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## U.S. DEPARTMENT *of* STATE



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# Nicaragua

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion; provides for freedom of belief, religion, and worship; and states no one “shall be obligated by coercive measures to declare his or her ideology or beliefs.”

According to multiple media reports, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and international organizations, the government accelerated its attacks on the Roman Catholic Church and evangelical Christian (also known as evangelicals) groups, the two most observed faith traditions in the country. Throughout the year, police arrested 27 Catholic priests and two Catholic seminarians, detained many other Catholic priests for short periods of time for interrogation purposes, and expelled from the country 18 Nicaraguan and three foreign-national Catholic priests. In April, President Daniel Ortega called the country’s Catholic Church hierarchy “bishops of Satan.” In September, during the 54th session of the UN Human Rights Council, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights reported his office “continued to document violations of freedom of religion and belief, mainly directed against the Roman Catholic Church, including arbitrary detentions.” In February, a judge sentenced Bishop Rolando Alvarez, without trial, to 26 years in prison and revoked his citizenship for committing treason and cybercrimes. The same month, the government exiled 222 political prisoners who had been accepted for humanitarian parole into the United States, including six Catholic priests and five others affiliated with the Catholic Church. After the former political prisoners arrived in the United States, the Managua Court of Appeals declared those individuals

“traitors” and declared the government had stripped them of their citizenship. In February, an appeals court declared an additional 94 Nicaraguan nationals – including 10 Catholic priests – “traitors” for committing “conspiracy to undermine national integrity” and “spreading false news,” stripping them of their citizenship and ordering the confiscation of their property. In March, the Holy See closed its nunciature (embassy equivalent) in Managua after the Nicaraguan government “suspended” diplomatic relations in response to Pope Francis comparing the Ortega administration to the Nazi dictatorship of Hitler. A civil rights lawyer and researcher documented 667 acts of aggression against the Catholic Church and 70 against the evangelical community from April 2018 through August 2023, including arrests, detentions, robberies, desecrations, increased police and parapolice surveillance, and bans on religious processions. In April, police arrested three worshippers while they tried to hold a traditional Holy Week procession. The worshippers remained in prison through year’s end. Reportedly, proregime actors surveilled both Catholic and evangelical services and clergy and tried to intimidate worshippers. According to media reports, from 2018 through the end of the year, more than 60 evangelical pastors self-exiled due to threats or were forced into exile by authorities. In August, the government closed the Jesuit-operated Central American University (UCA), alleging it was a center of terrorism.

Users of social media reported unknown individuals destroyed a Jewish monument in Managua and shared videos of Jewish tombstones desecrated with red swastikas painted on them. According to reports, the government removed the markings. Reports of theft from and vandalism of churches continued. In January, a parish in San Rafael del Sur reported unknown individuals broke into the parish and desecrated communion wafers. The parish priests called the acts sacrilege.

The U.S. Department of State and the embassy continued public and private efforts to protect religious freedom in the country and took measures to hold the Ortega-Murillo regime responsible for its silencing of religious leaders, including by placing those who seized the Jesuit-run UCA and played a role in the seizure of its properties on the Section 353 “Corrupt and Undemocratic Actors” list. Additionally, the Department of State imposed visa restrictions on hundreds of individuals who enabled the regime in its assaults on religious groups and leaders, including Bishop Alvarez. In October, the Chargé raised with the Foreign Minister the U.S. government’s concerns about the marking of swastikas on Jewish tombstones and the desecration of a menorah in Managua. In September, the Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs posted on X (previously known as Twitter), “We ... condem[n] the actions of the Nicaraguan government that persecute religious freedom, close civic space, and repress the independent voices of the Nicaraguan people. Fear will never extinguish hope.” In

July, the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom posted on X, “We continue to call for the immediate and unconditional release of all those unjustly detained for peacefully expressing their religious beliefs in Nicaragua. I urge authorities to allow Bishop Rolando Alvarez, fellow clergy, and lay persons to peacefully pursue their pastoral work.” The Chargé and other U.S. embassy officials met regularly with a range of religious actors to discuss restrictions on religious freedom or belief.

On December 29, 2023, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State designated Nicaragua a Country of Particular Concern for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. For Nicaragua, the existing ongoing restrictions are referenced in section 5 of the Nicaragua Investment Conditionality Act of 2018 (the NICA Act).

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## Section I.

### Religious Demography.

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 6.6 million (midyear 2023). According to the 2005 census (the most recent available), conducted by the Nicaraguan Institute of Statistics and Census, 59 percent of the population is Catholic and 22 percent evangelical, including Pentecostals, Mennonites, Moravian Lutherans, and Baptists. A September 2022 CID-Gallup survey found Catholics and evangelicals make up 41 and 38 percent of the population, respectively. According to a survey conducted in 2019 by the market research firm Borge and Associates, the percentage of evangelicals is increasing, and the percentage of Catholics is decreasing. Borge and Associates found Catholics make up 43 percent of the population, evangelicals 41 percent and religious believers without affiliation 14 percent. According to the Borge survey, groups that together constitute less than 2 percent of the population include Jehovah’s Witnesses, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Moravian Lutheran Church, Jews, Muslims, and nonbelievers.

Most members of the Moravian Lutheran Church, largely concentrated in the country’s North and South Caribbean Coast Autonomous Regions, are of Indigenous or Afro-Caribbean descent.

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## Section II.

# Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

## LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion. It provides for freedom of belief, religion, and worship, and states no one “shall be obligated by coercive measures to declare his or her ideology or beliefs.” The constitution states there is no official religion; however, the law entrusts government-controlled, community-level action groups with promoting “Christian values” at the community level.

The requirements for registration of religious groups – except for the Catholic Church, which has an agreement known as a concordat with the government – resemble those for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). According to the law that regulates NGOs, registration requires an application, articles of association, and designation of officers. The National Assembly must approve a group’s application for “constitution,” or legal standing. Following approval, the group must go through a second approval process with the Ministry of Interior before it can register as an association or NGO, allowing it to incur legal obligations, enter into contracts, and benefit from tax and customs exemptions. Following registration, religious groups are subject to the same regulations as other NGOs or associations.

The Catholic Church does not have to register as a religious group because its presence in the country predates the legislation; however, the government requires organizations dedicated to charity or other social work affiliated with the Catholic Church to register.

By law, organizations and persons receiving resources of foreign origin cannot participate in domestic politics. The government can fine, imprison, or confiscate or freeze the assets of any person or entity in violation of this law. The law exempts registered religious organizations from the requirement to register as foreign agents with the Ministry of Interior. By law, those receiving exemptions cannot participate in or support activities related to the country’s internal or foreign affairs.

Ministry of Education regulations for primary school education require the educational goals and curriculum for elementary grade students and teachers follow the government’s “Christian, Socialist, and Solidarity” principles. The government’s 2021-2026 human development policy recognizes religious activities as part of the country’s cultural traditions. The law establishes education in the country as secular but recognizes the right of private schools to be religiously oriented.

Missionaries must obtain religious worker visas and provide information concerning the nature of their missionary work before the Ministry of Interior authorizes their entry into the country. Locally based religious organizations must provide documentation and request travel authorization from the Ministry of Interior prior to the arrival of visiting persons or religious groups. Missionaries must complete the process before arrival, and it generally takes several weeks to do so.

The law regulating telecommunication services provides for imposing fines, not seizing property, to sanction media outlets, including ones affiliated with religious organizations, that do not meet administrative requirements.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

## **GOVERNMENT PRACTICES**

### **Abuses Involving Violence, Detention, or Mass Resettlement**

According to multiple media reports and statements by civil rights activists and international organizations, the government accelerated its attacks against the Catholic Church and evangelical groups. In September, during the 54th session of the UN Human Rights Council, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights reported that his office “continued to document violations of freedom of religion and belief, mainly directed against the Roman Catholic Church, including arbitrary detentions.” The commissioner also highlighted his office had documented coercive and arbitrary criminal and administrative sanctions, harassment, and detentions of both priests and worshippers, as well as the confiscation of Catholic Church-administered schools. A July report from human rights organization Nicaragua Nunca Mas (Nicaragua Never Again) stated the government’s persecution against the Catholic Church had been state policy since 2018.

On February 10, a judge sentenced Bishop Alvarez, without trial, to 26 years in prison and revoked his citizenship for committing treason and cybercrimes. Neither Alvarez nor his lawyers received the documents necessary to form a legal defense, according to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). Authorities transferred Alvarez from house arrest to maximum security La Modelo prison, which according to *El Pais*, “has the reputation of being the worst dungeon” in the country. On February 9, President Ortega publicly remarked that Alvarez refused exile to the United States, calling him a “madman” who

“must think he is about to take the place of His Holiness the Pope.” Independent media considered these comments to be Ortega’s justification for Alvarez’s February 10 sentencing.

Throughout the year, police arrested 27 Catholic priests. Media attributed the arrest of some priests and Catholic Church-affiliated laypersons to their links with Bishop Alvarez: six of the arrested priests practiced in Esteli and Matagalpa, the two dioceses that Alvarez administered. Among these priests was Father Alvaro Toledo, whom police arrested in October after his homily praying for Catholic parishes whose priests had been arrested. “Our diocese is running out of priests, we don’t have priests,” he said. Police arrested Father Osman Amador after repeated homilies requesting prayer for Bishop Alvarez. In June, police arrested Freylin Moreno Ponce, a layperson and choir member of the Guadalupe Parish in Matagalpa. The day prior to his arrest, Ponce posted on social media asking followers to pray for Bishop Alvarez.

According to media reports, on October 1, parapolice – armed civilians acting at the behest of government officials – arrested Fathers Alberto Centeno and Juilo Norori from their parishes in the diocese of Esteli, where imprisoned Bishop Alvarez was apostolic administrator. Media outlets reported that in July, 50 police officers and 20 plainclothes individuals stopped Father Fernando Zamora while he was driving home after Mass, seizing his vehicle without legal basis. He was later arrested, and police did not inform Father Zamora’s relatives of the reason for his arrest or where they were holding him, and they did not provide family visitation rights, causing those close to him to assess Father Zamora had been kidnapped. On October 7, police arrested Father Yessner Pineda, and on October 8, they arrested Father Ramon Reyes of the south Caribbean coast.

On May 24, police arrested Matagalpa Diocese priest Father Jaime Montesinos. Two days later, police informed the public through a press release that authorities had charged Father Montesinos with committing acts that “undermine independence, sovereignty, and the nation’s self-determination,” politically motivated charges the government uses against individuals it considers opponents of President Ortega, according to domestic and international human rights organizations. These organizations have widely reported such accusations have political motivations and the government uses them to persecute those whom it thinks oppose President Ortega. Montesinos did not face a trial before his expulsion on October 18.

In May, police detained Esteli priests Fathers Eugenio Rodriguez and Leonardo Guevara. The diocese of Esteli issued a May 22 statement reporting that police said they investigated both priests for their administration of Caritas Esteli, a religious nonprofit organization the National Assembly ordered closed in February 2022. Police released Guevara on October 5, after four

months of detention without formal charges or a trial. Father Rodriguez remained under de facto house arrest, never charged, until his expulsion on October 18.

According to multiple media reports, police and paramilitaries detained 18 Catholic clergy and seminarians in December, later releasing two of them and placing them under police and paramilitary surveillance. The whereabouts of the other 16 were unknown at year's end. Police and paramilitary detainees on December 20 included Bishop Isidoro del Carmen Mora Ortega of Siuna Diocese and seminarians Alester Saenz and Tony Palacio, both of the Nuestra Senora de Fatima Seminary in Siuna. On December 22, authorities detained and later freed Father Jader Guido of the Matagalpa Cathedral while keeping him under surveillance. On December 24, they detained and later released Monsignor Oscar Escoto of the Matagalpa Diocese. On December 26, they arrested Father Pablo Villafranca of Masaya. On December 28, detainees included Father Hector Treminio of the Santo Cristo de Esquipulas Parish, Monsignor Carlos Avilez of the Managua Archdiocese, and Monsignor Marcos Diaz Prado of the Santo Tomas Apostol del Puerto de Corinto Church. On December 29, authorities arrested Monsignor Silvio Fonseca of the Archdiocese of Managua, Father Mykel Monterrey of Nuestra Senora de Candelaria Parish in Managua, Father Raul Zamora of the Divina Misericordia Parrish in Managua, Father Gerardo Jose Rodriguez, of the Purisima Concepcion Parish in Managua, Monsignor Miguel Mantica of the San Francisco de Asis Parish in Managua, and Father Ismael Serrano of the St. Michael of the Archangel Parish. On December 30, they arrested Father Ismael Serrano, parish priest of the St. Michael the Archangel Church in Managua.

In April, police arrested three worshippers during their attempt to carry out a traditional Holy Week procession in the city of Nindirí despite a ban on the procession. Police charged the three men under the Cybercrimes Law; they remained in prison through year's end.

According to a 2023 report entitled *Nicaragua: A Persecuted Church? (2018-2022)*, government-directed actions targeting evangelicals included attacks on more than 50 evangelical churches, the closure of evangelical NGOs, siege and repression of evangelical pastors or their families, confiscations of buildings, impediments to carrying out activities, and the exile of more than 20 evangelical pastors. On December 18, police announced an investigation against a U.S. citizen working with the evangelical organization Mountain Gateway and the U.S.-based evangelist ministry "Shaking the Nations." Police arrested 11 Nicaraguan individuals affiliated with Mountain Gateway, including nine pastors, citing a money laundering investigation, and transferred them to La Modelo prison. On December 20, the Ministry of Interior canceled the organization's legal status and called on the Attorney General to seize its assets, saying the

organization had obscured its finances and impeded oversight. All 11 Nicaraguans remained imprisoned at year's end without formal charges filed against them.

According to a Canopy Forum (online publication by the Center for the Study of Law and Religion at Emory University) article written by Teresa Flores, a Peruvian lawyer and director of the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America, the Ortega government's measures to sanction members of the Catholic Church and other religious communities involved in political organizing led to more general limitations on the right to religious freedom in Nicaragua. "By silencing religious leaders, authorities are trying to remove one of the few remaining institutions that can challenge the authoritarian Ortega government," she wrote.

During the year, the government expelled or forced into exile many Catholic clergy due to police harassment and fear of governmental repression. In March, the Holy See closed its nunciature in Managua after the government proposed suspending diplomatic relations in response to Pope Francis comparing the Ortega administration to the Nazi dictatorship of Hitler during a televised interview. In March 2022, the government expelled the Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Waldemar Stanislaw Sommertag.

On February 9, the government exiled 222 political prisoners who had been accepted for humanitarian parole into the United States, including six Catholic priests (Father Sadiel Eugarrío, Father Ramiro Tijerino, Father Jose Diaz, Father Raul Vega, Father Enrique Martinez Gamboa, and Father Oscar Danilo Benavidez) and five others affiliated with the Catholic Church (seminarist Darwin Leiva, seminarist Melquin Sequeira, Matagalpa Diocese cameraman Sergio Cardenas, and two Catholic journalists). Four of the priests and three of the laypersons had been detained with Bishop Alvarez at the Matagalpa curia in 2022. Three days before their exile to the United States, a court convicted and sentenced those seven detainees to 10 years in prison for "conspiracy to undermine national integrity" and "spreading fake news." Legal experts called the trial spurious for its multiple irregularities. After the former political prisoners arrived in the United States, the Managua Court of Appeals declared them "traitors" to the homeland, stripping their citizenship and ordering their "deportation," despite no such penalties existing under the law. The OHCHR's September report said the penalty occurred without due process and was an "arbitrary measure" without basis in national or international law.

On October 18, the government expelled 12 imprisoned Catholic priests to Rome. A Vatican spokesperson confirmed the Nicaraguan government had requested the Holy See accept the priests. According to a spokesperson for the Society of Jesus of Nicaragua, the expulsion was "a kind of kidnapping and deprivation of liberty." The 12 Catholic clergy included priests



arrested between 2022 and the first week of October. Among them, the government convicted only Monsignor Leonardo Urbina and Father Manuel Garcia; the remaining 10 had not stood trial before their expulsions. The government filed no charges against nine of the 12 detainees.

On February 15, an appeals court declared 94 Nicaraguan nationals – including 10 Catholic priests – “traitors” to the homeland for committing “conspiracy to undermine national integrity” and “spreading false news,” stripping their citizenship and ordering their property confiscated. Authorities did not inform the individuals of their pending trial before conviction and sentencing. Legal experts and human rights groups said the process violated international law and had no legal basis in national legislation. Father Harving Padilla, the sole priest living in the country when stripped of his citizenship, went into hiding in May 2022, after police officers and vehicles surrounded his parish and closed street access. Padilla remained in hiding until announcing his exile in October.

Throughout the year, the government denied at least 10 Nicaraguan clergy – nine Catholic priests and one evangelical pastor – reentry into the country after foreign travel. Authorities denied entry to Fathers Tomas Zamora and William Mora, from the Leon Diocese and the Siuna Diocese, respectively, following August travel to Portugal to take part in World Youth Day. In all cases, airline officials notified the priests during check-in that the government had not authorized their reentry into the country and did not allow them to board the airplane. In November, authorities denied Father Jairo Mercado from the Granada Diocese reentry into the country after a pastoral mission trip to the United States.

At least eight priests self-exiled from the country after frequent police and government supporter harassment, according to media. Media sources reported two Matagalpa-based laypersons self-exiled in January because they refused a police request to falsify testimony against Bishop Alvarez. In September, media sources reported 17 Catholic leaders of various Matagalpa communities self-exiled due to constant police and government supporter harassment. According to human rights activists, there were more cases of priests denied reentry and others who self-exiled, but not all made their situations public. There were no reports of clergy returning to the country after self-exiling.

In July, the government revoked the residency of Friar Domingo Pepe, an 84-year-old Italian priest who had lived in the country for 53 years. That same month, police raided the house of nuns from the Brazilian Catholic Order Poor Sisters of Jesus Christ in Leon. The government expelled the nuns to El Salvador after immigration authorities denied renewal of their residence permits. Immigration authorities ordered the nuns, who said they did not plan to

leave the country, not to make the decision public. In April, the government expelled Father Donaciano Alarcon, a Panamanian national who served as parish priest in San Jose de Cusmapa, after he prayed for Bishop Alvarez in his homilies. After his expulsion, Alarcon said police detained him on Holy Monday, informing him he was “altering peace” and had to leave the country. The same day, police drove Alarcon to the Honduran border, without prior notice. Also in April, immigration authorities expelled three nuns from the congregation of the Dominican Sisters of the Anunciata who ran the Lopez Carazo nursing home and school.

According to the Associated Press, Silvio Baez, the auxiliary bishop of Managua, his fellow priests, and many worshippers who fled or had been exiled recently and now lived in Miami, weekly Mass was a means of pushing back against the government’s violent suppression of critics, including many Catholic leaders. In November, Baez said the Church, in addition to offering practical help, could continue advocating human rights and a different social and political way because “there, nobody can say this.” Baez opened each Mass with a prayer for Bishop Alvarez’s health, strength and “unconditional freedom.”

According to online news site 100% Noticias, since 2018, more than 60 evangelical pastors self-exiled due to threats or the government forced them into exile by denying them reentry into the country after they had traveled abroad.

### **Abuses Involving the Ability of Individuals to Engage in Religious Activities Alone or In Community with Others**

According to press and social media reports, Catholic priests throughout the country continued to experience harassment from police and government supporters who acted with police. Civil rights lawyer and researcher Martha Patricia Molina documented 667 aggressive acts against the Catholic Church and 70 against the evangelical community between April 2018 and August 2023 in her October report, which included arrests, robberies, desecrations, increased police and parapolice surveillance, and banned processions.

In October, media outlets reported police had summoned at least nine laypersons, regular churchgoers of the Catholic Church in northern cities of the country, telling them they were under investigation without specifying a reason. Police instructed them to report to a police station to “sign in,” which some had to do weekly and others every 15 or 20 days. Police required those under investigation to report in advance any travel beyond their respective municipal limits. Legal experts said police had no legal authority to impose such measures.

In October, police and officials of the penitentiary system carried out tactical demonstrations, including the use of canines, in front of Saint Peter's Cathedral in Matagalpa during Sunday Mass, according to media sources. The demonstrations interrupted the homily and disrupted access to the cathedral through closures of adjacent streets. In July, media reported complaints by Matagalpa residents, who said large vendor fairs, government-led sports activities such as motorcycle races, boxing platforms, or horse parades were set up on the main public roads surrounding Saint Peter's Cathedral almost every weekend. Such fairs and activities required authorization from the ruling Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) Party, the FSLN-controlled Matagalpa City Hall, and police. Vendors installed tents in front of and around the cathedral, making access to the church difficult. Loud music played over speakers interrupted regularly scheduled church services.

Bans on religious celebrations continued throughout the year. Multiple Catholic parishes reported they did not celebrate traditional pilgrimages of local patron saints and other religious processions in their communities because authorities did not grant them the necessary permits to use public streets. The parishes suspended or confined religious festivities to church premises, except for the few who obtained police authorization to use the streets. The police prohibited the Catholic Church from holding Stations of the Cross processions during Lent and Holy Week in many cities throughout the country, according to media reports. As in 2022, officials did not authorize the St. Jerome Parish in Masaya to use the streets for their annual October processions in honor of Saint Michael the Archangel and Saint Jerome. On September 29, Saint Jerome's Day, hundreds of police officers surrounded the parish to prevent the clergy and churchgoers from taking the image to the streets. In January, more than 15 anti-riot police officers stood in front of the entrance to the Saint Mary Magdalene Parish in the Monimbo neighborhood of Masaya to prevent clergy and churchgoers from taking out the statue of Saint Sebastian for its annual traditional procession. Media sources reported that in January, police banned at least six Catholic processions during the first two weeks of the year.

Catholic clergy reported the government continued to deny them access to prisons – a practice started shortly after the 2018 prodemocracy protests – except for a small number of reportedly government-aligned priests. Catholic clergy said before 2018, they had regularly entered prisons to celebrate Mass and offer detainees communion and confession. Prison authorities continued to deny political prisoners access to Bibles, a practice reported since 2018.

Some ordained priests serving at the Archdiocese of Managua, especially foreign nationals, requested to serve in other countries, according to Cardinal Brenes during a Sunday homily broadcast on social media. Media linked those requests to the government's ongoing repression of the Catholic Church since the 2018 sociopolitical crisis.

Multiple media outlets reported ongoing government surveillance of Catholic clergy and police harassment of churchgoers. According to media reports based on anonymous interviews with Catholic priests, police and FSLN supporters surveilled priests, who feared complaining publicly about the arbitrary intimidation. Regime supporters attended masses to monitor sermons, preventing some services from taking place due to intimidation. Leaders of other faith-based groups reported the use of similar tactics, including video and audio recordings of homilies by government supporters who had "infiltrated" congregations. Catholic clergy reported large groups of police and parapolice gathered around church premises and took pictures to intimidate priests and churchgoers in several cities throughout the country.

Police briefly interrogated churchgoers about their religions. In January, a former government employee anonymously told media she had to support the government's decision to persecute the Catholic Church to keep her job. She said the government restricted state employees from going to church (unless directed to do so by the government), taking part in processions, or any other religious activity. During her interview, she also said the government sent people to religious services with the sole purpose of surveilling sermons and churchgoers.

According to news reports, the government also surveilled, harassed, and threatened members of the Protestant community, particularly evangelicals. Authorities threatened evangelical pastors, limiting their ability to speak freely in sermons. Evangelical communities reported police limited their ability to meet for certain church events. Many evangelical leaders said they lacked support networks and were reluctant to report government repression. The government established a strategy to control evangelical churches by threatening their closure, according to a media report. According to a 100% Noticias article, the government forced the creation of the Federation of Evangelical Churches, led by Pastor Omar Duarte of the Rivers of Living Water evangelical megachurch, to build progovernment loyalty and ensure complicity and silence among evangelical pastors throughout the country. Many pastors reportedly joined the federation out of fear of repression, while others joined to take advantage of economic benefits the government promised. The article said government supporters surveilled all evangelical services and that no foreign pastor or Christian musician could enter the country without government approval. The report also stated evangelical

pastors had to present themselves to the Ministry of the Interior every two months to receive government approval for their churches to operate. If authorities received reports that a pastor was critical of the government, they would order their church to close.

Throughout the year, the government revoked the operating licenses of hundreds of faith-based nonprofit organizations. During the first half of the year alone, the government revoked the operating licenses of at least 315 faith-based nonprofit organizations: 233 organizations belonging to an evangelical denomination, 38 linked to the Catholic Church, and 41 from other faith-based groups. The government closed most nonprofit organizations for lack of compliance with anti-money laundering legislation, among other allegations, which independent observers said was spurious. Several nonprofit groups requested “voluntary” closure, but human rights organizations reported Ministry of Interior threats and harassment motivated most closures. Media outlets reported the government revoked the operating licenses of 23 evangelical churches, including the international Christian Mission Association Verbo in May, made up of a network of 27 evangelical churches and which ran two orphanages, three schools, and numerous feeding centers for children. On March 7, the Ministry of Interior ordered the closure of University John Paul II, under the administration of the Catholic Church’s Conference of Bishops, and the Christian Autonomous Nicaraguan University, a faith-based private university.

Religiously affiliated NGOs said the Ministry of Interior, responsible for regulating nonprofit organizations, imposed excessive administrative burdens, including requirements to submit monthly financial reports, renew monthly tax-exemption and banking services certifications, and restrictions on their ability to receive funding directly from international donors. These NGOs reported operational limitations increased during the year, in some cases rendering the organization inoperable. The Ministry of Interior continued to deny or delay legally required permits and tax-exemption approvals to certain religiously affiliated NGOs. Some NGOs reported a decline in donations because parishioners feared government retribution for “financing terrorism.” Administrative burdens forced several evangelical churches to close or merge with other evangelical churches to continue operating. The ministry stated it had not received compliance documentation and delayed providing certifications for some evangelical churches, according to civil society organizations.

In March, the Ministry of Interior closed Caritas, an international Catholic NGO accredited to the country since 1965, and the Caritas Jinotega chapter, at Caritas’ voluntary request. The Ministry of Interior began denying tax exemptions to Caritas in 2018, and in 2019, Caritas asked supporters to stop sending donations because it was unable to retrieve them from

Customs. Caritas continued to report that since 2018, it had not received from the Ministry of Interior its annual certificate authorizing it to operate in the country. Caritas sources said the failure to renew the certificate prevented the organization from receiving tax exemptions, prohibited the importation of materials, and hindered its ability to bring in medical missions as part of the social services it provided to Nicaraguans. Caritas had significantly reduced its social services because of harassment from government supporters in the communities where it worked and because of government-imposed administrative burdens. Media outlets reported in January that Caritas Jinotega was on the verge of closure and without economic resources because the Ministry of Interior refused to issue the necessary approvals to continue its operations. Without the ministry's approval, donor organizations were unable to disburse funds. Among its social work activities, Caritas Jinotega ran a home that sheltered elders.

Other Catholic nonprofit organizations from which the government revoked operating licenses and seized assets included the Ave Maria House Association, which had operated for 33 years in the country; the Poor Fraternity of Jesus Christ Foundation, which worked in underserved communities providing food and clothing; and the Association Daughters of Saint Louise de Marillac in the Holy Spirit, which managed a religious school in Jinotega. Immigration authorities also ordered the expulsion of three nuns from that congregation. In April, government authorities confiscated a monastery of Trappist nuns in San Pedro de Lovago, Chontales, transferring it to the Nicaraguan Institute of Agricultural Technology. The Trappist nuns presented to the Ministry of Interior the paperwork for a voluntary closure on March 1, and on March 3, government authorities verbally informed Monsignor Marcial Guzman, Bishop of the Juigalpa Diocese, that the nuns could no longer go to the monastery. The Trappist order left after 22 years in country. Upon their departure, the nuns handed over the convent, monastery, and property to the diocese of Juigalpa for administrative purposes while the Ministry of Interior completed the voluntary closure of its legal status. Government authorities, however, confiscated the Trappist nuns' assets before the ministry reached a resolution on the convent's legal status.

On August 15, a judge charged the UCA, with "serving as a terrorism center" and ordered the seizure of the institution and its assets. According to experts, UCA has been one of the region's most highly regarded universities. Government authorities froze UCA's bank accounts on August 9, without a trial or citing any legal basis for the decision. According to human rights defenders, UCA had suffered government retaliation since the 2018 prodemocracy demonstrations. Authorities had reduced UCA's annual national budget over the years until it was completely excluded from the budget in 2022. Although the Jesuits had registered their

residence in Managua as an independent asset unaffiliated with UCA, authorities confiscated their residence on August 19, evicting the occupants, including at least three elderly priests. The Jesuit Order's Central American Province released an August 23 statement saying the Interior Minister's actions lacked legal basis. It condemned the state's systematic repression and "crimes against humanity" aimed at establishing "a totalitarian regime." A week later, the Ministry of Interior revoked the legal status of the Jesuit Order and ordered the confiscation of its assets. As with past seizures, authorities made accusations of terrorism and financial malfeasance against the Jesuits to justify their decision. The Jesuit Province of Central America condemned the confiscation and called it a "totalitarian" action. According to media sources, since December 2021, the Ortega regime had closed at least 26 Nicaraguan universities and seized their assets.

On October 24, the Ministry of Interior ordered the closure and confiscation of the assets of the local Franciscan Friars Order as well as 16 other NGOs, many of which had ties to Catholic or evangelical churches. The ministry alleged the entities had failed to declare their sources of revenue and donations in violation of the law. Hours after the announcement, Ministry of Education officials and National Police officers appeared at a Franciscan-run high school to suspend classes, reportedly confiscated computers, and notified parents of new state control of the high school.

By law, all registered religious congregations benefit from tax and customs exemptions; however, in July, several Catholic Churches received property tax collection notices from corresponding municipal governments, an attempt to financially suffocate churches, according to media outlets. When asked about the collection notices, Cardinal Brenes told media outlets the situation had been resolved.

Catholic Church bank accounts, as well as personal bank accounts of some Catholic priests, remained frozen through year's end. On May 27, police issued a press release accusing the Catholic Church of money laundering, alleging various Catholic dioceses throughout the country had committed illicit fund management and stating its investigation had found hundreds of thousands of dollars "hidden in bags" in various church facilities. In the press release, police made an unclear link between the alleged money laundering and "acts of treason" by which "other individuals" had been judged, without further explaining the allegations. Clergy told media outlets authorities had frozen the Church's bank accounts without providing any official notification, despite a police statement that it had informed the Catholic Conference of Bishops. Although the legal process used to freeze the bank accounts was opaque, media reported the 90-day investigatory period expired on August 27, and

formal charges should have followed, or the precautionary measures been lifted, by that date. No charges were filed against the Catholic Church or its representatives by year's end.

The Catholic Church's social work was reduced significantly because of its frozen bank accounts. The San Vicente de Paul senior home, of the diocese of Jinotega, was "handed over" to the Jinotega municipal government and the Ministry of the Family because the Church was unable to continue covering the expenses of its 25 resident elders, the salaries of the workers, and payments for basic services. The Saint John Paul II National Propaedeutic Seminary of Bluefields, in the southern Caribbean area of the country, closed in September because the government had frozen the Church's bank accounts.

In February, telecommunications regulator TELCOR ordered, without explanation, the closure of evangelical radio station Metro Stereo Rosa de Saron in Leon.

### **Transnational Repression**

Priests in exile reported the Nicaraguan consulates refused to renew their expired passports.

### **Abuses Involving Discrimination or Unequal Treatment**

The government continued its selective restriction on some foreign religious visitors to the country based on the perceived political affiliation of the visitor's local sponsor.

In multiple speeches during the year, President Ortega and Vice President Rosario Murillo criticized Catholic clergy and accused them of inciting violence and backing an alleged coup against the government during the 2018 prodemocracy protests. On April 19, Ortega called the Nicaraguan Catholic Church hierarchy "bishops of Satan." He called the ban on Holy Week processions justified by a need to "avoid manipulations" by the priests, whom he said, "wanted blood." A week prior, Vice President Murillo attacked the clergy. Glory "to the true God," she said, "Not to the God that those who, full of evil, have invented and sowed so much suffering and pain among Nicaraguan families a few years ago." In a February 21 speech, Ortega called cardinals and priests a "mafia" for "embezzling millions," adding he did not have "any respect for the priests [he has] met here in Nicaragua." Ortega questioned, "Who elects the Pope?" and proposed the people should elect bishops and cardinals.

In May, pro-FSLN radio commentator William Grigsby called the Ortega-Murillo government a "victim" of a conspiracy directed by the Vatican and the United States Government. "Bishops



and priests of the Nicaraguan Catholic Church are the executors of the conspiracy,” Grigsby said. He justified a ban on Catholic processions by calling the processions “part of the strategy to sow chaos, actions, and violent incidents.” Grigsby referred to Catholic priests as “political secretaries” of the Vatican responsible for, together with the United States, recruiting people and hitmen in the parishes.

As in prior years, the Ortega-Murillo government sponsored local religious activities organized through municipal governments, all of which were under FSLN control. During the Saint Dominic celebrations in August, the Managua mayor, Reyna Rueda (FSLN), appointed herself the host of the annual procession, taking control of the celebration while sidelining Catholic clergy. Vice President Murillo continued to promote faith-based activities organized by the government in her daily radio remarks.

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### Section III.

## Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Reported anti-Catholic activities included insults, death threats, theft of Catholic religious items, and unlawful entry into Catholic churches. Catholic clergy continued to report they believed the government directed or encouraged vandalism and the desecration of churches. According to local media, in June, a parish in Jinotega reported trespassers broke into the church vestry and stole church items and money. In May, unidentified individuals forcibly entered a Catholic church in Nindirí, broke sacred artifacts used for storing communion wafers, and stole other sacred items. In January, a parish in San Rafael del Sur also reported unknown individuals broke into the parish and desecrated communion wafers. The parish priests called the trespasses sacrilege.

On October 21-22, unidentified persons vandalized at least 41 Jewish graves (located in a small corner of Managua’s main cemetery) with red paint and swastikas. Similarly, a small public monument with a menorah was vandalized with red paint and damaged. According to reports, the government removed the markings.

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### Section IV.

## U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Department of State, including the embassy, continued public and private efforts to protect religious freedom in the country and took measures to hold the Ortega-Murillo regime responsible for its silencing of religious leaders, including by placing those who seized Jesuit-run UCA and played a role in the seizure of its properties on the Section 353 “Corrupt and Undemocratic Actors” list. Additionally, the Department of State imposed visa restrictions on hundreds of individuals who enabled the regime in its assaults on multiple groups in the country, to include religious leaders such as Bishop Alvarez.

In October, the Chargé raised with the Foreign Minister U.S. government concerns about the vandalism of Jewish tombstones with swastikas and of a menorah.

On September 3, the Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs posted on X, “We ... condem[n] the actions of the Nicaraguan government that persecute religious freedom, close civic space, and repress the independent voices of the Nicaraguan people. Fear will never extinguish hope.”

In July, the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom posted on X, “We continue to call for the immediate and unconditional release of all those unjustly detained for peacefully expressing their religious beliefs in Nicaragua. I urge authorities to allow Bishop Rolando Alvarez, fellow clergy, and lay persons to peacefully pursue their pastoral work.”

The Chargé and other embassy officials met regularly with senior religious leaders. At these meetings, embassy representatives raised concerns about limitations on freedom of religion or belief and the government’s retaliation against religious groups who voiced beliefs that contradicted government rhetoric.

On December 29, 2023, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State designated Nicaragua a “Country of Particular Concern” for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. For Nicaragua, the existing ongoing restrictions are referenced in section 5 of the Nicaragua Investment Conditionality Act of 2018 (the NICA Act).

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