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2024

Nicaragua

LANDSINFORMATION

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I tjänst för världens förföljda **kristna**

World
Watch
Research

Nicaragua: Full Country Dossier

January 2024



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

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Contents

| | |
|---|----------|
| Introduction | 3 |
| World Watch List 2024 | 3 |
| Copyright note..... | 4 |
| Sources and definitions | 4 |
| WWL 2024 Situation in brief / Nicaragua | 5 |
| Brief country details | 5 |
| Map of country..... | 5 |
| Dominant persecution engines and drivers | 6 |
| Brief description of the persecution situation | 6 |
| Summary of international obligations and rights violations | 6 |
| Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period | 7 |
| Specific examples of positive developments | 7 |
| External Links - Situation in brief | 7 |
| WWL 2024: Keys to understanding / Nicaragua | 9 |
| Links for general background information | 9 |
| Recent history | 9 |
| Political and legal landscape | 10 |
| Religious landscape | 14 |
| Economic landscape..... | 18 |
| Social and cultural landscape..... | 19 |
| Technological landscape | 23 |
| Security situation | 24 |

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Trends analysis | 26 |
| External Links - Keys to understanding | 26 |
| WWL 2024: Church information / Nicaragua..... | 32 |
| Christian origins..... | 32 |
| Church spectrum today | 32 |
| Areas where Christians face most difficulties | 33 |
| Christian communities and how they are affected | 33 |
| External Links - Church information..... | 34 |
| WWL 2024: Persecution Dynamics / Nicaragua..... | 34 |
| Reporting period | 34 |
| Position on the World Watch List | 34 |
| Persecution engines | 34 |
| Drivers of persecution | 36 |
| The Persecution pattern..... | 38 |
| Pressure in the 5 spheres of life | 39 |
| Violence..... | 46 |
| 5 Year trends | 48 |
| Gender-specific religious persecution / Female | 50 |
| Gender-specific religious persecution / Male | 51 |
| Persecution of other religious minorities..... | 52 |
| Future outlook..... | 52 |
| External Links - Persecution Dynamics..... | 53 |
| Further useful reports..... | 53 |

Introduction

World Watch List 2024

| Rank | Country | Private life | Family life | Community life | National life | Church life | Violence | Total Score WWL 2024 | Total Score WWL 2023 | Total Score WWL 2022 | Total Score WWL 2021 | Total Score WWL 2020 |
|------|--------------|--------------|-------------|----------------|---------------|-------------|----------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| 1 | North Korea | 16.7 | 16.7 | 16.7 | 16.7 | 16.7 | 12.8 | 96 | 98 | 96 | 94 | 94 |
| 2 | Somalia | 16.5 | 16.7 | 16.6 | 16.6 | 16.6 | 10.6 | 93 | 92 | 91 | 92 | 92 |
| 3 | Libya | 15.9 | 16.0 | 15.9 | 16.1 | 16.4 | 10.2 | 91 | 88 | 91 | 92 | 90 |
| 4 | Eritrea | 14.6 | 14.9 | 15.5 | 15.9 | 15.7 | 12.8 | 89 | 89 | 88 | 88 | 87 |
| 5 | Yemen | 16.7 | 16.7 | 16.7 | 16.7 | 16.7 | 5.9 | 89 | 89 | 88 | 87 | 85 |
| 6 | Nigeria | 13.5 | 13.9 | 14.5 | 14.9 | 14.4 | 16.7 | 88 | 88 | 87 | 85 | 80 |
| 7 | Pakistan | 13.2 | 13.9 | 15.0 | 15.1 | 13.1 | 16.7 | 87 | 86 | 87 | 88 | 88 |
| 8 | Sudan | 14.1 | 14.2 | 14.9 | 14.9 | 15.5 | 13.3 | 87 | 83 | 79 | 79 | 85 |
| 9 | Iran | 15.0 | 14.6 | 13.5 | 15.8 | 16.5 | 10.9 | 86 | 86 | 85 | 86 | 85 |
| 10 | Afghanistan | 15.7 | 15.9 | 15.2 | 16.3 | 16.6 | 4.6 | 84 | 84 | 98 | 94 | 93 |
| 11 | India | 12.2 | 12.6 | 13.3 | 14.8 | 13.2 | 16.5 | 83 | 82 | 82 | 83 | 83 |
| 12 | Syria | 13.4 | 14.3 | 13.9 | 14.3 | 14.2 | 11.1 | 81 | 80 | 78 | 81 | 82 |
| 13 | Saudi Arabia | 15.2 | 15.3 | 14.8 | 15.7 | 16.6 | 3.3 | 81 | 80 | 81 | 78 | 79 |
| 14 | Mali | 11.1 | 10.1 | 14.7 | 12.8 | 15.1 | 15.6 | 79 | 76 | 70 | 67 | 66 |
| 15 | Algeria | 14.4 | 14.1 | 11.5 | 14.0 | 15.6 | 9.8 | 79 | 73 | 71 | 70 | 73 |
| 16 | Iraq | 14.2 | 14.4 | 14.0 | 14.8 | 13.9 | 7.8 | 79 | 76 | 78 | 82 | 76 |
| 17 | Myanmar | 12.2 | 10.6 | 13.4 | 13.7 | 13.0 | 16.1 | 79 | 80 | 79 | 74 | 73 |
| 18 | Maldives | 15.6 | 15.5 | 13.6 | 16.0 | 16.4 | 0.9 | 78 | 77 | 77 | 77 | 78 |
| 19 | China | 13.0 | 10.0 | 12.8 | 14.6 | 16.0 | 11.1 | 78 | 77 | 76 | 74 | 70 |
| 20 | Burkina Faso | 11.7 | 9.7 | 13.2 | 11.5 | 13.8 | 15.6 | 75 | 71 | 68 | 67 | 66 |
| 21 | Laos | 11.6 | 10.6 | 13.2 | 14.3 | 14.0 | 11.3 | 75 | 68 | 69 | 71 | 72 |
| 22 | Cuba | 13.2 | 8.7 | 13.8 | 13.3 | 15.1 | 8.7 | 73 | 70 | 66 | 62 | 52 |
| 23 | Mauritania | 14.6 | 14.2 | 13.8 | 14.2 | 14.2 | 1.3 | 72 | 72 | 70 | 71 | 68 |
| 24 | Morocco | 13.2 | 13.8 | 11.7 | 12.8 | 14.4 | 5.4 | 71 | 69 | 69 | 67 | 66 |
| 25 | Uzbekistan | 14.6 | 12.7 | 13.9 | 12.6 | 15.5 | 1.7 | 71 | 71 | 71 | 71 | 73 |
| 26 | Bangladesh | 12.4 | 10.6 | 12.5 | 10.8 | 10.4 | 14.1 | 71 | 69 | 68 | 67 | 63 |
| 27 | Niger | 9.4 | 9.6 | 14.5 | 7.7 | 13.1 | 15.9 | 70 | 70 | 68 | 62 | 60 |
| 28 | CAR | 10.3 | 8.6 | 13.9 | 9.6 | 12.2 | 15.6 | 70 | 70 | 68 | 66 | 68 |
| 29 | Turkmenistan | 14.2 | 12.3 | 13.6 | 13.9 | 15.5 | 0.6 | 70 | 70 | 69 | 70 | 70 |
| 30 | Nicaragua | 12.1 | 7.6 | 13.2 | 13.2 | 14.1 | 9.6 | 70 | 65 | 56 | 51 | 41 |
| 31 | Oman | 14.3 | 14.0 | 10.6 | 13.3 | 14.0 | 3.1 | 69 | 65 | 66 | 63 | 62 |
| 32 | Ethiopia | 9.9 | 9.7 | 12.6 | 10.4 | 12.1 | 14.4 | 69 | 66 | 66 | 65 | 63 |
| 33 | Tunisia | 12.3 | 13.2 | 10.2 | 12.4 | 13.8 | 6.9 | 69 | 67 | 66 | 67 | 64 |
| 34 | Colombia | 11.1 | 8.6 | 12.9 | 11.3 | 10.4 | 14.1 | 68 | 71 | 68 | 67 | 62 |
| 35 | Vietnam | 11.3 | 9.4 | 12.4 | 13.8 | 14.2 | 7.2 | 68 | 70 | 71 | 72 | 72 |
| 36 | Bhutan | 13.1 | 12.1 | 12.4 | 14.1 | 14.3 | 2.2 | 68 | 66 | 67 | 64 | 61 |
| 37 | Mexico | 11.5 | 8.5 | 12.5 | 11.1 | 10.6 | 14.1 | 68 | 67 | 65 | 64 | 60 |
| 38 | Egypt | 12.5 | 13.7 | 11.4 | 11.9 | 10.9 | 7.8 | 68 | 68 | 71 | 75 | 76 |
| 39 | Mozambique | 9.3 | 8.5 | 13.9 | 8.4 | 12.5 | 15.0 | 68 | 68 | 65 | 63 | 43 |
| 40 | Qatar | 14.2 | 14.2 | 10.5 | 13.2 | 14.4 | 0.6 | 67 | 68 | 74 | 67 | 66 |
| 41 | DRC | 8.0 | 7.9 | 12.6 | 9.7 | 13.0 | 15.9 | 67 | 67 | 66 | 64 | 56 |
| 42 | Indonesia | 10.9 | 12.3 | 11.5 | 10.2 | 9.7 | 11.5 | 66 | 68 | 68 | 63 | 60 |
| 43 | Cameroon | 8.8 | 7.6 | 12.6 | 8.0 | 13.1 | 15.9 | 66 | 65 | 65 | 64 | 60 |
| 44 | Brunei | 15.0 | 14.7 | 10.0 | 10.8 | 14.1 | 1.3 | 66 | 65 | 64 | 64 | 63 |
| 45 | Comoros | 12.7 | 14.0 | 11.2 | 12.4 | 14.2 | 1.1 | 66 | 66 | 63 | 62 | 57 |
| 46 | Tajikistan | 13.8 | 12.6 | 12.3 | 12.9 | 13.4 | 0.6 | 66 | 66 | 65 | 66 | 65 |
| 47 | Kazakhstan | 13.3 | 11.8 | 12.1 | 12.8 | 14.3 | 1.1 | 65 | 65 | 64 | 64 | 64 |
| 48 | Jordan | 12.9 | 14.2 | 10.5 | 12.4 | 12.8 | 2.2 | 65 | 65 | 66 | 64 | 64 |
| 49 | Malaysia | 13.0 | 14.1 | 11.5 | 12.2 | 11.1 | 2.4 | 64 | 66 | 63 | 63 | 62 |
| 50 | Turkey | 13.0 | 11.5 | 11.6 | 13.2 | 11.4 | 3.1 | 64 | 66 | 65 | 69 | 63 |

| Rank | Country | Private life | Family life | Community life | National life | Church life | Violence | Total Score WWL 2024 | Total Score WWL 2023 | Total Score WWL 2022 | Total Score WWL 2021 | Total Score WWL 2020 |
|------|-------------------------|--------------|-------------|----------------|---------------|-------------|----------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| 51 | Kenya | 10.3 | 9.2 | 11.4 | 8.0 | 11.5 | 12.4 | 63 | 64 | 63 | 62 | 61 |
| 52 | Tanzania | 9.3 | 10.8 | 10.3 | 8.6 | 8.7 | 14.4 | 62 | 63 | 61 | 58 | 55 |
| 53 | Nepal | 12.1 | 10.4 | 9.5 | 13.2 | 12.3 | 4.4 | 62 | 61 | 64 | 66 | 64 |
| 54 | Kuwait | 13.1 | 13.6 | 9.4 | 12.0 | 12.2 | 0.9 | 61 | 64 | 64 | 63 | 62 |
| 55 | Djibouti | 12.3 | 12.6 | 12.7 | 10.1 | 12.3 | 1.1 | 61 | 60 | 59 | 56 | 56 |
| 56 | Chad | 11.6 | 8.2 | 10.2 | 10.2 | 10.3 | 10.6 | 61 | 58 | 55 | 53 | 56 |
| 57 | UAE | 13.3 | 13.4 | 9.5 | 11.3 | 12.8 | 0.7 | 61 | 62 | 62 | 62 | 60 |
| 58 | Sri Lanka | 12.9 | 9.2 | 10.8 | 11.5 | 9.7 | 5.9 | 60 | 57 | 63 | 62 | 65 |
| 59 | Azerbaijan | 13.2 | 9.9 | 9.6 | 11.9 | 13.6 | 1.7 | 60 | 59 | 60 | 56 | 57 |
| 60 | Palestinian Territories | 13.1 | 13.3 | 9.7 | 10.7 | 12.1 | 0.9 | 60 | 60 | 59 | 58 | 60 |
| 61 | Kyrgyzstan | 13.2 | 10.3 | 11.3 | 10.5 | 12.2 | 1.3 | 59 | 59 | 58 | 58 | 57 |
| 62 | Russian Federation | 12.7 | 7.7 | 10.6 | 12.8 | 12.9 | 1.7 | 58 | 57 | 56 | 57 | 60 |
| 63 | Rwanda | 9.4 | 7.7 | 9.0 | 10.4 | 11.7 | 9.4 | 58 | 57 | 50 | 42 | 42 |
| 64 | Burundi | 7.6 | 7.8 | 9.4 | 9.8 | 9.7 | 12.8 | 57 | 55 | 52 | 48 | 48 |
| 65 | Bahrain | 12.0 | 13.2 | 8.6 | 11.3 | 8.5 | 1.1 | 55 | 55 | 57 | 56 | 55 |
| 66 | Honduras | 7.9 | 4.7 | 12.2 | 7.3 | 9.9 | 12.6 | 55 | 53 | 48 | 46 | 39 |
| 67 | Venezuela | 6.0 | 4.4 | 11.1 | 10.0 | 10.8 | 10.7 | 53 | 56 | 51 | 39 | 42 |
| 68 | Togo | 9.2 | 6.7 | 9.3 | 7.1 | 11.0 | 8.9 | 52 | 49 | 44 | 43 | 41 |
| 69 | Guinea | 10.3 | 7.5 | 8.3 | 8.3 | 10.5 | 7.2 | 52 | 48 | 43 | 47 | 45 |
| 70 | Uganda | 8.1 | 5.0 | 7.4 | 6.7 | 8.8 | 15.9 | 52 | 51 | 48 | 47 | 48 |
| 71 | Angola | 6.8 | 6.7 | 8.1 | 11.5 | 11.4 | 7.2 | 52 | 52 | 51 | 46 | 43 |
| 72 | Lebanon | 11.0 | 10.2 | 7.0 | 6.1 | 6.6 | 7.2 | 48 | 40 | 11 | - | 35 |
| 73 | Gambia | 8.3 | 8.2 | 8.9 | 8.8 | 8.9 | 3.7 | 47 | 44 | 44 | 43 | 43 |
| 74 | South Sudan | 5.7 | 4.4 | 7.0 | 6.3 | 7.6 | 15.6 | 46 | 46 | 43 | 43 | 44 |
| 75 | Belarus | 9.6 | 3.8 | 5.8 | 9.7 | 13.3 | 3.3 | 46 | 43 | 33 | 30 | 28 |
| 76 | Ivory Coast | 12.0 | 6.5 | 8.7 | 5.9 | 8.0 | 3.3 | 44 | 44 | 42 | 42 | 42 |
| 77 | Ukraine | 5.5 | 4.8 | 8.0 | 11.6 | 11.6 | 2.8 | 44 | 37 | 37 | 34 | 33 |
| 78 | Israel | 9.8 | 8.6 | 5.8 | 6.3 | 6.9 | 6.7 | 44 | 38 | 41 | 40 | 38 |

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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 2024 reporting period was 01 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- 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 can be found on the research pages of the Open Doors website: <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-documentation/> and on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom): <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>.

WWL 2024 Situation in brief / Nicaragua

Brief country details

| Nicaragua: Population (UN estimate for 2023) | Christians | Chr% |
|--|------------|------|
| 6,855,000 | 6,506,000 | 94.9 |

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

Map of country



| Nicaragua: World Watch List | Points | WWL Rank |
|-----------------------------|--------|----------|
| WWL 2024 | 70 | 30 |
| WWL 2023 | 65 | 50 |
| WWL 2022 | 56 | 61 |
| WWL 2021 | 51 | 63 |
| WWL 2020 | 41 | 72 |

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 | Political parties, Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups, Government officials, Ideological pressure 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, legal prosecution, closure and expropriation of many Christian organizations (including universities and churches) in addition to violent actions with the aim of 'suffocating' the Church and silencing its voice. This has progressively intensified since 2018 as church leaders and others have continued 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

- **February 2023:** Bishop Rolando Alvarez, under arrest since August 2022, was [sentenced to 26 years and 4 months imprisonment](#) on 9 February (Christian Post, 12 February 2023). He was found [guilty](#) of the “crimes of undermining national integrity, propagation of false news through information technology, obstruction of functions, aggravated disobedience or contempt of authority, all of this committed to the detriment of society and the State of the Republic of Nicaragua” (El País, 17 February 2023). He has been assigned to a [punishment cell](#) in La Modelo prison where he is being held incommunicado (CNA, 3 March 2023).
- **May 2023:** Access to bank accounts of various dioceses and churches was [blocked](#) by the authorities. Police stated that they had been informed of "illegal activity in the management of funds and resources in bank accounts that had belonged to people convicted of treason" (El País, 27 May 2023).
- **September 2023:** Since May 2023, Roman Catholic Priest Harving Padilla, one of the most outspoken critics of the dictatorial regime, had been under house arrest, confined in La Purisima seminary in Managua for 16 months. However, at the end of September 2023, he managed to [escape](#) and left the country (Despacho 505, 5 October 2023).

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 and governments. For instance, the US government included Nicaragua as a “[Country of particular concern](#)” due to its record of religious freedom violations (France 24, 02 December 2022). The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) also [urged](#) the Nicaraguan government to stop repressing religious freedom and persecuting the Roman Catholic Church, and to release all individuals who have been arbitrarily deprived of liberty (IACHR, 15 September 2023). The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights for Central America and the English Caribbean (OHCHR), together with the IACHR, have also [condemned](#) the continued violations of his human rights against Bishop Álvarez and other members of the Catholic Church (IACHR, 18 August 2023). The European Parliament [approved](#), by a large majority, a resolution demanding the release of Bishop Álvarez and denounced the persecution of the Catholic Church by the regime (Infobae, 15 September 2022) as well as demanding [proof of life](#) to verify the bishop's prison conditions (La Prensa, 15 June 2023).

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: sentenced to 26 years and 4 months imprisonment - <https://www.christianpost.com/news/nicaraguan-court-sentences-catholic-bishop-to-26-years-in-prison.html>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: guilty - <https://elpais.com/opinion/2023-02-17/repudio-la-condena-ilegal-del-obispo-rolando-jose-alvarez-lagos.html>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: punishment cell - <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/253788/aid-to-the-church-in-need-greatly-concerned-about-nicaraguan-bishop-sentenced-to-prison>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: as blocked - https://elpais.com/internacional/2023-05-27/el-regimen-de-ortega-y-murillo-congela-las-cuentas-bancarias-de-la-iglesia-catolica-de-nicaragua.html?event_log=oklogin
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: escape - <https://www.despacho505.com/el-padre-harving-padilla-burla-encierro-policia-impuesto-por-la-dictadura-y-logra-exiliarse/>
- Specific examples of positive developments: Country of particular concern - <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20221202-us-adds-cuba-nicaragua-wagner-group-to-religious-freedom-blacklist>
- Specific examples of positive developments: urged - https://www.oas.org/en/IACHR/jsForm/?File=/en/iachr/media_center/PReleases/2023/218.asp
- Specific examples of positive developments: condemned - https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/jsForm/?File=/en/iachr/media_center/preleases/2023/184.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/>
- Specific examples of positive developments: proof of life - <https://www.laprensani.com/2023/06/15/politica/3161407-parlamento-europeo-pide-al-regimen-prueba-de-vida-de-monsenor-rolando-alvarez>

WWL 2024: Keys to understanding / Nicaragua

Links for general background information

| Name | Quote Reference | Link | Last accessed on |
|---|--------------------------------------|---|------------------|
| Amnesty International 2022/23 Nicaragua report | AI Nicaragua 2022 | https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/americas/central-america-and-the-caribbean/nicaragua/report-nicaragua/ | 30 June 2023 |
| BBC News Nicaragua profile – updated 4 April 2023 | BBC Nicaragua profile | https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-19735631 | 30 June 2023 |
| Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2022 – covering 137 countries | BTI Nicaragua Report 2022 | https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/NIC | 30 June 2023 |
| CIA World Factbook Nicaragua - updated 19 June 2023 | World Factbook Nicaragua | https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/nicaragua/ | 30 June 2023 |
| Crisis24 Nicaragua report (Garda World) | Crisis24 Nicaragua report | https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/nicaragua | 30 June 2023 |
| Economist Intelligence Unit Nicaragua profile 2023 | EIU Nicaragua profile 2023 | https://country.eiu.com/nicaragua | 30 June 2023 |
| FFP's Fragile States Index 2023 – covering 179 countries | FSI 2023 Nicaragua | https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/ | 30 June 2023 |
| Freedom House's 2023 Democracy index – covering 29 countries, Nicaragua not included | Democracy Index 2023 | https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores | |
| Freedom House's 2023 Global Freedom index – covering 210 countries | Global Freedom Index 2023 Nicaragua | https://freedomhouse.org/country/nicaragua/freedom-world/2023 | 30 June 2023 |
| Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2023 report – covering 70 countries | Freedom on the Net 2023 Nicaragua | https://freedomhouse.org/country/nicaragua/freedom-net/2023 | 2 January 2024 |
| Georgetown's Women, Peace and Security Index 2021/2022 – covering 170 countries | GIWPS 2021 Nicaragua profile | https://giwps.georgetown.edu/country/nicaragua/ | 30 June 2023 |
| Girls Not Brides Nicaragua report | Girls Not Brides Nicaragua | https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/nicaragua/ | 30 June 2023 |
| Human Rights Watch World Report 2023 - Nicaragua country chapter | HRW 2023 Nicaragua country chapter | https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/nicaragua | 30 June 2023 |
| Internet World Stats available in 2023 | IWS 2023 Nicaragua | https://www.internetworldstats.com/central.htm#ni | 30 June 2023 |
| RSF's 2023 World Press Freedom Index – covering 180 countries | World Press Freedom 2023 Nicaragua | https://rsf.org/en/nicaragua | 30 June 2023 |
| Transparency International's 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index – covering 180 countries | CPI 2022 Nicaragua | https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022/index/nic | 30 June 2023 |
| UNDP: Human Development Report Nicaragua | UNDP HDR Nicaragua | https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/NIC | 30 June 2023 |
| US State Department's 2022 International Religious Freedom Report Nicaragua | IRFR 2022 Nicaragua | https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/nicaragua/ | 30 June 2023 |
| USCIRF 2023 Nicaragua report – covering 17 CPC / 11 SWL | USCIRF 2023 Nicaragua CPC | https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2023-05/Nicaragua.pdf | 30 June 2023 |
| World Bank Macro Poverty Outlook Nicaragua - April 2023 | Macro Poverty Outlook 2023 Nicaragua | https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/e408a7e21ba62d843bd90dc37e61b57-0500032021/related/mpo-nic.pdf | 30 June 2023 |
| World Bank Nicaragua data - 2021 | World Bank Nicaragua data | https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfile&b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncountry=NIC | 30 June 2023 |
| World Bank Nicaragua overview – updated 4 April 2023 | World Bank Nicaragua overview | https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/nicaragua/overview | 30 June 2023 |

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, acting under a socialist-communist influence, 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. In 2018, a series of civil society claims against the pension system ended in anti-government protests demanding the president's and the president's wife (Rosario Murillo) resignation. The government's response to the protests was [violent repression](#), in which at least 328 people died, not to mention the hundreds of political prisoners and exiled Nicaraguans (La Vanguardia, 9 October 2019). Since then, Nicaragua has seen a weakening of the rule of law, nationwide corruption, and repression against any critic of the government, including human rights organizations, independent press and religious leaders, especially the Catholic Church. State and non-state agents endorsed by the government still target these social actors and their supporters, most of the time through laws that restrict the most fundamental freedoms.

During the COVID-19 outbreak, the government made little effort to prevent the spread of the virus since authorities refused 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. However, according to the WHO, there were [only 245 COVID-related deaths](#) between 3 January 2020 and 2 August 2023 (WHO, accessed 7 August 2023).

During the presidential 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 (France24, 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). A [visit](#) by the president of Iran to Nicaragua, both governments known for violating human rights, has raised concern about authoritarian governments around the world strengthening ties (El País, 13 June 2023).

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. The largest opposition bloc was the [National Coalition](#) (Wtop News, 25 June 2020) made up of seven civil and political organizations, but gradually, due to [lack of unity](#) and government oppression, it has lost any effective power (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 2023, there is talk of a [new opposition group](#) emerging; it has no public name and their members remain anonymous for security reasons. It is not in itself a political organization, but is built around dialogue between government opponents (Voz de América, 29 June 2023). There is a more public new political movement called "[Va por Nicaragua](#)"; 80% of its members are in Nicaragua and it seeks the return of rule of law and democracy (La mesa redonda, 19 June 2023).

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 some 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.

Just four months before the municipal elections in November 2022, town councils controlled by 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 consolidated its power by taking control of all 153 municipalities (Abc News, 8 November 2022).

The next regional elections will be held in 2024, however there is no indication of a transparent process or respect for the political rights of the Nicaraguan population. At the beginning of October 2023, the Supreme Electoral Council (CSE) [canceled](#) the legal personality of the Miskito indigenous party Yapti Tasba Masraka Nanih Aslatakanka (Yatama) and arrested two deputies from the same party in an attempt by the government to gain absolute control over regional governments (Despacho 505, 4 October 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 involved in "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 this law, demonstrations and calling for the respect of human rights would be regarded as terrorist acts;
- iii. Law 996 of June 2019 or Amnesty Law: This 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 funding of 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): This law serves to disqualify political opponents from running for elected office;
- vii. Law on Cybercrimes (Law 1042 of 2020): This law 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: This law 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, or disgust in the national community";

- ix. General Law for the Regulation and Control of Non-Profit Organizations: This law 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.
- x. Special Law that regulates the loss of Nicaraguan nationality (Law No. 1145): Determines that anyone who is sentenced according to the provisions of Law No. 1055 will lose Nicaraguan nationality.
- xi. Reform to Article 21 of the Constitution of the Republic that establishes that all traitors to the Homeland lose their national status.
- xii. Approval of the reform (in the first legislature) to Article 97 of the Constitution of the Republic and of the Organic Law of the National Police to establish criminal sanctions for those police officers who desert from continuing to provide services, suppressing the non-partisanship of that institution and submitting it to the executive branch.

In addition, the system set up to combat money laundering and the financing of terrorism (ML/FT) has been [instrumentalized](#) by the government to target political opponents and weaken any criticism from civil society (Expediente Abierto, 31 May 2023).

To investigate 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 instead from the Commission's headquarters in Washington DC (OAS, April 2021). Similarly, the Nicaraguan government announced the country's [withdrawal](#) 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). On 19 November 2023, the exit became officially into effect, two years after it was announced by the government of Nicaragua. This withdrawal "does not nullify the other legal obligations for which it is responsible by virtue of its ratification of other inter-American conventions" (DW, 8 November 2023).

At the 53rd General Assembly of the Organization of American States (OAS), the resolution entitled "The Human Rights Crisis in Nicaragua" was [approved](#), which condemned the persistent oppression of political opponents, the media, religious entities, including the Catholic Church and charitable organizations (El País, 23 June 2023). For its part, in the Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner, about the human rights situation in Nicaragua, it is mentioned that the government has continued to [unduly limit](#) the country's civic and democratic spaces, increasing its control over institutions and public spaces, and restricting activities by individuals and critical groups (10 August 2023).

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 which have imposed sanctions are:

- i. The [USA](#) with sanctions relating to the freezing of assets, prohibition of financial transactions and cancellation of visas to more than 270 of those involved in violations of fundamental freedoms, including the members of the Ortega Murillo family, and judges involved in depriving Nicaraguans of their basic right to citizenship and human rights abuses

(US Department of State, 25 July 2023). 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). In May 2023, the [US ambassador](#) in Managua left the country. The delegation will be in the hands of a “long-term” charge d’affaires (Rivaltimes, 2 May 2023).

- 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, 25 July 2023);
- 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 (France, 29 September 2022). The sanctions were [extended](#) until 15 October 2024, due to the deterioration in the political and social situation of the country (DW, 10 October 2023).

Additionally, recognized international civil society organizations have been highlighting the dismantling of state institutions, cases of arbitrary detention, the poor conditions detainees have to face, and the persecution of government critics. Among those active are: Human Rights Watch (HRW 2023 Nicaragua country chapter), [International Crisis Group](#) (ICG, June 2023), Freedom House (Global Freedom Index 2023 Nicaragua) and Amnesty International (AI Nicaragua 2022), among others.

Through all the maneuvering to stay in power, the ruling party's excesses and abuses have caused the popularity of the FSLN to [fall](#) to one of its lowest levels ever: In July 2023, only 13% of those surveyed expressed their affinity with the party (El Mundo CR, 21 July 2023). For September 2023, Cid Gallup pointed out that Daniel Ortega only had [33%](#) approval from Nicaraguans (Artículo 66, 25 October 2023). The apparent [negligence](#) in handling the pandemic (Artículo 66, 27 July 2022) - including the harassment of [health professionals](#) (OAS, 28 July 2021) -, the blocking of the distribution of humanitarian aid as a result of [closing down](#) civil society organizations (France24, 20 September 2022), the cases of imprisonment, torture, forced deportation, persecution for political reasons and citizenship-stripping on arbitrary grounds, have all served to exacerbate the political crisis in the country.

In the WWL 2024 reporting period, around 222 political prisoners were released by the government, immediately forced to leave the country and were then declared [stateless](#) (El País, 9 February 2023).

Towards the end of the reporting period, various sources indicated the existence of an [internal crisis](#) in the government, as a result of disagreements between the Nicaraguan armed forces and the growing influence of Rosario Murillo, but also because the party is preparing for a possible transition of power, especially since Daniel Ortega's physical and mental health is reported to be weakening (100% Noticias, 7 September 2023).

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, mostly Catholics, suffered reprisals for their outspokenness in denouncing human rights violations and for the support given to political prisoners. Further, during the days of the COVID-19 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 legal context affects society as a whole, government measures have been designed to repress opposition voices in particular, which is why church leaders, as some of the main critics of the government, have become a vulnerable target for reprisals. During 2022 and 2023, government action against the Church intensified and has 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 can be seen below (in: Religious landscape), these recommendations were used as the legal framework for carrying out arbitrary arrests and other types of action against church leaders.

Religious landscape

| Nicaragua: Religious context | Number of adherents | % |
|---|---------------------|------|
| Christians | 6,506,000 | 94.9 |
| 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 | 13,400 | 0.2 |
| Atheist | 3,300 | 0.0 |
| Agnostic | 188,000 | 2.7 |
| Other | 103,400 | 1.5 |
| <i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i> | | |

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

Since 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 outspokenness of the Catholic Church about the situation in the country 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 (Observatorio Libertad Religiosa, 4 May 2023).

The August 2023 report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Right about the situation of human rights in Nicaragua has drawn [attention](#) to the sharp escalation in the frequency and gravity of the attacks against the Catholic Church and its members. (HRC, 10 August 2023). Statements by the [Episcopal Secretariat of Central America](#) (Vatican News, 21 February 2023), the [Latin American and Caribbean Episcopal Council](#) (ADN, 11 February 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 2024 reporting period, government hostility towards church leaders (particularly Catholic bishops and priests) and towards churches and faith-based organizations intensified. 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 (Los Angeles Times, 26 May 2023). Arrests can lead to detainees being sent to jail or house arrest. In either case, it is usual that standard legal procedures are not followed. In general, those arrested have tried to defend priests, refused to fabricate crimes against them and have made known the injustices facing them. They include [journalists](#) (Swissinfo, 15 December 2022) and [ordinary church members](#) (100 Noticias, 2 August 2022). An arrest was also made of a journalist who [broadcast](#) a Catholic procession which the authorities had tried to prevent taking place (Infobae, 18 August 2023). The case of Bishop Rolando Álvarez is an example: He was arrested and [sentenced](#) to 26 years and 4 months in prison after he refused to be exiled (El 19 Digital, 10 February 2023). Since July 2023, he has remained in La Modelo, a maximum security prison. Church leaders and various sectors of civil society [are worried](#) about his health, especially since there are constant reports of torture and ill-treatment being carried out (100 Noticias, 14 March 2023).

Various religious communities, civil society organizations, governments and international organizations have spoken out regarding the irregularity of his imprisonment and demanded his immediate release. In June 2023, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) requested the Inter-American Court of Human Rights to [expand](#) the provisional measures to include Bishop Álvarez who is deprived of liberty for expressing his disagreement with the policies of the current government (OAS, 23 June 2023). The Court [acted accordingly](#) (IACHR, 28 June 2023). In August 2023, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights for Central America and the English Caribbean (OHCHR), [condemned](#) the continued

violations of human rights, such as being held in solitary confinement without access to medical care and essential drugs (IACHR, 18 August 2023).

- ii. **Cancellation of legal status:** The government has [canceled](#) the registration and legal status of hundreds of organizations linked to the Church, including universities, technical institutes, church-run schools, cultural centers, associations that promote educational programs, justice and peace commissions, seminars, and human rights and humanitarian or social assistance organizations (Artículo 66, 8 March 2023). The cancellations have been deemed necessary either due to alleged non-compliance with civil society regulations or to encourage voluntary dissolution.
- iii. **Seizure of property:** The Ortega government has seized [Christian-owned property](#) and media outlets, especially those that lost their legal status (Catholic News Agency, 5 July 2023).
- iv. **Expulsion from the country:** Priests, nuns and evangelical pastors have been [forced into exile](#) (Despacho 505, 7 October 2023), either because their residency permits were not renewed when they left the country to carry out ministerial activities and were not allowed to enter again, or on occasions, they have been forcibly transferred to the border from one moment to the next. Such expulsions have been mostly related to pastoral work and lack of identification with government policies. Those expelled lose their Nicaraguan nationality.
- v. **Overt police harassment:** House blockades carried out by government officials, paramilitaries, and party sympathizers have become common practice as a form of intimidation against church leaders. So too has the surveillance and monitoring of church activities. There have even been reports of [seminarians](#) affiliated with the regime passing on information about seminary activities to the authorities (Confidencial, 29 March 2023). In some cases, police harassment [intensified](#) in the run-up to the November 2021 elections (100 Noticias, 20 October 2021).
- vi. **"Siege" tactics:** Police have sometimes [completely surrounded](#) churches and church grounds (100%Noticias, 22 May 2022). Such blockades have impeded priests from holding church services. Sometimes a priest has had to celebrate a communion service with a congregation through fencing to [prevent](#) police from entering the church building (IP Nicaragua, 16 August 2022).
- vii. **Accusations against the Church:** 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). In February 2023, President Ortega [accused](#) priests and bishops of being a mafia that has committed crimes and embezzled millions of dollars (El País, 21 February 2023).
- viii. **Closure of media outlets:** In many areas, Catholic [radio](#) and [television](#) broadcasting outlets have been censored and/or taken off the air; offices which were forced to close down have been taken over by the authorities and their legal status cancelled (ABC News, 2 August 2022 and Article 66, 7 July 2022). This sort of restriction also affected other Christian denominations, as was the case of [Enlace - Channel 21](#) (DW, 3 May 2023).

- ix. **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 (Confidencial, 23 September 2023).
- x. **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).
- xi. **Economic pressure:** Among the recent measures adopted by the regime, is the state intervention of [bank accounts](#). Access for various dioceses in the country has been blocked under the justification of stopping illegal activities in the management of funds and resources (money laundering) in bank accounts that had belonged to people convicted of treason. This measure has hampered the financing and operation of church activities (DW, 28 May 2023). Among the multiple consequences of this measure is the [blocking of pensions](#) for retired priests (Aica, 25 July 2023).
- xii. **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).
- xiii. **Ban on Christian celebrations:** The Nicaraguan National Police prohibited [processions](#) during Easter and Holy Week (Infobae, 8 April 2023) and continued with this practice later on, with other [religious festivities](#) (Fuentes Confiables, 21 August 2023). In some cases, in its attempt to control the Church, the government has organized its own religious events.
- xiv. **Stripping of nationality and civil rights:** Religious leaders sanctioned under Law No.1055 lost their [nationality](#) and their citizenship rights for life. For example, this has happened to Bishop Álvarez (Despacho 505, 10 February 2023) and [Bishop](#) Silvio Báez (Swissinfo, 16 February 2023).

Relations with the Catholic Church became so tense that in the WWL 2024 reporting period the Nicaraguan government decided to [close](#) the Nicaraguan embassy to the Holy See and asked the Vatican to also close its Nunciature in Managua. Monsignor Diouf left the country in March 2023 having been in charge of the Vatican diplomatic mission for a year, ever since the government expelled the nuncio, Waldemar Stanislaw Sommertag (AP News, 18 March 2023).

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 which they cannot pretend not to see (Diocese of Granada, 14 July 2022). During the 2021 elections, ecclesiastical authorities continued to [criticize](#) the lack of democratic guarantees and the countless irregularities, including the suppression 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). Certain Protestant churches 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 [possibility](#) of the government controlling their internal affairs, for example, with regard to tithes and offerings (La Mesa Redonda, 23 September 2022). The result has been [increased division](#) among Protestant/Evangelical groups (La Mesa Redonda, 24 March 2023).

Economic landscape

According to UNDP HDR Nicaragua:

- **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 (2011-2021):** 24.9%

According to the World Bank Nicaragua overview:

- **Economic growth:** "GDP expanded by 3.8 percent in 2022 despite high inflation, global headwinds, and the damage caused by Hurricane Julia. This expansion was driven by robust private consumption fueled by remittances and net exports. Nicaragua's economic growth is projected to moderate to 3.1 percent in 2023 due to the global economic slowdown and a tight monetary policy environment. Thereafter, growth is projected to rise modestly, driven by an increase in exports as global economic conditions improve and the continued strong stance of the country in remittances and foreign direct investment."
- **Inflation:** "The average annual inflation in 2022 surged to 10.5 percent - the highest among Central American countries and more than double the average inflation rate over the past decade. Inflation was driven by strong domestic consumption and higher import prices of food and fuel. Inflation is projected to moderate gradually in the medium term in line with the fiscal and monetary tightening and decelerating fuel and food prices."
- **COVID-19:** Welfare impacts from the pandemic lingered as around 10 percent of formal employees in 2019 transitioned to an informal sector by end-2021.

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, in February 2023, the Monthly Index of Economic Activity (IMAE) [registered](#) an accumulated growth of 3.4 percent (3.5% year-on-year). Accumulated growth has been mainly driven by the good performance of activities such as hotels and restaurants, mining and quarrying, transportation and communications, and commerce, among others. It also points out that as of February 2023, the open unemployment rate was 3.2 percent (4.5% as of February 2022), underemployment was 36.3 percent (40% in February 2022) and the labor participation rate rose to 67.4 percent (66.8% in February 2022), however, the latter remains below the levels prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, which is an indication that the labor market has not yet overcome the imbalances that took place during the pandemic. As of March 2023, inflation was 10.39 percent year-on-year (11.59% in December 2022) (BCN, April 2023).

There has also been a reduction in the labor force due to the fact that many citizens have emigrated, causing a brain drain, which means significant emigration of highly educated or highly skilled individuals. According to World Population, Nicaragua score [7.60](#) in brain drain (World Population, July 2023).

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. The blocking of the bank accounts of various dioceses under the pretext of combating money laundering (mentioned above in: *Religious landscape* and below in: *Social and cultural landscape*), is one of the most recent measures which aims at stifling church activity. In addition there are many regulations and laws approved that hinder, prevent or criminalize the financing of Christian organizations, especially Catholic ones or those linked to a religious leader considered an opponent of the government.

Social and cultural landscape

According to the World Factbook Nicaragua:

- **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:** 59.8% of total population (2023)
- **Literacy rate:** 82.6% (2015).

According to World Bank Nicaragua data:

- **People using at least basic drinking water services (% of population):** 82 (2020)
- **School enrollment (gross):** For pre-primary (2020) is 69%; for primary (2021) 107% and for secondary (2010) 68%
- **Compulsory school education:** 7 years (2022)
- **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 (ILO estimate):** 5.6% (2022)
- **Refugee population by country of origin:** 16,145 (2022)

According to UNDP HDR Nicaragua:

- **Human Development Index (HDI):** 0.648 (female) and 0.678 (male)..
- **Gender Inequality Index (GII):** Nicaragua has a GI value of 0.424, ranking it 102 out of 162 countries in the 2021 index.

According to the [UNHCR's Global Trends Report 2022](#):

- **Refugees:** Compared with 2019, the increase of new asylum applications in 2022 represents a 31 per cent increase. More than 2 in 5 new applications (42 per cent) were made by nationals of countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, notably Venezuela (+186 per cent to 264,000), Cuba (a six-fold increase to 194,700), Nicaragua (+49 per cent to 165,800).

Other factors:

- **Malnutrition:** According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations ([FAO](#)), in Mesoamerica, Honduras showed the highest prevalence of undernourishment, with 18.7 percent of the population facing hunger in the period 2020–2022, followed by Nicaragua (17.8 percent) and Guatemala (13.3 percent), which in absolute terms represented 1.9 million, 1.2 million and 2.3 million people respectively (FAO, 2023). The [World Food Program](#) states that after a two-year recession, Nicaragua experienced economic growth in 2021 and 2022. However, it continues to be one of the poorest countries in Latin America. Undernourishment has improved, yet chronic undernutrition is 14 percent, with some regions reaching rates of up to 30 percent. Additionally, obesity and malnutrition are on the rise. Also, the country is vulnerable to recurrent natural hazards, [ranking 21 in the World Risk Report 2022](#) (WFP, Nicaragua Annual Country Report 2022). Food insecurity is closely related to poverty and the frequency of natural hazards.
- **Unemployment/Employment:** According to [Statista](#) (Employment in Nicaragua, accessed 2 January 2024):
 - The unemployment rate in Nicaragua is forecast to reach 6.76% in 2024 (i.e., 0.39 million unemployed people).
 - The employment rate in Nicaragua is forecast to reach 68.62% in 2024 (i.e., 3.96 million employed people).
- **NGOs:** Despite the context of poverty and food crisis, the government has tightened control over non-profit organizations. According to the database prepared by the MESENI, between 18 April 2018 and 31 August 2023, the state [canceled](#) the legal status of 3,390 organizations out of a total of 7,227 legally registered in the country in 2018 (CIDH, November 2023). Authorities can also seize the assets of associations that commit “unlawful acts,” violate “public order,” or hinder the Interior Ministry’s “control and surveillance” (HRW 2023 Nicaragua country chapter).
- **Human rights issues:**
 - Human Rights Watch 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 (HRW 2023 Nicaragua country chapter).
 - Likewise, the US State Department's Nicaragua 2022 Human Rights Report states that [significant human rights issues](#) included - "unlawful or arbitrary killings, including extrajudicial killings; torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment by prison guards and parapolice; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; arbitrary arrest and detentions; political prisoners; transnational repression against individuals located in another country; serious problems with the independence of the judiciary; arbitrary and unlawful interference with privacy; punishment of family members for alleged offenses by a relative; serious restrictions on free expression and media, including threats of violence against journalists, unjustified arrests of journalists, and censorship; substantial interference with the rights of peaceful assembly and freedom of association, including overly restrictive

laws on the organization, funding, or operation of nongovernmental organizations and civil society organizations; severe restrictions on religious freedom; restrictions on freedom of movement and residence within the country and the right to leave the country; inability of citizens to change their government peacefully through free and fair elections; serious and unreasonable restrictions on political participation; serious government corruption; serious government restrictions on and harassment of domestic and international human rights organization", among others.

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, of those 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 allegedly missing and on account of 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).

In the WWL 2024 reporting period, several Catholic universities have been [stripped](#) of their legal status for allegedly failing to comply with their legal obligations, i.e., "for not being accredited in quality indicators, not reporting their financial statements and boards of directors". In addition, according to the authorities, they also did not present "clarifications" about their assets (Prensa Comunitaria, 8 March 2023). In the expropriated university buildings and campuses, the National Council of Universities (CNU) has installed new state universities, and in addition to [eliminating](#) university autonomy, it has initiated tight control over the student population (Confidencial, 3 August 2023).

As a notable example of this in 2023, the Central American University (UCA), which was considered to be the "last center of free thought in Nicaragua", was [closed](#). On 15 August 2023, an entry was published in the official newspaper "La Gaceta", announcing the seizure of the UCA's assets, movable and immovable property and bank accounts, and accusing the university of terrorism, even though there was no evidence for this. Immediately, important changes were made: The name of the university was changed to Casimiro Sotelo University (Despacho 505, 18 August 2023). A few days later, the residence where the Jesuit priests of the UCA lived was [confiscated](#) and they were forced to vacate it, since regime officials argued that it was now property of the State of Nicaragua. Documentary evidence showing that the property was not actually owned by the UCA was presented but was simply ignored (Confidencial, 20 August 2023).

The Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua (GHREN) has [pointed out](#) that the university sector of Nicaragua as a whole no longer has independent institutions. The legal status of 27 private universities, including the Jesuit Central American University, has been cancelled and their assets confiscated. Authorities have refused to provide students with certificates showing their recognition of courses already completed. Many students are unable to carry on with their studies due to the lack of valid paperwork. In addition, academic staff have been dismissed, have

had their pension payments withheld, and have also been forced to leave the country (OHCHR, 12 September 2023).

Additionally, a matter of high concern is the [indoctrination](#) of children. There have been reports about how on the anniversary of the death of former Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, the Ministry of Education ordered classes at public schools to create posters etc. to celebrate his Communist and dictatorial ideals in a society in which the only voice promoted is that of a government following those same ideals. The Teachers' Union denounced the [indoctrination](#) of teachers and arbitrary dismissals of those not aligning with the ruling party (100% Noticias, 29 June 2023).

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). On the other hand, It is easier to get a job in the public sector when having a [political endorsement](#) from the FSLN party (Confidencial, 12 July 2023). Further, according to the Assistant Secretary General, the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights has received [testimonies](#) about restrictions on economic, social, and cultural rights suffered in Nicaragua by those who do not possess the ruling party's membership card. Without such a membership card, many Nicaraguans have limited possibilities to obtain or maintain a job in the public sector, to access higher education (including scholarships), social protection or health services, exemplified by a report of a person denied surgery until he registered with the party. The same restrictions are reportedly affecting people (as well as their family members) who are perceived as opponents or critics of the government (OHCHR, 3 March 2023).

In this context, through church aid programs delivering basic necessities such as food, healthcare and education, churches are viewed by the Ortega regime as 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 and organizations is also of major concern (La Gaceta, 7 February 2022). The blocking of church bank accounts has also been a huge obstacle for churches to continue community projects helping the poor. As well as harming the population served by the Church, these are methods of intimidation with the aim of limiting the influence of Christian leaders within communities. More recently, the government [blocked](#) the retirement funds for retired priests set up by the Nicaraguan Episcopal Conference. This action prevents older priests from collecting their pensions and covering many of their basic needs (Vida Nueva Digital, 25 July 2023).

Technological landscape

According to Internet World Stats (IWS 2023 Nicaragua):

- **Internet usage:** 54.8% penetration - survey date: March 2021 (Most recent survey available)
- **Facebook usage:** 54.8 % penetration – survey date: March 2021

According to World Bank Nicaragua data:

- **Mobile phone subscriptions:** 97 per 100 people (2021).

According to Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2023 Nicaragua:

- The Nicaraguan government and its allies have used copyright laws, including the US Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA), to secure the removal of content produced by independent media outlets. In recent years, police have also reportedly coerced government critics into deleting videos or photos that depict antigovernment protests from their devices. Nicaragua lacks independent bodies that ensure oversight of content restriction processes. Authorities do not act transparently when it comes to the removal of online content.⁵⁷ Under the 2020 Special Cybercrimes Law, decisions to block websites are to be made by TELCOR and the Foreign Ministry, both of which are effectively dominated by the presidency.
- There is a deteriorating environment for free expression in Nicaragua, worsened by a judiciary that lacks independence. In practice, the judiciary is subservient to the executive and has been used to target the political opposition, religious figures, and other critics of the Ortega regime through significant criminal sentences.
- Internet users, and journalists in particular, have been subjected to intimidation and physical assaults in connection with their online activity. Torture and ill-treatment in detention is common.

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. 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 (Confidential, 17 October 2022).

According to RSF (World Press Freedom 2023 Nicaragua), it is not safe to practice journalism in Nicaragua. Journalists who remain in the country are forced to work with utmost caution and do not sign their articles for fear of reprisals. Cameras are often confiscated and there is hardly any reporting in the field. At least four journalists who fled the county to avoid arrest were declared “traitors to the homeland” and were stripped of their citizenship. Many journalists

have had to flee the country. The Inter American Press Association has urged the international community to denounce the regime's persecution of freedom of expression and of the press (SIP, 11 May 2023).

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). This means that if reporters mention cases of violence, raids or any government actions targeting churches and church leaders, 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 recent years, the Nicaraguan Institute of Telecommunications and Post Office [arbitrarily closed](#) Catholic radio stations (100 Noticias, 1 August 2022), and ordered cable companies to [stop transmitting](#) Catholic channels (Swissinfo, 29 June 2022).

Security situation

The recent Report of the Group of Experts on Human Rights on Nicaragua (GHREN) has observed an [escalation](#) in the persecution of dissent by the government. They have documented how the government harasses individuals perceived as opposing the authorities and puts them under severe pressure to leave the country. Many of those who have been released following detentions in the last months face daily threats and surveillance. The report also mentions how religious actors, in particular of the Catholic Church, are increasingly being targeted (OHCHR, September 2023).

This is a harsh scenario for those perceived as voicing opposition, especially for political prisoners. As of August 2023 there are [89 political prisoners](#) in the country (Mecanismo para el reconocimiento de personas presas políticas, August 2023). 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 requested 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). Nonetheless, Human Rights Collective Nicaragua Nunca Más has [documented](#) 158 acts of torture and other forms of degrading treatment used against these prisoners in the period 2018-2022 (Nicaragua Observatory Against Torture - 8th Report, 16 June 2023):

- Extreme and inhumane conditions of detention
- Degrading verbal treatment
- Beatings
- Death threats against them and/or their families

- Temporary enforced disappearance
- Burns, electric shocks, and torture by suspension or "hanging"
- Pulling out nails, and simulated execution or murder
- Other acts such as dragging people, dry and wet asphyxiation, lacerations or cuts with knives, strangulation, threats with weapons, mutilation and similar acts, "Russian roulette," incitement to commit suicide, poisoning by tear gas or fumigation, deprivation of medical care, food and hydration, coercion to ingest drugs, overcrowding, etc.

The situation is no better for religious leaders. 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](#) (El País, 31 January 2023). At the regional level, the [IACHR](#) has reported on the limiting of democratic freedom, the prohibition of protests and demonstrations, the closure of independent media outlets, the arbitrary detention of important opposition leaders and the closure of civic spaces (IACHR, 2022).

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" although 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 (HRW 2023 Nicaragua country chapter), human rights defenders, journalists and critics have been targets of death threats, assault, intimidation, harassment, surveillance, online defamation campaigns, arbitrary detention and prosecution. Police frequently station themselves outside the houses of government critics, preventing them from leaving, in what amounts to arbitrary house arrest. Other tactics include the use of fake accounts with the names of opponents to incriminate them for a crime, large-scale [raids](#) (Nicaragua Investiga, 3 May 2023) and the so-called "Security that guarantees peace" surveillance program, through which government officials drive through streets and enter homes. Many assume that the ultimate intention is to implement greater surveillance of the citizenry and to [identify](#) opponents of the government (IP Nicaragua, 9 June 2023). Among the critical voices are several church leaders and other Christians – mainly Catholics. The victims of such actions have no protection; the laws passed in recent 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 offenses have no [recourse to justice](#) (Nicaragua Actual, 14 July 2022).

Trends analysis

1) The dictatorial regime clings to power by intensifying repression

Since the outbreak of protests in April 2018 in which the population expressed their disagreement with the form of government, dictatorial practices have intensified targeting any type of perceived opposition to the regime. Thus, the abuse of state power, corruption, the absence of democratic electoral processes and the continuous and serious violations of the fundamental freedoms of citizens have become the methods chosen by the Sandinista government to maintain itself in power and avoid losing control over the country, given the growing rejection among the population. However, despite the constant reprisals of which it is a victim, the Church has not ceased to speak out, becoming a voice of authority that has earned the legitimate respect of the Nicaraguan people.

2) Government repression attempts to nullify civil society

Harassment and hostility towards civil society members who do not support the regime have intensified. The government seeks to silence them through intimidation, veiled in a legal framework designed to give an appearance of legitimacy. Although several areas of civil society have been weakened, it nevertheless continues to call firmly for a return to democracy and respect for human rights. In this respect, the Church is considered one of the main enemies of the regime in the way it perseveres in denouncing injustice despite the abuses that have been perpetrated against it and that have especially attacked its leaders.

3) The continued pressure from the international community is a key factor

International concern has grown, particularly since the fifth term of the Ortega government brought with it a wave of ever bolder repression against opposition voices within and outside the country. This intensified repression has caused the international community to denounce human rights violations and speak out in favor of the victims of the regime, explicitly acknowledging that the Church is a frequent target of the Ortega/Murillo government. The international sanctions and regular pronouncements on government abuses have been a key factor in giving visibility to the crisis and putting pressure on the government.

External Links - Keys to understanding

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WWL 2024: 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](#) (Encyclopedia.com, Catholic church in Nicaragua, accessed 2 January 2024). 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](#) (Moravian Church in Nicaragua, accessed 2 January 2024).

Church spectrum today

| Nicaragua: Church networks | Christians | % |
|--|------------------|--------------|
| Orthodox | 0 | 0.0 |
| Catholic | 5,212,000 | 80.1 |
| Protestant | 1,443,000 | 22.2 |
| Independent | 523,000 | 8.0 |
| Unaffiliated | 39,400 | 0.6 |
| Doubly-affiliated Christians | -712,000 | -10.9 |
| Total | 6,505,400 | 100.0 |
| <i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i> | | |
| Evangelical movement | 1,133,000 | 17.4 |
| Renewalist movement | 1,459,000 | 22.4 |

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

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 2023 estimates, 80.1% of Nicaraguan Christians are Catholics, a fall of 0.6% 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 government. Protestants and non-traditional evangelical denominations are growing and gaining an increased presence in the country. Despite the divergence among some evangelical leaders due to their ambiguous position regarding government abuses, many of them are also recognized in society for their opposition voice and support for the most vulnerable in society.

Areas where Christians face most difficulties

Given the government's intensive 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, Managua, 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. This denomination has had to face multi-faceted forms of hostility from government actors, especially when its church leaders have voiced opposition to government measures. Currently, it is the religious group most affected by state reprisals, since it is one of the last independent voices in the country and is widely respected by society. Other historical Christian denominations noted an increase in regime hostility towards them during the WWL 2024 reporting period, mainly through administrative (legal) reprisals for refusal to align with government propaganda.

Converts: Converts in Nicaragua are mainly 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 mainly of Baptist and Pentecostal groups, Mennonites and Moravian Lutherans. They are in the minority and do not have the same representation at social level as the Historical communities. 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 or restrictions on certain church events. Both forms of hostility are a form of government reprisal for their refusal to support regime interests.

External Links - Church information

- Christian origins: carried out by the Jesuits - <https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/nicaragua-catholic-church>
- Christian origins: in Bluefields in 1849 - <https://www.moravian.org/mission/nicaragua/>

WWL 2024: Persecution Dynamics / Nicaragua

Reporting period

1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023

Position on the World Watch List

| Nicaragua: World Watch List | Points | WWL Rank |
|-----------------------------|--------|----------|
| WWL 2024 | 70 | 30 |
| WWL 2023 | 65 | 50 |
| WWL 2022 | 56 | 61 |
| WWL 2021 | 51 | 63 |
| WWL 2020 | 41 | 72 |

The upward trend in the country's persecution situation continued in the WWL 2024 reporting period with a sharp rise of 5 points, caused mainly by increases in pressure in all Spheres of life. The deterioration of the rule of law in the country became more evident as i) the president became more powerful, and ii) the legal framework was manipulated to silence and cause the disappearance of civil society actors not aligning with the ruling party's political interests. The harassment of the Church and attempts to suffocate it became more direct to the point of - among other things - prosecuting and imprisoning church leaders in retaliation for a) their public demands for the rule of law to be respected - especially during and after the election period - and b) for giving assistance to those most in need, including to those considered opponents by the ruling Sandinista Party.

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 | Strong |
| 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.

In this country, the three main engines are blended.

Dictatorial paranoia (Strong):

According to Freedom House, Nicaragua scored 19/100 in the Global Freedom Index 2023 and is ranked as "not free". Political rights scored 5/40 and civil rights scored 14/60. 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 or face the consequences for being considered traitors. 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 – have faced acts of retaliation when they have questioned the regime's authority and legitimacy and demanded that human rights (including specific mention of religious freedom) and democratic principles be respected. As a result, the ruling party has carried out a campaign in which church leaders and Christians have been threatened, monitored, mistreated, arrested, prosecuted, insulted, expelled from the country, called enemies and terrorists, and have generally been constantly harassed. Churches have also been vandalized and church services disrupted and hindered, with the aim of creating a climate of fear for those identifying as committed Christians and publicly supporting the Church and its leaders.

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 suppress 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, surveillance, 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 authoritarian countries, such as Cuba and Venezuela, with which Nicaragua has a close relationship. This engine is clearly and closely blended with aspects of *Dictatorial paranoia* and *Organized corruption and crime*.

Organized corruption and crime (Medium):

The dictatorial context favors corrupt practices which have become deeply rooted in the country. According to the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI 2022), Nicaragua is at [rank 167](#) out of 180 countries, scoring 19 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 and other illegal markets (such as smuggling and illegal mining) are 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 (also known as "Ortega death squads"), criminal groups and Sandinista mobs act in collusion with the government to act against 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 | STRONG | WEAK | STRONG | MEDIUM |
| Government officials | - | - | - | - | Very weak | Medium | Weak | Strong | Medium |
| Ethnic group leaders | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| Non-Christian religious leaders | - | - | - | - | - | Very weak | Very weak | Very weak | - |
| Religious leaders of other churches | - | - | - | - | Weak | Very weak | - | Weak | Very weak |
| Violent religious groups | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| Ideological pressure groups | - | - | - | - | - | Medium | Weak | Medium | Weak |
| 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 | - |
| Political parties | - | - | - | - | Weak | Strong | Weak | Strong | Medium |
| Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups | - | - | - | - | - | Medium | Weak | Strong | Medium |
| Organized crime cartels or networks | - | - | - | - | - | Very weak | - | Very weak | Very 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 teaching 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 (including Church leaders) 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.

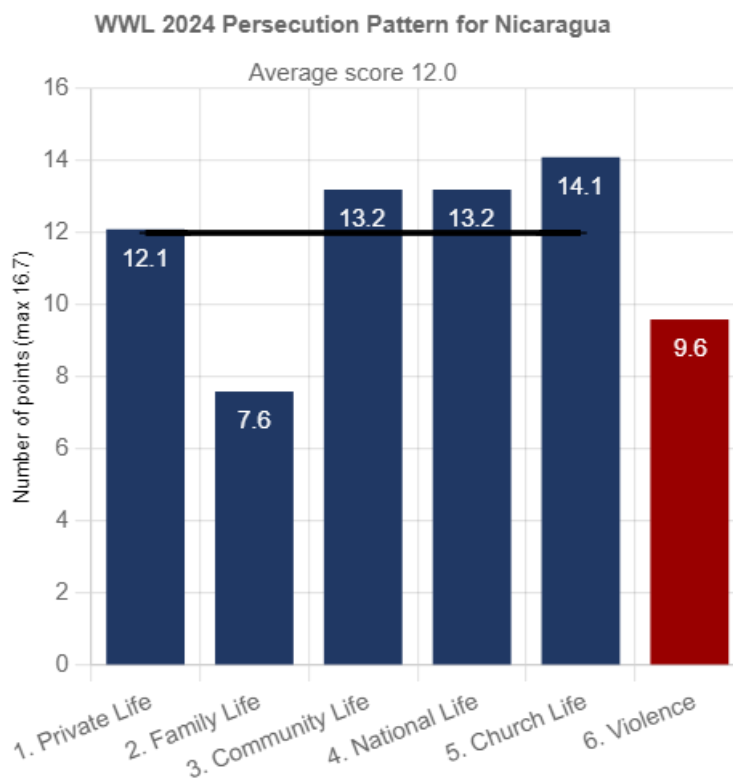
Drivers of Organized corruption and crime:

- **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 activi-

ties. 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



The WWL 2024 Persecution pattern for Nicaragua shows:

- The average pressure on Christians in Nicaragua is at a very high level, rising from 11.0 points in WWL 2023 to 12.0 points in WWL 2024.
- Pressure is strongest in the *Church* (14.1), *National* (13.2) and *Community* (13.2) *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 9.6 points, which represents an increase of 0.2 points in the level of government reprisals against Christians. Even when the levels of violence remain

at a very high level with a slight increase, the score reflects the several violent incidents experienced by the national Church, especially regarding a significant increase in public Christian buildings attacked (in comparison to WWL 2023) to intimidate Christians 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 2024 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 increasing trend towards direct action against church leaders, it has become 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;
- defend Church opposition to ruling party ideology;
- use social media to support priests or human rights activists under government surveillance or even when they simply click “like” on a post in which prayers are requested for the release of Bishop Rolando Álvarez.

Action has also been taken to prevent the entry into the country of Christians who have advocated for the release of imprisoned church leaders. Surveillance, especially of social networks, is permanent and the criminalization of any Internet content opposing regime interests is now justified under the new Cybercrime law. Many Christians self-censor to avoid reprisals.

Block 1.9: It has been risky for Christians to meet with other Christians. (3.50 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, Managua, 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 or in circumstances in which discontent and distrust against the government becomes more noticeable. 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. This could be made worse by the presence of a church leader or Christian activist. At times, the continuous application of curfews or police fences also prevented Christians from being able to get together for meetings, even when there was no religious motivation.

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, especially in a context of escalating repression towards manifestations of faith and support for the Church. When a Christian is known as an 'opponent' (for any arbitrary reason, even because affiliation with the FSLN party has been abandoned to embrace the Christian faith), government authorities are likely to interrogate extended family members too. In order to avoid retaliation for being linked to an 'enemy of the regime', the extended family may report on activities, companions, or meeting places of their Christian relative, thus putting the latter in danger.

Block 1.3: It has been dangerous to privately own or keep Christian materials. (3.00 points)

As stated by the US State Department (IRFR 2022 Nicaragua): “The regime denied political prisoners access to Bibles”. This also applies to imprisoned Church leaders. 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. With the absence of Christian material, they are expected to lose faith and plunge into despair. The possession of Christian material is also risky for family members who try to share it with political prisoners, since they are then considered to be in possession of subversive material. Also, according to in-country sources, if they keep at home anything bearing prayers and biblical messages referring to Bishop Álvarez, to peace in the country, to anyone who has been abducted, or to political prisoners, that is all considered suspicious material and hostility towards them will increase. Additionally, there have been known situations in which ordinary Christians and church leaders suffered mistreatment during entry controls into the country because they had among their belongings rosaries, World Youth Day material and new editions of the Bible.

Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

Block 2.7: Parents have been hindered in raising their children according to their Christian beliefs. (3.50 points)

The main obstacle for Christian parents is the school indoctrination mentioned in Block 2.8. If parents try to protect their children from state propaganda or complain about the socialist-communist influence at school, they are immediately considered regime opponents and become victims of questioning by the authorities and other reprisals. Although in the past, most Christian parents tried to find private space for sharing their faith with their children, due to the massive closure of Christian educational projects, parents are currently encountering more obstacles.

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 propagated by the regime. As stated in IRFR 2022 Nicaragua: “Ministry of Education regulations for primary school education require that the educational goals and curriculum for elementary grade students and

teachers follow the government's 'Christian, Socialist, and Solidarity' principles." Thus, 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, admiration for Hugo Chávez (former Communist leader of Venezuela) is encouraged and "Augusto Sandino" (anti-USA Nicaraguan rebel leader in 1927-1933) has been compared to Christ.

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. (3.50 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 have been detained (often Christians) or kept under house-arrest have not been allowed to have any kind of communication with their families and have been kept 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 because they are being watched by police officers. In addition, the government has sometimes prevented Christians from re-entering the country or has taken away their nationality, making it impossible for them to return to their families.

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 than in the WWL 2023 reporting period, when Christian children refuse to participate in pro-government activities, they are labeled "children of terrorists" or "coup heirs". Also, there are sporadic cases involving *Christian denominational protectionism* where children are victims of bullying when their religious practices are not accepted by their classmates.

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 neighborhoods, schools and workplaces and act violently against any anti-government protesters or against anyone suspected of not aligning with the regime. They support the police by recording names, addresses and movements of regime opponents. Christians in the commu-

nity 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 because the Church is labeled an “enemy of the state” that must be eliminated, and church leaders are presented as being “traitors to the country.” 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' (for political purposes and 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. In this context, those who are not part of these types of events are suspected of being opponents.

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 opposes the regime; this has increased progressively since April 2018 and has reached its highest peaks with the massive closure and confiscations of educational institutions, which pass under the absolute control of the state and therefore, the level of obstacles and reprisals also increases in that proportion. 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 hostility 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 as happens with those who practice journalism, they can still be accused of betraying the nation for not defending or fully supporting the state authorities. Given the wave of hostility against the Church experienced during the WWL 2024 reporting period, through such intimidation, it is intended that Christians 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, stability for the regime and a life of hostility for those considered “opponents.” 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)

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.

The minimum guarantees of human rights are not applied in the country, much less for the political prisoners who have been imprisoned for being considered opponents of the regime (including those who in practice were imprisoned for the same reason although without formally being classed as such due to the lack of transparency in state information). Thus, given the networks of impunity and corruption, Christians that are classified as dissidents or opponents of the government are doubly vulnerable during judicial processes in the country, especially if they are a church leader. This was most notable in the trial of Bishop Rolando Alvarez, as IRFR 2022 Nicaragua mentioned: “According to media, a lack of transparency by judicial authorities contributed to uncertainty surrounding Bishop Álvarez’s detention.” There were similar cases of other Christians accused in court whose procedural guarantees were not respected and were victims of various types of mistreatment during their time in prison. They often stood accused for crimes they did not commit, through the help of (false) witnesses, who were sometimes

forced to be part of these processes. Their families and attorneys were also sometimes be intimidated. Many have been sent to prison or placed under house-arrest without ever having been formally sentenced.

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

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 violence, hatred and discord with their subversive ideas. 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.

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 were/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 aiming to create a climate of intolerance towards the Church, especially against priests and bishops, or at least an atmosphere of fear among those supporting them. Militants of the party add to this by ridiculing Christians, for instance on social media platforms.

Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

Block 5.11: Pastors or other Christian leaders (or their family members) have been special targets of harassment for faith-related reasons. (4.00 points)

As mentioned in several parts of this country dossier, Christian leaders (mainly Catholics) reported that the government retaliated against:

- churches running projects to support vulnerable people,
- those calling for a return to democracy and an end to human rights violations,
- those advocating the release of political prisoners,
- those who publicly called for prayer for the health and freedom of Bishop Álvarez,
- those who criticized the abusive policies of the regime,
- all those who, from their position of religious leadership, promoted a faith-based message of unity and peace which contradicted the regime narrative.

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, church leaders (of various denominations and rank), their families and many who are linked to the work of the Church, have been victims of insults, defamation, mockery, beatings, arrests, court sentences, forced displacement, loss of property, death threats, and loss of nationality, among other hostilities. At other times, they have been prevented from receiving medicine, water and electricity. For instance, priests and parish leaders have been mocked and blocked from leaving church buildings. Some church leaders

were prevented from holding services in their churches, and sometimes those wishing to attend church services (held by those leaders) 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. (4.00 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 to 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, especially those dedicated to provide educational services. 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 regime. In the WWL 2024 reporting period, various Catholic dioceses in the country experienced a financial blockade by government authorities. The impossibility of accessing bank accounts caused the suspension of humanitarian assistance projects, infrastructure projects and paralyzed many other church activities, including pension funds for retired priests.

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 increasingly targeted with reprisals for criticizing the regime, denouncing its human rights violations and calling for respect for rule of law. Indeed, the spiral of hostilities against them has systematically escalated, reaching its highest point in the WWL 2024 reporting period with disruption of church services, frequent forced displacements, detentions, imprisonment, loss of nationality, confiscation of private and Church property, expulsions and closures of religious organizations and church-affiliated media.

Block 5.5: Churches have been hindered from organizing Christian activities outside church buildings. (3.75 points)

In the previous reporting period (WWL 2023), IRFR 2022 Nicaragua reported: “Multiple Catholic parishes reported they did not celebrate traditional pilgrimages of local patron saints and other religious processions in their communities because authorities did not grant them the necessary permits to use public streets. The parishes either suspended or confined the religious festivities to church premises.” However, during 2023 and in accordance with the worsening of guarantees for the Church in the country, this situation has deteriorated noticeably for both the Catholic Church and churches of other denominations. Thus, not only processions, pilgrimages, and other activities of popular Catholic piety have been prohibited (sometimes even with police fences set up outside churches), but also activities of other Christian denominations such as a “Bible Trans-

lation Day” were banned as well. According to the report “Nicaragua: A Persecuted Church?” (Iglesia Perseguida, October 2023), during Holy Week in 2023 alone, around 3,176 processions were prohibited in the 397 Catholic parishes throughout the country.

This hostility towards expressions of Christian faith in public spaces not only prevents religious events from taking place outside churches, but also:

- Christian faith communities have been forced to keep their faith inside Church buildings and under strict state control;
- the leaders who promote or are in charge of these types of activities face harassment from the authorities,
- those participating in leading such activities are at risk of being considered “traitors”, “opponents”, “disturbers of public order”.

The regime seeks to diminish the presence and role of the Church in the public sphere, whenever it contradicts ruling party interests.

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 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.*

| Nicaragua: Violence scores per Block 6 question in questionnaire | WWL 2024 | WWL 2023 |
|---|----------|----------|
| 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? | 347 | 31 |
| 6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons? | 38 | 23 |
| 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? | 22 | 3 |
| 6.5 How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)? | 2 | 17 |
| 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)? | 15 | 32 |
| 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? | 11 | 3 |
| 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? | 3 | 12 |
| 6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons? | 10 | 3 |
| 6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons? | 71 | 41 |

In the WWL 2024 reporting period:

- **Christian buildings attacked (347):** Most of the Christian properties closed or confiscated were a form of government reprisal against the church leaders responsible for running them and as way of dissuading the Church, its leaders and members from continuing to spread a message contrary to the interests of the regime. Other attacks often involved arson, vandalism and damage to church property.
- **Christians detained (38):** Most of the detainees were Catholic leaders accused of being instigators of action against the regime. In many cases, the 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 sentenced (22):** Many of these cases involved Christian activists or church leaders who had been publicly defending human rights, claiming justice for protesters, criticizing the regime’s abuses, or simply because of personal or professional closeness with those considered to be government opponents. Some Christian prisoners were released during the WWL 2024 reporting period: In February 2023, they were sent on a plane to the USA and were subsequently stripped of their nationality and assets.
- **Christians forced to leave the country (71):** The recorded incidents included national and foreign Church leaders (pastors, priests, deacons, seminarians, missionaries, nuns, monks etc.) who had lived in the country for several years but were now expelled or denied re-entry to the country. 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.

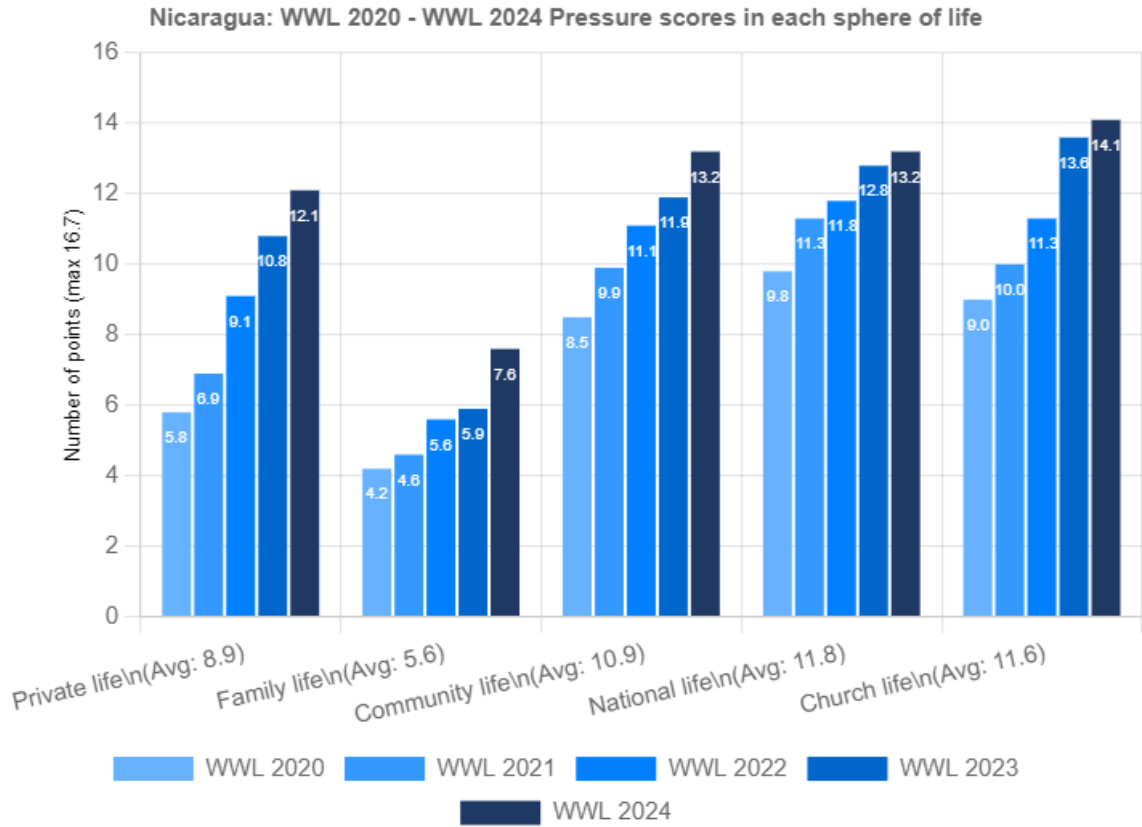
5 Year trends: Average pressure

| Nicaragua: WWL 2020 - WWL 2024 | Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life |
|--------------------------------|---|
| 2024 | 12.0 |
| 2023 | 11.0 |
| 2022 | 9.8 |
| 2021 | 8.5 |
| 2020 | 7.5 |

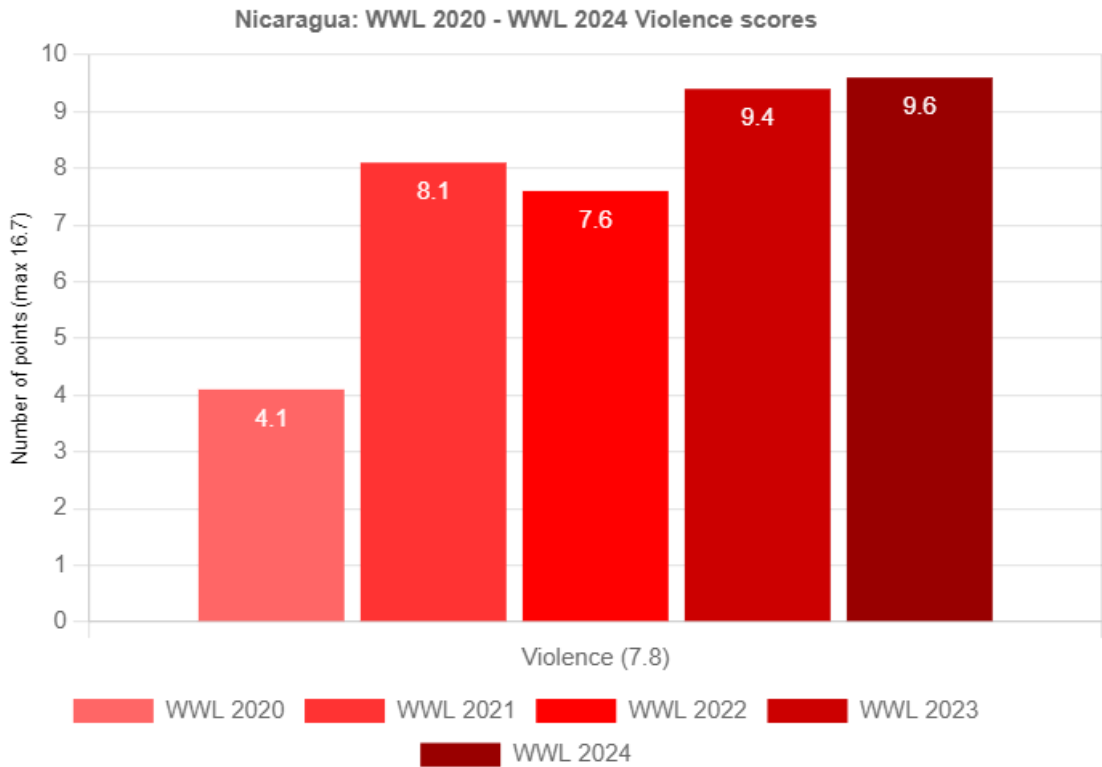
The table shows that the average pressure on Christians has steadily increased since WWL 2020, with a more notable increase since the 2022 elections that consolidated the Ortega dictatorship in his sixth presidential term. Since then, reprisals against the Church have become more direct, especially the repression against religious leaders considered “political enemies” and against the faith communities led by them.

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 progressively on the rise, due to the fact that government and FSLN-supporter hostility towards Christians has intensified. This dynamic is most noticeable in *Community, National and Church life*.



5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



As Christian communities have increasingly opposed government abuses, so reports of violence against the Church (in such categories as detentions, sentences, forced displacement, property attacks) have increased as well. The highest violence score to date was reached in WWL 2024.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

| Group | Female Pressure Points |
|---------------------|--------------------------|
| Economic | - |
| Political and Legal | - |
| Security | Violence – physical |
| 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 past reporting year, placing 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 Male gender profile below for further details).

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, GWPSI 2021, Nicaragua profile, p.29). Whilst sporadic, there are some reports of women being beaten by men because of their association with the church, suggesting that women face an increased vulnerability to domestic violence and abuse because of their faith. Faith may act as an additional catalyst for violence to existing situations of domestic instability. A country expert records examples of women being beaten with belts and threatened with knife attacks from their husbands because of their affiliation and role at the church.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

| Group | Male Pressure Points |
|---------------------|---|
| Economic | Economic harassment via business/job/work access; Economic harassment via fines |
| Political and Legal | Denied citizenship; False charges; Imprisonment by government; Travel bans/restrictions on movement |
| Security | Abduction; Forced to flee town/country; Violence – physical |
| Social and Cultural | Violence – psychological; Violence – Verbal |
| Technological | - |

In general, country experts state that persecution affects all citizens, regardless of age, social status, gender or ethnicity. However, it is men who suffer greater forms of persecution because of their faith. 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. This high-tension political pressure in all spheres of life mainly “forces them to leave the country to preserve their lives and this causes the family to fall apart.”

The violence and brutal persecution of the State against the Catholic Church has caused the exile and banishment of at least 57 priests in 2023. Reports indicate that arrests have been made at night or early in the morning, accompanied by violent raids, smear campaigns and threats. In addition, religious leaders face a judicial process full of irregularities under secrecy, with “hidden” hearings, and without the right to a trusted defence of those involved.

Most church leaders (primarily Catholic) or ministry leaders in Nicaragua are male and are subject to greater pressure and surveillance. 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 hardships and pressure 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 by the US State Department ([IRFR 2021 Nicaragua](#)): “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 commit-

ting crimes.”

Priests and parishioners have been taken hostage inside churches; verbally and psychologically 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 such violence and pressure, many men – particularly church leaders – feel 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. The Ortega dictatorship has stripped priests and civilians of their nationality and citizenship rights; accused by the Public Ministry or “treason against 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

No cases of persecution of non-Christian religious groups were mentioned by the US State Department in IRFR 2022 Nicaragua or by the USCIRF in its 2023 Nicaragua report.

Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

Dictatorial paranoia, combined with Communist and post-Communist oppression

Aggressive reprisals against opposition voices show how far the Ortega/Murillo regime has departed from democratic practice. Such actions have contributed to a loss of general trust towards the authorities. To the extent that the churches continue to speak out against the abuses of the regime, their vulnerability increases and is replicated in other dimensions of the exercise of religious freedom. Therefore, it is a key task to draw the attention of the international community to the real situation for Christians in the country, together with calls for a return to the rule of law, for the release of political prisoners, and for respect of religious freedom, especially in the case of Bishop Rolando Alvarez. If changes do not take place, it seems that little can prevent the situation from escalating even more.

In order to remain in power, the government attempts to control all dimensions of life: Individual decisions and thoughts are discouraged in favor of those dictated by the paternalistic state. However, despite the fear of reprisals, it has not been possible to control the Church or completely prevent Christians from seeking to follow their own religious convictions when it comes to interacting with the regime. In this context, while severe harassment of the Church has been taking place, the Church is also recognized as being a direct victim of the abuses of state power and this has increased empathy among the general population and even motivated conversions to Christianity.

Organized corruption and crime

With the presidential family firmly in power, threats and bribery among public officials and members of the FSLN have become increasingly evident. Indeed, the level of corruption in the

country is vast. While the network of corruption of officials and the promotion of the growth of criminal structures allied to the regime persists, the risk of attacks on the Church is likely to increase because it challenges state interests.

External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution engines description: rank 167 - <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022/index/nic>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: IRFR 2021 Nicaragua - <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/NICARAGUA-2021-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.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 Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

As in earlier years, these are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

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