

Crackdown on Religious Freedom in Nicaragua

Testimony for the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom

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It is an honor for me to participate in this panel. As an exiled Nicaraguan, I feel the moral obligation to tell as many people as possible what my country is going through, what Nicaraguans suffer on a civil and religious level, so thank you to the commission for giving me this opportunity. I left my country in a state of war in September 2018. Four years have passed since the crisis broke out and nothing seems to have improved but on the contrary, violations of human and religious rights have become institutionalized in Nicaragua. The Ortega and Murillo regime has created a state of fear based on terror.

From the action of the Ortega-Murillo regime, various repressive measures can be identified, backed by a “legal system”; that it is illegitimate and applied arbitrarily to anyone who questions the authoritarian regime of Ortega and Murillo.

In this scenario, religious leaders or faith-based organizations that consistently denounce the regime for human rights violations, become targets of politically motivated religious freedom violations. Therefore, any religious leader known or associated with the opposition is harassed or pressured to the point of violence. In this way, religious activities are hampered or interrupted, and places of worship vandalized. None of those affected have a legitimate institution, in which such illegal actions can be denounced, or the guarantee of their rights is demanded.

In 2018 the Catholic Church opened its temples to protect the lives of citizens who were initially protesting for a social reform and due to the violent response of the government, the protests quickly became a massive social outburst demanding freedom. Since then, the Catholic Church has become a voice for the demands of the Nicaraguan people, exposing illegality, abuses of power, and violations of the human, civil, and religious rights of Nicaraguans.

As of today, the Catholic Church has been the target of at least 190 attacks, including the burning of the Managua Cathedral in 2020. Around 60 individuals of the Catholic Church have left the country or have been expelled from Nicaragua. These individuals have been stripped of their passports, nationality, residence, and in some cases, they have been denied entry to Nicaragua or some have decided to go into exile as they fear for their lives.

Among the religious individuals who have left Nicaragua, is the former apostolic nuncio Waldemar Stanislaw Sommertag who was expelled by the Government of Nicaragua. There are currently 10 religious’ prisoners, all priests of the Catholic Church, including Bishop Rolando Alvarez who is under house arrest.

The Ortega Murillo regime has canceled at least 8 Catholic radio stations and the episcopal conference television channel.

The regime's attack on the Catholic Church is systematic, ranging from verbal attacks in public speeches by the regime, accusing the bishops and priests of being terrorists and of attempting a coup against Ortega.

In daily life, Catholics must deal with permanent surveillance. The Ortega's police oversee permanently monitoring the parishes and recording on video the entrances and exits of ordinary citizens who only attend churches in their religious exercise and mainly looking for a word of hope and peace. The parishioners are afraid to attend the temples because their faces are recorded on video that are in the hands of a murderous police officers. They fear that these images will be used against them, to accuse them of being involved in the alleged terrorist activities led by Catholic bishops and priests.

Catholics are afraid to contribute financially to the churches, thinking that they may be accused of financing the coup that, according to Ortega-Murillo, the Catholic Church is coordinating.

For many of you this sounds illogical or even absurd, but believe me when I tell you, in my country the unimaginable occurs on a daily basis. The regime in these 4 years has clearly demonstrated that even the most minimal actions such as attending mass, supporting the social work of the church, can represent - if they consider it - an act of terrorism and an attack against the peace and stability of the country.

Nearly 2,700 civil society organizations have been closed in Nicaragua over the course of these 4 years, it is difficult to count how many of these are of religious origin, but without a doubt many organizations, both Catholic and Evangelical, have been cancelled. The government's excuse for these cancellations is alleged non-compliance with regulations of the Ministry of the Interior (MinGob) and the General Directorate of Taxes.

The Superintendency of Banks in Nicaragua controls the income and expenses of the parishes, and any movement of money is subject to investigation. If myself as a Christian want to give a contribution to my church, I must know that this act can result in an investigation for alleged terrorism.

Undoubtedly, the attack and violations of religious freedom have been mainly against the Catholic Church, however, there is a record that the Evangelical Church has also been a victim. Evangelical churches operate in the country as NGOs. The moment a pastor or an evangelical leader expresses himself in public outside of religious matters, these churches are cancelled. The fear of losing their legal status has kept them silent in the face of the crisis.

The Government's tactics of repression have shifted from accusing the catholic leaders of terrorists, harassment, incarceration, fire, and bombs to churches, to fiscal control, and permanent surveillance. At the beginning of this crisis the Government set the precedence that being against the regime results in death, prison, and exile. Now after years of using these tactics, the Nicaraguan Government has turned to using laws to discourage individuals from supporting Catholic and Evangelical churches.