are growing and gaining an increased presence in the country. Many of them are also recognized in society for opposing the dictatorship.

Areas where Christians face most difficulties

Given the government's totalitarian control over all the country, persecution is present nationwide and at all levels. The cities with the highest number of incidents of persecution against Christians are Granada, Jinotega, Masaya, Jinotepe, Leon, Matagalpa, Boaco and Estelí.

Christian communities and how they are affected

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

Historical Christian communities: The largest denomination in this category is the Roman Catholic Church. Where opposition to the government's dictatorial measures is expressed, verbal and physical aggression is likely from government officials, paramilitary groups and other regime supporters. Other historical Christian denominations noted an increase in regime hostility towards them during the WWL 2023 reporting period, mainly through administrative reprisals for refusal to align with government propaganda.

Converts: Converts in Nicaragua are former regime sympathizers or government officers that have become Christians and are now considered part of the opposition. This category also experiences hostility similar to that faced by the historical churches where opposition to the ruling party is expressed.

Non-traditional Christian communities: This category is made up of Baptist and Pentecostal groups, Mennonites and Moravian Lutherans. They are in the minority and do not have the same representation at social level. This category also experiences hostility similar to the historical churches whenever opposition to the ruling party is expressed (especially if they had been receiving regime-support in the past), with the main threat being loss of legal status to operate in the country.

External Links - Church information

- Christian origins: Programa Latinoamericano de Estudios Socio-religiosos - <http://www.prolades.com/cra/regions/cam/nic/espanol/religion-en-nica.pdf>

WWL 2023: Persecution Dynamics / Nicaragua

Reporting period

1 October 2021 - 30 September 2022

Position on the World Watch List

Nicaragua: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2023	65	50
WWL 2022	56	61
WWL 2021	51	63
WWL 2020	41	72
WWL 2019	41	73

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2019-2023 reporting periods

Nicaragua rose 9 points in WWL 2023. This shows a trend of repressive escalation since the April 2018 protests. During the reporting period, the presidential couple Ortega-Murillo (ORMU) did

not cease in their attempt to forcefully silence any dissenting voice, especially if it was the Church because of the image of authority and legitimacy it has in the country. President Ortega's elite is making every effort to silence activists demanding civil society participation, the respect of democracy and even those providing humanitarian assistance. The spiral of political reprisals against the Church includes church vandalism, the closure of church-run colleges and universities, the closure of church radio-TV stations and Christian NGOs, arbitrary detention, blocking the movement of priests, the prosecution of church leaders, the expulsion of religious leaders, and hindering entry to and exit from the country. church leaders and Christians from various denominations (but especially those linked to the Roman Catholic Church) faced monitoring, discrimination, defamation, arrests, and other forms of hostility. The goal of these politically motivated religious freedom violations is the intimidation of Christians in order to silence them and make the Church and its leaders lose credibility among the population.

Persecution engines

Nicaragua: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Not at all
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Not at all
Clan oppression	CO	Not at all
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	Weak
Communist and post-Communist oppression	CPCO	Medium
Secular intolerance	SI	Weak
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Strong
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Medium

The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.

Dictatorial paranoia (Strong)

According to Freedom House, Nicaragua scored 23/100 in the Global Freedom Index 2022 and is ranked as "not free". Political rights scored 5/40 and civil rights scored 18/60. President Ortega has filled state institutions with loyal supporters, banned leading opposition parties and adapted the legal framework (including the Constitution) to allow his indefinite re-election and violations of civil rights. Government officials at all levels must support the regime. The whole state apparatus functions to keep the president and his political elite, including members of his family, in power. Through weakening democracy and the rule of law, his goal has been to remain in power without giving the opposition a fair opportunity to be able to participate in the political life of the country. Church leaders and Christian groups – especially Roman Catholics – who question the regime's authority and legitimacy and request that human rights and democratic principles be respected, face acts of retaliation. As a result, the ruling party has carried out a

campaign in which church leaders and Christians have been threatened, mistreated, arrested, prosecuted, insulted, called enemies and terrorists, and have generally been harassed. Churches have also been vandalized and church services disrupted, with the aim of creating a climate of fear.

Communist and post-Communist oppression (Medium)

The ruling party is the Socialist Sandinista National Liberation Front (SNFL), and supporters of President Daniel Ortega revere him as “Comandante Daniel”. Socialist-Communist patriotism is taught in schools and it is imposed on citizens through the different state institutions, even through violent means. Hence, the regime monitors all institutions and seeks to repress Christian values and views which could endanger party ideology and threaten the regime's authority. Christians, especially religious leaders, who criticize the regime face harsh repression and censorship and are victims of politically motivated religious freedom violations. Sometimes aspects of religion (such as religious festivals and Biblical references) are deliberately distorted and used to support the regime's interests, which is a common tactic in other Communist countries, such as Cuba and Venezuela, with which Nicaragua has a close relationship. This engine is clearly blended with aspects of Dictatorial paranoia and Organized corruption and crime.

Organized corruption and crime (Medium)

The dictatorial context favors corrupt practices which are deeply rooted in the country. According to the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI 2021), Nicaragua is at rank 164 out of 180 countries, scoring 20 points (0= highly corrupt and 100= very clean). This reflects how serious corruption with the purpose of furthering regime interests has become and how illicit drug trafficking is also gaining ground. The judicial system, security forces and public services all operate to keep the Sandinista's leaders in power making use of all resources available: Bribes, manipulation and use of political influence are common practice. Similarly, non-state agents such as paramilitary groups, criminal groups and Sandinista mobs act in collusion with the government to repress opponents with impunity. Many Christians face the threats and illegal actions of these groups and have no recourse to justice.

Drivers of persecution

Nicaragua: Drivers of Persecution									
	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	-	-	-	-	WEAK	MEDIUM	WEAK	STRONG	MEDIUM
Government officials	-	-	-	-	Very weak	Medium	Weak	Strong	Medium
Ethnic group leaders	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	-	-	-	-	-	Very weak	Very weak	Very weak	-

Nicaragua: Drivers of Persecution									
	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	-	-	-	-	WEAK	MEDIUM	WEAK	STRONG	MEDIUM
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	-	Weak	Very weak	-	Weak	Very weak
Violent religious groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	Weak	Weak	Medium	-
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	-	-	-	-	Very weak	Weak	Very weak	Weak	Very weak
One's own (extended) family	-	-	-	-	Very weak	Very weak	Very weak	Very weak	Very weak
Political parties	-	-	-	-	Weak	Medium	Weak	Strong	Medium
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	-	-	-	-	-	Medium	Weak	Strong	Medium
Organized crime cartels or networks	-	-	-	-	-	Very weak	-	Weak	Weak
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.) and embassies	-	-	-	-	-	Very weak	-	Very weak	Very weak

The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. Please note that "-" denotes "not at all". For more information see WWL Methodology.

Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia

- Government officials (Strong):** Government officials at all levels support the regime. The whole state apparatus functions to keep the president and his political elite – including some members of his family - in power through totalitarian control, which means there is no room for opposition or any kind of criticism. The army, police, Congress and the Electoral Tribunal work together to suppress and censor any form of opposition. Christians are affected where their activities, preaching or teachings are seen to be attempts at destabilizing the government or challenging the president's authority.
- Political parties (Strong):** The ruling FSLN party controls almost all state entities, it has managed to weaken all opposition parties and civil society leadership, thus hindering usual democratic processes and any transparency in future elections. Christians who question the ruling party's legitimacy or who demand transparent elections have become the target of reprisals.
- Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups (Strong):** The government uses a variety of violent groups (also known as 'Ortega death squads' or parapolice forces) to terrorize citizens and silence anyone daring to demand that the elite step down from power. They are known for disrupting church services.

- ***Ideological pressure groups (Medium):*** These are the groups with radical political ideologies promoted by FSLN. The best known is the so-called “Sandinista Youth”. They are the ones who identify Christian opponents as targets for action to be taken against them by the authorities or themselves.

Drivers of Communist and post-Communist oppression

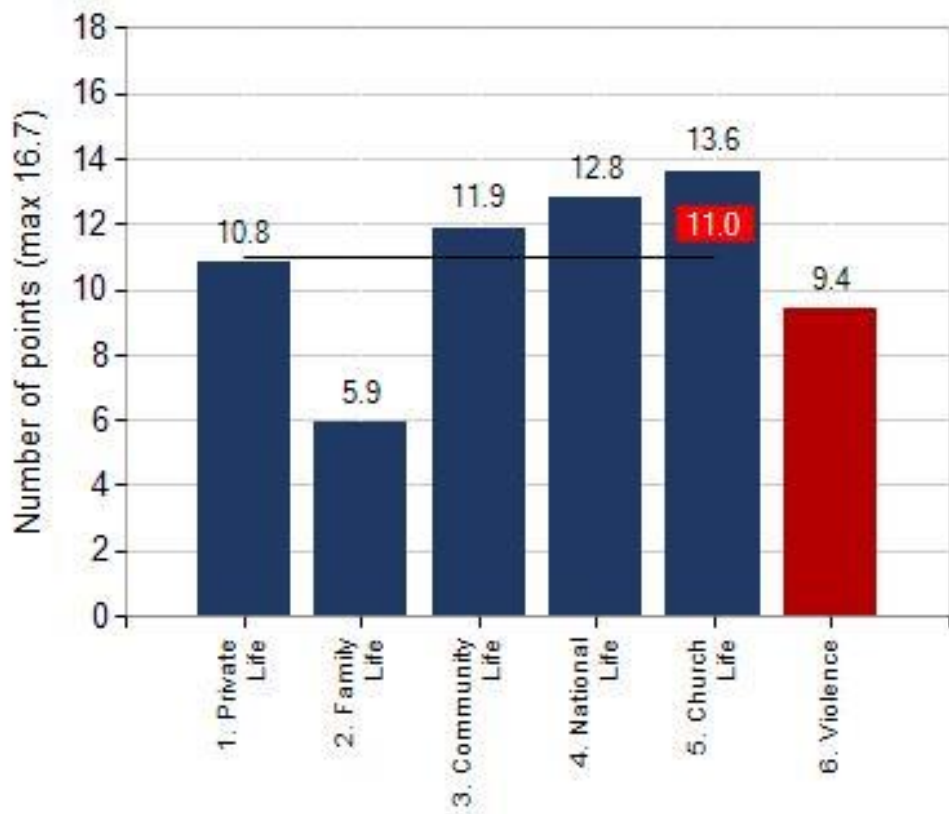
- ***Government officials (Medium):*** Government officials monitor church leaders and religious activities in general in order to identify any signs of ideas opposing the principles of the Sandinista Revolution. State authorities harass Christians who express faith-based views in conflict with regime policy or who accompany or provide support to the opposition. The government accuses and treats them as traitors and enemies.
- ***Political parties (Medium):*** Militant members of the FSLN ruling party play an important role in boosting patriotism and support for the government. Given that they use the state apparatus to impose the ideology of the Party, they are the ones who provide the resources for the repression of the Christians who oppose it.
- ***Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups (Medium):*** These act as the tough, violent arm of the regime. They seek to silence any dissenting voice in order to prevent the influence of the opposition spreading in society. Christians speaking up about democracy, respect of human rights or rule of law become the main targets of these groups.

Drivers of Organized corruption and crime

- ***Government officials (Strong):*** The authorities at local and national levels can conduct illegal actions with impunity given the existing networks of corruption. Government officials on their own or using paramilitary groups and criminal groups repress Christian dissidents and any Christian organization seeking to publicize corrupt government activities. Christians are an especially vulnerable group since they have nowhere to turn to for protection.
- ***Political parties (Medium):*** The ruling party exerts absolute control through the government. Since the ruling party is the main corrupt agent of the state, Christians can hardly make known their faith-based points of views regarding democracy and transparency without being punished or censored.
- ***Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups (Medium):*** Thanks to the alliances they have with government officials, paramilitary groups have had the freedom to attack and terrorize citizens in the wake of anti-government and anti-corruption protests.
- ***Organized crime cartels or networks (Medium):*** The government employs members of gangs for their squads and parapolice groups to suppress opposition voices. The state thus makes use of organized crime and its economic resources to attack civilians (including Christians) who are critical of the regime.

The Persecution pattern

WWL 2023 Persecution Pattern for Nicaragua



The WWL 2023 Persecution pattern for Nicaragua shows:

- The average pressure on Christians in Nicaragua is at a very high level, rising from 9.8 points in WWL 2022 to 11.0 points in WWL 2023.
- Pressure is strongest in the *Church* (13.6), *National* (12.8) and *Community* (11.9) spheres of life due to the repressive measures employed against church leaders and churches who are regarded as being supporters of anti-government elements who oppose regime interests.
- The score for violence is 9.4 points, which represents an increase of 1.8 points in the level of government reprisals against Christians. Compared to the WWL 2022 reporting period, there have been a greater number of churches and Christians attacked in attempts to intimidate them and silence their criticism.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, four questions have been selected from the WWL 2023 questionnaire for brief commentary and explanation. The selection usually (but not always) reflects the highest scoring elements. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. (To see how individual questions are scored on a scale of 0-4 points, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).

Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

Block 1.4: It has been risky for Christians to reveal their faith in written forms of personal expression (including expressions in blogs and Facebook etc.). (3.75 points)

With the increase of persecution against church leaders, it is more frequent that Christians are targeted and threatened by the regime when they express faith based political opinions criticizing government practices and the lack of transparency in the elections, when they defend Church opposition to ruling party ideology, or when they use social media to support priests or human rights activists under government surveillance. Surveillance, especially of social networks, is permanent and the criminalization of any Internet content opposing regime interests is now justified under the new cybercrime laws. Many Christians self-censor to avoid reprisals.

Block 1.8: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with those other than immediate family (extended family, others). (3.25 points)

Within pro-government families, or with any member of the FSLN party, to be Christian and critical of the government can provoke trouble. When a Christian is known as an 'opponent', government authorities are likely to interrogate extended family members too. In order to avoid retaliation, the extended family may report on activities or meeting places of their Christian relative, thus putting the latter in danger.

Block 1.9: It has been risky for Christians to meet with other Christians. (3.25 points)

This has been a widespread problem, especially among Catholic Christians living in areas where priests and bishops have experienced high levels of government hostility, such as Masaya, Matagalpa, Leon, Boaco and Jinotega. Meetings between them were often misinterpreted as being conspiratorial against the government and/or supporting the opposition, particularly when they occurred around the electoral period. Also, when Christians meet in their homes for any reason, their cars may be photographed and they are liable to be disturbed by the police. At times, the continuous application of curfews also prevented Christians from being able to get together for meetings, even when there was no religious motivation.

Block 1.7: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with immediate family members. (3.00 points)

Within pro-government families, or with any member of the FSLN, to be Christian and outspoken about government repression represents a risk, especially where the family might fear reprisals for being linked to an 'enemy of the regime'. In such cases, Christians are placed under pressure

not to speak out against the regime and (sometimes) not to meet with members of their church, especially if it is being monitored by the government. There is also evidence of inter-denominational conflict within families where a family member has chosen a different church affiliation.

Block 1 - Additional information

To own or keep Christian materials (e.g. Bibles) is allowed for most citizens in the country; however, it can be difficult in places like prisons or police stations. Such materials can cause Christians in jail to be classified as terrorists and mistreated and they must use them in secrecy. In some extreme cases, Christians avoid having them in their possession as they could link them to congregations or church leaders known for their stance against the regime.

Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

Block 2.8: Christian children have been pressured into attending anti-Christian or majority religion teaching at any level of education. (3.50 points)

Educational programs in schools indoctrinate young children in the ideology of the dictatorship. Children and young people are forced to carry FSLN flags and banners with wording that praises the regime and to attend pro-government rallies. Children of Christian parents are compelled not only to learn teaching that does not conform to Christian faith but are encouraged to believe that any ideology that goes against the government's must be eradicated by force. The presidential couple are revered as national heroes and “Augusto Sandino” has been compared to Christ.

Block 2.7: Parents have been hindered in raising their children according to their Christian beliefs. (3.25 points)

The main obstacle for Christian parents making it difficult to raise their children according to their Christian beliefs is the school indoctrination mentioned in Block 2.8. If parents try to protect their children from state propaganda, they are immediately considered regime opponents and become victims of reprisals. Most Christian parents try to find private spaces to share their faith with their children.

Block 2.9: Children of Christians have been harassed or discriminated against because of their parents' faith. (3.25 points)

Children of Christians are likely to face discrimination and abuse as long their parents keep opposing the regime. Government supporters threaten them as a means of warning their parents to stop being critical of the government. These actions are sometimes led by teachers, classmates or other parents. With more frequency during the WWL 2023 reporting period, when Christian children refuse to participate in some progovernment activities, they are labeled as “children of terrorists” or “coup heirs”. Also, there are sporadic cases involving *Christian denominational protectionism* or *Secular Intolerance* where children are victims of bullying when their religious practices are not accepted by their classmates.

Block 2.10: Christian spouses and/or children of Christians have been subject to separation for prolonged periods of time by circumstances relating to persecution. (3.25 points)

Christians who do not support the regime have faced (or been threatened with) kidnappings, arbitrary imprisonment and many have been forced to flee their homes. Such situations cause the separation of families for prolonged periods of time. Arbitrary arrest is one of the most frequent tactics against those considered 'enemies' and was a recurrent practice after the ruling party consolidated power in the November 2021 elections. Many of those who are detained (often Christians) or kept under house-arrest are not allowed to have any kind of communication with their families and are isolated from their relatives for prolonged periods of time. In other cases, Christians flee their homes in order to avoid reprisals against their relatives and cannot usually keep in contact with them for a prolonged period. In addition, the government has sometimes prevented Christians from re-entering the country, making it impossible for them to return to their families.

Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

Block 3.2: Christians have been monitored by their local communities or by private groups (this includes reporting to police, being shadowed, telephone lines listened to, emails read/censored, etc.). (3.50 points)

Civilian groups and pro-government sympathizers look out for any suspicious activity in the neighborhoods, schools and work places and act violently against any anti-government protesters. They support the police by recording names, addresses and movements of regime opponents. Christians in the community linked to churches and leaders known for their opposition to the regime are likely to be targeted and followed on a daily basis. This monitoring increased after the November 2021 elections.

Block 3.5: Christians have been put under pressure to take part in non-Christian religious ceremonies or community events. (3.50 points)

Sometimes, Christians - especially public workers - must attend political events in which both the ruling FSLN and the almost messianic figure of the president are praised as heroes; in such context, church affiliation is seen as a sign of national betrayal. Christians are forced to attend pro-government events in order not to be considered 'opponents' and not to expose their churches and families to harassment. The regime is also known to organize 'religious events' (without the consent of church leadership) with the aim of discrediting church leaders and confusing congregations. Pressure is exerted on workers to attend and show their support during such events.

Block 3.9: Christians have faced disadvantages in their education at any level for faith-related reasons (e.g. restrictions of access to education). (3.50 points)

The administrative authorities of the universities collude with the government to put pressure on students who oppose the regime; this has increased since April 2018. Christian students connected to a church leader or church known for its opposition to the regime run the risk of being easily targeted by university authorities (including professors closely related to the

regime) and can face being 'handed over' to the police on charges of terrorism. Such students face suspension, the chance of continuing their education is blocked, and their academic records may be deleted. If they are not deleted, it is recorded that they were expelled, making it difficult for them to be accepted at any of the surviving private education centers.

Block 3.13: Christians have been interrogated or compelled to report to the local vigilante/police for faith-related reasons. (3.50 points)

Due to the high levels of social monitoring and surveillance, all citizens (and especially those who speak out against the regime) are watched not only by government authorities but also by the Citizen Power Councils (CPC) and the Sandinista Leadership Committees. Christians in these circumstances (especially those who were in prison or have a relative under arrest, or who are known to be close to a church leader regarded as a terrorist) face having to constantly report their activities and meeting places to the authorities. They are interrogated by the police because outspoken Christians are automatically viewed as being linked to anti-government activities. They are also interrogated if they try to provide assistance to Christian leaders (including priests and nuns) facing government harassment. Some have been forced to make public statements condemning the very people they were trying to help.

Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

Block 4.8: Christians have been hindered in expressing their views or opinions in public. (4.00 points)

Every time Christians publicly express their faith-based points of view concerning the injustices of the regime, the authorities lash out against them with threats and other forms of repression carried out by state security forces, Sandinista mobs or paramilitary groups, allegedly operating within the legal framework. To be linked with the opposition via statements or pictures can be a reason to be targeted, especially if the subject is state abuse of religious leaders. Even if Christians try to be neutral, they can still be accused of betraying the nation for not defending or fully supporting the state authorities. Through such intimidation, it is intended that Christian academics, journalists and other professionals self-censor and refrain from open criticism of the government.

Block 4.14: Those who caused harm to Christians have deliberately been left unpunished. (4.00 points)

Those who harm Christians are both state and non-state agents endorsed by the government. Any kind of attack against Christians, church leaders, Christian organizations and Christian property is hardly ever brought to prosecution, let alone punished. The corruption networks ensure total impunity for the perpetrators and stability for the regime. Even when an “apparent” investigation is carried out, the final analysis can be sure to diminish the actual crime, for instance by highlighting the negligence of the Christians involved.

Block 4.15: Christians accused in court have been deprived of equal treatment. (4.00 points)

The minimum guarantees of human rights are not applied in the country, much less for the more than 200 political prisoners who have been imprisoned for being considered opponents of the regime, not to mention those who in practice were imprisoned for the same reason even though they do not receive such category formally due to the lack of transparency in the state information. Thus, given the networks of impunity and corruption, Christians that are classified as dissidents or opponents of the government are doubly harassed during judicial processes in the country, especially if the prosecuted are religious leaders, as happened during the WWL 2023 reporting period. The rules of due process are not applied in their case, and many times they stand accused for crimes they did not commit. Their families and attorneys will also sometimes be intimidated. Many are sent to prison or placed under house-arrest without even being formally sentenced. There is unequal treatment for those who are considered opponents of the government, this includes, in addition to arbitrary detentions, the lack of assistance from a lawyer, or an impartial judge, and the violation of the right to due process. Additionally, the (official) press department blocks media coverage (including international monitoring) of judicial sources. Those prosecuted may also be denied pastoral support from their churches during and after the trial.

Block 4.11: Christians have been subjected to smear campaigns or hate speech. (3.50 points)

Due to the government's control of the media, biased information has frequently been spread, with Christians and church leaders being portrayed as terrorists and traitors who are planning a coup and promoting social unrest. The president and vice-president have repeatedly insulted Christians in this way and have encouraged others to do so too, thus creating a climate of intolerance towards the Church, especially against priests and bishops. Militants of the party add to this by ridiculing Christians, for instance on social media networks. When churches issued statements concerning the seriousness of the human rights crisis, the lack of transparency in the electoral process, the importance of respect for democracy, the response from the presidential couple (President Daniel Ortega and his wife, Rosario Murillo) was to insult Christian teaching, church leaders and other believers by labeling them as demons who spread hatred and discord. The objective behind delegitimizing the Church is to justify the repressive actions against it since the attacks are presented as being a necessary strategy to get rid of 'fake' religious leaders and bring peace back to the country.

Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

Block 5.20: It has been risky for churches or Christian organizations to speak out against instigators of persecution. (4.00 points)

Since 2018, most churches and Christian organizations have been targeted with reprisals for criticizing the regime, denouncing its human rights violations and calling for respect for rule of law. To the extent that the Church has remained firm in its support for the most vulnerable and needy, the spiral of hostilities against them has systematically escalated, reaching its highest point in the WWL 2023 reporting period with frequent kidnappings, arrests, imprisonment, expulsions and closures of religious organizations and church-affiliated media.

Block 5.1: Church activities have been monitored, hindered, disturbed, or obstructed. (3.75 points)

There is constant police surveillance outside the Christian buildings and during Church activities considered to be linked to 'traitors' - i.e., political opponents, including religious leaders labeled that way. Church activities have also been disrupted by verbal attacks from Sandinista sympathizers. Church members are aware that there are some parishioners connected to the regime, who infiltrate their churches to inform the authorities about the people attending services and what they say and do. In addition, armed groups take photos of the exteriors of churches or chapels in order to intimidate and discourage attendance at services. Sometimes, details gained from monitoring are shared with criminal groups or groups sympathetic to the government so that they know when they can enter a church to rob or vandalize it.

Block 5.11: Pastors or other Christian leaders (or their family members) have been special targets of harassment for faith-related reasons. (3.75 points)

As mentioned in several parts of the WWL questionnaire, Christian leaders (mainly Catholics) reported that the government retaliated against churches running projects to support ordinary people. Priests and bishops have been portrayed by the regime as opportunists and schemers and have faced mental and physical abuse as a result; some have even faced prosecution and imprisonment. Christians, religious leaders, their families and many who are linked to the work of the Church have become victims of insults, defamation, mockery, beatings, arrests, forced displacement, loss of property and death threats. For instance, priests and parish leaders have been mocked and blocked from leaving church buildings. At other times, they have been prevented from receiving water or electricity. Some church leaders were prevented from holding services in their churches, and sometimes those wishing to attend church services held by those people were prevented from entering the churches.

Block 5.18: Churches have been hindered in establishing, managing, maintaining and conducting schools, or charitable, humanitarian, medical, social or cultural organizations, institutions and associations. (3.75 points)

Since the approval of the Law concerning Foreign Actors, there have been increasing restrictions on church-run institutions due to the strict requirement to declare the origin of each item of international funding received. Fines have been arbitrarily imposed where the authorities consider the donor to be a danger for the national interest. The government has increasingly used this procedure to deny licenses for registration, to cancel the legal status of those entities and to generally hinder the activities of church-affiliated organizations. In addition, the regime has continued to target humanitarian work carried out by such organizations, often via aggressive FSLN supporter action. Blocking the distribution of humanitarian and medical church aid in disaster areas and to those in poverty serves a clear purpose, namely, to keep the population dependent on the economic handouts that the government provides, thus buying the people's support and giving legitimacy to the dictatorial regime.

Violence

Violence is defined in WWL Methodology as the deprivation of physical freedom or as bodily harm to Christians or damage to their property. It includes severe threats (mental abuse). The table is based on reported cases as much as possible, but since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as being minimum figures. The following 5 points should be considered when using the data provided in the Block 6 table:

1. Some incidents go unreported because the Christians involved choose not to speak about the hostility being faced. Possible reasons for this may be:

- Doing so would expose them to more attacks. For example, if a family member is killed because of his/her faith, the survivors might decide to keep silent about the circumstances of the killing to avoid provoking any further attacks.
- In some circumstances, the reticence to pass on information may be due to the danger of exposure caused by converts returning to their previous faith.
- If persecution is related to sexual violence - due to stigma, survivors often do not tell even their closest relatives.
- In some cultural settings, if your loved one is killed, you might be under the obligation to take revenge. Christians not wishing to do that, may decide to keep quiet about it.

2. Other incidents go unreported for the following possible reasons:

- Some incidents never reach the public consciousness, because no one really knows about it; or the incident is simply not considered worth reporting; or media coverage is deliberately blocked or distorted; or media coverage is not deliberately blocked, but the information somehow gets lost; or the incidents are deliberately not reported widely for security reasons (e.g. for the protection of local church leaders).
- In situations where Christians have been discriminated against for many years, armed conflict can make them additionally vulnerable. Christians killed in areas where fighting regularly takes place are unlikely to be reported separately. Examples in recent years have been Sudan, Syria and Myanmar.
- Christians who die through the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care (due to long-term discrimination) are unlikely to be reported separately. Christians are not always killed directly; they can be so squeezed by regulations and other oppressive factors that they die – not at once, but in the course of years. This often includes the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care, or exclusion from government assisted socio-economic development projects. These numbers could be immense.

3. For further discussion (with a focus on the complexity of assessing the numbers of Christians killed for their faith) please see World Watch Monitor's article dated 13 November 2013 available at:
<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2013/11/number-of-christian-martyrs-continues-to-cause-debate/>.

4. The use of symbolic numbers: In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10*, 100* etc.) is given and indicated with an asterisk. A symbolic number of 10* could in reality even be 100 or more but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 100* could go well over 1000 but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 1,000* could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000*, 100,000* and 1,000,000*: Each could indicate much higher numbers, but WWR chooses to be cautious because the real number is uncertain.

5. The symbol "x" in the table: This denotes a known number which cannot be published due to security concerns.

Nicaragua: Violence Block question		WWL 2023	WWL 2022
6.1	How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	0	0
6.2	How many churches or public Christian properties (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	31	28
6.3	How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	23	1
6.4	How many Christians have been sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment, or similar things for faith-related reasons?	3	1
6.5	How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	17	1
6.6	How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.7	How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians?	0	0
6.8	How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	32	22
6.9	How many houses of Christians or other property (excluding shops) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	3	0
6.10	How many shops or businesses of Christians have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	12	0
6.11	How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	3	4
6.12	How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	41	11

In the WWL 2023 reporting period:

- **Christian buildings attacked (31):** Most of the public Christian properties closed were a form of government reprisal against the church leaders responsible for running them. Other attacks often involved arson, vandalism and damage to church property.
- **Christians detained (23):** Most of the detainees were Catholic leaders accused of being instigators of action against the regime. In many cases, the church leaders had first suffered a police blockade, preventing them from leaving their homes. After some days, they were then formally arrested and in some cases, prosecuted.

- **Christians attacked (32):** These incidents happened mostly when Christian activists or church leaders were involved in publicly defending human rights, claiming justice for protesters and in criticizing the regime. The attacks were in the form of beatings and death threats carried out by security agents, government sympathizers, paramilitary groups or other allies of President Ortega's regime.
- **Christians forced to leave the country (41):** Most of these cases were foreign church leaders who had lived in the country for several years but were now expelled or denied re-entry to the regime. Other cases involved Christians fleeing the country in the face of government reprisals.

5 Year trends

The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

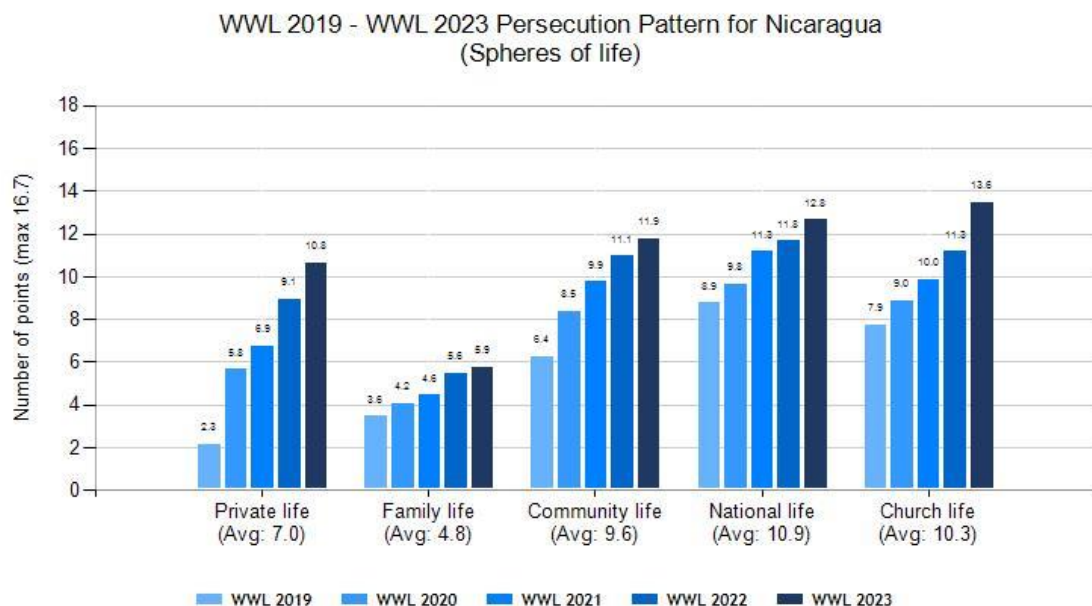
5 Year trends: Average pressure

Nicaragua: WWL 2019 - WWL 2023 Persecution Pattern history	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2023	11.0
2022	9.8
2021	8.5
2020	7.5
2019	5.8

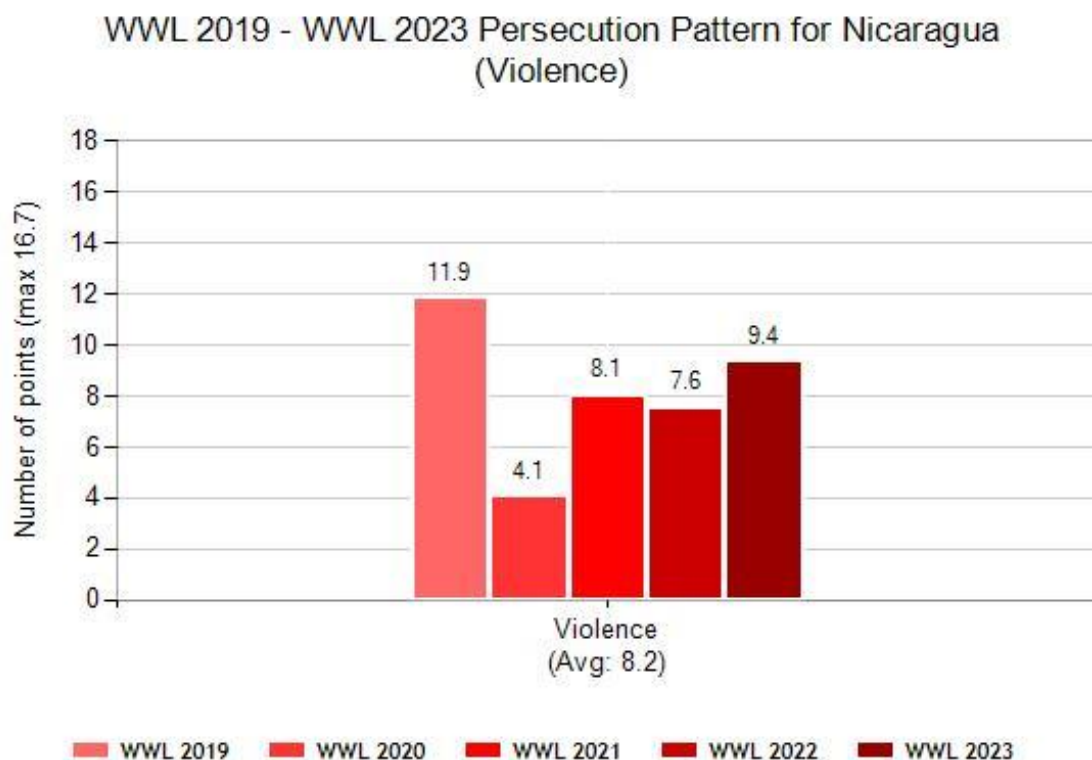
The table shows that the average pressure on Christians has steadily increased since WWL 2019, which is the period following the April 2018 protests. In this part of the country's history, the Church has been facing growing repression from the state.

5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life

As can be seen in the chart below, pressure in *all spheres of life* has been on the rise, due to the fact that government and FSLN-supporter hostility towards Christians has intensified. Church leaders have continued to call for the government to respect human rights and democratic principles and have continued to suffer the consequences for this.



5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



Although the highest level of violence was reached in WWL 2019, the scores for the last three reporting periods remain in the category 'very high' due to the levels of repression which are also manifested as *smash*.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	-
Security	-
Social and Cultural	Violence – psychological
Technological	-

Compared to other Latin American countries, women and girls experience relatively few gender-specific forms of religious persecution. Those most at risk are female dissidents of the regime, human rights activists, or relatives of political opponents. Christian women – primarily Catholic – can fall into this category. They then easily find themselves at the mercy of allies of the government (who keep them under constant surveillance) and criminal groups. Ongoing state oppression under President Daniel Ortega has worsened in the WWL 2023 reporting period, placing such women in a condition of increased vulnerability. Due to a lack of confidence in the justice system, many victims have not reported crimes against them. Perpetrators enjoy impunity, and even those imprisoned for their crimes are often later granted pardons.

Christian women and girls also suffer the loss of Christian men and boys, who are more vulnerable to being imprisoned, abducted, or forced to flee Nicaragua (See below: *Gender-specific religious persecution/Male*).

More broadly, Nicaraguan women remain at high risk of domestic violence, although the introduction of new legislation to tackle this has been welcomed as a positive development ([Georgetown, Women Peace and Security Index 2021/22, p.29](#)).

Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

Group	Male Pressure Points
Economic	Denied inheritance or possessions; Economic harassment via business/job/work access; Economic harassment via fines
Political and Legal	Denied access to Christian religious materials, teachings and rites; False charges; Imprisonment by government; Travel bans/restrictions on movement
Security	Abduction; Forced out of home – expulsion; Forced to flee town/country; Violence – physical
Social and Cultural	Denied access to social community/networks; Denied communal resources; Denied food or water; Denied/restricted healthcare; Violence – psychological; Violence – Verbal
Technological	-

Men and boys are, in general, more likely to experience visible forms of persecution than women. This is primarily linked to the roles that men and boys assume. Male youths are more likely to take part in demonstrations demanding the resignation of the president and suffer government retaliation. Reports suggest that male students have also been forced to participate in political events organized to show support for Ortega's regime, even without their parents' consent. The high level of political pressure in all spheres of life forces many "to leave the country to preserve their lives and this causes the family to fall apart," as a country expert explained.

Most church leaders (primarily Catholic) or ministry leaders in Nicaragua are male. When the government identifies a man associated with a church known for its opposition to the regime, he is more vulnerable to repression, and he will suffer pressure and hostility from state and non-state agents. "It has been known that banks and microfinance institutions had as a policy not to lend money to Christian ministers like pastors, even when it was to finance their own businesses and not necessarily [related] to their churches. They also tend to deny loans to Christian businessmen when they are targeted by government, or they are politically active," a source revealed.

Those who provided shelter and medical assistance to protesters in 2018 continue to experience government retribution years later, including slander, arbitrary investigations by government agencies, and unfounded charges. Catholic priests are especially vilified by President Ortega. As noted in the 2021 Report on International Religious Freedom by the US Department of State: "Throughout the year, President Daniel Ortega and Vice President and First Lady Rosario Murillo verbally harassed priests and bishops, labelled them "terrorists in cassocks" and "coup-plotters," and accused them of committing crimes" (IRFR 2021). Priests and parishioners have been taken hostage inside churches, denied water and electricity, verbally abused, and physically beaten. Others have been abducted, or imprisoned where they face maltreatment, and are denied access to family members ([OAS, July 9, 2021](#)).

Considering these pressures, many men – particularly church leaders – have felt forced to flee the country, facing the dangers of possible capture by human traffickers and other criminal groups. Others who remain have been subjected to immigration restrictions and increased difficulty moving freely within the country. A country expert summarizes: "All possible obstacles are imposed because they not only want to harass the Church and the leaders they consider to be in opposition, but also because the ultimate goal is to prevent the spread of the faith."

Persecution of other religious minorities

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2021) and USCIRF 2022, no information on cases of persecution of non-Christian groups was reported.

Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

Dictatorial paranoia

After an electoral process with a lack of transparency, political harassment and abuse of power against opposition candidates, and hostilities against any critic of the regime, the results that proclaimed Ortega the winner in November 2021 have lost total legitimacy and credibility inside and outside the country. Given that the voices of the opposition calling for a return to democracy and respect for human rights are becoming louder, reprisals against them are also becoming more open, with new forms of intimidation to demonstrate the absolute control of the regime. This increases the vulnerability of the Church, which despite being a constant victim of government attacks, has continued to support the weakest in society and publicly denounce the government's repressive measures. It is essential to recognize the risk that the Church is experiencing in these circumstances and to demand the minimum guarantees for its work in the country, both as an institution and for the full exercise of the right to religious freedom of its leaders and parishioners.

Communist and post-Communist oppression

As the government further restricts protests and critical voices, discontent with the SNFL political model becomes ever more widespread. Repression, surveillance, arrests, etc. against those who defend the rule of law will continue to be tactics of the regime as long as it remains in office. However, even when government harassment to control the Christian message and repress religious leaders is intended to give the appearance of legitimacy under repressive laws, the perseverance of the churches in the face of persecution has given them a voice of real authority to continue defending social interests and seeking the benefit of those most in need.

Organized corruption and crime

Corrupt practices in the administration of public resources are frequent and well known, despite the lack of transparency in public institutions. This form of abuse of power will persist as long as the Ortega government maintains absolute control of the different areas of government, to ensure the financing of repressive actions and support for the criminal networks that benefit from them. Through the loyalty - and sometimes fear - on the part of government collaborators, church leaders and their churches are likely to remain the target for frequent attacks.

External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: Georgetown, Women Peace and Security Index 2021/22, p.29 - <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/WPS-Index-2021.pdf>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: OAS, July 9, 2021 - https://www.oas.org/en/IACHR/jsForm/?File=/en/iachr/media_center/PReleases/2021/171.asp

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the new Research & Reports page of the website od.org. As in earlier years, they are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom) using the following links:

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Nicaragua>