

NICARAGUA 2013 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws protect religious freedom and, in most instances, the government respected religious freedom. In February the government implemented the “Live Beautiful Plan” that reformed public school civics class curricula to enforce obligatory education based on Christian values. 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.

U.S. embassy officers met with government officials to promote religious freedom and pressed them concerning 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 associated with significant ethnic populations, to discuss religious freedom issues.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.8 million (July 2013 estimate). According to a 2005 census conducted by the Nicaraguan Institute of Statistics and Census, 58.5 percent of the population is Catholic and 21.6 percent evangelical, which includes Pentecostals, Mennonites, Moravian Lutherans, and Baptists. A public opinion survey conducted during the year by M&R Consultants estimates Catholics at 53 percent of the population and evangelicals at 28 percent. Evangelical leaders state that evangelicals and other Protestants account for 43 percent of the population. The Assemblies of God, the largest evangelical Pentecostal church, estimates its membership at 450,000. Other Christian groups include Jehovah’s Witnesses and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). There are also small numbers of Jews and Muslims.

The Moravian Lutheran Church 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 these two regions, nearly 48 percent of the population self-identifies as Moravian Lutheran.

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Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws generally protect religious freedom. A new government policy, however, requires mandatory education based on religious values. 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.

In February the government began to implement “The Living Clean, Living Healthy, Living Beautiful, and Living Well Plan,” known as the “Live Beautiful (“Vivir Bonito”) Plan”, which reforms public school civics class curricula to include obligatory education based on “Christian, socialist, and solidarity” values. Under the plan, the government requires community participation in religious events. In remote communities that do not have access to public education, the government provides limited subsidies to religious schools for helping fulfill the government's public education mandate.

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.

Government Practices

The government trained 45,000 public school teachers on how to implement the “Live Beautiful Plan” and mandated teachers to change the focus of their civics class to promote Christian values. The government also developed activities within the community and public schools based on “Christian, socialist, and solidarity values.”

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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 clergy. Catholic officials reported the government withheld subsidies for underprivileged Catholic schools based on the priest's political affiliation, and noted increased government pressure to register school teachers as public employees. Evangelical leaders reported government pressure to decorate the grounds of subsidized schools with the governing party's political propaganda.

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 the part of the importing groups. On occasion, customs agents held donated medical supplies, including medication, beyond their expiration dates, resulting in loss of the supplies. Evangelical leaders reported that, in most cases, donations required an approval letter authorized by the governing party's community-based action groups. Catholic and evangelical leaders also reported that donations and social projects required the approval of government entities such as the Ministry of the Interior or the Ministry of Education.

Catholic and evangelical leaders stated that, due to past government harassment and the threat of future harassment, they felt pressured to refrain from addressing political issues on their radio stations.

Catholic and evangelical leaders continued to express concern over the government's use of clergy, statements, 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. Although 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 Catholic Church for political gain.

Leaders of most religious groups stated that government officials were unwilling to meet with them to discuss their concerns about religious freedom.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

In meetings with government officials, U.S. embassy officers emphasized that religious freedom is a universal human right. Embassy officers also raised with government officials reports of government harassment of religious groups critical of government policies.

Embassy representatives met regularly with Catholic Church 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.