

KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, religious freedom conditions in Nicaragua remained the same as in 2020. During April 2018 protests against reforms to the public pension system, Catholic clergy provided aid and sanctuary to and voiced support for [the protesters](#). As a result, President Daniel Ortega used his government and supporters to persecute members of the clergy, worshipers, and Catholic organizations. This pattern of harassment continued in 2021, as the government maintained its campaign against the Catholic Church. In 2021, the backdrop for religious freedom violations was not ongoing protests as in the last few years, but rather the runup to the general election in which President Ortega sought reelection for a fourth consecutive term. In the process, President Ortega's government [arrested](#) or disqualified numerous opposition candidates, imprisoned other critical figures such as journalists and human rights defenders, and [raided](#) the last remaining printed newspaper, *La Prensa*. Members of the Nicaraguan Catholic Church denounced the government's tactics, expressed their support for free and fair elections and human rights, and called for the release of political prisoners.

As in preceding years, in 2021, President Ortega and his wife, Vice President Rosario Murillo, made verbal attacks against the Catholic Church that contributed to the perilous environment in which the Church operated. In June, Vice President Murillo [accused](#) priests of stealing and raising funds to distribute among themselves. At an anniversary celebration of the Nicaraguan Army Air Force in July, President Ortega [called](#) priests "Pharisees . . . speaking as if they were saints [with] no respect for Christ, no respect for God." USCIRF received reports that on August 13, President Ortega said that protesters opened fire on their fellow

citizens and tortured police officers "with the applause and support of priests." The next day, Vice President Murillo [called](#) clergy "sons of the devil" and accused them of condoning crimes and approving of the deaths of Nicaraguans. In the same speech, she said bishops were "fake shepherds" performing "satanic rites" and "witchcraft" to allegedly overthrow the government. On October 4, President Ortega again attacked clergy by [calling](#) the bishops "terrorists," a potentially grave accusation considering the government adopted a wide-reaching and strict [antiterrorism law](#) in the wake of the 2018 protests.

The government also continued to cancel visas or prevent the return of foreign-born priests as a tactic to pressure Catholic clergy. In January and February, the Directorate General of Immigration and Nationality (DGME) [prevented](#) two Franciscans—Friar Santos Fabián Mejía, head of the San Francisco de Asís parish in Juigalpa, and José Lemus Aguilar, parish priest of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Church in Matagalpa—from returning to Nicaragua from El Salvador. There was no official [reason](#) given for the denials of entry, but an immigration officer allegedly told Friar Fabián that he had gotten too involved in politics. On April 30, the DGME [canceled](#) the permanent residency of another Franciscan, Father Damián Muratori, director of El Tepeyac, a Franciscan sanctuary in the city of San Rafael del Norte. He was given 90 days to leave the country. Originally born in Italy, Father Muratori had lived in Nicaragua since 1976. Although he was given no explanation for why he was being deported, he [suspects](#) it may be because of his popular sermons and the false [accusation](#) that he had participated in the 2018 protests.

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 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; and
 - Collaborate with and encourage multilateral organizations, such as the Organization of American States, to monitor and investigate religious freedom violations that occur in Nicaragua and work to identify perpetrators and tolerators of religious freedom violations, and seek the repeal of problematic laws such as the Foreign Agents Regulation Law.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Continue to raise human rights and democracy concerns in Nicaragua and bring attention to religious leaders and organizations silenced by the Ortega regime.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- Podcast: [Nicaragua's Assault on Religious Freedom](#)
- Factsheet: [Controlling Civil Society's Purse Strings](#)

Background

President Ortega is the head of state and government of Nicaragua. He and his party, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), exercise authoritarian control over the government and electoral process. Roman Catholics [account](#) for about 50 percent of Nicaragua's population, followed by Evangelical Christians at 33.2 percent; followers of unspecified religions at 13.2 percent; Jews, Muslims, and others at 2.9 percent; and 0.7 percent adhering to no 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 lashing out at the Catholic Church after it aided demonstrators and individual Catholic clergy voiced opposition to the government.

Leading up to the 2021 November election, Catholic clergy were outspoken in their support for free elections and the release of political prisoners. In a June 10 letter, Nicaraguan bishops [decried](#) "arbitrary and illegal restrictions of citizens' freedoms and the persecution of the opposition and media outlets." Clergy increasingly called the election [illegitimate](#) and an Ortega victory a forgone conclusion. Monsignor Carlos Aviles, spokesman for the Archdiocese of Managua, [posited](#) that "[these] are not elections. It's a way to legitimize a period of increasing dictatorship."

Harassment of Worshipers and Clergy

Supporters of the Ortega regime continued to enter churches disruptively during Mass. In the northwestern town of Chinandega, a mob shouting [slogans](#) in favor of the Ortega government [interrupted](#) an April mass held in tribute to the victims of the violence against April 2018 protesters and political prisoners. Also in April, Father Edwin Román [claimed](#) that at a mass he held at the St. Michael the Archangel Parish in Masaya nearly 80 police, paramilitaries, and other bystanders gathered outside. At the end of the mass, some of those outside threw stones at the church.

The Archbishop of Managua, Cardinal Leopoldo Brenes, is an [outspoken](#) critic of the Ortega regime and was vocal in the runup to the election. According to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, police have kept Cardinal Brenes under supervision ever since he left the hospital after contracting COVID-19 in September. Agents surround his home and monitor his movements with the intention of intimidating him, despite the fact that he has not been charged with a crime and is not a suspect in any ongoing investigation.

Vandalism and Theft of Church Property

In late March, thieves stole money from El Tepeyac, supposedly entering the church via the roof and hogtying the security guard. On July 5, the Immaculate Conception of Mary parish church in Jalapa was [broken into](#) in the middle of the night, with damage to the church's door and a statue of Jesus and Mary. Later in July, an unknown assailant [broke](#) into the chapel at the San Caralampio Church in Diriamba, stealing sound equipment and desecrating the Eucharist. As in previous

years, no one has been held to account for crimes committed against churches, and the government did not offer additional security for houses of worship.

Abuses against Protestants

The government also targeted Protestant institutions and individuals, especially those who have spoken out against the government. USCIRF received reports that the government exerted pressure on Protestants by increasing taxes on institutions, closely examining foreign funding, and harassing pastors who speak out against government abuses. In January, police in Jinotepe arrested and [beat](#) Pastor Rudy Palacios on his way to a meeting of the Democratic Restoration Party (PRD), a popular Protestant political party in Nicaragua. Pastor Palacios [supported](#) and provided food supplies to protesters in 2018.

After the elections, the Nicaraguan Institute of Telecommunications and Postal Services (TELCOR) arbitrarily [canceled](#) the license for Enlace Canal 21, Nicaragua's only Christian television channel. It is believed that the government took this action after the leader of the channel, Pastor Guillermo Osorno, challenged the results of the presidential election and denounced electoral irregularities.

Key U.S. Policy

In February, the State Department issued a press statement [expressing](#) concern for the Nicaraguan government's crackdown on civil society, specifically through the [Foreign Agents Law passed](#) last year. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken [condemned](#) the Ortega-Murillo government for "repression and electoral manipulation" that "stripped the November 7 vote of any real significance." Around the time of the election, the U.S. Congress passed and President Joseph R. Biden signed the [RENACER Act](#). The act establishes "measures to monitor, report on, and address corruption and human rights abuses in Nicaragua," including calling for sanctions on Nicaraguan officials responsible for the unfair election, requiring State Department reports on senior government officials involved in gross human rights violations, and advocating oversight of foreign assistance for projects in the country.

The U.S. government continued to enact robust sanctions against Nicaraguan officials, though none referred to religious freedom violations. On June 9—a week after the Nicaraguan government arrested four presidential candidates—the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) [sanctioned](#) four government officials, including President Ortega's daughter. Then, on November 15 OFAC [imposed](#) sanctions on the Public Ministry of Nicaragua and nine government officials in response to the sham elections. On January 10, 2022, the State Department [announced](#) "visa restrictions on 116 individuals complicit in undermining democracy in Nicaragua," including local leaders and justice officials. OFAC also sanctioned six members of the Ortega regime. On November 15, 2021, the State Department again [placed](#) Nicaragua on its Special Watch List for severe violations of religious freedom.