



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

COUNTRY UPDATE: NICARAGUA

March 2020

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To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.

Religious Freedom Conditions in Nicaragua in 2019

By Zack Udin, Project Specialist

Overview

This Country Update provides an overview of the key religious freedom violations that occurred in Nicaragua during 2019.

Background

In April 2018, Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega [announced](#) reforms to the country's public pension system without a period of public comment or solicitation. This was the latest in a series of undemocratic actions that caused major peaceful protests, including by senior citizens and students. 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.

In keeping with its religious views, the Catholic Church provided sanctuary and medical aid to protesters during the initial clashes. As the demonstrations continued, the Church [accepted an invitation](#) to mediate a National Dialogue between the protesters and the government. The Church was asked to fill this role given its prominence and legitimacy in Nicaraguan society. (Catholics make up an [estimated](#) 46% of the population of Nicaragua, compared to 33% evangelical Protestants, 14% religiously non-affiliated, and less than 4% of other religions.) 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](#).

Though the government abandoned the reforms in question, protests against Ortega's rule are ongoing. Ortega's regime continues to [curtail people's right to peaceful protest](#) and respond violently to these protests. The Church continues to aid and support protesters, provide spaces for improvised demonstrations, and use masses to call for the cessation of violence against opponents of the regime. Some clergy, like [Bishop Silvio Báez](#), unambiguously denounce the Ortega regime and its proxies in the streets.

Since the breakdown of the National Dialogue, the police, paramilitaries, and pro-Sandinista mobs have harassed the Catholic Church, its personnel, and its followers. Government forces regularly hound clergy in church and at home, desecrate churches, and



intimidate worshippers to the point where some are unable or unwilling to attend Mass. Yet, President Ortega denies any state-led persecution of clergy, declaring “[t]here is not a single priest who can claim that he’s been attacked by the government.” 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, sought to infiltrate parishes, and given money to support festivals for patron saints with the aim of gaining supporters among the devout.

July 2018 was an especially tense month, with multiple attacks on Church institutions, officials, and followers. President Ortega made an [inflammatory speech](#) denouncing the Church in which he called clergymen “coup mongers,” “terrorists,” and “pedophiles” and accused them of stockpiling weapons in their churches on behalf of protesters. Paramilitaries [shot at](#) a priest’s car and beat his driver. A mob attack on a church in Jinotepe damaged pews, religious icons, and a small chapel in the building, causing the Archdiocese of Managua to suspend indefinitely the Eucharist service there. On the same day, a group of paramilitaries and other regime supporters [attacked Bishop Silvio Báez](#) and four other Catholic clergymen, as well as a representative from the Nicaraguan Association for Human Rights. Finally, [for nearly 15 hours](#) on the night of July 13, a group of 155 students, priests, and journalists took refuge in the Divine Mercy Church in Managua as paramilitaries surrounded and fired upon the church. The façade of the building, plus paintings and relics inside, bore bullet holes from the siege. These incidents laid the groundwork for what would become regular occurrences of harassment.

Key Freedom of Religion or Belief Issues in 2019

Alongside a continued [climate of repression and rampant human rights violations](#), many of the same religious freedom violations and abuses committed by the Ortega regime and its supporters against the Catholic Church and its followers in 2018 continued in 2019.

Intimidation and Inability to Worship: Pro-Ortega forces continued to seek to instill fear in Catholic clergy and devotees, including by maintaining a threatening presence near churches. Security forces surrounded churches during Mass and filmed those entering and exiting church buildings. Father Edwin Román, a priest in the small city of Masaya and a well-known opponent of the regime, says that [officers surrounded his church](#) during masses held to remember those killed during the protests and to celebrate political prisoners released from jail.

In some cases, pro-government supporters went beyond surrounding a church. During a November 2019 Mass service to mourn victims of the government’s repression, [Sandinistas threw rocks](#) at the San Felipe de Molagüina church in the northern city of Matagalpa. Also in November 2019, [a mob formed outside](#) of the San Juan Bautista church in Masaya during Mass and tried to break in. Priests and churchgoers sought to prevent their entry by stacking pews against the door, but the mob was able to attack parishioners with pipes, machetes, and metal bars. Police and anti-riot forces were at the scene but did nothing to halt the violence.

Examples of disruptions of worship:

- Security forces surrounding churches during Mass
- Security officers filming worshippers entering and exiting church and priests' homilies
- Ortega supporters throwing projectiles at churches during Mass
- Mobs forcing their way into churches during Mass
- Mobs physically assaulting parishioners in churches
- Customs officials withholding sacramental wine

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.

Harassment and Arbitrary Arrest of Clergy: The Ortega regime and its supporters also targeted Catholic priests with defamatory accusations, arbitrary arrests, death threats on social media, and violent attacks.

In December 2019, police [detained](#) Father Ramón Alcides Peña Silva for 12 hours overnight without a warrant for allegedly disturbing the peace by celebrating Mass. Father Alcides Peña was forced to sleep on the ground in his cell during his time in jail.

Police stopped Father Edwin Román, priest of the San Miguel Arcángel church in Masaya, twice at roadway checkpoints. [In February 2019](#), eight police officers surrounded his car, including riot police. As he tried to record his arrest, an officer slapped his face and tried to take his phone. They let him go after 30 minutes, which he attributed to the presence of a crowd who had been alerted to his situation. Two months prior, police detained him at a checkpoint for three hours. Plainclothes security agents also have [followed](#) his movements. A government spy once [entered his church](#) to ask him where to find bombs, seeking to entrap him in the allegations that Ortega promulgated in his speeches. Additionally, paramilitaries have [surrounded](#) Father Román's church during Mass.

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.

Auxiliary Bishop Silvio Báez



The Ortega regime and its supporters engaged in a campaign of harassment against Auxiliary Bishop Silvio Báez of Managua for his criticism of the government's violent repression of the government's violent repression in 2018, including:

- The Ortega regime [released an audio clip](#) in October 2018 in which Bishop Báez allegedly discussed the situation in Nicaragua and plotted Ortega's removal from office. An independent sound engineer verified that the regime manipulated the audio clip in question.
- The political secretary of the Sandinista Front in León forced public employees in the cities of León and Granada [to sign a letter](#) to the Vatican demanding Bishop Báez's removal for instigating "violence and disunity." The employees were given no opportunity to read the letter and if they did not sign, they would lose their jobs.
- Báez received death threats through social media sites like Twitter and Facebook on a daily basis.
- At the San Sebastian Basilica in Diriamba, Báez [was knifed in the arm](#) while leading a group of priests in helping to shield protesters from Sandinistas.

Initially Báez maintained a low profile, opting to deliver his weekly homilies in a [secluded seminary](#) on the outskirts of Managua. However, his situation became untenable in June 2018 after an official at the U.S. Embassy in Managua [called Báez in his home](#) to warn that he was the target of an assassination attempt. As a result, Pope Francis recalled Báez back to Rome indefinitely.

Damage to Churches: With the Catholic Church opening up its doors, protesters initially congregated in churches because security forces typically avoided entering them. Nevertheless, church buildings have suffered significant damage from clashes between protesters and Ortega supporters. Supporters of the regime have besieged, desecrated, assaulted, and threatened churches in many cities around the country. Police forces often stand by as mobs attack churches and worshippers. Vandals also have marked churches with graffiti, defacing the outer walls with pro-Sandinista messages and anti-Catholic Church messages.

In November 2019, 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. At the nearby [San Juan Bautista church](#), Reverend Harvin Padilla planned to lead a procession of worshippers in solidarity with the hunger strikers. Hearing this, a mob of Ortega supporters formed around the San Juan Bautista church during Mass and 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.

Also in November 2019, 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 hunger strikers were forced to shelter in the cathedral's annex. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) [swiftly condemned](#) the desecration of the cathedral and the harassment of the hunger strikers. The violence against churches continues into 2020. On January 1, 2020, a mob attacked [a church in Tipitapa](#), stealing items, decapitating a statue of the Virgin Mary, and defacing a statue of Jesus on a crucifix.

U.S. Policy

Since 2018, high-level U.S. officials have spoken out repeatedly against the Nicaraguan government's assaults on religious freedom. 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. Additionally, Vice President Pence [spoke by phone](#) in August 2018 with Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Secretary of State of the Holy See to discuss the political crisis and condemn the violence against protesters and the Church. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Samuel Brownback said on International Religious Freedom Day in October 2018 that he was ["strongly concerned"](#) by the situation and called on the government to protect religious freedom and the Church's right to operate freely. In the wake of the attacks on hunger strikers in November 2019, the Department of State [spokesperson said](#), "The Ortega regime's siege of a place of worship is unacceptable, as are the arrests of more than a dozen individuals who were attempting to aid the hunger strikers." In December 2019, the State Department placed Nicaragua on its [Special Watch List](#) for severe violators of religious freedom.

The U.S. government also 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.

In December 2019, Representatives Albio Sires (D-NJ) and Francis Rooney (R-FL) of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, Civilian Security, and Trade [introduced a resolution](#) supporting Nicaraguan civil society, condemning the Ortega government's continued violations of human rights, and urging the international community to hold the Ortega government accountable for attacks on religious freedom.



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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on threats to religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.

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