

NICARAGUA 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in most instances, the government respected religious freedom. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year. However, the government demonstrated partisan favoritism for religious groups supporting its sociopolitical agenda. Religious groups critical of the government's policies reported government harassment.

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

Embassy officers met with government officials to promote religious freedom and inquired about reports of government harassment of religious groups critical of government policies. Embassy officers met regularly with leaders of all major religious groups, as well as with smaller religious groups that represent significant ethnic populations, to discuss religious freedom issues.

Section I. Religious Demography

The National Institute of Development Information, the government's statistics and research agency, estimates the population is 6 million. A 2005 census conducted by the Nicaraguan Institute of Statistics and Census identifies Roman Catholics and evangelical Christians as the two largest religious groups. According to the census, 58.5 percent of the population identifies itself as Catholic and 21.6 percent as evangelical, which includes Pentecostals, Mennonites, Moravian Lutherans, and Baptists. A 2010 public opinion survey estimates Catholics at 56.2 percent of the population and evangelicals at 24.9 percent. Evangelical leaders discount these figures, claiming larger percentages of the population.

The Assemblies of God, Nicaragua's largest evangelical Pentecostal church, estimates its membership at 640,000. Evangelical leaders estimate evangelicals currently represent 43-46 percent of the population; they include Moravian Lutherans, Baptists, and other Protestants in that number. Catholic Church leaders estimate a decrease in their membership, but offer no statistics. Evangelical leaders estimate Catholics represent up to 56 percent of the population.

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Groups constituting 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 88,000 members, is largely concentrated in the country's North and South Autonomous Regions. A large percentage of its members are Amerindians and people of Afro-Caribbean descent. In the two regions, nearly 50 percent of the population self-identifies as Moravian Lutheran. Moravian leaders estimate that 5 percent of their members have transferred to the Assemblies of God church.

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. The National Assembly must approve a group's application for legal standing. Following approval, the group must register with the Ministry of Government as an association or foundation. Groups must register to incur legal obligations or enter into contracts.

Missionaries must obtain religious worker visas, which the authorities routinely provide; however, the process must be completed before arrival and takes 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 also celebrate their patron saint's day as an official holiday.

Government Practices

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There were no reports of abuse of religious freedom. However, the government reportedly imposed restrictions on religious groups critical of government policies.

The Catholic Church reported the government dismissed its 2011 allegation of a systematic strategy of harassment, which included death threats and harassing text messages from members of organizations linked to the ruling party. Following the 2011 killing of a Catholic priest, described by the church as politically motivated, Catholic leaders reported the Nicaraguan National Police chief presented church officials with evidence they believe had been tampered with, and encouraged them to request withdrawal of the investigation.

Government officials asserted that the national police investigated reports of selective government harassment of religious workers and determined there were isolated instances of criminal harassment, handled appropriately by the judicial system.

Both Catholic and evangelical church leaders reported that the government provided or withheld financial support and tax and utility subsidies for individual churches based on the political affiliation of the church's priest or pastor. Catholic officials reported the government withheld subsidies for underprivileged Catholic schools, and noted increased government pressure to register school teachers as public employees.

Moravian Lutheran leaders attributed a lack of government harassment during the year, in contrast to 2011, to church officials' restraint in making political remarks and the affiliation of many new members who were also members of the ruling political party.

Catholic and evangelical leaders stated government customs agents routinely withheld or delayed clearance on imports of donations for social projects in retaliation for anti-government commentary. On occasion, customs agents held donated medical supplies, including medication, beyond their expiration dates, resulting in loss of the supplies.

In contrast to 2011, the government reportedly ceased to revoke broadcast licenses or tamper with radio stations owned by religious groups. However, Catholic and evangelical leaders stated that past government harassment, and the threat of future harassment, forced them to refrain from expressing political criticism on their radio stations.

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Catholic and evangelical leaders expressed concern over the government's continued use of religious clergy, rhetoric, and symbols to influence the population and promote 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 presided over official government events. Though officially declared retired by the Vatican, the same official appeared in full clerical dress during these events. Catholic officials complained the retired official falsely presented the image of an active representative of the church for political gain.

Leaders of most religious groups complained government officials were unwilling to meet with them to discuss their concerns about 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

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

Embassy representatives met regularly with Catholic leaders and officials of the largest evangelical Christian groups to discuss religious freedom. In addition, embassy staff remained in contact with the leaders of other religious groups.