

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2022, religious freedom conditions in Nicaragua worsened considerably. The government of Nicaragua, under President Daniel Ortega and Vice President Rosario Murillo, escalated its campaign of harassment and severe persecution against the Catholic Church by targeting clergy, eliminating Church-affiliated organizations, and placing restrictions on religious observances. Violations of religious freedom that occurred in previous years—such as hate speech against the Catholic Church and denial of entry into the country for clergy—continued in 2022 as well.

The Nicaraguan government heightened its crackdown against members of the clergy. Despite the high level of persecution against Catholic leaders since protests in 2018, 2022 was the first year in which the government imprisoned members of the clergy. Father Manuel Salvador García was [sentenced](#) in June to two years in prison for threatening a crowd with a weapon, and later he was [sentenced](#) to another two years and eight months for allegedly assaulting a parishioner. [José Leonardo Urbina](#) was [sentenced](#) to 30 years in prison for abuse of a minor; his secret trial lasted only two days and [lacked due process](#). Additionally, the government made several high-profile moves against Rolando Álvarez, Catholic bishop of the Diocese of Matagalpa and Estelí. Following multiple instances of harassment in spring and summer, in August police conducted an early-morning raid on Bishop Álvarez's church in Matagalpa, [detained](#) him, and put him under house arrest in Managua. Additional priests detained in 2022 include [Óscar Benavidez](#) in August and [Enrique Martínez Gamboa](#) in October. The government also engaged in hate speech against clergy and expelled priests or prevented them from returning to the country.

Within the context of a widespread crackdown on civil society organizations critical of the government, the Ortega

regime has also pressured the Catholic Church by hindering or preventing Church-affiliated organizations and services from operating. In 2022, the regime [shut down](#) over 3,000 nongovernmental organizations, often citing legislation such as the “foreign agents” law or Law No. 977, [Law against Money Laundering, Financing of Terrorism and Financing of the Proliferation of Arms](#), to justify its consolidation of control over civil society. The National Assembly ordered the [revocation](#) of the legal status of a Catholic university and several Catholic educational and charitable projects in the city of Estelí and later [approved](#) a law that would strengthen its control over educational institutions and strip funding from the Jesuit-run school *Universidad Centroamericana* (Central American University).

In May, the Nicaraguan Institute of Telecommunications and Postal Services (TELCOR) [ordered](#) the removal of the Episcopal Conference of Nicaragua's *Canal Católico* (Catholic Channel). In its place the regime began airing *Nicarao TV*, widely [perceived](#) as a propaganda network. TELCOR also ordered the [closure](#) of at least [eight](#) radio stations operated by the Catholic Church. In August, police in Sébaco [forcibly](#) entered the [chapel](#) where *Radio Católica* operated. They seized broadcast equipment and forced the church's priest to take [refuge](#) in the parish house for several days.

In June, the government [canceled](#) the legal status of Missionaries of Charity—an order established by Mother Teresa—for allegedly failing to declare the origins of its funding in line with Law No. 977. Missionaries of Charity had operated in Nicaragua since 1988, [running](#) a “children's nursery, a home for abused and abandoned girls and a nursing home.” The government also forced the nuns in the order to leave the country.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Nicaragua as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Impose targeted sanctions on Nicaraguan government agencies and officials responsible for violence and other punitive actions against houses of worship, religious leaders, and organizations 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;
- Press the Nicaraguan government to unconditionally release religious prisoners of conscience, commit to due process for religious detainees, and permit access to Bibles and religious consultations for all political prisoners; and
- Exercise increased scrutiny of any loan or financial or technical assistance provided by international financial institutions for projects in Nicaragua, pursuant to the Reinforcing Nicaragua's Adherence to Conditions for Electoral Reform Act of 2021 (RENACER Act).

The U.S. Congress should:

- Hold public hearings to amplify congressional concerns over religious prisoners of conscience in Nicaragua and work with like-minded parliamentarians in other countries to advocate for their release and the release of other prisoners of conscience.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom in Nicaragua in 2022](#)
- **Hearing:** [Crackdown on Religious Freedom in Nicaragua](#)
- **Podcast:** [Nicaragua's Assault on Religious Freedom](#)
- **Podcast:** [Deteriorating Religious Freedom Conditions in Nicaragua](#)

## Background

President Ortega is the head of state and government of Nicaragua. He and his party, the Sandinista National Liberation Front, exercise authoritarian control over the government and electoral process. Roman Catholics [account](#) for about 50 percent of Nicaragua’s population; Evangelical Christians account for 33.2 percent; followers of unspecified religions account for 13.2 percent; Jews, Muslims, and others account for 2.9 percent; and 0.7 percent do not adhere to any religion.

Nicaragua is embroiled in a social and political crisis that started after the government’s repression of peaceful protests in April 2018. The Ortega administration began [targeting the Catholic Church](#) after it aided demonstrators and individual clergy voiced opposition to the government’s human rights abuses. Since 2018, government actors and pro-Ortega groups have routinely intimidated and harassed worshippers; vandalized churches; and targeted clergy with defamatory accusations, arbitrary arrests, death threats, deportations, and violent attacks.

## Persecution of Bishop Rolando Álvarez

The Nicaraguan government’s persecution against Bishop Álvarez is illustrative of its crackdown on members of the clergy. Álvarez was a mediator in the national dialogue in 2018 and was critical of the government’s human rights record. In May, police placed Álvarez under [24-hour surveillance](#). As a result, Álvarez took refuge in a church in Managua—which the police then surrounded—and began a hunger strike to protest his treatment. Police [allowed](#) the bishop to return to his own diocese in Matagalpa but escorted his vehicle for the two-hour journey. On August 5, the national police [announced](#) an investigation into Bishop Álvarez. He was under de facto [house arrest](#) at his Matagalpa church residence for two weeks until police conducted an early-morning raid on the church, [detained](#) the bishop, and put him under house arrest in Managua. He was charged with “conspiracy,” “spreading false news,” and “damaging the Nicaraguan government and society.” Vice President Murillo justified the bishop’s arrest by arguing that it served to “guard the peace, security, and tranquility of Nicaraguan families.” In February 2023, a court [sentenced](#) Bishop Álvarez to 26 years in prison and also announced that “he would be fined and stripped of his Nicaraguan citizenship.”

Authorities detained seven other men at the same time as Bishop Álvarez’s arrest, including three priests, one deacon, two seminarians, and one layman. In February 2023, the regime sentenced the men to 10 years in prison for “conspiracy to undermine national integrity” and “for spreading false news.” Days later, the regime [released](#) the seven men and exiled them to the United States along with over 200 other political prisoners.

## Harassment of Clergy

The government continued to use similar tactics as in previous years to incite fear in the Catholic community. It again expelled priests and prevented them from returning to the country after traveling abroad, without any official explanation. Monsignor Waldemar Sommertag served as the papal nuncio in Managua starting in 2018. In March

2022, the Nicaraguan government abruptly withdrew his credentials and forced him to leave the country. In September, the Directorate General of Immigration and Nationality [notified](#) Father Juan de Dios García via email that he was banned from returning after he visited family in the United States. A short while later, the regime [denied](#) entry to Father Guillermo Blandón after he traveled to Israel with a stopover in the United States.

Shortly after Pope Francis [acknowledged](#) dialogue between the Vatican and the Nicaraguan government, President Ortega—during a televised speech—[called](#) the Church a “perfect dictatorship” and renewed his old accusations of clergy as “killers” and “coup plotters.” In December, he also accused clergy of “calling for bloodshed” during the 2018 protests.

## Prohibition of Religious Rituals

The regime continued to arbitrarily ban Catholic processions in several cities. In August, the police [prohibited](#) a procession in Managua for “reasons of internal security.” In lieu of the procession, parishioners [gathered](#) peacefully under heavy police presence for Mass at the cathedral. Similar prohibitions occurred at least [four](#) times in [September](#), [twice](#) in [October](#), and [twice](#) in [November](#).

## Key U.S. Policy

The U.S. government continued to enact robust sanctions against Nicaraguan organizations and officials. The [RENACER Act](#) expanded the Corrupt and Undemocratic Actors list to include Nicaragua. In March, the U.S. Department of State [added](#) nine Nicaraguan officials to the list for “undermining the democratic processes or institutions of Nicaragua” during the 2021 [sham election](#), making those individuals ineligible for visas and admission to the United States. Further rounds of visa restrictions came in [June](#) and [July](#) when the State Department imposed restrictions on an additional 116 individuals for undermining democracy, including judges, prosecutors, National Assembly members, and Interior Ministry officials.

In June, the U.S. Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control [sanctioned](#) the state-owned mining company *Empresa Nicaraguense de Minas* and one official in the government pursuant to Executive Order 13851. In October, the Joseph R. Biden administration [announced](#) another slate of sanctions against individuals and entities in Nicaragua “to hold the Ortega-Murillo regime accountable for its escalating human rights violations, continued dismantling of democratic institutions,” and attacks on civil society. These measures put [pressure](#) on Nicaragua’s gold sector, allow for future trade restrictions, and impose visa restrictions on more than 500 individuals “who work for the Nicaraguan government or formulate, implement, or benefit from policies or actions that undermine or injure democratic institutions.”

On November 30, the State Department for the first time [designated](#) Nicaragua as a CPC under IRFA and imposed as the relevant president action the existing ongoing restrictions referenced in section 5 of the Nicaragua Investment Conditionality Act of 2018 (the NICA Act). Nicaragua previously had been on the State Department’s Special Watch List since 2019.