

European Centre for Law and Justice



THE PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS IN NICARAGUA

2018 - 2024



RES DE
NAT
SAC



Grégor Puppinck, PhD, is the Director of the ECLJ. In 2016, he was appointed as a member of the OSCE/ODIHR Expert Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief, whose role is to support OSCE participating States in implementing their commitments regarding the right to freedom of religion or belief.

Thibault van den Bossche is an Advocacy Officer for Religious Freedom at ECLJ. He holds a Master 2 in International Relations from Lyon 3 University (France) and a Master 2 in Communication and Media from Senghor University in Alexandria (Egypt).

Hannah Waters is a J.D. Honors candidate at Regent University School of Law (USA) and serves as a legal intern at the ECLJ. Hannah Waters holds a Bachelor of Arts in Law and National Security from Regent University.

Jeanne Roger holds a Diploma of Advanced University Studies in internationalist and humanitarian field law and a Master 2 in humanitarian action and law from Aix-Marseille University. She is a legal intern at the ECLJ.

Nicolás Sánchez Girotti holds a Degree in Law and a Master's in International Relations from CUNEF (Centre attached to the Complutense University of Madrid, Spain). He is a legal intern at the ECLJ.

The European Centre for Law and Justice (ECLJ) is an international non-governmental organisation dedicated to the promotion and protection of human rights in Europe and worldwide. The ECLJ has enjoyed special consultative status with the United Nations/ECOSOC since 2007.

The ECLJ addresses legal, legislative and cultural issues through an effective strategy of advocacy, education and litigation. In particular, the ECLJ defends the protection of religious freedoms and human dignity before the European Court of Human Rights and other mechanisms established by the United Nations, the Council of Europe, the European Parliament, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and other bodies. The ECLJ intervenes in particular before the ECHR in numerous cases as a third-party intervener, as well as in support of applicants or governments.

The ECLJ bases its action on "the spiritual and moral values which are the common heritage of the European peoples and the true source of individual freedom, political liberty and the rule of law, principles which form the basis of all genuine democracy" (Preamble of the Statute of the Council of Europe).

European Centre for Law and Justice

4 Quai Koch
67000 Strasbourg

www.eclj.org

secretariat@eclj.org

© ECLJ, 2024

The ECLJ does not claim ownership of the photographs included or cited in this report.

Summary

Since 2018, Nicaragua, under President Daniel Ortega, has been conducting a systematic campaign of repression against Christians, particularly Catholics, in retaliation for their peaceful opposition to the regime. These actions include: physical attacks, arbitrary arrests, bans on religious demonstrations, the closure of churches, the confiscation of religious property, and the expulsion of clergy. More than 870 attacks against the Catholic Church have been recorded, while evangelical churches, initially spared, are now also being targeted. **This repression aims to silence critics of the regime and eradicate the spiritual influence of Christian churches in favour of a political ideology centred on the cult of the Sandinista regime.**

According to UN human rights experts, some of these repressive actions can be classified as crimes against humanity. Such actions comprise: murder, torture, prolonged arbitrary detention in inhumane conditions, as well as deportations of members of the clergy and critical religious leaders. These **crimes, characterized by their systematic nature and targeting of specific religious groups, aim to destroy any form of moral or social opposition to the regime.** Among the most emblematic cases is that of Monsignor Rolando Álvarez, who was subjected to inhumane imprisonment and later stripped of his nationality.

At the same time, the international community has condemned these actions, but the responses remain largely symbolic and insufficient to counter the regime's impunity. Although targeted sanctions have been imposed by the United States and the European Union, their impact remains limited, and the Ortega government continues to strengthen its strategic alliances with authoritarian powers such as Russia and China. These alliances allow the regime to circumvent international pressure while consolidating its internal repression.

In the face of these challenges, Nicaraguan Christians continue to resist, embodying **one of the last critical voices in a country where civic space is now virtually closed.** Persecution is not limited to physical or institutional attacks: it also aims to erase spiritual traditions by banning religious processions and celebrations that are integral to local culture. In this context, the urgency of mobilizing international efforts to support persecuted Christian communities is more crucial than ever. This includes increased protection for exiles and human rights defenders, as well as support for the reconstruction of destroyed religious and civic institutions.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
I. THE HISTORICAL ROLE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN NICARAGUA	4
1. The Catholic Church: Between Support and Opposition to Sandinismo.....	4
2. The Catholic Church: The Last Critical Voice of Ortega's Regime	9
II. THE VIOLATIONS OF THE RIGHTS OF CHRISTIANS	12
A. Physical Attacks, Harassment, and Threats	13
B. Incitement to Discrimination, Hostility and Violence Against the Church	15
C. Arbitrary Detentions of Clergy Members	16
D. Violation of the Freedom of Conscience and Religion	18
E. Violation of the Right to freedom of Opinion and Expression.....	20
F. Violation of the Right to Freedom of Assembly and Association	21
G. Imprisonment and Expulsion of Clergy Members	24
H. Denial of Nationality	25
I. Entry Bans to Nicaragua	26
J. Confiscation of Church Property	27
K. Christians in Nicaragua as Victims of Crimes Against Humanity, According to UN Experts	28
III. WEAKENING OF THE RULE OF LAW AND CONCENTRATION OF POWER	31
IV. THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY'S INSUFFICIENT RESPONSES	35
A. Nicaragua on U.S. State Department of State's list of Countries of Particular Concern.....	35
B. UN Condemnations Without Coercive Sanctions	37
C. International Alliances Protecting Nicaragua	38
1. The Issue of Relations with Russia	39
2. Nicaragua Breaks Ties with Taiwan to Strengthen Relations with China ...	39
V. RECOMMENDATIONS	41
ANNEX: THE LAW APPLICABLE TO THE CRIMES OF THE ORTEGA REGIME	47
1. Right to Freedom of Thought, Conscience, and Religion	47
2. Right to Freedom of Expression and Opinion.....	47
3. Right to Freedom of Assembly and Association	48
4. Right to Liberty and Security	48
5. Right to Nationality	49
6. Right to Freedom of Movement and Residence	49
7. Right to Property	50



INTRODUCTION

Before 2017, Nicaragua's future looked bright. A top tourist destination in Central America, it was also one of the fastest-growing economies in the region (5% per year). Nicaragua's president, Daniel Ortega, was then serving his third successive term since his election in 2006. He had previously ruled the country for a decade (1979–1990), at the head of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN),¹ after overthrowing the bloody Somoza dictatorship (1937–1979).² Although Ortega transformed Nicaragua into a Sandinista dictatorship,³ making the country a "mini-Venezuela,"⁴ **the government had largely retained popular support through extensive social assistance programs.**

However, in 2017, one of Nicaragua's main financial supporters, Venezuela, withdrew its aid, due to its own economic collapse, ending Managua's ability to finance its extensive social welfare benefits.⁵ When President Ortega



Protests, 2018 (Amnesty International/Wilmer López)

proposed substantial social security reforms in April 2018, on the recommendation of the International Monetary Fund, protests broke out across the country. Seeing them as a threat to his power, Ortega mobilized pro-government militias and security forces to crack down on the dissidents. **Ortega's violent crackdown left over 355 dead, 2,000 injured, and 2,000 arbitrary arrests.**⁶

According to the Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts (GIEI), established by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) in July 2018, "the State of Nicaragua has committed acts that must be considered crimes against humanity under international law," with the repression constituting a "widespread and systematic attack directed against the civilian population."¹ Despite the end of the protests, Ortega, re-elected as president in 2021, continues to use excessive force, targeting dissidents through violence and arbitrary arrests.

The Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua (GHREN), established by the UN Human Rights Council in March 2022, joined the GIEI in condemning Nicaragua's actions, considering that the human rights violations committed by Ortega since April 2018 (extrajudicial executions, arbitrary detentions, torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, arbitrary deprivation of nationality and violations of the right to remain in one's own country) **amounted to crimes against humanity.**⁷

State persecution of Christians in Nicaragua is reaching alarming proportions. Since March 2023, the United Nations Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua has described it as crimes against humanity.⁸ Since 2018, President Daniel Ortega has been openly waging war against Christians, in retaliation for their peaceful opposition to a social security reform. **According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), more than 440,000 Nicaraguans have sought asylum worldwide between 2018 and 2023.**⁹ The European Centre for Law and Justice (ECLJ) denounced this persecution in its contribution to the 2024 Universal Periodic Review of Nicaragua and continues its work with UN and European bodies.¹⁰

Despite Nicaragua's constitutional commitment to respecting human rights, the Nicaraguan government has violently repressed Christian communities, particularly the Catholic Church, in retaliation for their criticism, with the aim of neutralizing them. Since the start of popular protests in 2018, Christians in Nicaragua have been subjected to physical attacks, harassment, arbitrary detentions, forced closures of places of worship, confiscation of their property, dissolutions and suppressions of religious organizations, Christian media and charities, and a ban on religious events. **Between 2018 and 2024, more than 870 attacks against the Catholic Church have been recorded.** The government has also carried out numerous expulsions of people opposed to the dictatorship, including journalists and members of the clergy, and has revoked the nationality of several of its opponents after expulsion. The persecution of Christians in Nicaragua is mainly carried out through the use of violence, which increases the seriousness of the facts and endangers the lives of those who are considered targets by the government.

The Church and the various religious communities in Nicaragua represent a group with a strong capacity for mobilization. They have also openly criticized the government's management, which is why the regime considers them a threat. **This persecution is not only perpetrated by the government, but also by civilians who support the regime.** This fosters conflicts among compatriots and generates a highly dangerous division within society. A worrying fact has been the expulsion of Church leaders from the country. The forced departure



of several bishops has deprived the Nicaraguan faithful of their spiritual guides, leaving a deep void for the faithful. In addition, these expulsions are carried out in an arbitrary and discriminatory manner, accentuating the feeling of insecurity among the believing population.

Behind this persecution is the government's idea of erasing religion from the consciousness of Nicaraguans. **The goal is to implant another type of cult: that of the Sandinista movement, the party and the President.** These must become the only symbols of veneration for the people. For a national government to promote such a replacement through the persecution of a part of its population is an attack on the most fundamental human freedoms. Freedoms that precede any legislation or system of government and are inherent to the human person. It is imperative that democratic nations, which defend human freedoms, confront this type of regime and provide support to Christians and citizens who find themselves under this oppression. The imposition of effective sanctions and diplomatic negotiation should be an absolute priority.

This report begins with an overview of the evolution of relations between the State and the Catholic Church. This first section illustrates how these relations shifted from initial support for the Somoza regime, to backing the Sandinista Revolution, followed by growing criticism of the Sandinista dictatorship in the 1980s, culminating in the complete breakdown observed today.

The second section of this report details the severe violations of the rights and freedoms of Christians committed by Ortega's regime.

The third section presents the structural breaches of the rule of law caused by legislative and constitutional reforms implemented by the ruling regime.

The fourth section addresses the insufficiency of the responses by various countries and international organizations to these abuses, as well as Ortega's regime's reaction, which involves seeking new alliances with China and Russia to counteract the effects of sanctions imposed by Western countries.

Finally, this report provides a series of recommendations aimed at improving the current situation and protecting the victims.

As a complement, an annex compiles the national and international legal standards applicable to the human rights violations mentioned in the report.

I. THE HISTORICAL ROLE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN NICARAGUA



Daniel Ortega, President of Nicaragua, and his wife Rosario Murillo, Vice President of Nicaragua. Managua (Nicaragua), 21 August 2013. Photo: Fernanda LeMarie - Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ecuador. (Wikimedia.)

1. The Catholic Church: Between Support and Opposition to Sandinismo

With 615 million faithful, Latin America is the continent with the second largest number of Christians, after Africa.¹¹ However, Latin America still accounts for 23% of the world's Christians. The United States government estimates Nicaragua's total population at 6.6 million (mid-2023) according to the 2005 census (the most recent available), conducted by the National Institute of Statistics and Censuses of Nicaragua, and that 59% of the population is Catholic and 22% is evangelical, including Pentecostals, Mennonites, Moravian Lutherans, and Baptists. A September 2022 CID-Gallup survey found that Catholics and evangelicals make up 41% and 38% of the population, respectively. According to a 2019 survey by market research firm Borge and Associates, the percentage of evangelicals is increasing while the percentage of Catholics is decreasing. Borge and Associates found that 43% of the population is Catholic, 41% is evangelical, and 14% of believers are religiously unaffiliated.¹²

Liberation Theology and Sandinismo

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) had a unique implementation in Latin America. The basic ecclesial communities, small Christian communities formed mainly by lay people, who meet to pray, study the Bible and reflect on their social reality, had

already emerged in Brazil in the late 1950s, and then spread throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, fostering an "ecclesio genesis," the emergence of a new form of Church.

Liberation theology, the first theology to emerge outside the European and North Atlantic context, developed to rethink the discourse on God in a context of poverty and oppression in Latin America, marked by great inequality of wealth. It aims to place the poor at the centre of theological reflection and to adopt their perspective.¹³ The expression "liberation theology" was first used by the Peruvian priest and theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez at the Medellín (Colombia) congress of the Latin American Episcopal Council (CELAM) in 1968.

Liberation theology, due to its social and political impact, has been attacked by Latin American oligarchies and by the United States, where its supporters were treated as communists during the Cold War. This Christian commitment to justice has led to the assassination of thousands of believers, making the Latin American Church a Church of martyrs, of which the Archbishop of San Salvador, Óscar Romero, canonized in 2018, is the most emblematic.

Liberation theology was also controversial within the Church, between progressives and conservatives. Before the Medellín Congress of 1968, opened by Pope Paul VI, the Nicaraguan Church was a very traditional and conservative institution, which openly supported the Somoza dictatorship. In the early 1970s, many Christians touched by liberation theology became activists or sympathizers of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). The Marxist guerrilla movement founded in 1961, inspired by the victory of the Cuban revolution (1953-1959), eagerly welcomed these young radical Christians, without seeking to impose any ideological conditions on them.

The theological and political radicalization of the delegates of the Word,¹⁴ and the frequent repression they suffered at the hands of Somoza's National Guard, led many of them to join the FSLN. As early as 1978, the Evangelical Committee for Agrarian Promotion (CEPA), created in 1968 by the Jesuits, broke its formal ties with the Church and became an independent Christian organization allied with the FSLN. Similar, though less radical, activities took place among Protestants. After the 1972 earthquake, Protestant leaders created the Evangelical Committee for Aid and Development (CEPAD), which undertook human rights activities and became increasingly hostile to the Somoza regime. Some Protestant pastors also supported the Sandinistas.¹⁵



Sandinistas at the gates of the National Guard headquarters in Estelí: "The Man with the Molotov Cocktail," Nicaragua, 16 July 1979. (© Susan Meiselas/ Magnum Photos)

Sandinismo in power: Christianity between fusion and distinction

As the crisis of the dictatorship deepened, the Church hierarchy became more critical of Somoza, without fully joining the FSLN. Bishop Miguel Obando y Bravo, mediator between the Sandinista guerrillas and the Somoza government, became in the years following the victory of the insurrection in 1979 one of the leaders of the opposition to "communist Sandinismo" and of the "Popular Church" engaged in the revolutionary process. The Popular Church is a religious movement in Latin America, influenced by liberation theology, which supported the social struggles of the oppressed and defended a Christianity committed to social justice. Unlike most bishops, who feared a fusion between Sandinismo and Christianity, the vast majority of religious orders (especially the Jesuits and the Maryknolls)¹⁶ chose the FSLN camp.¹⁷

Thus, in 1979, the Trappist priest Ernesto Cardenal became Minister of Culture, the Jesuit Fernando Cardenal, his brother, was appointed head of the Literacy Crusade (and in 1984 Minister of Education), the Maryknoll Miguel d' Escoto Minister of Foreign Affairs. They remained ministers until Ortega's defeat in the 1990 election. In 1980, the Franciscan Edgar Parrales was appointed Minister of Welfare and remained so until 1982. This active Christian participation also included many Protestants: 500 pastors and evangelical leaders of Nicaragua signed a declaration announcing their readiness to cooperate with the revolutionary process.¹⁸

Pope John Paul II's visit to Nicaragua in March 1983 marked a turning point in relations between the Catholic Church and the Sandinistas. He supported the bishops and denounced the Popular Church, ordering the Cardenal brothers and Miguel d'Escoto to resign from their government responsibilities. When they refused to do so, they were suspended *ad divinis*. The mass celebrated by the pope was interrupted several times by chants from Sandinista supporters. During the 1980s, Nicaraguan bishops sought support from the United States and expressed solidarity with the Contras,¹⁹ armed groups supported by the United States to fight the Sandinista government. Several priests were then accused by the government of counter-revolutionary activities and expelled from the country, like Monsignor Pablo Antonio Vega, Bishop of Juigalpa, vice-president of the Episcopal Conference, expelled to Honduras in 1986.²⁰

Losing the 1990 elections after ten years of Sandinista dictatorship, Daniel Ortega went into opposition. The enmity between Bishop Obando y Bravo (appointed cardinal by Pope John Paul II in 1985) and Ortega gained new momentum on the eve of the 1996 elections. Three days before, Bishop Obando y Bravo delivered from the pulpit of the cathedral in Managua the "parable of the viper," in which he told the story of a man who took pity on a dying snake, a snake that eventually bit and killed him. After this homily, which clearly referred to Ortega, the Sandinista movement suffered another crushing defeat in the elections.²¹

Perhaps seduced by the positive image that the Catholic Church enjoyed in the country, Daniel Ortega then tried to redeem himself and "make himself seen in a good light" by the latter. He reconciled with Cardinal Obando y Bravo, who himself celebrated the wedding mass in 2005 for Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo, who had

lived together for 25 years.²² On the eve of the 2006 elections, Daniel Ortega apologized for the abuses he had inflicted on the Catholic Church, particularly against Bishop Bismarck Carballo Madrigal, whom he had compromised in a sex scandal in August 1982 to discredit the Church and who then became his ally.²³ During the campaign, Ortega demonstrated his opposition to abortion, fully supporting the position of the Catholic hierarchy.²⁴

Ortega managed to return to power in 2006, a power he has not relinquished since. Bishop Obando y Bravo continued to provide symbolic support to Daniel Ortega's new governments. In 2007, the new National Assembly, with a Sandinista majority, created a new Commission for Reconciliation and Peace to ease lingering tensions following the civil war of the 1980s between the Sandinista army and the contra militias, appointing Bishop Obando as its president.²⁵ In 2016, the National Assembly declared Bishop Obando y Bravo a "National Hero of Peace and Reconciliation."²⁶

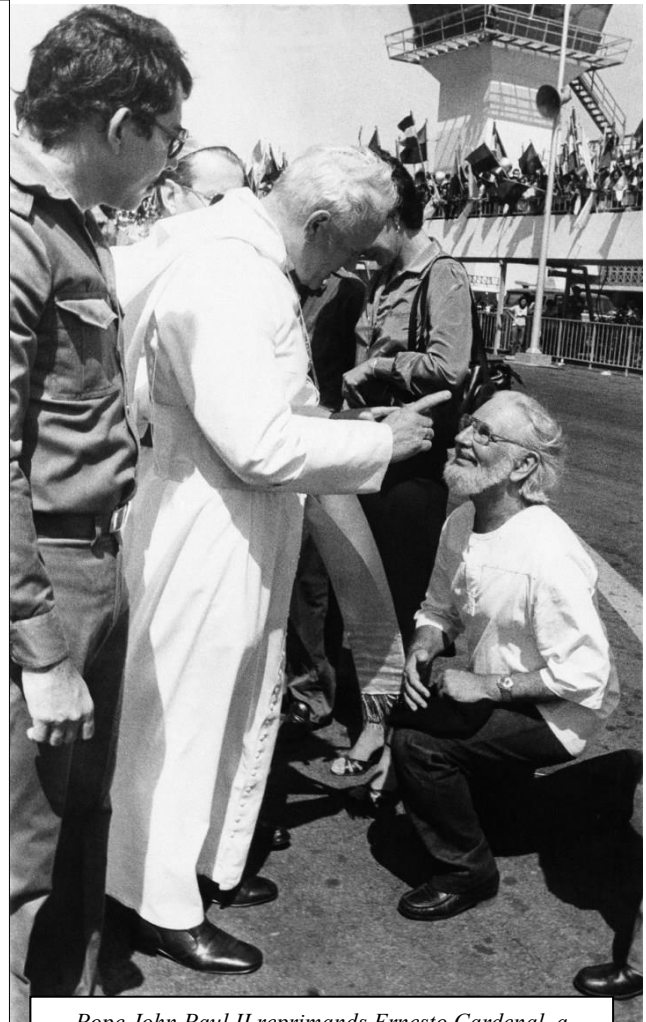
*Born in January 1925 in Granada, near the capital Managua, **Ernesto Cardenal** was ordained as a Trappist priest in 1965, after studying philosophy and literature in the United States and Mexico.*

He was one of the leading proponents of liberation theology, a social movement rooted in the Catholic Church, influenced by Marxism, and developed in Latin America during the 1970s. He participated in the Sandinista revolution, which in 1979 led to the fall of Anastasio Somoza's authoritarian regime. In his memoirs, Mr. Cardenal stated that his life had always been "guided by God," who had inspired him to "become a revolutionary long before the emergence of the FSLN" in 1961.

Appointed Minister of Culture in the first FSLN government in 1979, Ernesto Cardenal was publicly reprimanded by Pope John Paul II on the tarmac of Managua airport upon his arrival for an official visit in 1983. The Polish Pope refused to grant his blessing to the priest-minister, who knelt before him, and, raising a stern finger, admonished him, telling him to "first reconcile with the Church." Two years later, as the priest had not relinquished his political role, the Pope suspended him a divinis.

Ernesto Cardenal then became one of the fiercest critics of John Paul II and his successor Benedict XVI, whose pontificates, in his view, set the Catholic Church back. The suspension was lifted by Pope Francis in February 2019. Politically, Ernesto Cardenal fell out with Daniel Ortega, accusing him of betraying revolutionary ideals to cling to power, and left the FSLN in 1994. He passed away in March 2020.

([Le Monde](#))



Pope John Paul II reprimands Ernesto Cardenal, a Jesuit priest and minister in the Sandinista government, on the tarmac of Managua airport upon his arrival on 4 March 1983. [MARIO TAPIA / AP](#)



Born in February 1926, **Miguel Obando y Bravo** came from a peasant family. After completing his ecclesiastical studies, he was ordained as a priest of the Salesian Order on 10 August 1958 and became a bishop on 31 March 1968. In February 1970, he was appointed Archbishop of Managua, and on 25 May 1985, he was made a cardinal by Pope John Paul II in Rome, becoming the only cardinal in Central America at the time.

During the Sandinista revolution against Somoza, his role as a mediator helped secure the release of several imprisoned Sandinista leaders, including Daniel Ortega in 1974. However, the Sandinistas' rise to power turned the cardinal into a critic of the regime he had initially openly supported, which he later described as an attempt to neutralise religious activity in Nicaragua.

President of the National Reconciliation Commission, he was once again appointed as a mediator in 1987 to negotiate the peace process in Nicaragua between the Sandinista government and the "Contras." In July 2003, on the occasion of the 24th anniversary of the Sandinista revolution and with an electoral motive, Ortega publicly apologised for his government's actions against the Church. In September 2005, Archbishop Obando y Bravo officiated the church wedding of Ortega and Rosario Murillo, the current Co-President of Nicaragua.

Back in power, Ortega appointed him in 2007 as President of the new Peace and Reconciliation Commission. In 2016, the National Assembly declared Obando y Bravo a "National Hero of Peace and Reconciliation." The Episcopal Conference of Nicaragua, which opposed the involvement of clergy in party affairs, stated that he acted "in a personal capacity" within the Ortega government. Upon his death in June 2018, the government declared three days of national mourning.

ElSalvador.com

In the early years, the government was also sympathetic to evangelicals. Ortega officially supported Bible Day celebrations (to commemorate the anniversary of the first Spanish translation of the Bible in 1569) and inaugurated a Bible Plaza in Managua in September 2008. On that occasion, he announced that he would hand over the title deeds of 190 plots of land to evangelical churches and pledged that the government would cover the cost of printing tens of thousands of Miskito-language Bibles for the people of the autonomous region of the North Caribbean Coast.²⁷ He supported the creation of numerous evangelical organizations and funded them until they abruptly ceased in 2018. Pastors were elected as deputies of the Sandinista National Liberation Front to the National Assembly.²⁸

During this period, the government expressly incorporated religious slogans and concepts into its official rhetoric. During President Ortega's second term, the slogan "Nicaragua, Christian, Socialist and Solidarity" was invented and has since been constantly repeated in official documents and institutional advertising.²⁹ Since 2014, the country's community development model has begun to be defined as a model of "faith, family and community."³⁰

In 2014, the National Assembly promoted a reform of the Political Constitution of Nicaragua, which expressly recognizes in its articles 4 "*inspired by Christian values, socialist ideals, practices based on solidarity, democracy and humanism, as universal and general values, as well as the values and ideals of Nicaraguan culture and identity*" and in its article 5 "*respect for the free self-determination of peoples, Christian values, socialist ideals, and practices based on solidarity,*" specifying that "*Christian values ensure brotherly love, the reconciliation between the members of the Nicaraguan family, the respect for individual diversity without any discrimination, the respect for and equal rights of persons with disabilities, and the preference for the poor.*"³¹

2. The Catholic Church: The Last Critical Voice of Ortega's Regime

However, tensions between the government and the Catholic Church grew, with bishops denouncing his totalitarian tendencies. In January 2017, Ortega appointed his wife Rosario Murillo as vice president of Nicaragua.³² During the bloodily suppressed protests of 2018, the Church initially mediated between the government and protesters, but Ortega broke off dialogue. He accused Catholic leaders of planning a coup with American help, going so far as to call the bishops "*putschists*" and "*Satanists.*"³³

In April 2019, Pope Francis asked Bishop Silvio José Báez, auxiliary bishop of Managua who had been threatened with death, to go into exile.³⁴ In November 2019, while several opposition protesters had taken refuge in the cathedral of Managua, pro-government activists broke inside and attacked a priest and a nun.³⁵ The same cathedral was set on fire in the summer of 2020, after a Molotov cocktail was thrown.³⁶

From March 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Catholic Church distanced itself from the government's management, which refused to comply with the recommendations of the World Health Organization, did not publish reliable data on the number of people infected or deceased, and continued to promote public activities and mass events. In order to avoid contagion, the Catholic Church implemented preventive measures and suspended processions and patronal festivals, including the Holy Week processions in 2020 and 2021, as well as the popular procession of Santo Domingo, patron saint of Managua. The Bishop of Matagalpa, Monsignor Rolando Álvarez, criticized the mayors for usurping the authority of the Church by calling for processions that had previously been suspended by ecclesiastical authorities: "*Now the city halls have become pseudo-parishes and the mayors have become pseudo-priests. Because our parishes cancel the processions, the mayors organize them. It's crazy!*"³⁷

In November 2021, the legitimacy of the new general elections was widely questioned.³⁸ During the electoral campaign, the Catholic Church denounced the lack of guarantees for the holding of free and fair elections.³⁹ For its part, the Federation of Evangelical Churches of Nicaragua, chaired by the Sandinista Reverend Omar Duarte,⁴⁰ published a pastoral letter emphasizing the "*great responsibility [...] of exercising the right to civic vote*" and calling on evangelical churches and pastors to place themselves "*at the disposal of the national authorities to contribute [...] to maintaining a spirit of trust and tranquillity in this electoral process.*"⁴¹

Once Ortega was re-elected for a fourth consecutive term, January 2022 marked a new phase of "total closure of civic and democratic space" in the country.⁴² During this phase, there was an intensification of acts of repression against the Catholic Church and its members. In some cases, against pastors and evangelical churches, the latter because of their autonomous capacity to generate social mobilization or bring people together.



Monsignor Rolando Alvarez prays on his knees before the police surrounding the curia. Later that day, on 4 August 2021, his house arrest began. (Photo: [Taken from social media](#))

The acts committed against members of the Catholic Church worsened the deterioration of relations between the government and the Holy See. In March 2022, Ortega dismissed the apostolic nuncio, Archbishop Waldemar Stanislaw Sommertag,⁴³ before accusing the pope and the bishops in February 2023 of belonging to "an organized mafia in the Vatican."⁴⁴ Archbishop Marcel Diouf, who was acting in the interim, had to close the Holy See representation in Nicaragua in March 2023, a week after the pope referred to Daniel Ortega's "imbalance" and compared his government to "crude dictatorships" such as "the communist dictatorship of 1917 or the Hitler dictatorship of 1935."⁴⁵

Despite condemnations and investigations by various international institutions, such as the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights,⁴⁶ Managua has only intensified its human rights violations. Since 2018, Nicaragua has become infamous for its flagrant violations of freedom of expression, freedom of association, and freedom of thought and conscience. For example, the Ortega regime is trying to end civic life, adopting a policy of "prohibiting any centre of life and activity that it does not control."⁴⁷ On August 19, 2024, the Nicaraguan government decreed the closure of 1,500 NGOs, mostly Christian, accusing them of failing to report their financial statements. This is the largest dissolution of organizations ordered since 2018; the total number of these closures is 5,600.⁴⁸

This repression is accompanied by sham trials aimed at silencing political opposition and human rights defenders.⁴⁹ The UN Group of Experts report denounced

systematic human rights violations, including arbitrary detentions of members of the Catholic Church and other Christian denominations.⁵⁰ The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) called for an end to this repression and reported inhumane detention conditions for at least 141 people.⁵¹ Christians, now among the few remaining critical voices, face persecution under Daniel Ortega's regime, responsible for committing crimes against humanity.

II. THE VIOLATIONS OF THE RIGHTS OF CHRISTIANS

Nicaragua persecutes Christians, even though it has committed itself, constitutionally and according to international treaties to which it is a party, to respect their most basic rights such as the rights to freedom of religion, expression, peaceful assembly and association. Added to this is violence, lack of due process and fair trial, and arbitrary detention. Nicaragua is thus guilty of crimes against humanity against Christians, accusing them of appearing critical, adversarial, or not loyal enough to the government.

President Daniel Ortega began to intensify attacks on the Catholic Church and its faithful in a more visible manner starting in 2018. During the popular protests initially caused by social security reforms that broke out in April of that year, the Church initially played the role of intermediary between the government and the protesters, before joining the protesters' camp in the face of the brutality of the repression.

Since then, Ortega has accused the Church of conspiring against his government and has undertaken repressive actions, such as arresting priests and expelling nuns and other clergy. Not only has he carried out arbitrary arrests, he has also closed media outlets and confiscated Church property. Added to this is the banning of thousands of non-governmental organizations and associations, and a wave of physical attacks against those perceived as opponents of his regime.



Granada Cathedral, symbol of the city

In its July 2024 update, a report produced by Martha Patricia Molina, a human rights defender in Nicaragua, records **a total of 870 attacks against the Catholic Church since April 2018.**⁵² **Of these, at least 92 attacks were carried out in 2018. This figure decreased in the following years, with 88 attacks in 2019, 64 in 2020, and 56 in 2021. However, an alarming increase was observed in 2022 with 171 attacks, followed by a peak in 2023 with 307 attacks. In the first half of 2024, 92 new attacks have already been reported.**

These data highlight a clear trend of escalating violence against the Catholic Church in Nicaragua, particularly since 2022. Although the number of attacks temporarily decreased between 2019 and 2021, the sharp increase in attacks in 2022 and 2023 illustrates a significant intensification of the repression carried out by the Ortega-Murillo regime. The number of attacks in the first half of 2024, already equivalent to that of the whole of 2018, underlines the increasing seriousness of these acts.

It is important to note that in addition to the repression against the Catholic Church in recent years, there is now increasing repression targeting the Evangelical Church and other religious denominations. Although initially these did not seem to be in the government's crosshairs, it is now clear that they are now part of Ortega's repressive strategy. To date, more than 100 attacks against the Evangelical Church have been recorded.⁵³

It should also be noted that the data presented, especially regarding the number of attacks of any kind against the Church, are approximations. In fact, not all crimes are systematically reported by the civilian population as well as by members of the Church, out of fear, but also in the hope that the repression will eventually stop. Unfortunately, the attacks continue to occur with the same intensity.

A. Physical Attacks, Harassment, and Threats

Physical attacks, death threats and harassment have become recurring means of intimidation and repression against dissenting voices. These acts, often orchestrated by state forces, but also by pro-government groups or non-state actors, constitute the most dangerous form of religious persecution. Indeed, they directly endanger the lives of those targeted and reflect a deliberate desire to eliminate any form of resistance or moral dissent. **The repetition and severity of these attacks demonstrate a pattern of systematic persecution, targeting those who dare to express their faith or denounce abuses of power.** This context transforms churches and priests into particularly vulnerable targets in a climate of increasing violence. If we focus only on the year 2018, we see that more than 320 people were murdered and more than 2,000 injured,⁵⁴ mainly in connection with government repression. These figures illustrate the gravity of the situation Nicaragua is going through and the violence of the Ortega regime.



The Church of Divine Mercy in Managua, after being targeted by gunfire from pro-government armed groups. July 13, 2018 (Revista Abril).

As part of the social protests that began in April 2018 in Nicaragua, a group of students occupied the facilities of the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua (UNAN) in Managua as early as May 7. On July 13, 2018, after several days of attacks on the protesters, the students, exhausted and fearing for their safety, attempted to negotiate a peaceful exit from the university. Their demands were ignored. That same day, the students were attacked by pro-government armed groups and several of them sought refuge in the Church of the Divine Mercy, aided by priest Raúl Zamora. The church quickly became the target of sustained gunfire, including from the roofs of surrounding buildings and from various points in the vicinity. The attackers used high-calibre weapons, causing extensive damage to the church structures and putting the lives of the students in danger.

Despite several attempts at negotiation to stop the shooting and allow the evacuation of the wounded, the attack continued throughout the night. The students, sheltering behind improvised barricades inside the church, faced a situation of great distress, with no possibility of escape. Two of them were killed by gunshots to the head and the wounded had to wait several hours before being able to receive medical care. It was not until the morning of July 14 that the survivors were able to be evacuated under police surveillance, after lengthy negotiations.⁵⁵

On July 9, 2018, three important figures of the Catholic Church – Cardinal Leonardo Brenes (President of the Episcopal Conference of Nicaragua), Monsignor Silvio Báez and the Apostolic Nuncio Monsignor Waldemar Stanislaw Sommertag – were attacked by members of pro-government groups while they were visiting the city of Diriamba, in the department of Carazo. The purpose of the visit was to verify the denunciations of civil society regarding acts of violence committed by the National Police since the previous day, which had caused the death of several people. During the visit, the ecclesiastics were locked up in the Basilica of San Sebastián by pro-government armed groups.⁵⁶ Two prelates of the Church were injured, as well as several journalists who accompanied the visit.

In addition to repeated physical attacks, there has been an intensification of threats, sometimes of death, and harassment against members of the Catholic Church and political opponents. There have been documented cases of plainclothes police officers infiltrating masses to photograph and film priests and congregants, with the intent of intimidating them afterward.⁵⁷ There are also forms of online harassment, such as threats sent *via* WhatsApp.⁵⁸ The police presence in front of parish houses or priests' residences constitutes another method of pressure and intimidation, transforming their daily lives into a real ordeal.

According to the NGO Christian Solidarity Worldwide, the National Police has also put pressure on evangelical pastors. For example, in October 2022, on the southern Caribbean coast, police officers threatened a pastor with death and demanded that he close his church after misinterpreting remarks made during his sermon.⁵⁹



Cardinal Leopoldo Brenes, President of the Nicaraguan Episcopal Conference, Monsignor Silvio Báez Ortega, and Monsignor Sommertag during a press briefing in front of the San Sebastian Basilica in Diriamba, on 9 July 2018. ([Vatican News](#))

B. Incitement to Discrimination, Hostility and Violence Against the Church

A wave of hostilities and violent acts has spread throughout the country, orchestrated directly by the government, which has used the platforms at its disposal to disseminate hate speech. Directed mainly against the Catholic Church, they have provoked a reaction from the Nicaraguan law enforcement agencies, pro-government armed groups and citizens close to the Sandinista Front. The latter have carried out effective repression against the civilian population opposed to the regime and against the clergy. This has manifested itself not only in the form of threats, hostility or various forms of discrimination, but has also triggered a series of physical aggressions, attacks on places of worship and against members of the clergy, transforming hate speech into real, tangible and destructive violent actions.

In a speech in 2018 on the anniversary of the Sandinista revolution, President Ortega openly called the bishops and the Episcopal Conference “coup plotters” and called on his supporters to “not let their guard down” and to practice “self-defence.”⁶⁰ It is clear that if the President spreads this kind of speech, the direct consequence is a rejection of the Church by Sandinista sympathizers translated, in many cases, into violent acts. This is a clear example of how the State, here through its highest representative, incites discrimination and violence against the Church.

Other means of incitement to hatred against the Church and Christians are also used, in particular through wall inscriptions in the streets and on public furniture, carrying messages such as "murderer priests" or "the only church that shines is the one that burns."⁶¹ According to the latest surveys, approximately 86 hateful graffiti and messages have been recorded.⁶² These acts are committed not only by members of the civilian population, but also by various state bodies, including the police. The latter, for example, accused some priests on their social networks of having looted a police station and described them as false Christians inciting hatred, violence and destruction,⁶³ which shows that even the police play an instigating role in hostilities against the Church and lack impartiality.

Government sympathisers leave hateful graffiti on the walls of the Metropolitan Cathedral of Managua. (LA PRENSA/ROBERTO FONSECA)



C. Arbitrary Detentions of Clergy Members

Nicaraguan authorities have skilfully reorganized and manipulated the judicial system to facilitate arbitrary detentions, including by changing the application of criminal laws and weakening institutions that are supposed to guarantee justice and impartiality. First, **the regime has centralized control over judicial and police institutions, allowing for the direct instrumentalization of criminal law.** Judges and prosecutors, often appointed through opaque mechanisms and influenced by the executive branch, are used as tools of repression, rather than as guarantors of the rule of law. This allows for arbitrary arrests against political opponents, critical voices, and even members of the clergy who express dissent.⁶⁴

In addition to mass arrests of the population, particularly marked during the 2018 protests, the authorities have also targeted members of the Church and other Christian denominations. According to the Group of Experts on Human Rights in Nicaragua, 73 cases of arbitrary detention of people linked to these communities were recorded between 2018 and 2024.⁶⁵ Among those detained are priests, pastors, seminarians, as well as journalists and artists involved in the defence of human rights within religious organizations.

An example of these arrests of members of the Church is the case of the nuns of the Institute of the Poor of Jesus Christ in the city of León.⁶⁶ In July 2023, these nuns were apprehended in the middle of the night by the police. The police forcibly broke into their place of residence and took them to an unknown destination. Today, these nuns are no longer in Nicaragua.



A protester holds a crucifix during a demonstration against President Daniel Ortega's government in Managua. May 15, 2023. ([Global Sisters Report](#)/Photo : CNS/Oswaldo Rivas, Reuters)

The transformation of the judicial system has been accompanied by the introduction of ambiguous repressive laws that broaden the scope of charges that can be brought against individuals. For example, charges of "conspiracy against national integrity" or "spreading false information" are often vaguely formulated and used against people perceived as opponents. Notable cases include that of Víctor Ticay,⁶⁷ a journalist and correspondent for Canal 10, exemplifies this repression. Arrested in April 2023 for broadcasting a religious procession during Holy Week, he was held in conditions of enforced disappearance for several months before being sentenced to eight years in prison. His trial, marked by violations of the right to a fair trial, shows the use of the judicial system as a tool for political and religious repression. Víctor Ticay is currently serving his sentence.⁶⁸

The lack of clarity of these laws allows for the criminalization of legitimate behaviours, such as public criticism or participation in religious activities, thereby transforming social or humanitarian practices into criminal offenses. Detentions are also facilitated by extrajudicial practices such as the absence of arrest warrants, arrest by individuals in plainclothes, and prolonged detention without access to a fair trial.⁶⁹ These methods allow the regime to intimidate individuals without respecting minimum standards of justice, while formally asserting that these arrests are within the law. Furthermore, the lack of effective control of judicial institutions, combined with a widespread submission of judicial actors to the directives of the executive branch, results in **a systematic and abusive use of the system to neutralize any form of dissent.**

D. Violation of the Freedom of Conscience and Religion

Religious freedom is a fundamental and inalienable right, essential to human dignity. This right allows every individual to freely choose, practice and manifest his or her religious beliefs, without fear of coercion, discrimination or repression by the State or society.

In Nicaragua, the right to religious freedom is being systematically and alarmingly violated: since 2018, for instance, more than 9,000 processions and religious activities have been banned.¹

In September 2022, for example, the Nicaraguan National Police took steps to ban traditional religious festivities in the streets in honour of Saint Jerome, the patron saint of the city of Masaya. These celebrations, which are the largest in the country, extend from September to December, attracting large numbers of worshipers and participants. To ensure compliance with this ban, hundreds of police officers, including riot police, were deployed around the parish of San Jerónimo, preventing processions and other religious activities from taking place in public spaces. The decision to impose this restriction was officially announced to the faithful in a statement from the Archdiocese of Managua, which provoked discontent among the inhabitants of the region.⁷⁰ This ban, introduced in 2022, was maintained not only for the feasts of San Jerónimo, but also during the Holy Week celebrations in 2023 and 2024, profoundly disrupting the religious and cultural traditions of the community. In 2024, the number of processions banned during Holy Week across the country rose to almost 5,000, in addition to the many arrests related to these bans.⁷¹



*The Traditional Saint Jerome Festivities in Masaya.
([infobae](#)/Foto19 Digital)*

While large religious gatherings, such as processions, have been banned, so have masses celebrated in cemeteries on November 2, the day of the faithful departed. This Catholic tradition of believers in Nicaragua is now restricted, thus limiting their right to freely practice their faith.⁷²

Although these measures have mainly targeted churches and public manifestations of the Catholic faith, the Human Rights Group of Experts has also noted restrictions affecting the public activities of other Christian denominations, particularly from 2022. In September of that year, the National Council of Pastors of Nicaragua in Nagarote, located in the department of León, issued a statement informing evangelical churches of the cancellation of the Bible Day festivities in that locality. This decision, justified by instructions received from local authorities, cited reasons related to the safety of the participants.⁷³

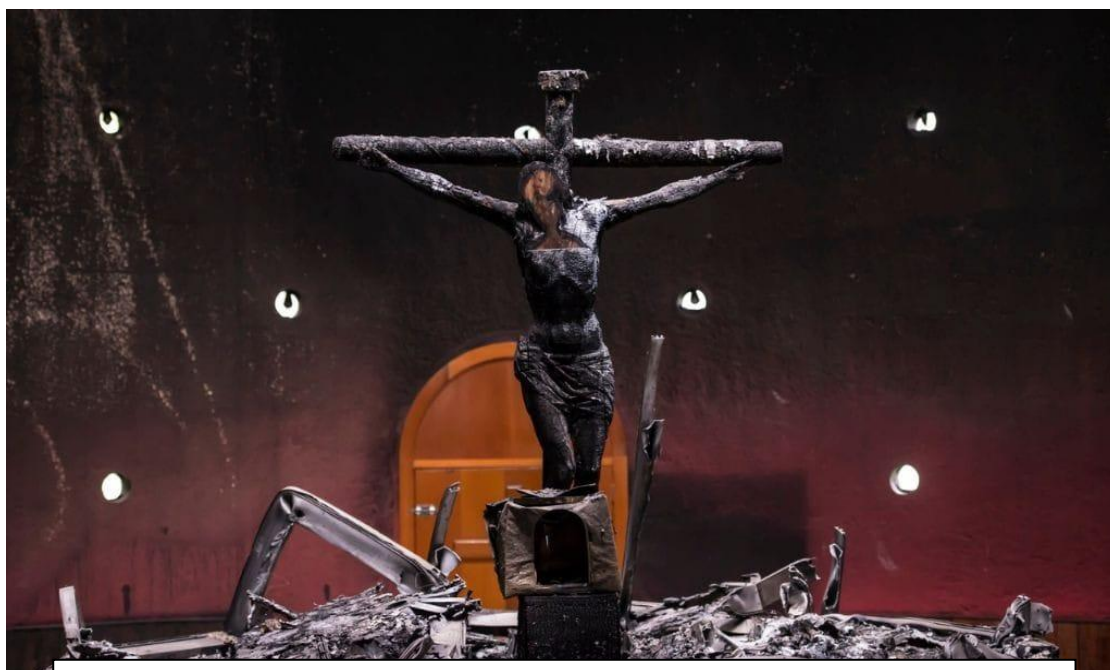
The National Police have also repeatedly prevented entire groups from celebrating religious ceremonies. For example, on December 24, 2022, the Police refused to allow an Assemblies of God church in a rural area to celebrate Christmas with a Bible study followed by games and a meal for a group of approximately 20 children. The Police have since prohibited the church from holding any religious activities involving children.

In March and July 2023, a second Assemblies of God church in the Autonomous Region of the South Caribbean Coast was denied permission to hold special religious events. For the past two years, this church has not been allowed to hold religious events. While services used to be held three times a week, the government now allows only one 45-minute meeting each Sunday. The pastor reported that many church members have stopped attending for fear of reprisals.⁷⁴

These bans are linked to the government's desire to prevent any independent social mobilization organized by churches, perceived as a threat to the total control it seeks to exercise over all spheres of society. These persecutions and bans constitute a serious attack on religious freedom, limiting the fundamental right of Christian communities to practice their faith freely.

Another violation of religious freedom consists of acts of vandalism perpetrated by the civilian population. For example, on July 31, 2020, the historic Precious Blood of Christ on the Cross in Managua, a most venerated statue dating from the 17th century, was burned by a firebomb thrown by an unidentified individual. According to Rosario Murillo, vice president and wife of President Ortega, it was an accidental fire. The Nicaraguan Center for Human Rights (CENIDH) assumes that it was the Ortega-Murillo regime that ordered such sacrilege, in continuation of their campaign of hatred against the Catholic Church.⁷⁵

In early November 2024, the Ortega government once again trampled on the right to religious freedom. Priests were prohibited from administering the extreme unction to the sick in hospitals.⁷⁶ Human rights defender Martha Patricia Molina collected the testimony of about ten priests who were denied entry to hospitals. This appears to be a new form of persecution by the government, preventing the faithful from receiving this sacrament, which is of crucial importance to many at the end of their lives. It is a ruthless way of trying to remove any religious element from the lives of Nicaraguan citizens, especially in their final days.



Precious Blood of Christ on the cross in Managua. ([Dariomedios](#))

E. Violation of the Right to freedom of Opinion and Expression

Freedom of expression is often measured by the degree to which a government interferes in the media and retaliates against those who openly criticize the government. In Nicaragua, this freedom is seriously compromised: many media outlets have been closed by the government and those expressing dissent face arrests and forced expulsions. These actions illustrate the climate of repression fostered by the state, restricting not only access to information but also the fundamental right to express oneself freely. **Since 2018, the regime has closed at least 54 media outlets of all kinds⁷⁷ and 22 religious outlets.⁷⁸ In addition, an estimated 278 journalists are currently in exile.⁷⁹**

Several priests have been arrested, convicted and then expelled from Nicaragua because of their public statements, including Father Benito Enrique Martínez. Gamboa. During the "March of Mothers" on May 30, 2018, in Managua, he said: "Nicaraguans are the majority and have a pure heart, not bloodstained hands like

others. Do not be discouraged! Long live Nicaragua!"^{80,81} Father Martinez Gamboa was deported and now lives in exile in the United States.

In August 2022, as part of a growing crackdown on the Catholic Church, TELCOR, a decentralized agency that reports directly to the Presidency, ordered the closure of several local channels belonging to the dioceses of Matagalpa and Estelí, including TV Merced, Canal San José, and several Catholic radio stations such as Radio Hermanos and Radio Nuestra Señora de Fátima. The government claimed that these stations did not have the necessary permits to operate. However, Monsignor Rolando Álvarez, Bishop of Matagalpa, publicly stated that he had submitted all the required documents since 2016 without ever receiving a response from the authorities.⁸²

Priests who utter critical words to the regime during their homilies are arrested. Any form of dissent or public denunciation of the government, even from the pulpit, is severely repressed by the authorities, which often leads to arrest. So is the case of Father Héctor Treminio, who criticized the political elite for its enrichment, despite the extreme precariousness of the Nicaraguan population.^{83,84}

The Bishop of the Diocese of Siuna, Monsignor Isidoro Mora, was arrested and expelled in January 2024. He had said in a homily the day before his arrest: "I bring you the greetings of the Episcopal Conference, we remain united in prayer for this dear Diocese of Matagalpa, for Monsignor Rolando and for each one of you." That day, he had also expressed his gratitude to Monsignor Oscar Escoto, Vicar General of the Diocese of Matagalpa, who was also arrested and expelled on the same date.⁸⁵



The police banned the procession of the famous Saint Jerome in Masaya. September 2022 (infobae/Photo EFE).

F. Violation of the Right to Freedom of Assembly and Association

Dozens of Protestant, Catholic and other religious churches have had their legal status revoked. Furthermore, these are not only organizations of a religious nature, but all kinds of entities that are gradually being eliminated from the civic space in

Nicaragua. The Nicaraguan government seeks to monopolize the management of social assistance and international cooperation, trying to transform the State into the sole administrator of this type of organizations through state institutions.

The Ministry of the Interior published in *La Gaceta*, the official journal, the list of dissolved organisations, 92 of which were religious in nature. This new government measure revoked the legal status of 1,651 civil society organisations at the beginning of August 2024, **bringing the total number of organisations that have arbitrarily lost their legal status since 2018 to 5,552.**



Among the major national evangelical organizations affected is the Asociación Misión Cristiana Verbo Divino, whose status was revoked on May 19, 2023. Present in Nicaragua for nearly three decades, this association managed 27 churches as well as several humanitarian projects, including the Casa Bernabé orphanage.⁸⁶

On January 16, 2024, the government also dissolved several organizations and churches of other Christian denominations, such as the Asociación Misión Pentecostés Jehovah Proveerá, the Asociación Misión Apostólica Evangelística y Profética, the Fundación Iglesia Familiar Nueva Restauración and the Asociación Misiones Trasmundiales de Nicaragua. As of December 2023, the legal status of the Puerta de la Montaña (Mountain Gateway) Church, or the Asociación Ministerio Internacional Berea (Pentecostal) and Asociación Ministerio Internacional Creciendo en Gracia was also revoked. This is one example among others.⁸⁷

The Association of Missionaries in Nicaragua, founded by Mother Teresa of Calcutta, or the Nicaraguan Evangelical Alliance were among **the 169 civil society organizations whose legal status was revoked by the Nicaraguan government in an announcement on August 29, 2024.**

These cancellations came despite the fact that these organizations, although very socially active and capable of mobilizing large numbers of followers in religious demonstrations, had not issued any direct criticism of the government. Their dissolution illustrates the Ortega regime's desire to control all forms of social influence, including that of religious groups.

In addition to this, international faith-based associations, such as the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD), **Caritas** International, as well as evangelical organizations such as *Christian Aid* and *Compassion International*,⁸⁸ have also lost their legal status, depriving Nicaraguans of the humanitarian aid they provided.

A significant portion of these organizations worked for health, education and assistance to the most vulnerable. Their absence leaves a void in assistance to the most destitute.

To cite an example that illustrates

the consequences of the closure of some organizations, **an estimate by the IACHR indicates that the closure of 126 entities,⁸⁹ which offered protection programs, educational and health services, as well as assistance to children, academic support and many other similar initiatives, has left around 350,000 families without support.** Specifically, more than 50,000 girls and boys are directly affected by this situation.

Still in the health sector, the closure of “Operación Sonrisa”⁹⁰ can only be outraged, given the very nature of this organization. It was an entity dedicated to providing medical care to children living in poverty, with a special focus on facial reconstruction surgeries for children and adolescents with cleft lip or palate. Over 30 years, this organization performed more than 11,000 surgeries in Nicaragua, benefiting more than 5,000 patients, all treated free of charge. The facilities of this organization were confiscated in July 2022.

We must also take into account the economic aid provided by some organizations. **According to the IACHR, this massive closure results in a loss of more than 250 million dollars and affects more than 3.4 million beneficiaries, a toll that is all the heavier because it affects a developing country.**⁹¹

Regarding the right to education, university autonomy and academic freedom, the closure of universities and technical and higher education centres also affects a considerable number of people. According to the IACHR, **more than 37,000 university students have been directly affected.**⁹² This constitutes a serious problem for these individuals, who find themselves unable to complete their studies, thus compromising their prospects of integration into the labour market, which could lead to even greater problems in the future.

The social consequences of these dissolutions are disastrous. The closure of these organizations has a direct impact on the most vulnerable groups in society, including children, students, and families living in poverty. The elimination of these structures leads to an erosion of the social fabric and a worsening of economic and social inequalities.



April 2018, Nicaraguan students protest in Managua against the repression by Daniel Ortega's government security forces. (El Universo / AFP)

G. Imprisonment and Expulsion of Clergy Members

The fundamental right to freedom has been seriously violated in Nicaragua since 2018. The Daniel Ortega regime has been carrying out a systematic campaign of religious persecution that has led to the exile of more than 245 committed Christians, including 91 nuns and 154 clergy including bishops, priests, deacons and seminarians.⁹³ In the first four months of 2024 alone, 34 priests were forced to leave the country under pressure from the government.⁹⁴ Today, the situation in Nicaragua is marked by pervasive insecurity, where individual freedom is constantly under threat. The deprivation of liberty can strike anyone, without warning, exposing every citizen to uncertainty and permanent risk.

The most emblematic event of insecurity in Nicaragua took place on August 4, 2022, when the National Police besieged the church of Matagalpa, locking up Monsignor Rolando Álvarez and 11 other members and workers of the Church. After 15 days of siege, eight people were arrested and charged with crimes against national security. In December 2022, Monsignor Álvarez was accused of compromising national security, while the other detainees were accused in October of forming violent groups and inciting hatred. In January 2023, they were sentenced to ten years in prison for undermining national integrity and spreading false information.⁹⁵



Monsignor Rolando Álvarez, Bishop of Matagalpa, holding the Blessed Sacrament on 4 August 2022, as the National Police attempt to prevent him from leaving the episcopal residence to celebrate Mass at St. Peter's Cathedral. ([LA PRENSA](#))

On February 10, 2023, just one day after being among the few who refused deportation to the United States alongside 222 expelled political prisoners, Monsignor Rolando Álvarez was sentenced to 26 years and four months in prison⁹⁶. He was convicted of multiple charges, including treason, undermining national integrity, and disseminating false information. Although he initially refused to leave Nicaragua, Monsignor Álvarez was eventually released and transferred to the Vatican on January 14, 2024, along with other clergy members, as part of an agreement between Daniel Ortega's regime and the Holy See. He was accompanied on the transfer by another bishop, fifteen priests, and two seminarians.^{97,98}

International pressure led to the release of 135 political and religious prisoners in 2024, but many people are still illegally detained for expressing their faith or criticizing the regime. This repression includes the confiscation of religious property and the banning of religious processions, seriously affecting the Catholic Church as well as other Christian communities in Nicaragua.⁹⁹ Among the 135 political and religious prisoners released were the 13 pastors affiliated with *Mountain Gateway*. They had been arrested in December 2023 after a large evangelical event in Nicaragua. In March 2024, they were sentenced for money laundering to sentences of up to 15 years in prison, accompanied by a fine of nearly \$1 billion.¹⁰⁰

On November 13, 2024, another clergyman was expelled from Nicaragua: The President of the Episcopal Conference, Monsignor Carlos Enrique Herrera, Bishop of Jinotega, after expressing criticism during a Mass. He had complained about a noisy activity organized by the Sandinista-controlled municipality in Jinotega, which was disrupting the proper conduct of the Mass. Monsignor Herrera called the event sacrilegious, due to its lack of respect for worship.¹⁰¹ The mayor in question, Leonidas Centeno, is one of the regime's most loyal supporters. This public criticism directly led to the bishop's expulsion from the country.

H. Denial of Nationality

Daniel Ortega's regime has not only expelled its opponents from the country but has also stripped them of their nationality, condemning them to statelessness.

This is the case of Bishop Rolando Álvarez, who was arrested and sentenced to 26 years in prison. He is currently in Rome thanks to the intervention of the Holy See, which managed to negotiate his release, as well as that of other clergy members. In this specific case, **in addition to being exiled, he was also stripped of his nationality and deprived of his civil rights for life.**¹⁰² It is a blatant violation of the right to nationality, guaranteed by the Nicaraguan Constitution and the 1961 Convention to Reduce Statelessness. The revocation of his nationality places Monsignor Álvarez in a situation of statelessness.

This example is not isolated: Monsignor Silvio Báez, auxiliary bishop of Managua, was also stripped of his nationality and forced into exile. **According to the latest information from Nicaragua, 452 people have been deprived of their nationality in recent years.**¹⁰³ Among them are not only members of the Church but also journalists, activists and other opponents of the Ortega dictatorship.¹⁰⁴ One of the best-known cases is that of the writer Sergio Ramírez, who was vice president of Daniel Ortega during his first term from 1985 to 1990. Exiled in 2021, Ramírez was stripped of his nationality in 2023.

Spain has taken the initiative to offer Spanish nationality to 135 people affected by this situation. Among them are Catholics and several members of various religious groups affected, such as those of *Mountain Gateway*.¹⁰⁵

I. Entry Bans to Nicaragua

The Group of Experts of the United Nations noted a specific pattern of violations of the right to freedom of movement, which included the deprivation of the right to leave or enter one's own country. These violations were directed against individuals perceived as opponents and their families. In its report on human rights violations in the areas of freedom of movement and nationality, it was noted that, starting in 2021, and increasingly, the government has used the ban on entry into the territory of Nicaraguan citizens as an instrument of repression against these opponents or those perceived as such. According to a source of the Group of Experts, in addition to the Directorate-General for Migration and Foreigners, a group of advisers to the Vice-President participates in reviewing the profiles of the individuals targeted to decide whether they constitute a potential threat. These decisions are final and without appeal.¹⁰⁶

These prohibitions have targeted both members of the Catholic Church and representatives of other Christian denominations in Nicaragua. Through these studies, we have discovered numerous cases of entry bans to Nicaragua, particularly since 2022, although this phenomenon began in 2018. These bans have mainly targeted priests and nuns of the Catholic Church, but also members of the Evangelical Churches. The data collected indicate that, from June 2022 to March 2024, 18 entry bans to Nicaragua were reported, 17 of which involved Catholic priests and an Evangelical pastor. Among those turned back at the border are Nicaraguan citizens, such as the Evangelical pastor Saturnino Cerrato, a former presidential candidate.¹⁰⁷ This illustrates the government's willingness to block access to those it perceives as potential opponents, including religious and political figures. This phenomenon also includes the refusal to renew passports for nationals abroad, preventing them from returning to their own country.¹⁰⁸



*The evangelical pastor Saturnino Cerrato.
(Despacho 505)*

Another method used by the government to expel people it considers threats is to deny the renewal of their residence permits. This is a measure applied to foreigners legally residing in Nicaragua, particularly members of the Catholic Church and other religious denominations. Since 2020, at least 21 people have been affected by this measure, but it is possible that the number is higher given the difficulty in counting and recording these cases.¹⁰⁹

J. Confiscation of Church Property

Property rights have been seriously compromised in Nicaragua over the years, with the government being the main violator. Insecurity has spread, particularly affecting the Church, which, according to available data, has suffered 95 thefts and desecrations since 2018.¹¹⁰

In fact, as of 2018, 19 confiscations of properties belonging to the Catholic Church in Nicaragua have been recorded.¹¹¹ These confiscations were made possible by the annulment of the legal personality of certain religious organizations, as well as the non-recognition of their legal status, resulting from arbitrary decisions by the authorities. They are also due to the forced exile of many members of the clergy, leaving vacant property that was seized by the State.

According to the Group of Experts of the United Nations, following the arbitrary revocation of the legal personality of universities, church-affiliated media outlets and non-profit organizations, it was discovered that their assets were also confiscated by the authorities, a situation that extends to some entities that had not yet been officially dissolved.¹¹²



Supporters of Ortega looted the Santiago Apóstol Parish in Jinotepe in 2018. Photo : Confidential, [Taken from social media](#).

The confiscated assets of various religious orders, such as their churches, residences, universities or schools, are placed at the disposal of the State and reallocated to public institutions.¹¹³ These confiscations, carried out under unconstitutional standards and through opaque procedures, violate the right to property. Furthermore, the confiscated assets have not been properly compensated, and the entities concerned, whether organizations or the Church, have no effective means of recourse to challenge these confiscations or obtain compensation.

To cite an example, the government confiscated the monastery of Santa María de la Paz, transferring it to the Nicaraguan Institute of Agro-Food Technology (INTA), two months after the presumed "voluntary" departure of Trappistine nuns. The nuns

specify that they left the monastery under the administration of the diocese while they proceeded to the voluntary closure of their association with the Ministry of the Interior. However, they denounced that after filing the act of "voluntary" closure on March 1, 2023, the government authorities verbally informed their bishop, as early as March 3, that access to the monastery would henceforth be prohibited, because INTA would take possession of it.¹¹⁴ The nuns had undertaken a legal process of closing their association and temporary administration of the monastery by the diocese. However, without respecting these steps or the rights of the legitimate owners, the government appropriated the property to reassign it to a public institution.

Villa Carmen, a house of the Society of Jesus where six priests who collaborated with the Central American University resided. These priests were forced to abandon their homes under pressure from police forces, without even being allowed to retrieve their personal belongings. This event is part of the confiscation of the University's property, after the annulment of its legal personality.¹¹⁵



The Central American University of Managua, led by the Jesuits, was seized by the government on 16 August 2023. (Vatican News)

Bank accounts have also been affected by these measures.¹¹⁶ The government has ordered the freezing of bank accounts of several Catholic Church organizations in Nicaragua, including the National Priestly Security Fund, administered by the Episcopal Conference of Nicaragua for retired priests. The fund, which has been in place for more than 20 years, provided monthly pensions to retired priests, but the accounts have been frozen, preventing any payments. In addition, bank accounts for the dioceses of Managua, Matagalpa, and Estelí have also been frozen. The government justifies these measures by accusing the Church of money laundering.

K. Christians in Nicaragua as Victims of Crimes Against Humanity, According to UN Experts

The State responded to the 2018 protests with violent repression. The available data attest to this: there were more than 300 deaths, more than 2,000 people injured and at least 2,000 arbitrary detentions. According to the Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts (GIEI-Nicaragua) and various United Nations mechanisms, it was concluded that, as part of the State repression, Nicaragua committed acts that amount to crimes against humanity.¹¹⁷ These crimes mainly include murder, deprivation of liberty, persecution for political reasons, forced disappearances and torture.

The profile of victims has gradually broadened, including not only opponents of the government, but also people belonging to groups with the capacity to mobilize

society autonomously. It is clear that the Catholic Church and other religious denominations have this capacity, which has made them major targets of these persecutions.¹¹⁸

The Human Rights Group of Experts on Nicaragua proposes guidelines to follow that can serve as a basis for determining whether the crimes committed by the government in recent years actually constitute crimes against humanity.

Regarding arrests or deprivations of liberty, the following is stated:

"For conduct involving imprisonment or other severe deprivation of physical liberty to qualify as a crime against humanity, it is necessary to establish: (i) the deprivation of a person's liberty; (ii) that the deprivation of liberty is arbitrary; and (iii) that the act or omission by which the person is deprived of their physical liberty is committed by the perpetrator, or by one or more persons for whom the perpetrator is criminally responsible, with the intent to arbitrarily deprive the person of their physical liberty, or with reasonable knowledge that their act or omission is likely to result in an arbitrary deprivation of physical liberty."¹¹⁹

The arbitrary arrests reported earlier in this report have, in several cases, led to convictions and prison sentences due to the individuals' critical stance against widespread human rights violations perpetrated by the government. These arrests were often accompanied by lengthy interrogations and secret detentions, frequently prolonged and without due process guarantees. According to the guidelines established by the group of experts, these arrests could amount to crimes against humanity.¹²⁰

With regard to acts of torture, the following is specified:

"To qualify an act of torture as a crime against humanity, it is necessary to establish, in addition to the contextual elements: (i) the infliction, by act or omission, of severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental; (ii) the intent regarding the act or omission; and (iii) that the act or omission is aimed at obtaining information or a confession, punishing, intimidating, or coercing the victim or a third party, or discriminating, for any reason, against the victim or a third party."¹²¹

The example of Monsignor Rolando Álvarez, detained for more than 17 months, illustrates a possible case of torture. His detention was marked by long periods of isolation in a high-security section of *La Modelo* prison, known as "*El Infiernillo*."¹²² A section known for its inhumane conditions, its dark and unsanitary cells, poorly ventilated and humid, among others. During the first 43 days of his detention, Monsignor Álvarez was not allowed to receive any visitors, which increased his psychological stress.¹²³

Another example concerns nine priests detained in the *El Nuevo Chipote* prison. They were placed in a "torture environment," subjected to prolonged isolation, and their detentions were carried out in secret.¹²⁴ The conditions inside this prison were terrible: they were threatened, insulted, denied access to Bibles, and prevented from praying out loud. Due to the combination of these factors, these treatments could be considered acts of torture.¹²⁵

Regarding the deportations, the following elements are highlighted:

"To qualify a deportation of the population as a crime against humanity, it is necessary to establish: (i) the forced displacement of individuals; (ii) that the individuals are lawfully present in the territory from which they are displaced; (iii) that the displacement lacks a basis in international law; and (iv) that there is intent to forcibly displace the population."¹²⁶

The Group of Experts therefore has reasonable grounds to believe that the documented expulsions constitute the crime of deportation as a crime against humanity.¹²⁷ To cite a few examples, all deportations carried out against members of the Church or other religions were carried out against their will and in a discriminatory manner, which is a practice not permitted under international law. Indeed, international law prohibits any form of discrimination. It is clear that the clergy who were expelled were expelled because of their status and what they represent, namely opponents of the government.¹²⁸

In terms of persecution, the following is highlighted:

"The Group of Experts recalls that the crime of persecution is an extreme form of discrimination, which has been described in international jurisprudence as one of the most heinous of all crimes against humanity because it is based on the denial of the principle of equality of human beings. In this regard, to qualify an act of persecution as a crime against humanity, it is necessary to establish that the conduct: (i) effectively discriminates, (ii) deprives or infringes upon fundamental rights established in international law, (iii) is based on racial, religious, or political grounds, and (iv) is carried out deliberately with the intent to discriminate."¹²⁹

If these guidelines are followed, the crimes committed as a whole, such as arbitrary arrests, deportations, conditions of detention and others, could be considered persecutions carried out as part of a systematic and targeted attack against a part of the population, namely the members of the different Churches present in Nicaragua, thus constituting crimes against humanity.¹³⁰

III. WEAKENING OF THE RULE OF LAW AND CONCENTRATION OF POWER

The power wielded by the president and vice president in Nicaragua is so extensive that all state institutions are subordinated to them. This undermines the independence of state bodies and renders effective oversight of their actions impossible.¹³¹ In addition, Daniel Ortega has reformed the Constitution a dozen times, allowing him an indefinite number of terms.

To achieve this concentration of executive power, various constitutional and legal reforms were adopted, shaping the system currently in force in Nicaragua. It can be said that this process began in 1999 with the so-called "Alemán -Ortega Pact."¹³² This pact established a two-party system, one of its objectives being to facilitate the co-optation of important positions in the public administration. Subsequently, other controversial reforms and pacts were added with the aim of ensuring the control of power by the two main parties: the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) and the Constitutionalist Liberal Party (PLC).¹³³



View of the Granada Cathedral

In 2010, legal reforms were enacted to bolster the party's influence over judicial appointments. Consequently, the Inter-American Commission declared that Nicaragua lacks an independent judiciary.¹³⁴ The new constitutional reform of 2014, approved by the National Assembly, further strengthened the president's power.¹³⁵ It abolished the prohibition on presidential re-election and established the possibility of indefinite re-election. It also reformed the electoral system by introducing election by simple majority and eliminating the need for a runoff.¹³⁶ A simple majority in the first round is sufficient to win the election.

Through this reform, the president is also empowered to rule by decree, and his appointments to high-level positions are ratified by a simple majority in the National Assembly. The obligation for the president to present an annual report to the National Assembly, as an accountability mechanism, was also eliminated.¹³⁷ In this same logic, the reform established a direct subordination of the National Police and the army to the

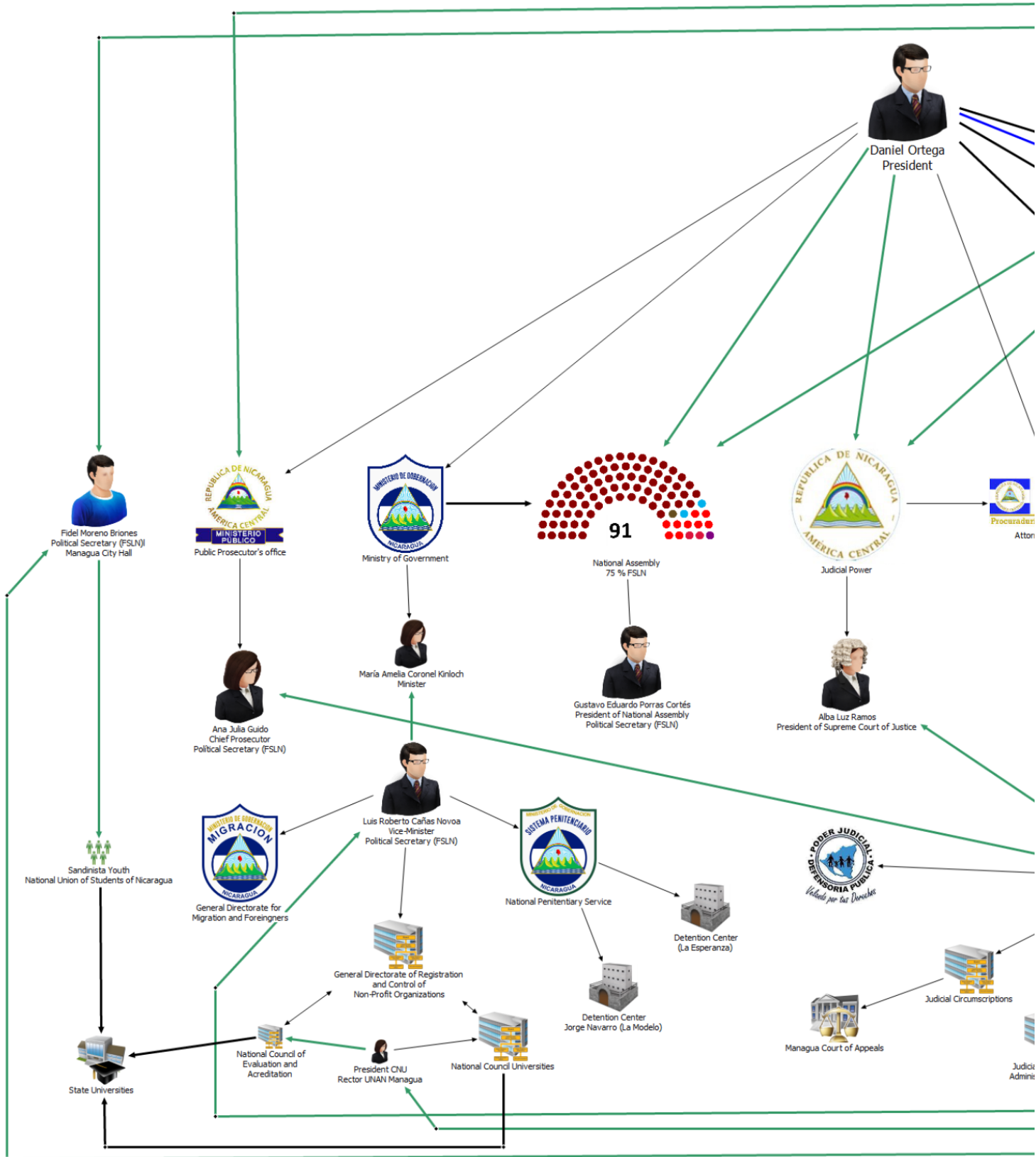
president as supreme head of both institutions. This 2014 reform allowed for an expansion of the functions of the army, which is now empowered to carry out "citizen security" duties.¹³⁸ In 2014, the Sandinista Party and several magistrates close to the president already officially occupied three of the four chambers of the judiciary. In addition, the judicial career no longer guarantees any impartiality.¹³⁹

The 2018 protests revealed the nature of the power that Ortega had consolidated over the years. The use of disproportionate force by the police and various pro-government groups under his command as supreme leader, the arbitrary arrests and detentions of dissidents, the criminalization of protests, and the occupation and looting of the offices of human rights organizations and media outlets,¹⁴⁰ are explained by its control over the judiciary and other public institutions, thus preventing any denunciation or questioning of its actions.¹⁴¹

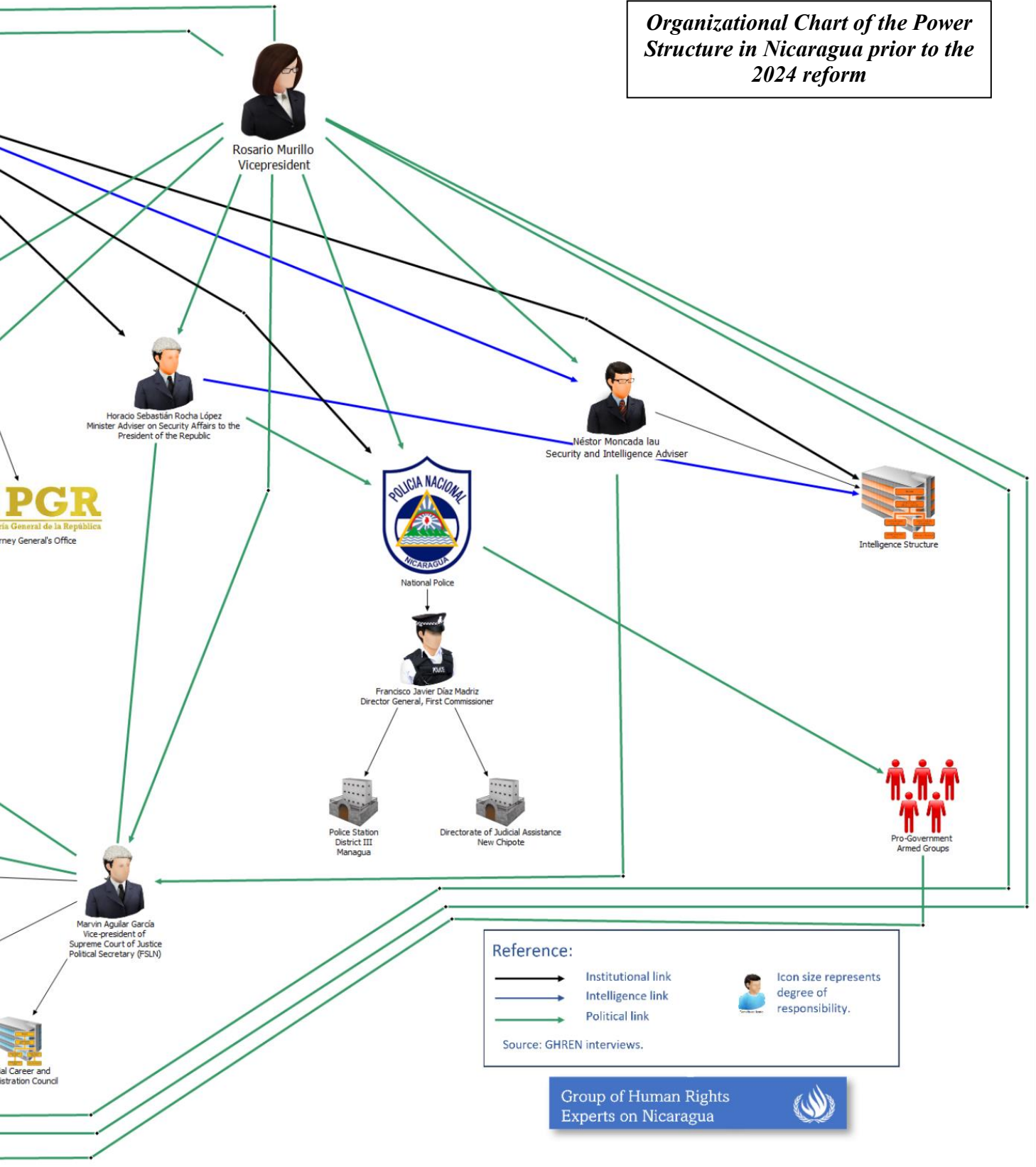
This situation highlights an absolute absence of the rule of law, judicial independence, and adherence to the separation of powers.

Another ally of the executive branch is the legislative branch, which has passed laws whose effect is to further restrict freedom of expression and close what remains of democratic spaces.¹⁴² All the powers that make up the State of Nicaragua are subordinate to the executive branch, which creates conditions of governance in which human rights have no internal protection.¹⁴³

Daniel Ortega sees his hold on the country further increased with the adoption by Parliament on November 22, 2024, of a constitutional reform, which among other things, makes his wife Rosario Murillo a "co-president". Controlled by the ruling party, the Sandinista National Liberation Front, Parliament approved "unanimously" the reform project presented by Daniel Ortega. It will be ratified during a parliamentary session in January 2025, according to the president of the unicameral assembly. According to this text, "the presidency of the Republic is composed of a co-president and a co-president", designated during elections organized "every six years", and no longer every five years. The two leaders coordinate "the legislative, judicial, electoral bodies" or those managing regions and municipalities, while the current constitution considered them independent.¹⁴⁴



Organizational Chart of the Power Structure in Nicaragua prior to the 2024 reform



IV. THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY'S INSUFFICIENT RESPONSES

A. Nicaragua on U.S. State Department of State's list of Countries of Particular Concern

The United States has imposed a series of sanctions against the Daniel Ortega regime in response to human rights abuses and growing political repression in Nicaragua. These have been deployed in different forms, targeting both individual officials and the country's economy, but have failed to produce significant results on the internal situation.

In 2022, Nicaragua was placed on the list of *Countries of Particular Concern (CPC)* by the U.S. Department of State. This designation, which is renewed annually, identifies countries where severe violations of religious freedom are systemic. In Nicaragua's case, the persecution of the Catholic Church, including the imprisonment of religious figures and the closure of several churches, were key factors in this designation. In 2024, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom recommended Nicaragua be re-listed, which could lead to additional sanctions targeting regime officials.

One of the most significant responses is the adoption of the RENACER Act (*Reinforcing Nicaragua's Adherence to Conditions for Electoral Reform*),¹⁴⁵ in 2021. This law sought to tighten U.S. sanctions against the Ortega regime, expanding those established by the NICA Act of 2018. The latter required U.S. representatives in international financial institutions to vote against any loans to Nicaragua, in order to limit the country's access to funding. The RENACER Act went further by including sanctions on specific sectors of the Nicaraguan economy, visa restrictions for those close to the regime, and requiring increased monitoring of elections. Although the RENACER Act expired in December 2023, several members of the U.S. Congress have proposed renewing it or implementing similar legislation to maintain pressure on the regime.

In addition, executive orders signed by successive US presidents have strengthened these sanctions. The *Executive Order* 13851,¹⁴⁶ signed by Donald Trump in 2018, allowed the Treasury Department to directly sanction individuals involved in human rights abuses. This includes Nicaraguan political and judicial officials, accused of facilitating repression, such as the imprisonment of clergy and political opponents. In 2022, President Joe Biden signed *Executive Order* 13851 into law. Order 14088,¹⁴⁷ which further expanded these sanctions. This decree restricted U.S. investment in certain Nicaraguan economic sectors, including industries related to natural resource extraction and infrastructure, thereby limiting financial flows to the regime.

However, despite all of these sanctions, their impact on the situation in Nicaragua has been relatively limited. The Ortega regime has continued its repression of opponents and religious institutions, and economic ties between the United States and Nicaragua have remained significant. The United States remains Nicaragua's largest trading partner, accepting about two-thirds of the country's exports and supplying more than a third of its imports.¹⁴⁸ In addition, foreign direct investment (FDI) from the United States has increased, despite the deterioration in political relations. Thus, while the sanctions are intended to isolate the Ortega regime on the international stage, they have not been enough to curb its repressive actions, nor to significantly reduce economic ties between the two countries.



View of the Managua Cathedral

Migrant trafficking

Although Nicaragua is located more than 2,200 kilometres south of the United States, the Nicaraguan crisis poses a potential threat to the integrity of the U.S. border. Faced with the growing influx of migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border, President Daniel Ortega has exploited the vulnerability of these refugees, thereby endangering U.S. security.

In 2022, Managua eliminated the visa requirement for several African and Asian countries, replacing this traditional security measure with a lucrative arrival fee. This particularly high tax generates millions of dollars each month for the Ortega regime. At the same time, a state-controlled immigration network was set up. Through charter flights, this network facilitates the journey of migrants to the US border by directing them to Honduras and Guatemala.¹⁴⁹ By eliminating visas and establishing this immigration network, Nicaragua has become an essential stopover for many migrants in route to the US border. For example, between August and October 2023,

approximately 60% of Haitians arriving in the United States passed through Managua. Similarly, between January and November 2023, more than 100,000 Cuban immigrants used Nicaragua as a “bridge” to the United States.¹⁵⁰

At the same time, many Nicaraguans are fleeing their own country in search of freedom and better living conditions. In 2023 alone, 139,000 Nicaraguan migrants crossed the U.S. border.¹⁵¹ The politically, economically, and socially motivated exodus of Nicaraguan citizens to the United States represents an unprecedented influx of people from that country. While the United States typically adopts a welcoming stance toward asylum seekers, the scale of this mass influx could present a significant homeland security challenge and impose an excessive burden.

B. UN Condemnations Without Coercive Sanctions

Despite the escalation of human rights violations in Nicaragua, several international institutions and states have demonstrated a lack of decisive action, allowing the Ortega regime to continue its repression with impunity. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) was one of the first to denounce the government's abuses, documenting cases of violent repression, torture, arbitrary detention and forced exile.¹⁵² However, the IACHR's recommendations have not led to tangible actions or severe sanctions against the regime. Indeed, despite multiple warnings from this institution, the member states of the Organization of American States (OAS) have failed to impose coercive measures that could have put significant pressure on the Nicaraguan government.

On the other hand, despite producing damning reports on human rights violations, particularly through its bodies such as the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the United Nations has failed to build a strong enough international consensus to intervene effectively. Resolutions of condemnation within the UN Human Rights Council have been hampered by political divisions among members, and no fact-finding missions or major humanitarian interventions have been implemented to provide relief to the victims of the repression.

On April 3, 2023, pursuant to a resolution entitled "Promotion and Protection of Human Rights in Nicaragua" (A/HRC/RES/52/2), the Human Rights Council decided to extend the mandate of the Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua for a period of two years, following an initial one-year mandate granted on March 31, 2022 (A/HRC/RES/49/3). In this text, the Council expressed grave concern over the deterioration of democracy, the rule of law, the separation of powers, and the human rights situation in Nicaragua, as well as reports indicating that human rights violations and abuses have been committed since April 2018 without those responsible being held accountable for their actions.¹⁵³

At the same time, the reaction of many states has been limited to verbal statements or non-binding individual sanctions. The European Union has extended for one year their sanctions against the Nicaraguan regime, targeting a total of twenty-one individuals and three entities, including Vice President Rosario Murillo, for serious human rights violations and attacks on democracy.¹⁵⁴ These sanctions, initially decided in 2019, will remain in force until 15 October 2025. These measures include the

freezing of assets belonging to these individuals and entities within the EU, as well as a travel ban, preventing entry and transit through European territory.¹⁵⁵ On September 28, 2022, Nicaragua declared the head of the European Union Delegation in the country *persona non grata*; in response, the EU took the same measure against Nicaragua's ambassador in Brussels on October 10, 2022.

Although the United States and the European Union have imposed targeted sanctions against senior regime officials, these actions remain largely symbolic and have not had a significant impact on the country's domestic situation. Moreover, many other states have chosen to remain silent or maintain diplomatic and trade relations with Managua, minimizing the international consequences for the regime.

This overall inaction, both by regional and international institutions and states, leaves the Nicaraguan population without real support in the face of repression. The lack of a coordinated and concerted response allows Ortega to strengthen his grip on power, while maintaining impunity for systematic human rights violations.



Nicaraguan Ambassador Zoila Yanira Muller Goff, on the left, and Ursula von der Leyen, on July 14, 2022. ([Euractiv](#))

C. International Alliances Protecting Nicaragua

In parallel with this repressive policy, the Nicaraguan government has sought strategic alliances to strengthen its position and counter its isolation and the sanctions imposed on it by the international community. Nicaragua's foreign policy, under President Daniel Ortega, has gradually been consolidated around strategic alliances with authoritarian powers such as Russia and China. This choice, which could be seen as a way of circumventing international pressure, raises questions about the long-term consequences for regional stability and the country's internal development.

1. The Issue of Relations with Russia

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine launched in 2022, Russia is forced to intensify its participation in the geopolitical game of the Western Hemisphere. In this strategy, Nicaragua represents a valuable opportunity for Russia due to the characteristics sought by it. Fully controlled by Ortega, Nicaragua facilitates Russian activities in the country: thanks to close diplomatic relations, some Russian facilities enjoy autonomy on the territory, and Nicaragua's support is unwavering, thus providing Russia with ample room for manoeuvre.¹⁵⁶ This could threaten the stability of this entire region of the world due to the possible expansion of Russian influence in neighbouring territories.



The sending of troops and military equipment under the pretext of humanitarian and security cooperation seems above all a provocation against the United States, historically influential in the region.¹⁵⁷ The arrival of Russian troops in July 2022 marks a significant step in this relationship, recalling the tensions of the Cold War, without reaching the scale of the 1962 missile crisis. This military rapprochement with Moscow raises concerns about the Nicaraguan government's ability to manage geopolitical conflicts of interest that, until now, have been mainly on the American continent, but which could be exported to Europe.

More recently, in 2024, a new rapprochement took place between the two countries. Nicaragua signed a joint declaration with Russia in Moscow, represented by Laureano Ortega Murillo, the president's son and presidential adviser, as well as the president's special representative for affairs with Russia. The objective of this declaration is to "counter" the sanctions imposed by the United States and other countries due to human rights violations and the invasion of Ukraine. According to Rosario Murillo, vice president and wife of Daniel Ortega, this declaration aims to counter the sanctions, which Nicaraguan leaders prefer to call "aggressions", being, according to them, unilateral coercive measures.¹⁵⁸

The declaration stipulates that, unilateral coercive measures including those of an extraterritorial nature, imposed by a third State, group or association of States, and any violation of the Charter of the United Nations or international law should not be recognized or applied. It also adds that the use of such unilateral coercive measures is illegal, contrary to the Charter of the United Nations and international law and entails the international responsibility of the State concerned.

2. Nicaragua Breaks Ties with Taiwan to Strengthen Relations with China

Furthermore, Nicaragua's partnership with China,¹⁵⁹ formalized in December 2023, demonstrates a clear shift by Nicaragua towards non-democratic regimes, seeking new support in the face of growing international isolation. The reestablishment of diplomatic relations with Beijing, after breaking with Taiwan, demonstrates this desire to integrate into the Chinese sphere of influence. This strategic partnership goes



beyond simple economic exchanges; it also aims to strengthen China's political influence in the region, in opposition to the traditional hegemony of the United States. Nicaragua thus adheres to the principle of "one China", supporting Beijing in its territorial claims. In return, China provides crucial economic support, in the form of investments and infrastructure projects within the framework of the "Belt and Road" initiative.

In January 2024, a free trade agreement between the two countries entered into force, providing for a zero-tariff reduction on 95% of the goods included in the agreement.¹⁶⁰ This agreement further strengthens economic ties between China and Nicaragua, consolidating their cooperation around common interests of considerable importance.

The joint statement issued by China and Nicaragua is very similar to the joint statement with Russia. The essence of its content aims at the same objectives in both cases. One almost identical point mentioned in the statement is: "*The two sides jointly reject hegemonism and power politics, resolutely oppose the politicization and instrumentalization of human rights issues, as well as the interference of any country in the internal affairs of other countries under the pretext of democracy and human rights, and refuse the imposition of unilateral coercive measures, so-called sanctions.*"¹⁶¹

This statement reflects the same spirit of distrust towards international organizations and claims independence of Nicaragua's internal affairs, while challenging the alleged hegemony of these organizations. The statement affirms that Nicaragua does not accept sanctions resulting from human rights violations, and China, like Russia, supports this disregard for these sanctions.

However, this commitment could pose problems for Nicaragua's future, as it ties it closely to external powers that pursue their own strategic objectives, often to the detriment of local sovereignty and democratic interests.

It is worth asking what consequences these alliances have for the Nicaraguan people. Intensifying relations with authoritarian regimes could indeed accentuate Ortega's repressive rule, moving the country further away from democratic values and human rights. Moreover, these partnerships not only strengthen Nicaragua's international stature, but they also strengthen Ortega's domestic position, allowing him to rely on foreign support to resist pressure from the domestic opposition and international sanctions.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

We call on States to:

1. **Strongly condemn the widespread human rights violations** perpetrated by the Ortega - Murillo regime against its population,¹⁶² and impose sanctions on the institutions and individuals involved.
2. **Work together to raise the issue of the human rights situation in Nicaragua** in all regional and international organizations and toughen their diplomacy towards Nicaragua.¹⁶³
3. **Tighten the conditions of loans granted to the Nicaraguan government by international financial institutions** such as the World Bank (WB), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB).
4. **Promote efforts to conduct criminal investigations against senior Nicaraguan government officials** found guilty of crimes against humanity by the UN.
5. **To explore the possibility of initiating, unilaterally or jointly with other countries, proceedings against Nicaragua before the International Court of Justice**, particularly with a view to ensuring compliance with all human rights conventions to which Nicaragua has subscribed.¹⁶⁴
6. **Provide emergency visas for journalists, human rights defenders and Christians, and provide assistance to Nicaraguan refugees** by protecting them from the risks of transnational repression (including the possibility of family reunification when family members remaining in Nicaragua are also at risk) and providing psychological assistance to those who have been victims of torture.

ENDNOTES

¹ The Sandinista National Liberation Front (Spanish: Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional; abbreviated FSLN) is a Nicaraguan political party founded in 1961 as a socialist political-military organization inspired by the struggle of General Augusto Sandino. The FSLN played a major role in the history of Nicaragua by triggering the Sandinista Popular Revolution (Revolución Popular Sandinista) in 1979. The contras (counterrevolutionaries) financially supported by the United States attempted to regain power from Daniel Ortega's FSLN, in order to prevent the country from turning to communism, as Cuba had done. For several years, almost the entire national budget was spent on armaments. A full-blown civil war ravaged the country until the end of the 1980s.

² The Somozas were an influential Nicaraguan family that became a political dynasty for 43 years, between 1937 and 1979. Three members of this dynasty were presidents of the Republic: Anastasio Somoza García (1896-1956), Luis Somoza Debayle (1922-1967), his eldest son, and Anastasio Somoza Debayle (1925-1980), his second son. The 1979 revolution led by the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) overthrew the Somoza dynasty.

³ Sandinismo is a Nicaraguan political movement of the left, originally nationalist and anti-imperialist with later socialist influence, which promotes Latin American integration. It is based on the political ideas of Augusto César Sandino (1895–1934), the national hero of Nicaragua, from whom it takes its name.

⁴ *Radio France*, "[In indifference, the totalitarian drift of Nicaragua, a mini Venezuela](#)," June 16, 2021.

⁵ *Council on Foreign Relations*, "[Nicaragua in Crisis: What to Know](#)," November 26, 2018.

⁶ *Organization of American States*, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), "[Nicaragua: Six years after social protests. IACHR reestablishment of democracy, end to repression and impunity](#)," April 18, 2024.

⁷ *OHCHR*, [Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua](#), Reports of the Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua (A/HRC/52/63) 2 March 2023, and (A/HRC/55/27) 28 February 2024.

⁸ *OHCHR*, [Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua](#), Reports of the Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua (A/HRC/52/63), March 2, 2023; (A/HRC/55/27), February 28, 2024 and (A/HRC/55/CRP.5), July 22, 2024.

⁹ *Organization of American States*, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), "[Nicaragua: Six years after social protests. IACHR reestablishment of democracy, end to repression and impunity](#)," April 18, 2024.

¹⁰ *ECLJ*, [Status of Human Rights in Nicaragua for the 47th Session of the Universal Periodic Review](#), April 2024.

¹¹ *Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary*, "[Status of Global Christianity, 2024, in the context of 1900-2050](#)," 2024.

¹² US Department of State, "[Nicaragua 2023 International Religious Freedom Report](#)," p. 3, accessed October 28, 2024.

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ The Delegates of the Word were lay people trained to celebrate certain sacraments in rural areas not regularly served by a priest, but also to provide literacy classes and disseminate health and agricultural information. They organized community meetings around biblical texts, during which the problems of the community were debated, outside the control of the bishops.

¹⁵ Michael Löwy, "Christianity and Sandinismo in Nicaragua," *Marxism and Liberation Theology*, 1988, pp. 21-25.

¹⁶ Maryknoll is the name of three canonically distinct missionary organizations of the Catholic Church in the United States that have worked together for a century to evangelize in the Far East, Southeast Asia, Latin America, and Africa. They are the Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America, founded in 1911, for priests and brothers; the Maryknoll Sisters of St. Dominic, founded in 1912, for religious women; and the Maryknoll Lay Missionaries, founded in 1912, for lay people.

¹⁷ Michael Löwy, "Christianity and Sandinismo in Nicaragua," *Marxism and Liberation Theology*, 1988, pp. 21-25.

¹⁸ Diffusion of Information on Latin America, "Pastors in National Reconstruction, Declaration of the 500, October 5, 1979," weekly no. 579, *Nicaragua: Protestants and the Revolution*, November 29, 1979.

¹⁹ The Contras (Spanish for "counterrevolutionaries"), also known as the "Nicaraguan Resistance," were armed groups at war with the Sandinista government in Nicaragua between 1979 and 1990. United States support for these groups was heavily publicized by the Iran-Contra scandal.

²⁰ *Le Monde*, "[The Pope condemns the expulsion of Mgr Vega by the Nicaraguan government](#)," July 8, 1986.

²¹ *DW*, "[Iglesia católica y sandinistas: cuatro décadas de enemistad](#)," August 21, 2022.

²² *Aleteia*, "[Seven keys to understanding the situation of the Church in Nicaragua](#)," August 25, 2022.

²³ *La Prensa*, "[Monseñor Bismarck Carballo, victim of the conspiracy of the FSLN, the sword of Obispo Báez](#)," November 2, 2018.

²⁴ *Women in Red*, "[Nicaragua: Rosario Murillo says that the FSLN always opposes the abortion and fully responds to the position of the Catholic Church](#)," August 18, 2006.

²⁵ *Le Temps*, "[Daniel Ortega, reconciliation](#)," May 14, 2007.

- ²⁶ *Cath.ch*, "[Nicaragua: Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo, named "national hero"](#)," March 6, 2016.
- ²⁷ *BiblicaMente*, "[Ortega inaugurated monument and park for the Bible in Managua](#)," September 28, 2008.
- ²⁸ *Expediente Público*, "[De protestantes, casi nada: dogmas y miedo dominan a la comunidad evangélica de Nicaragua](#)," August 18, 2022.
- ²⁹ *Courrier international*, "[Nicaragua, Re-election of Daniel Ortega](#)," November 9, 2011.
- ³⁰ *El 19 Digital*, "[Compañera Rosario: Consejos de Desarrollo Humano fortalecerán el Modelo de Fé, Familia y Comunidad](#)," November 5, 2014.
- ³¹ Articles 4 and 5 of Law No. 854, [Law of Partial Reform of the Political Constitution of the Republic of Nicaragua](#), 2014.
- ³² *La Croix*, "[The Ortega couple, Nicaragua's two-headed presidency](#)," July 19, 2018.
- ³³ *La Croix*, "[Nicaragua: chronology of tensions between the Catholic Church and political power](#)," August 17, 2023.
- ³⁴ *France 24*, "[Pope transfers Nicaraguan bishop threatened for criticizing president](#)," April 10, 2019.
- ³⁵ *La Croix*, "[Violence in the cathedral of Managua](#)," November 19, 2019.
- ³⁶ *La Croix*, "[In Nicaragua, a cathedral targeted by an attack](#)," August 3, 2020.
- ³⁷ *Artículo 66*, "[Monseñor Álvarez acusa a alclades de usurpadores de funciones de la Iglesia: 'Con las cosas sagradas no se metan'](#)" September 16, 2021.
- ³⁸ *La Croix*, "[Nicaragua: without surprise and without opponent, Daniel Ortega wins the presidential election](#)," November 7, 2021.
- ³⁹ *Vatican News*, "[Nicaragua: Bishops seek free and transparent elections](#)," October 26, 2021.
- ⁴⁰ *100% Noticias*, "[Medios oficialistas promocionan vigilia del pastor Omar Duarte, alineado a dictadura de Nicaragua](#)," April 19, 2024.
- ⁴¹ *Radio-Corporacion*, "[Evangélicos invitan a los nicaragüenses acudir a los centros de votación](#)," November 4, 2021.
- ⁴² A/HRC/55/CRP.5, op. cit., § 310 et seq.
- ⁴³ *La Croix*, "[Nicaragua, the Vatican protests against the dismissal of the apostolic nuncio](#)," March 12, 2022.
- ⁴⁴ *Le Figaro*, "[Nicaragua: Ortega accuses a "mafia" of making decisions at the Vatican](#)," February 22, 2023.
- ⁴⁵ *France 24*, "[Nicaragua threatens to suspend relations with the Vatican](#)," March 13, 2023.
- ⁴⁶ *Gross Human Rights Violations in the Context of Social Protests in Nicaragua*, p. 89-93, OEA/Ser.L/V/II. Doc. 86, June 21, 2018.
- ⁴⁷ *Council on Foreign Relations*, "[The Pope and the Church in Nicaragua](#)," August 29, 2023.
- ⁴⁸ *Vatican News*, "[Nicaraguan government dissolves 169 more NGOs](#)," August 30, 2024.
- ⁴⁹ The Nicaragua Inquiry, "[The Silencing of Democracy in Nicaragua](#)," April 2024 (United-Kingdom Parliamentary ad-hoc inquiry into politically motivated targeting of the media, religious leaders, and the opposition in Nicaragua), pp. 19-36.
- ⁵⁰ A/HRC/55/CRP.5, op. cit., § 2.
- ⁵¹ *Organization of American States*, IACHR, "[Nicaragua: IACHR urges cessation of religious persecution and release of all persons arbitrarily detained](#)," August 14, 2024.
- ⁵² Martha Patricia Molina Montenegro, "[Nicaragua: ¿Una iglesia perseguida? V Entrega, 870 ataques, Abril 2018-Julio 2024](#)," p. 9, 2024.
- ⁵³ *Divergent*, "[Repression against the Church in Nicaragua is always more violent, advised by the GHREN of the United Nations](#)," September 12, 2024.
- ⁵⁴ *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, "[Crackdown on Religious Freedom in Nicaragua](#)," p. 2, November 15, 2022.
- ⁵⁵ *OHCHR*, Detailed conclusions of the Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua, A/HRC/52/CRP.5. Case 2: Attack UNAN Managua e Iglesia Divina Misericordia, pp. 109-113, March 7, 2023.
- ⁵⁶ *Confidencial*, "[Orteguistas asedian, hieren y roban a obispos y periodistas](#)," July 9, 2018.
- ⁵⁷ A/HRC/55/CRP.5, op. cit., § 186.
- ⁵⁸ *Id.*
- ⁵⁹ A/HRC/55/CRP.5, op. cit., § 125.
- ⁶⁰ *La Vanguardia*, "[Ortega acusa a la Iglesia Católica de "golpistas" y llama a la "autodefensa"](#)," April 20, 2024.
- ⁶¹ Martha Patricia Molina Montenegro, "[Nicaragua: ¿Una iglesia perseguida? V Entrega, 870 ataques, Abril 2018-Julio 2024](#)," pp. 48-50, 2024.
- ⁶² *Id.*, p. 12.
- ⁶³ *Id.*, p. 31.
- ⁶⁴ A/HRC/52/CRP.5, op. cit., § 519.
- ⁶⁵ A/HRC/55/CRP.5, op. cit., § 194.
- ⁶⁶ *Confidencial*, "[Policía orteguista irrumpe casa y se lleva a las religiosas de la Fraternidad Pobre de Jesucristo](#)," July 1, 2023.
- ⁶⁷ A/HRC/55/CRP.5, op. cit., § 196.

- ⁶⁸ *Infobae*, "[Condenaron en Nicaragua a ocho años de prisión a un periodista que cubrió una procesión católica](#)," August 18, 2023.
- ⁶⁹ A/HRC/55/CRP.5, op. cit., § 206.
- ⁷⁰ *Prensa Libre*, "[The Police Prohibits Catholic Processions in the Nicaraguan City of Masaya](#)," September 17, 2022.
- ⁷¹ *Nicaragua Investiga*, "[The dictatorship prohibits 4,800 planned processes to be carried out in the context of the Holy Week of 2024](#)," March 18, 2024.
- ⁷² *Vida Nueva Digital*, "[The government of Nicaragua prohibited the celebration of masses in cemeteries](#)," November 3, 2023.
- ⁷³ A/HRC/55/CRP.5, op. cit., § 131.
- ⁷⁴ *Christian Solidarity Worldwide*, "[Control hostil: Apretando las riendas a la Libertad de religión o creencias en Nicaragua](#)," February 2024.
- ⁷⁵ CENIDH, Centro Nicaragüense de Derechos Humanos, "[Ataque a la Iglesia Católica en Nicaragua 2019-2020](#)," p. 18-22, 2020.
- ⁷⁶ *Aleteia*, "[In Nicaragua, the government deprives the sick of the last rites](#)," November 13, 2024.
- ⁷⁷ *Vikes*, "[54 media outlets already banned in Nicaragua](#)," September 26, 2022.
- ⁷⁸ *Divergent*, "[Ortega-Murillo regime has closed 22 religious media outlets since 2018](#)," July 12, 2024.
- ⁷⁹ *The Tico Times*, "[Journalists flee Nicaragua as Ortega's repression escalates](#)," October 8, 2024.
- ⁸⁰ A/HRC/55/CRP.5, op. cit., § 150
- ⁸¹ <https://www.facebook.com/vagabundonicaragua/videos/palabras-de-el-padre-enrique-mart%C3%ADnez-gamboa-al-finalizar-la-marcha-del-movimien/1686732901380528/>.
- ⁸² A/HRC/52/CRP.5, op. cit., § 739.
- ⁸³ A/HRC/55/CRP.5, op. cit., § 151.
- ⁸⁴ *100% Noticias*, "[Policía secuestra al Padre Héctor Treminio, párroco de la Iglesia Santo Cristo de Esquipulas, Managua](#)," December 28, 2023.
- ⁸⁵ A/HRC/55/CRP.5, op. cit., § 152.
- ⁸⁶ *Id.*, § 165.
- ⁸⁷ *Id.*
- ⁸⁸ *Id.*, § 164.
- ⁸⁹ *IACHR*, "[Cierre del espacio cívico en Nicaragua](#)," September 23, 2023, op. cit., § 81.
- ⁹⁰ *Id.*, § 87.
- ⁹¹ *Id.*, § 84.
- ⁹² *Id.*, § 88.
- ⁹³ Martha Patricia Molina Montenegro, "[Nicaragua: ¿Una iglesia perseguida? V Entrega, 870 ataques, Abril 2018-Julio 2024](#)," p. 13, 2024.
- ⁹⁴ *Eternal Word Television Network*, "[870 attacks against the Catholic Church reported in Nicaragua since 2018](#)," August 17, 2024.
- ⁹⁵ A/HRC/52/CRP.5, op. cit., § 846.
- ⁹⁶ *Le Monde*, « [Au Nicaragua, l'évêque Rolando Alvarez condamné à vingt-six ans de prison](#) », 13 février 2023
- ⁹⁷ *La Croix*, « [Nicaragua : l'évêque Rolando Alvarez libéré et expulsé vers Rome avec dix-huit autres religieux](#) », 15 janvier 2024.
- ⁹⁸ *Infobae*, "[Reapareció Rolando Álvarez, el obispo nicaragüense expulsado por la dictadura de Ortega](#)," June 7, 2024.
- ⁹⁹ *Catholic News Agency*, "[Nicaragua releases 135 political, religious prisoners; many still remain detained](#)," September 5, 2024.
- ¹⁰⁰ *International Christian Concern*, "[13 Mountain Gateway-affiliated personnel released after nearly 9 months in prison](#)," September 5, 2024.
- ¹⁰¹ *El País*, "[Ortega y Murillo destierran al obispo Carlos Enrique Herrera, presidente de la Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua](#)," November 14, 2024.
- ¹⁰² *Infobae*, "[Reapareció Rolando Álvarez, el obispo nicaragüense expulsado por la dictadura de Ortega](#)," June 7, 2024.
- ¹⁰³ *EFE*, "[Nicaragua has been deprived of its nationality and its well-being to 452 Nicaraguans in two years](#)," September 10, 2024.
- ¹⁰⁴ *Id.*
- ¹⁰⁵ *Le Figaro*, "[L'Espagne offre sa nationalité à 135 opposants nicaraguayens déçus de leur citoyenneté](#)", October 5, 2024.
- ¹⁰⁶ A/HRC/55/CRP.5, op. cit., § 231.
- ¹⁰⁷ *Id.*, § 236.
- ¹⁰⁸ *Id.*, § 232.
- ¹⁰⁹ *Id.*, § 237-238.

¹¹⁰ Martha Patricia Molina Montenegro, "[Nicaragua: ¿Una iglesia perseguida? V Entrega, 870 ataques, Abril 2018-Julio 2024](#)," p. 12, 2024.

¹¹¹ *Id.*, p. 20.

¹¹² A/HRC/55/CRP.5, op. cit., § 248

¹¹³ *Id.*, § 252.

¹¹⁴ *100% Noticias*, "[Dictadura en Nicaragua confisca monasterio de monjas trapenses](#)," April 11, 2023.

¹¹⁵ A/HRC/55/CRP.5, op. cit., § 251.

¹¹⁶ *Swissinfo*, "[Denuncian que el Gobierno de Nicaragua ordenó bloquear el fondo de retiro para sacerdotes](#)," July 22, 2023.

¹¹⁷ *Organization of American States*, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), "[Nicaragua: Six years after social protests. IACHR reestablishment of democracy, end to repression and impunity](#)," April 18, 2024.

¹¹⁸ A/HRC/55/CRP.5, op. cit., § 260.

¹¹⁹ *Id.*, § 263.

¹²⁰ *Id.*, § 264.

¹²¹ *Id.*, § 271.

¹²² *Id.*, § 273.

¹²³ *Id.*

¹²⁴ *Id.*, § 274.

¹²⁵ *Id.*

¹²⁶ *Id.*, § 277.

¹²⁷ *Id.*, § 285.

¹²⁸ *Id.*, § 282.

¹²⁹ *Id.*, § 286.

¹³⁰ *Id.*, § 293.

¹³¹ *OHCHR*, [Power structure of the State of Nicaragua](#), (see page 45 of this report).

¹³² IACHR, "[Nicaragua: Concentration of power and debilitation of the Rule of Law](#)," October 25, 2021, § 2.

¹³³ *Id.*

¹³⁴ *Id.*, § 6.

¹³⁵ A/HRC/52/CRP.5, op. cit., § 108

¹³⁶ *Id.*, § 109.

¹³⁷ *Id.*

¹³⁸ *Id.*

¹³⁹ IACHR, "[Nicaragua: Concentration of power and debilitation of the Rule of Law](#)," October 25, 2021, § 6.

¹⁴⁰ *Id.*, § 4.

¹⁴¹ *Id.*, § 5.

¹⁴² *Id.*, § 5.

¹⁴³ *Id.*, § 15.

¹⁴⁴ Nicaragua's parliament passes constitutional reform that increases President Daniel Ortega's grip on the country.

¹⁴⁵ [Reinforcing Nicaragua's Adherence to Conditions for Electoral Reform Act of 2021](#), Pub. L. No. 117-54, November 10, 2021.

¹⁴⁶ [Executive Order 13851](#), November 27, 2018.

¹⁴⁷ [Executive Order 14088](#), October 24, 2022.

¹⁴⁸ US Department of State of Commerce, International Trade Administration. [Nicaragua-Country Commercial Guide](#), February 29, 2024.

¹⁴⁹ *El País*, "[Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega handsomely profits from vulnerable Haitian migrants](#)," November 8, 2023.

¹⁵⁰ *The Dialogue*, "[An Unprecedented Migration Crisis: Characterizing and Analysing its Depth](#)," November 1, 2023.

¹⁵¹ The Nicaragua Inquiry, "[The Silencing of Democracy in Nicaragua](#)," April 2024 (United-Kingdom Parliamentary ad-hoc inquiry into politically motivated targeting of the media, religious leaders, and the opposition in Nicaragua), pp. 15-16.

¹⁵² IACHR, "[Gross Human Rights Violations in the context of social protests in Nicaragua](#)," June 21, 2018.

¹⁵³ United Nations, "[Human Rights Council Adopts 22 Resolutions, Extends Mandates on \[...\] Nicaragua](#)," April 3, 2023.

¹⁵⁴ *Infobae*, "[The European Union extended a year more sanctions against the regime of Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua](#)," October 8, 2024.

¹⁵⁵ Council of the European Union, [Nicaragua: EU imposes sanctions against eight more individuals](#), 2 August 2021.

¹⁵⁶ *Expediente Abierto*, "[Rusia and Nicaragua: a peculiar relationship that brings security and democracy in the Western Hemisphere](#)," June 2, 2023.

¹⁵⁷ *Libération*, "[Nicaragua, future theater of operations for the Russian army](#)," June 14, 2022.

¹⁵⁸ DW, "[Nicaragua and Russia firman declaración conjunta ante sanctions](#)," April 23, 2024.

¹⁵⁹ Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Tunisia, "[Xi Jinping speaks by phone with Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega](#)," December 20, 2023.

¹⁶⁰ *China-Celac Forum*, "[China-Nicaragua Free Trade Agreement Comes into Force](#)," January 4, 2024.

¹⁶¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "[Joint Statement between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Nicaragua on Establishing Strategic Partnership](#)," December 20, 2023, (free translation).

¹⁶² In this sense, the ECLJ calls in particular on the deputies of the French National Assembly to vote for the proposed resolution [no. 2158 aimed at defending respect for human rights in Nicaragua](#), filed on February 7, 2024 at the initiative of Ms. Eléonore Caroit.

¹⁶³ For example, [the European Union](#) has adopted restrictive measures against a total of 21 individuals and 3 entities, currently in force until October 15, 2024.

¹⁶⁴ [Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness \(1961\)](#), [Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment \(1984\)](#) and its [Optional Protocol \(2002\)](#) (see <https://indicators.ohchr.org/>). In March 2024, Nicaragua [initiated proceedings](#) against Germany under the Genocide Convention. As such, it is clear that Nicaragua recognizes the jurisdiction of the ICJ.

ANNEX: THE LAW APPLICABLE TO THE CRIMES OF THE ORTEGA REGIME

1. Right to Freedom of Thought, Conscience, and Religion

Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,^{clxv} article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR),^{clxvi} to which Nicaragua has been a party since 1980, article 12 of the American Convention on Human Rights,^{clxvii} to which it has been a party since 1979, with provisions similar to those of article 18 of the ICCPR, and article 6 of the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief^{clxviii} recognize the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, which includes freedom of thought on all matters, personal convictions and commitment to a religion or belief, whether manifested individually or in community with others.

Article 29 of the Nicaraguan Constitution of 1987 (rev. 2014)^{clxix} guarantees freedom of conscience, freedom of thought, and freedom to profess or not to profess a religion. The Constitution establishes that no one may be subjected to coercive measures that may infringe on these rights or be forced to declare their beliefs, ideology, or convictions. The Constitution also guarantees the right to worship by recognizing that "*All persons, either individually or in a group, have the right to manifest their religious beliefs in public or private, through worship, practices and teachings.*" and specifies that "*No one may evade obedience to the law or impede others from exercising their rights and fulfilling their duties by invoking religious beliefs or dispositions.*" (Article 69). Constitutional freedoms are governed by the principle of equality before the law and non-discrimination based on "*based on birth, nationality, political belief, race, gender, language, religion, opinion, origin, economic position or social condition.*" (Article 27).

The Constitution establishes the principle of state secularism by stipulating that "*The State has no official religion*" (Article 14). The Constitution also establishes the secularism of education, although it recognizes "*the right of private education centres with a religious orientation to teach religion as an extracurricular subject*" (Article 124). The penal code protects the public expression of religions and beliefs by punishing with a fine anyone who "prevents or disrupts the exercise of worship or a religious ceremony" (Article 190).^{clxx}

2. Right to Freedom of Expression and Opinion

The right to freedom of opinion and expression is protected by several international and regional human rights instruments to which Nicaragua is a party^{clxxi}. It implies that no one shall be disturbed for his or her opinions and that everyone has the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing, in print, in the form of art, or through any other media

of his or her choice. This right to express oneself freely and without hindrance includes the right to hold and express an opinion without restriction or censorship, to receive and impart information and ideas through any media, as well as the right of access to public information ^{clxxii}.

3. Right to Freedom of Assembly and Association

The freedoms of assembly and association are enshrined in Article 20 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Articles 21 and 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and Articles 15 and 16 of the American Convention on Human Rights.

The Political Constitution of Nicaragua recognizes the right to peaceful assembly, establishing that the exercise of this right does not require prior authorization. It also recognizes the right to public assembly, demonstration and mobilization in accordance with the law (Articles 53 and 54). In the absence of specific legislation on the matter, the creation of churches, congregations, orders and other religious organizations is governed by the legislation on non-profit organizations (Law No. 1115). The scope of this law specifically includes organizations whose purpose is "to exercise the right to religious freedom", which may also carry out "charitable activities."^{clxxiii}

In August 2022, Law No. 1127 established that the Ministry of the Interior is responsible for cancelling the legal personality of non-profit organizations, at the request of the non-profit organization or the General Directorate for Registration and Control of Non-Profit Organizations. This reform is in direct contradiction with the provisions of Article 138, paragraph 5, of the Political Constitution, which states that it is the National Assembly that has the power to "grant and cancel the legal personality of civil associations." Therefore, all cancellations of legal personality approved under this reform are tainted with unconstitutionality.

4. Right to Liberty and Security

The right to personal liberty is a fundamental, essential and inalienable human right, recognized by customary international law as a norm of *jus cogens*. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights prohibits both arbitrary arrest and detention and unlawful deprivation of liberty, or deprivation of liberty imposed in defiance of due process of law (Article 9). The American Convention on Human Rights also provides for these rights in its articles 5 and 7. The fundamental guarantee against arbitrary detention is non-derogable.

As a State party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Nicaragua is required to effectively protect persons under its jurisdiction against arbitrary or unlawful detention, as well as to guarantee due process and the right to a fair trial. Nicaragua's Political Constitution establishes that "*No one may be arbitrarily detained or imprisoned, or be deprived of liberty except in cases determined by law*

and in accordance with legal procedures." (article 33). It also provides that detention may only be carried out pursuant to a written warrant issued by a competent judge or by authorities expressly authorized by law, except in cases of *flagrante delicto* (article 33, paragraph 1). The Constitution also contains a list of procedural guarantees consistent with international standards (articles 33(2.1) to 33(2.3) and 34).^{clxxiv}

5. Right to Nationality

Article 15 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and, at the regional level, Article 19 of the American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man and Article 20 of the American Convention on Human Rights, recognize the three dimensions of the right to nationality: the right to acquire a nationality, the right not to be arbitrarily deprived of one's nationality and the right to change one's nationality. The Constitution of Nicaragua does not indicate that no national may be deprived of his or her citizenship (Article 20), specifying that the granting, loss and recovery of nationality are governed by law (Article 21).

Although the decision to deprive persons of their nationality may be considered an internal decision of the State, the consequences, insofar as they significantly affect human rights and leave persons in a stateless condition and in a position of notorious vulnerability, make it necessary for international law to intervene, in the hands of other countries, to prevent such situations from occurring or, if they do occur, to provide solutions that involve the protection of these persons, their naturalization or the guarantee of their rights while their situation is being regularized.^{clxxv}

6. Right to Freedom of Movement and Residence

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights guarantees the right to freedom of movement and residence for everyone lawfully present in the territory of a State (Articles 13(1) and 12(1)). Similarly, the American Convention on Human Rights protects the right of movement and residence (Article 22(1)), the right to freely leave any country (Article 22(2)) and the right of citizens to return to and remain in their country of origin (Article 22(5)), theoretically preventing arbitrary expulsions. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has also ruled that the arbitrary expulsion of priests violates freedom of religious association.^{clxxvi}

Article 31 of the Nicaraguan Constitution guarantees citizens the right to move and reside freely within the national territory, as well as to enter and leave the country without restriction. The General Law on Migration and Foreigners (Law No. 761 of 2011) regulates the entry and stay of nationals and foreigners in Nicaragua. This law stipulates that foreigners have the same rights as Nicaraguans, with some exceptions (Article 11). It provides for the expulsion of foreigners in specific cases (Article 117), but only by judicial decision and in cases of threat to public order or national security

(Article 174). However, this law does not authorize the expulsion of Nicaraguan citizens.

7. Right to Property

The right to property is recognized by international human rights law and is part of customary international law. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 17) guarantees to everyone, individually or in groups, the right to own property and protection against arbitrary deprivation thereof. At the regional level, the American Convention on Human Rights (Article 21) also provides that everyone has the right to the use and enjoyment of his property, without being arbitrarily deprived of it. Property rights include tangible (movable and immovable) and intangible assets, such as economic contractual rights, covering items such as housing, land, bank accounts, pensions, and equipment.

The Constitution of Nicaragua guarantees the right to private ownership of movable and immovable property and the means of production (Article 44). However, it allows this right to be limited by law due to the "social function of property" and for "reasons of public utility or social interest." Real estate can therefore be expropriated according to the Expropriation Law of 1961.^{clxxvii} The Constitution explicitly prohibits the confiscation of property and provides that officials who violate this prohibition are liable for damages with their own property (Article 44, paragraph 4).

^{clxv} *United Nations, [Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948](#), Article 18: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."*

^{clxvi} *OHCHR, [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1966](#), Article 18:*

"1. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.

2. No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.

3. Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.

4. The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents and, when applicable, legal guardians to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions.

^{clxvii} *IACHR, [American Convention on Human Rights of 1969](#), Article 12.*

^{clxviii} [OHCHR, Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief of 1981](#), Article 6:

"In accordance with article 1 of the present Declaration, and subject to the provisions of article 1, paragraph 3, the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief shall include, inter alia, the following freedoms:

- (a) To worship or assemble in connection with a religion or belief, and to establish and maintain places for these purposes;
- (b) To establish and maintain appropriate charitable or humanitarian institutions;
- (c) To make, acquire and use to an adequate extent the necessary articles and materials related to the rites or customs of a religion or belief;
- (d) To write, issue and disseminate relevant publications in these areas;
- (e) To teach a religion or belief in places suitable for these purposes;
- (f) To solicit and receive voluntary financial and other contributions from individuals and institutions;
- (g) To train, appoint, elect or designate by succession appropriate leaders called for by the requirements and standards of any religion or belief;
- (h) To observe days of rest and to celebrate holidays and ceremonies in accordance with the precepts of one's religion or belief;"

^{clxix} [Nicaraguan Constitution of 1987 \(rev. 2014\)](#) (on *Constitute project*).

^{clxx} [Nicaraguan Penal Code \(Law No. 641\)](#) (free translation).

^{clxxi} Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 19; International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 19; International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Article 19; International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, Article 5; Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, Article 7; American Convention on Human Rights, Article 13; Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression of the Organization of American States, among others.

^{clxxii} See Human Rights Committee, [General Comment No. 34, on freedom of opinion and expression \(article 19\)](#), CCPR/C/GC/34, paragraphs 9, 11, 13 and 18.

^{clxxiii} General Law on the Regulation and Control of Non-Profit Organizations, Law No. 1115, adopted on March 31, 2022, published in La Gaceta No. 66, art. 11(1).

^{clxxiv} See also the Code of Criminal Procedure of the Republic of Nicaragua, Law No. 406, published in La Gaceta No. 243 and No. 244, arts. 1-5, 8-11 and 13-17.

^{clxxv} *Organization of American States, Inter-American Juridical Committee Report. Guide on the Protection of Stateless Persons*, OEA/Ser.Q, CJI/Doc.488/15 rev.1, June 3, 2015, § 17.

^{clxxvi} Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, *Riebe Star et al. v. Mexico*, Report No. 49/99, Case 11,160, April 13, 1999, §§ 102, 103 and 105.

^{clxxvii} Expropriation Law, Decree No. 581, approved on March 23, 1961.