

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2019, the government of Nicaragua continued a campaign targeting religious institutions, most notably the Catholic Church. When protests against the government broke out in April 2018 and authorities responded with excessive force, the Catholic Church—in keeping with its religious views—provided aid and sanctuary to protesters, condemned the excessive government force, and attempted to mediate a National Dialogue between the protesters and the government. Many of the same religious freedom violations and abuses committed by the Ortega regime and its supporters against the Church and its followers in the wake of the 2018 protests continued into 2019. These abuses include the intimidation and harassment of worshippers and religious leaders and the violent targeting of churches.

Government forces and citizens sympathetic to the regime routinely harassed Catholic Church clergy, with tactics including defamatory accusations, arbitrary arrests, death threats on social media, and violent attacks. Bishop Abelardo Mata Guevara, leader of the Nicaraguan bishop's conference, [reported](#) that he and at least seven other priests in his archdiocese have received death threats, causing him to limit his pastoral work. In December, police [detained](#) Father Ramón Alcides Peña Silva for 12 hours. He was forced to sleep on the ground in his cell and was given no food or drink during his arrest. The police [accused](#) Father Alcides Peña of disturbing the peace by conducting Mass at his church. Police

have twice stopped Father Edwin Román of Masaya, including in February 2019 when eight police officers [surrounded](#) his car and slapped him. Two months prior, police detained him at a checkpoint for three hours. They inspected his documents and vehicle, but told him that he was not free to go until they had an order from superiors. A mysterious van with a Sandinista flag came to the scene and the individuals inside told the officers to let him go. Afterward, the van followed his car. In a statement following the incident, authorities [accused](#) him of zigzagging while driving intoxicated, which Román denies. He has also had to contend with plainclothes officers [trailing him](#), government spies [asking him](#) where to buy bombs, and paramilitaries [surrounding his church](#) during Mass. Additionally, in April 2019, Pope Francis called Managua's auxiliary bishop Silvio Báez to Rome for an indefinite period following sustained harassment by the Nicaraguan government and its supporters since the start of the conflict, including an [assassination plot](#).

President Daniel Ortega has [inflamed](#) tensions by denouncing the Church as "coup mongers," "terrorists," and "pedophiles" and accusing priests of stockpiling weapons in their churches on behalf of protesters. Many religious leaders in the country contend that the government is politicizing religion during a political and social crisis. The government has utilized religious language and sought to infiltrate parishes.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Maintain Nicaragua on the U.S. Department of State's Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Impose targeted sanctions on Nicaraguan government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human

rights-related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations; and

- Encourage key countries, particularly those in Latin America, to ensure that violations of freedom of religion or belief are part of all multilateral or bilateral discussions with or about Nicaragua.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Support [H.Res.754](#)—"Expressing the sense of the House of Representatives

that the United States should continue to support the people of Nicaragua in their peaceful efforts to promote democracy and human rights, and use the tools under United States law to increase political and financial pressure on the government of Daniel Ortega"—and other legislation designed to condemn violations of religious freedom in Nicaragua.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Nicaragua in 2019](#)

## Background

The Republic of Nicaragua is a presidential republic with a multiparty system. The president is both head of state and head of government with no term limits. The unicameral National Assembly is the legislative branch and the judiciary is supposed to be independent of the executive and the legislature. However, President Ortega and his party, the Sandinista National Liberation Front, exercise authoritarian control over all three branches of government and the electoral process. An estimated 46 percent of the population of Nicaragua are Catholic, compared to 33 percent Evangelical Protestants, 14 percent religiously nonaffiliated, and less than 4 percent of other religions.

The country's current social and political crisis began in April 2018 when President Ortega [announced](#) reforms to the public pension system that precipitated major peaceful protests around the country. The government responded with [excessive force and repression, leading](#) to at least 325 persons killed, 2,000 injured, hundreds illegally detained and tortured, and more than 62,000 fleeing to neighboring countries. The Catholic Church emerged as a key actor in the crisis, providing sanctuary and medical aid to protesters and [accepting an invitation](#) to mediate a National Dialogue between the protesters and the government. Talks were underway in May 2018, but with the Church's insistence on not turning away demonstrators in need of aid and some clergy's support of the protesters, the Ortega administration began to lash out at the Church and the [dialogue dissolved](#).

Since the end of the National Dialogue, the government has continued its brutal repression of human rights. The tactics used by the government to quell the protests and keep its grip on public life include rampant corruption, arbitrary detention, torture, forced disappearances, the curtailment of civil liberties, and the hindrance of civil society organizations' operations.

## Damage to Churches

With the Catholic Church opening up its doors, protesters congregated in churches because security forces typically avoided entering them. Nevertheless, in 2019, church buildings suffered significant damage from clashes between protesters and Ortega supporters. Supporters of the regime besieged, desecrated, assaulted, and threatened churches in many cities around the country. Sometimes, these offenses occurred with the police standing nearby while mobs attacked the churches and worshippers.

In November, the government [shut off the electricity and water](#) to the San Miguel Arcángel church in Masaya because a group of 14 hunger strikers had sought refuge there, protesting the detention of family members. Police cordoned off a two-block radius around the church to stop activists from delivering water to the strikers. After a priest at the nearby San Juan Bautista church [planned to march](#) in solidarity with the hunger strikers at San Miguel Arcángel, a mob of Ortega supporters formed around the San Juan Bautista church during Mass. They eventually forced their way through a barricade of pews at the front door, attacking parishioners and altar boys with clubs, machetes, and metal bars. Police were nearby but did nothing to halt the violence.

Also in November, a group of mothers [conducting a hunger strike](#) against the regime's detention of their children sought refuge in

the Managua Cathedral. A mob burst into the cathedral, brandished crude weapons, stole items, broke locks around the building, and assaulted the priest and nun caring for the building until the pair had to flee in order to protect themselves. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) [swiftly condemned](#) the desecration of the cathedral and the harassment of the hunger strikers.

## Intimidation and Inability to Worship

Pro-Ortega forces sought to instill fear in Catholic clergy and devotees by maintaining a threatening presence near churches. Security forces surrounded churches during Mass and filmed those entering and exiting church buildings. Father Román says that [officers surrounded](#) his church during masses held in honor of those killed during protests and to celebrate the release of political prisoners.

In some cases, the violent disruption of church services by regime supporters was done with the acquiescence of police forces. On June 15, pro-government civilians [threatened, beat, and threw stones](#) at worshippers attending a service commemorating the death of a 15-year-old boy killed in the 2018 protests. Police were outside the cathedral but did not prevent the attack. In November, [Ortega supporters threw rocks](#) toward the San Felipe de Molagüina church in the northern city of Matagalpa while police looked on, though no injuries were reported.

In one instance, the Ortega government sought to disrupt a ritual that is fundamental to the Catholic faith. Cardinal Leopoldo Brenes [reported in October 2019](#) that the General Directorate of Customs, controlled by the regime, was withholding several containers of donated goods from abroad, including vessels of wine used in the Eucharist sacrament.

## Key U.S. Policy

At the [2018](#) and [2019 Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom](#), Vice President Michael R. Pence highlighted the Ortega government's campaign against the Catholic Church. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Samuel D. Brownback said on International Religious Freedom Day in October 2018 that he was ["strongly concerned"](#) with the situation and called on the government to protect religious freedom and the Church's right to operate freely. On December 18, 2019, the State Department [placed](#) Nicaragua on its Special Watch List for severe violators of religious freedom.

In December 2018, Congress passed the Nicaragua Human Rights and Anticorruption Act ([P.L. 115-335](#)), a bill that imposed sanctions on institutions and individuals responsible for violence against and infringement of the civil rights of protesters. It also directed the U.S. Department of the Treasury to limit the ability of international financial institutions to lend assistance to the Nicaraguan government. The U.S. government has imposed targeted sanctions on a number of Nicaraguan officials for corruption, human rights abuses, and/or undermining democracy in Nicaragua, including [three in July 2018](#), [four in June 2019](#), and [three in November 2019](#). Among those targeted were members of President Ortega's immediate family, including his wife [Rosario Murillo](#) and two of his sons, [Rafael](#) and [Laureano](#). The U.S. government also [offered humanitarian assistance](#) to Nicaraguans who have fled their country due to the ongoing conflict.