

NICARAGUA

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in most instances, the government respected religious freedom. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration with respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom. However, the government demonstrated partisan favoritism for religious groups that supported its sociopolitical agenda while religious groups critical of its sociopolitical policies reported government harassment.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

U. S. embassy officers met regularly with leaders of religious groups to discuss religious freedom issues. Embassy officers also met with government officials to promote religious freedom as a universal human right and tenet of U.S. foreign policy, and to request that reports of government harassment of religious groups be investigated.

Section I. Religious Demography

A 2005 census conducted by the Nicaraguan Institute of Statistics and Census identified Roman Catholics and evangelical Christians as the two largest religious groups. According to the census, 58.5 percent of the population identified itself as Catholic and 21.6 percent as evangelical, which includes Pentecostal Protestants, Mennonites, Moravian Lutherans, and Baptists. A 2010 public opinion survey estimated Catholics at 56.2 percent of the population and evangelicals at 24.9 percent. Catholic and evangelical leaders discounted these figures, however, with each claiming larger percentages of the population.

The Assemblies of God, Nicaragua's largest evangelical Pentecostal church, estimated its membership at 450,000, or 9 percent of the population. Evangelical leaders estimated that evangelicals currently represent 30 percent of the population and included Moravian Lutherans, Baptists and other Protestants in that estimate. Catholic Church leaders estimated that Catholics currently represent 70 percent of the country's population.

Groups that constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and Muslims.

The Moravian Lutheran Church, with approximately 90,000 members, is largely concentrated in Nicaragua's North and South Autonomous Regions. A large percentage of its members are Amerindians and persons of Afro-Caribbean descent. In the two regions, nearly 50 percent of the population identified itself as Moravian Lutheran.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. The constitution states that no one "shall be obligated by coercive measures to declare his ideology or beliefs." The constitution prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion.

The government's requirements for legal recognition of religious groups are similar to requirements for other nongovernmental organizations. A group must apply for "personeria juridica" (legal standing), which the National Assembly must approve. Following approval, the group must register with the Ministry of Government as an association or foundation. Groups that do not register cannot incur legal obligations or enter into contracts.

Missionaries are required to obtain religious worker visas, which are routinely provided; however, the process, which must be completed before arrival, continues to take several months.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter Sunday, the Immaculate Conception, and Christmas. The Festival of Santo Domingo (August 1 and 10) is an official holiday only in Managua. Many cities and towns have also made their patron saint's day an official holiday.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuse of religious freedom. However, religious groups alleged harassment against those who did not support government policies and

favoritism toward religious groups and individuals who supported the government's sociopolitical agenda.

Catholic Church leaders reported a systematic strategy of harassment whenever clergy publicly criticized the government. Catholic priests reported receiving death threats and harassing text messages from members of the ruling party's youth organization, Sandinista Youth-July 19, pro-Sandinista Citizen Power Council (CPC) members, and, on one occasion, a sitting Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) mayor. A Catholic priest stated the harassment followed several homilies in which he criticized the government. The same priest stated that CPC members entered his church, disrupted services, and verbally assaulted him. Catholic leaders also reported instances of targeted robberies and public confrontation by CPC and FSLN officials after a public rebuke of FSLN policies. Catholic leaders asserted that clergy, and the Catholic Church as an institution, were frequently the focus of media attacks by government officials. The leaders said that reports of abuse went unanswered or were met with indifference by the government.

In response to inquiries by U.S. embassy officers concerning reports of selective government harassment of religious workers, government officials responded that the reports were investigated by the national police, determined to be isolated instances of criminal harassment, and handled appropriately by the judicial system.

Both Catholic and evangelical church leaders reported that the government provided or withheld financial support and tax/utility subsidies for individual churches based on the political affiliation of the church's priest or pastor. Catholic Church officials reported an inability to obtain community outreach projects and funding without the explicit approval of local CPCs, which control the distribution of state resources at the municipal level. Church officials stated that CPCs distributed such projects and funding based solely on partisan support for the FSLN.

Following a Moravian Lutheran Church critique of the government, church leaders reported telephone services to some churches were disrupted, the Church's tax exempt status was denied, and utility costs for Moravian Lutheran churches were increased by nearly 100 percent. As a result, some Moravian churches reportedly reduced religious services and community outreach.

Both Catholic and evangelical leaders stated government customs agents routinely withheld or delayed the importation of religious goods as retaliation for anti-

government commentary. Both groups reported that the government refused to renew the broadcasting licenses of religious radio stations critical of the government. Moravian leaders noted two instances when church-affiliated radio stations were shut down as a result of government criticism or pro-opposition commentary.

The government often used religious symbols and made reference to religious values to further its ideological and political agenda. Government-sponsored billboards throughout the country portrayed images of President Daniel Ortega with the slogan “Christian, Socialist, and in Solidarity.” A retired senior member of the Catholic clergy typically presided over official government events and appeared in pro-Ortega campaign advertisements during the 2011 election campaign. Though officially declared retired by the Vatican, the same official appeared in full clergy regalia during these events. Catholic Church officials complained the retired official falsely presented the image of an active representative of the Catholic Church for political gain.

Catholic and evangelical leaders expressed concern over the government’s use of religious clergy, rhetoric, and symbols to influence the population. Leaders of smaller religious group complained the government was unwilling to meet with them and discuss their concerns regarding religious freedom.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Representatives from the U.S. embassy met regularly with religious leaders to discuss religious freedom issues.

Embassy officers also met with government officials to promote religious freedom as a universal human right and tenet of U.S. foreign policy. Embassy officers made inquiries with the government regarding reports of government-sanctioned harassment of Catholic priests.