

KEY FINDINGS

In 2020, religious freedom conditions in Nicaragua remained the same as in 2019. The government of Nicaragua maintained its campaign against the Catholic Church, continuing a pattern of harassment that began during April 2018 protests against reforms to the public pension system. Members of the Catholic Church acted upon their religious convictions by providing sanctuary to and voicing support for [the protesters](#). Following the Church's support of the protesters, President Daniel Ortega used his government and his supporters to persecute members of the clergy, worshippers, and Catholic organizations. Many of the abuses in 2020—violent attacks on churches, intimidation of worshippers, threats and hate speech, and harassment of Catholic institutions—emulate those committed by the Ortega regime since the civil uprising.

The Ortega government harassed Catholic officials and institutions in ways that disrupted the normal functions of the Church. In September, the Diocese of Estelí [announced](#) that one of its priests had his visa cancelled. According to the Episcopal Conference of Nicaragua, several other foreign-born priests who have worked in Nicaragua for decades face deportation. Additionally, the government repeatedly hampered the operations of the Church's primary charitable organization, Caritas. Following the outbreak of COVID-19, Caritas had its tax exemption status denied in April. Without the tax exemption, the organization is [unable](#) to withdraw foreign donations from customs. Additionally, the Regulation of Foreign Agents Law, passed in October, stipulates that [citizens](#) working for foreign governments, companies, foundations, or organizations are required to register as foreign agents with the Interior Ministry and must report monthly income and spending as well as the intended use of foreign funds. Among other concerns regarding the law's impact on religious organizations, observers worry it could be used to [hamper arbitrarily](#) the operations of Caritas and other foreign humanitarian organizations that receive donations from abroad.

As in preceding years, in 2020 senior members of the Ortega regime made inflammatory statements against the Catholic Church that contributed to the perilous environment in which the Church operated. For example, after President Ortega refused to initiate measures to safeguard the country against the COVID-19 pandemic and Catholic leaders expressed concern for the safety of Nicaraguans, Vice President Rosario Murillo, President Ortega's wife, [called](#) Catholic leaders "demons" who espouse hatred. Gustavo Porras Cortés, the president of the National Assembly and member of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), falsely claimed on December 20 that priests beat and torture Sandinistas.

Additionally, there were numerous violent attacks on Catholic churches around the country throughout the reporting period. These attacks usually involved known or suspected Ortega supporters forcibly entering churches and committing acts of vandalism and desecration. Often, perpetrators wore Sandinista emblems or colors. The most brazen instance of violence occurred in July, when an unknown assailant set off an incendiary device in a chapel attached to the Cathedral of Managua in what Catholic officials [called](#) a premeditated assault. The arson attack resulted in extensive damage to the interior of the building, including the charring of a 400-year-old wooden crucifix in the center of the room. It was not an isolated incident; USCIRF received reports indicating that nearly a dozen smaller attacks on churches occurred in the weeks [leading](#) up to and following the arson in Managua. Vice President Murillo peddled falsehoods against the Church in the wake of the attack when she baselessly [claimed](#) that a candle [igniting](#) a curtain was responsible for the blaze, despite neither candles nor curtains existing in the structure. The lack of credible government investigations into such attacks or prosecutions for perpetrators contributes to an environment of impunity for abuses against the Catholic Church.

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);
- In addition to existing sanctions based on human rights violations, 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;
- Encourage multilateral organizations such as the Organization of American States to investigate religious freedom violations that occur in Nicaragua and hold to account the perpetrators or instigators of criminal acts; and
- Support and collaborate with multilateral and/or nongovernmental organization (NGO) partners to monitor religious freedom violations and hate speech against religious actors, particularly ahead of the presidential election on November 7, 2021.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Hold public hearings highlighting religious freedom conditions in Nicaragua and U.S. policy toward Nicaragua.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- Factsheet: [Controlling Civil Society's Purse Strings](#)

Background

President Ortega is the head of state and head of government of the Republic of Nicaragua. He and his party, the FSLN, exercise authoritarian control over all three branches of government and the electoral process. Roman Catholics [account](#) for about 50 percent of the population, followed by Evangelical Christians at 33.2 percent, followers of unspecified religions at 13.2 percent, “other” religions (including Jews and Muslims) at 2.9 percent, and 0.7 percent adhering to no religion.

Nicaragua is embroiled in a social and political crisis that started in April 2018 when peaceful protests erupted after President Ortega announced reforms to the public pension system. Law enforcement responded to the protests with excessive force and repression. The Catholic Church stepped in to provide aid to protesters and mediate a National Dialogue. Since the Church refused to turn away demonstrators in need of aid and individual clergymen voiced opposition to the government, the Ortega Administration abandoned the talks and began lashing out at the Church. Over two years later, the Ortega regime’s ire against the Catholic Church has not abated. A presidential election is set for November 7, 2021, and Catholic Church officials in the country [fear](#) more violence leading up to election day.

Impunity for Violent Attacks on Churches

Attacks on Catholic churches were common occurrences throughout the country in 2020. In addition to the incendiary attack on the Cathedral of Managua, supporters of the regime threatened, vandalized, besieged, and desecrated churches across Nicaragua. Unlike in previous years, the attacks appear to have been perpetrated by citizens who support President Ortega, as opposed to law enforcement or paramilitary groups. No one—citizens, law enforcement, or paramilitary members—has been held to account for crimes committed against Catholic churches, officials, or worshippers since April 2018.

Harassment of Worshippers

Ortega supporters repeatedly entered churches prior to or during Mass to harass worshippers. On February 25, a group of agitators [entered](#) the San Felipe Apostol church in Matagalpa ten minutes before Mass to harass and film the parishioners. As parishioners and clergy scuffled with the group, a man approached the sacristan and punched him in the eye and a woman sprayed him with pepper spray. The church’s priest, Monsignor Roger Garcia, said that Sandinista “mobs” sought to take photographs of parishioners at that church in the past. On March 3, a group of Sandinistas clad in clothing the colors of the party [disrupted](#) the funeral service held at the Metropolitan Cathedral of Managua

in honor of well-known priest and poet Ernesto Cardenal. The group chanted anti-Catholic slogans, stole personal belongings of attendees, and made it difficult for Cardenal’s family to move the coffin to the hearse waiting outside. Law enforcement stood nearby the cathedral but did nothing to disperse the regime supporters. On July 19, services at two different churches in León and Matagalpa were [suspended](#) due to loud noise caused by Ortega supporters.

Vandalism of Church Property

Incidents of vandalism included smashing religious icons and stealing in [Tipitapa](#); splashing paint on religious icons and throwing away communion wafers in [Mateare](#); “breaking images, [offending] the tabernacle, trampling [communion wafers], breaking benches, and causing damage to furniture, doors and pipes” in [Nindirí](#); stealing paintings in [Managua](#); and defecating in various locations around a church in [Nindirí](#). These are only a small sample of the incidents that occurred at Catholic churches in Nicaragua in 2020.

Key U.S. Policy

In January, then Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo traveled to Central America to meet with Nicaraguan opposition leaders. During this meeting, then Secretary Pompeo [urged](#) President Ortega to end “repression, and to restore the fundamental civil liberties and support free and fair elections.” He also stated that the United States has provided Costa Rica with at least \$13 million to assist vulnerable populations, including Nicaraguans who fled their country to Costa Rica following the outbreak of civil unrest in April 2018. On December 2, 2020, the State Department again [placed](#) Nicaragua on its Special Watch List for severe violators of religious freedom.

The U.S. House of Representatives and Senate, on [March 9](#) and [June 16](#), respectively, passed resolutions supporting the Nicaraguan peoples’ pursuit of democracy and human rights and the use of tools under U.S. law to pressure the Ortega government. USCIRF had urged Congress to pass these measures. The U.S. government continued to enact robust sanctions against Nicaraguan officials and companies, though none referred to religious freedom violations. On March 5, the U.S. Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) [imposed](#) sanctions on the Nicaraguan National Police as well as police commissioners Juan Valle Valle, Luis Alberto Perez Olivas, and Juan Pastor Urbina for engaging in serious human rights abuses against protesters. Further, on July 17 OFAC [imposed](#) sanctions on Juan Carlos Ortega Murillo, son of President Ortega; Jose Jorge Mojica Mejia; and “two companies they use in an effort to distribute regime propaganda and launder money.”