

NICARAGUA 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion and provides for freedom of belief. The law, however, requires the indoctrination of Christian values at the community level, including in education. In June the National Assembly approved a new family law that invested in Family Committees, or community-level action groups, the responsibility for promoting “Christian values” in education and municipal activities. There were reports the government provided or withheld benefits from individual churches based on the political affiliation of the church’s clergy. Church leaders stated the government withheld or delayed import clearance for donations in retaliation for anti-government commentary by the importing religious groups. The government implemented obligatory public school curriculums on Christian values and required students to participate in Christian religious events. Religious leaders reported the government invoked religion to support political objectives.

Evangelical leaders stated there were reports of Roman Catholic priests in remote areas using what they described as offensive language against their communities.

U.S. embassy officers emphasized in meetings with leaders of the governing party, including with leaders in the National Assembly, that religious freedom is a universal human right. Embassy officers raised with government officials reports of favoritism towards Catholic groups over evangelical denominations, and also complaints about the government's appropriation of religious symbolism and language in its laws and policies. Embassy representatives met regularly with religious leaders to discuss religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.8 million (July 2014 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 2014 by M&R Consultants estimates Catholics at 49 percent of the population,

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evangelicals at 32.2 percent, and believers without affiliation at 11.9 percent. Other groups that together constitute 5 percent of the population include Jehovah's Witnesses and The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints (Mormons). Jews and Muslims make up less than 5 percent of the population.

The Moravian Lutheran Church is largely concentrated in the country's North and South Autonomous Caribbean Regions. The Moravian Lutheran Church estimates its membership at 97,000. A majority of its members are of indigenous or Afro-Caribbean descent.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion. It provides for freedom of belief, religion, and worship, and states no one "shall be obligated by coercive measures to declare his ideology or beliefs." In June the National Assembly approved a new family law that created government controlled, community-level action groups known as Family Committees. These bodies have responsibility for promoting "Christian values" at the community level in education and municipal activities. Examples include promoting neighborhood participation in state-sponsored religious events, and promoting "Christian values" in civics classes.

The government's requirements for legal recognition of religious groups are similar to those for other nongovernmental organizations. Registration requires an application, articles of association, and designation of officers. 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 standard process must be completed before arrival and takes several months.

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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.

Government Practices

Catholic and evangelical church leaders reported 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. For example, church leaders reported cases where government subsidies for teacher salaries were delayed, and where church tax exemptions were not honored, based on political statements made by clergy. They further reported the government manipulated subsidies for underprivileged schools on that basis. Catholic and evangelical leaders reported cases where government customs agents withheld or delayed clearance of imported donations in retaliation for anti-government commentary on the part of the importing religious groups; pro-government groups had no such delays.

Evangelical officials asserted the government's inclusion of Catholic officials but not representatives of other religious groups in public events showed unequal treatment, which they stated also promoted discrimination by municipal-level authorities against evangelical groups. Catholic leaders stated the government's use of Catholic language, tradition, and symbols violated their religious authority. For example, the government used retired, government-aligned Catholic priests to bless government-sponsored political events despite Catholic Church objections.

The government instituted obligatory public school civics curricula on Christian values and required students to participate in government-sponsored religious events, such as Catholic festivals. Teachers and families who opposed this policy were discriminated against when applying for municipal services.

Catholic and evangelical leaders continued to express concern over what they said was the government's use of Catholic clergy and Christian religious statements and symbols to promote its ideological and political agenda. For example, government-sponsored billboards throughout the country portrayed images of President Daniel Ortega with the slogan "Christian, Socialist, and in

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Solidarity.” The Family Committees duplicated Catholic celebrations, despite Catholic Church objections, and required support from government workers to staff events.

In May the government ended a seven-year boycott of meeting with the Catholic Church and met with senior church leadership, who presented a 46-point list of concerns, that included the need for transparent elections and electoral reforms, as well as the unauthorized use of Catholic religious symbols for partisan purposes. At year’s end, the government had not offered an official reply to the list of concerns or otherwise reacted to the meeting. Leaders of the largest evangelical groups stated that government officials were unwilling to meet with them to discuss their concerns about religious freedom and the course of the country’s development.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

An evangelical leader reported three incidents of Catholic priests in remote communities who used what the leader described as offensive language against local evangelical pastors. He further stated that in one of these cases the priest additionally encouraged the mayor to deny cooperation to local evangelical groups.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

In meetings with National Assembly leaders of the governing party, U.S. embassy officers emphasized that religious freedom is a universal human right. Embassy officers raised with government officials reports of favoritism towards Catholic groups over evangelical denominations and complaints about the government’s appropriation of religious symbolism and language in its laws and policies. In response, government officials denied violations of religious freedom and noted that, because the majority of the population is Christian, citizens would not take offense at the government’s actions.

Embassy representatives met regularly with Catholic leaders, officials of the largest evangelical Christian groups, and officials of the Caribbean coast’s Moravian Lutheran Church to discuss religious freedom. In addition, embassy staff remained in contact with the leaders of other, smaller religious groups.