

NICARAGUA 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

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.” Catholic and evangelical Protestant leaders stated the government made selective application of travel restrictions and customs processing based on a religious group’s political affiliation. Religious leaders continued to report the government retaliated against religious groups the government considered critical of the ruling party, including through customs seizures of imported equipment and the delayed clearance of donated goods. Religious leaders said these restrictions against some religious groups and preferences for others had increased since the government imposed additional entry requirements for individuals planning to travel to the country for religious purposes. According to some religious groups, these requirements continued to impede their legal right to travel. Catholic leaders said the government did not permit two separate missionary groups traveling from El Salvador to enter the country to exercise fundamental aspects of their religious practice, such as pilgrimage, charity, and missionary work. Catholic leaders stated the government continued to use religious symbolism and language in its laws and policies in order to promote its political agenda.

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

U.S. embassy officials met with Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials to raise issues some religious organizations faced with government-mandated travel approval requirements and to encourage the government to ensure uniform and efficient administrative processes for entry of foreign religious workers. Embassy representatives met regularly with a wide variety of religious groups, including Catholics, evangelical Protestants, Moravian Lutherans, Muslims, and the Jewish community, to discuss their concerns about politicization of religion and governmental retaliation against politically active religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 6 million (July 2017 estimate). 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 Protestant, including Pentecostals,

Mennonites, Moravian Lutherans, and Baptists. A survey conducted in June by M&R Consultants estimates Catholics compose 46 percent of the population, evangelical Protestants 33 percent, and religious believers without affiliation 14 percent. Groups that together constitute less than 4 percent of the population include Jehovah's Witnesses, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), the Moravian Lutheran Church, Jews, Muslims, and nonbelievers. Local media reported that the size of the Jewish community more than doubled after 114 people persons converted to Judaism in July.

The Moravian Lutheran Church is largely concentrated in the country's North and South Caribbean Coast Autonomous Regions. 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 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, but the law entrusts government-controlled, community-level action groups, known as Family Committees, with the responsibility for promoting "Christian values" at the community level.

The 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, enter into contracts, or benefit from tax and customs exemptions.

Missionaries must obtain religious worker visas and provide information regarding the nature of their missionary work before the Ministry of Interior will authorize entry into the country. A locally based religious organization must provide documentation and request travel authorization from the Ministry of Government seven days prior to the arrival of the visiting religious group. The process generally takes several weeks to complete.

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

Government Practices

Catholic and evangelical Protestant leaders said government customs agents continued to retaliate against religious groups for perceived criticism of the ruling party. The leaders reported incidents of customs seizures of imported equipment, delayed import clearance for donated goods, and delayed tax exemptions applicable to religious organizations. Catholic and evangelical Protestant leaders continued to state that progovernment religious groups did not experience similar retaliation. They said, however, that these retaliatory practices decreased during the year, which they attributed to the central government's unwillingness to alienate further sectors of society during a municipal election year.

Catholic and evangelical Protestant leaders stated the government continued its practice of providing or withholding financial support, tax exemptions, and utility subsidies for individual churches based on the political affiliation of the church's clergy. Church leaders reported cases in which the government did not honor church tax exemptions or delayed the exemptions because the clergy had made political statements criticizing government policies. One evangelical Protestant leader stated that a delay of a routine tax exemption on a donation of imported medical equipment and supplies hindered the delivery of medical assistance to his rural community after Hurricane Otto.

Government policy continued to require religious education through civics classes and participation in state-sponsored events, including processions to commemorate religious events and Catholic festivals, such as the celebration of *Purísima*, in which devotees commemorate the immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary. Ministry of Education officials and ruling party (FSLN) political secretaries frequently selected high school students to participate in these events. According to multiple media reports, government political signs with the slogan of "Christian, Socialist, and in Solidarity" were often posted around public schools. Several sources, including the media, reported that government officials viewed teachers and families who opposed this policy as political opponents and sometimes excluded them from government assistance programs.

Catholic and evangelical Protestant leaders continued to criticize the government's use of Catholic language, tradition, and symbols to promote its political agenda, which they said undermined their religious integrity and threatened freedom of religion. The government continued to require community participation for organizing, hosting, and staffing government-hosted religious festivities, such as

Easter, Holy Week, and *Purísima* celebrations. The government continued to hold its own Catholic celebrations and festivals, despite the disapproval of the Catholic Church's leadership of this practice. The government required government workers to staff the events, leaving them unable to attend the official Catholic Church celebrations. As in past years, government institutions set up 60 altars in public spaces to commemorate the Feast of the Immaculate Conception and distributed free goods funded by government budget appropriations. Senior Catholic and evangelical Protestant leaders continued to express concern about what they said was the government's use of retired Catholic clergy and Christian religious statements and symbols to promote its ideological and political agenda and officiate at government-sponsored politico-religious events.

On November 29, Vice President Rosario Murillo announced that President Daniel Ortega had introduced a bill declaring Catholic *Purísima* festivities "Nicaraguan cultural patrimony" and requested emergency approval. Catholic Church officials sent a letter to the government expressing their objections, after which ruling FSLN-party National Assembly leaders said on December 4 that the proposed bill was never on the docket and would be subject to debate. The government continued to use religious language in daily press conferences in connection with official issues; government-sponsored billboards throughout the country and posters in government offices portrayed images of the president with the slogan "Christian, Socialist, and in Solidarity."

Catholic and evangelical Protestant leaders continued to meet with representatives of the Ministries of Government and Foreign Affairs to advocate reduction of administrative requirements enacted in 2016 for individuals traveling to the country for religious purposes. According to some Catholic and evangelical Protestant leaders, the government's 2016 policy change continued to restrict religious workers from exercising elements fundamental to their religious practices such as pilgrimage, charity, and missionary work. After several months, many members of religious organizations said they had adapted to the new travel restrictions. There were few reports of religious groups being denied entry into the country; however, authorities reportedly detained two separate Catholic missionary groups in June at the northern border and eventually denied them entry.

Catholic and evangelical Protestant leaders stated the government continued to restrict travel selectively for some applicants traveling for religious purposes based on the perceived political affiliation of the applicants. They also said ruling party officials favored FSLN-allied churches. Representatives of both groups stated religious leaders received additional scrutiny and faced selective application of

laws if the government believed they posed a political threat or had not pledged their support to the ruling party. One religious leader said that since enactment of the additional immigration requirements, his organization had continued to refrain from making politically sensitive commentary, which he said might have contributed to favorable cooperation from government customs and immigration authorities.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy officials met with Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials to raise issues some religious organizations faced with government-mandated travel approval requirements and to encourage the government to ensure the administrative processes for entry of foreign religious workers from abroad were uniform and efficient. Embassy officials met with members of the National Assembly to inquire about plans to pass a bill declaring Catholic *Purísima* festivities “Nicaraguan cultural patrimony” and its potential religious freedom implications.

Embassy representatives met regularly with a wide variety of religious groups, including Catholic leaders, officials from a diverse selection of evangelical Protestant groups, officials of the Moravian Lutheran Church, officials of the Nicaraguan Islamic Association, and Jewish community leaders. Among topics discussed were concerns about the politicization of religion, governmental retaliation against politically active religious groups, and new entry rules for religious travelers.