

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2024

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

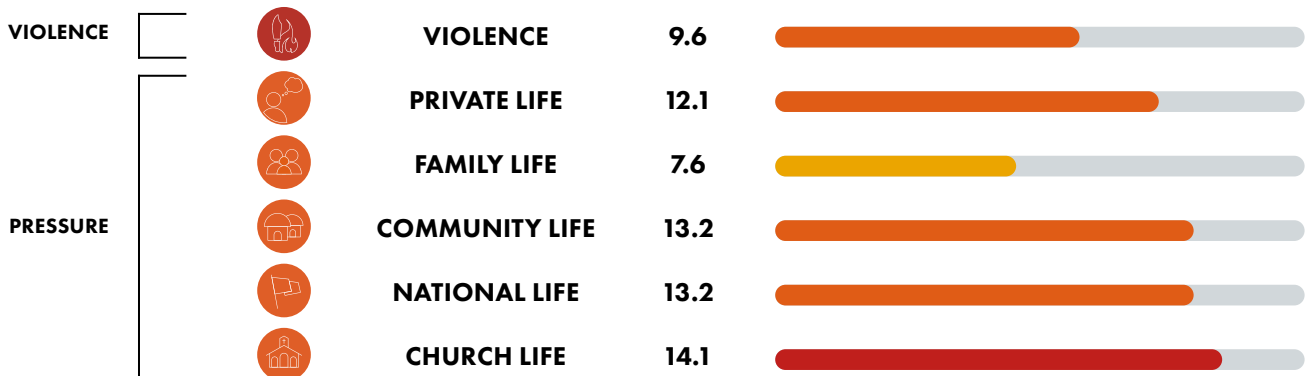
## NICARAGUA

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**30**



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### LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).

## Key findings

Under President Ortega, churches and Christians who have expressed their disagreement with the government's actions are viewed as destabilizing agents. This makes them a target for intimidation, harassment, monitoring, legal prosecution, closure and expropriation of many Christian organizations (including universities and churches) in addition to violent actions with the aim of 'suffocating' the Church and silencing its voice. This has progressively intensified since 2018, after social protests, as church leaders and others have continued to denounce the injustices and human rights violations perpetrated by the government. The November 2021 elections and changes to the legal framework have been used for increasing restrictions on the Church and Christian leaders who publicly called for the rule of law to be respected - especially during and after the election period. The Church and Christian leaders who help those most in need and call for the release of political prisoners, including religious leaders, are especially vulnerable.

## Quick facts

### LEADER

President Jose Daniel  
Ortega Saavedra

### POPULATION

6,855,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

6,506,000<sup>1</sup>

### MAIN RELIGION

Christianity

### GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic



## Context

Religious Context	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	6,506,000	94.9
Agnostics	188,000	2.7
Others	103,400	1.5
Ethno-religionists	32,000	0.5

Source<sup>2</sup>

Nicaragua emerged from a four-decade dictatorship in 1979. Daniel Ortega became the country's president in 1984, leaving office in 1990. He came back to the presidency in 2006 and has remained in power ever since. Over the years, Ortega has become increasingly dictatorial. During the elections held in November 2021, Daniel Ortega and his allies [tightened their grip on power](#) amid allegations of irregularities and serious violations of human rights (BBC News, 9 November 2021). Multilateral organizations and the international community condemned the election process and imposed sanctions on Nicaragua.

According to WCD 2023 estimates, 80.1% of Nicaraguan Christians are Catholics. Protestants and non-traditional evangelical denominations are growing and gaining an increased presence in the country.

Since social unrest began in April 2018, church leaders (mainly Roman Catholics) were involved in the official dialogue between opposition groups and the government, first as mediators and later as observers. However, in March 2019, as an act of protest at the regime's lack of commitment and continued violation of human rights, the Catholic Church decided to [cease](#) all active participation in the talks (Havana Times, 8 March 2019). Since then, the outspokenness of the Catholic Church about the situation in the country has caused it to be regarded as a 'public enemy' by the government and its allies. As a result, church leaders and churches have been [frequent targets](#) for all kinds of retaliation (Observatorio Libertad Religiosa, 4 May 2023), with the Ortega government using laws to criminalize opposing voices.

In the WWL 2024 reporting period, government hostility towards church leaders (particularly Catholic bishops and priests) and towards churches and faith-based organizations intensified. Some examples are arrests of [representatives](#) of the Catholic Church, especially those most critical of the government (Los Angeles Times, 26 May 2023) such as Bishop Rolando Álvarez, who was [sentenced](#) to 26 years and 4 months in prison after he refused to be exiled (El 19 Digital, 10 February 2023). In the WWL 2024 reporting period, around 222 political prisoners were released by the government, immediately forced to leave the country and were then declared [stateless](#) (El País, 09 February 2023).

<sup>1</sup> Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

<sup>2</sup> Others include Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian. Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

The government has [canceled](#) the registration and legal status of several organizations linked to the Church, including universities (Artículo 66, 8 March 2023), seized [Christian-owned property](#) and media outlets (Catholic News Agency, 5 July 2023) and [exiled](#) priests, nuns and evangelical pastors. The reporting period has also shown examples of [blockading](#) churches to prevent services being held, closing Catholic [radio](#) and [television](#) outlets (ABC News, 2 August 2022 and Article 66, 7 July 2022), party sympathizers joining church groups to [monitor the content of preaching](#) (Article 66, 10 June 2022) and banning [processions](#) during Easter and Holy Week (Infobae, 8 April 2023). Due to the scale of the repression against the Church in the country, Nicaragua has been considered as a [Country of Particular Concern](#) by the U.S. State Department.

## How the situation varies by region

Persecution is present nationwide and at all levels. The cities with the highest number of incidents of persecution against Christians are Granada, Jinotega, Masaya, Jinotepe, Leon, Matagalpa, Boaco and Estelí.

## Who is affected?

### [Communities of expatriate Christians](#)

This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis.

### [Historical Christian communities](#)

The largest group, the Roman Catholic Church, has seen multi-faceted forms of aggression and persecution by government actors, especially when the Church voices opposition to the government's dictatorial measures. Currently, it is the religious group most affected by state reprisals, as it is one of the last independent voices in the country and is recognized as a legitimate institution by society.

### [Converts to Christianity](#)

Converts in Nicaragua are mainly former regime sympathizers or government officers who have become Christians. They are now considered part of the opposition, and similarly experience hostility from the regime.

### [Non-traditional Christian communities](#)

This category includes Baptists and Pentecostals. While a minority, they also experience hostility when expressing opposition to the regime (especially if they had previously been receiving support from it), with the main threat being the loss of legal status to operate in the country.

## Main sources of persecution and discrimination

### [Dictatorial paranoia](#)

Church leaders and Christian groups, especially Roman Catholics, face retaliation when they call out the regime and call for human rights and democratic principles to be respected. Church leaders have been mistreated, threatened, harassed, accused of being traitors and enemies of the state, arrested, prosecuted, and sentenced. Churches have also been vandalized and services disrupted, creating a climate of fear.

### [Communist and post-Communist oppression](#)

Socialist-Communist ideology is taught in schools and imposed on citizens through state institutions, sometimes violently. Along with repression, intense monitoring, censorship and harassment, Christians face aspects of their religion (religious festivals, Biblical references) being deliberately

distorted in support of the regime's interests.

This is a practice that is carried out in Communist neighbors Cuba and Venezuela, with which Nicaragua has a close relationship.

### [Organized corruption and crime](#)

Corruption is a deepening problem in the country, along with illicit drug trafficking. The judicial system, security forces, and public services operate to keep the ruling party's leaders in power using sundry resources: bribes, manipulation, and political influence. Violent paramilitary groups (also known as "Ortega death squads"), criminal groups, and Sandinista mobs act in tandem with the government to repress opponents and dissidents. Christians are an especially vulnerable group since there is nowhere to turn for protection.

## How are men and women differently affected?

### Women

Nicaragua’s legal framework provides for freedom of belief, religion, and worship and promotes equal empowerment of Christian women in all areas of society. Nicaragua ranked 7th in the world for gender equality in the 2022 World Economic Forum Gender Gap Report and is among the leading countries in terms of female educational attainment and political empowerment. However, the government’s clampdown on political opposition has contributed to increasing challenges to the civil liberties of women – for Christians, particularly Catholic women – who oppose the regime, alongside non-governmental women’s rights organizations being closed.

#### Female typical pressure points:

- Violence – psychological

### Men

From verbal insults, death threats, and vandalization of religious items, a significant portion of hostilities by government and pro-government groups are targeted at Catholic priests, bishops, and other church leaders (who are primarily male). Politicians, such as the president, have described the Catholic clergy in Nicaragua as “killers” and “coup plotters” who promulgate “American imperialism”. Church leaders who are critical of the government can be forced to flee or arrested and sentenced to lengthy prison terms on false charges. Institutions linked to dissenters also face heavy sanctions by the government.

#### Male typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Denied access to social community/networks
- Forced to flee town/country
- Imprisonment by government
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – verbal



## WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2024	30	70
2023	50	65
2022	61	56
2021	63	51
2020	72	41

*Persecution continues to increase in this reporting period, with a sharp rise of 5 points, caused mainly by increases in pressure in all Spheres of Life. The deterioration of the rule of law can be seen in the co-optation of state power in the hands of the Ortega dictatorship and the manipulation of the legal framework to silence and disappear civil society actors who do not align with their political interests. The harassment and attempt to suffocate the Church became more pronounced to the point of prosecuting and imprisoning religious leaders in retaliation for the Church and Christian leaders publicly calling for the rule of law to be respected - especially during and after the election period - and who helping those most in need, including those considered opponents by the ruling Sandinista Party.*



## Examples of violence in the reporting period

- February 2023:** Bishop Rolando Alvarez, under arrest since August 2022, was sentenced to 26 years and 4 months imprisonment on 9 February (Christian Post, February 12, 2023). He was found [guilty](#) of the “crimes of undermining national integrity, propagation of false news through information technology, obstruction of functions, aggravated disobedience or contempt of authority, all of this committed to the detriment of society and the State of the Republic of Nicaragua” (El País, 17 February 2023). He has been assigned to a [punishment cell](#) in La Modelo prison where he is being held incommunicado (CNA, 3 March 2023).
- May 2023:** Access to bank accounts of various dioceses and churches was [blocked](#) by the authorities. Police stated that they had been informed of “illegal activity in the management of funds and resources in bank accounts that had belonged to people convicted of treason.” T (El País, 27 May 2023).
- September 2023:** Since May 2023, for 16 months, the priest Harving Padilla, one of the greatest critics of the dictatorial regime was under house arrest, confined in La Purisima seminary in Managua. The priest managed to escape even after being put under police surveillance and left the country. . (Despacho 505, 05 October 2023)

WWL Year	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians detained	Christians imprisoned or punished by the government	Christians forced to flee their countries
2024	347	38	22	71
2023	31	23	3	41

*This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - for full results see the violence section of the Full Country Dossier. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10\*, 100\* or 1000\*) is given which in reality could be significantly higher.*

### Private life

Christians are targeted and threatened by the regime when they express faith-based political opinions criticizing the government, including on social media. The Special Cybercrime Law penalizes those publishing Internet content opposing the regime, which has led to self-censorship for many. Additionally, when a Christian is known as a regime dissident, his extended family members may find themselves being interrogated by the government. This in turn has led to the practice of family members turning in information to the government about their Christian relatives’ activities and meeting places. Meetings with other Christians may be interpreted as conspiring against the regime, especially among Catholic Christians and in Masaya, Matagalpa and Leon. Christians’ meetings have been monitored or disturbed by state actors and cars photographed.

Nicaraguans may in general own or keep the Bible and other religious materials, but those in government detention are not allowed to do so.

### Family life

Educational programs in schools indoctrinate young children in regime ideology. Children are forced to carry flags and banners praising the regime and to attend pro-government rallies. If parents try to shield children from state propaganda, they are seen as regime opponents and are at risk of reprisals and community pressure. Their children face discrimination and abuse, labeled as “children of terrorists” or “coup heirs.” Dissident Christians are at risk of kidnappings, arbitrary arrest and imprisonment. Many have been forced to flee their homes, causing long-term separation of families.

### Community life

Christians are under pressure to attend state propaganda events, extolling the ruling party and the semi-messianic figure of the President, along with his wife, who is also the country’s Vice President. In such a context, church activism or even association with church leaders are seen as a sign of national betrayal. The regime is also known to organize “religious

events” without the involvement of church leadership, with the aim of discrediting church leaders and confusing the flock.

Similarly, Christians in the workplace (especially public sector) are pressured to attend pro-government events and to keep their religious views quiet for fear of reprisals. Students associated with Christian dissidents or targeted Church leaders have been harassed by pro-regime academics and administrators: suspended from school, expelled or handed over to the police on charges of terrorism.

### **National life**

To be linked with the regime opposition (via statements, pictures) is a reason to be targeted. Even political neutrality may be understood as political opposition for its lack of defense of the regime. The only political party operating without obstruction is the regime’s ruling party. Christians who have attempted to create a Christian political alliance to participate in democratic elections have been met with restrictions. Christian civil society organizations run up against a new law

that registers any regime political opposition as actions against the state, with accusations as extreme as coup-planning with foreign backing being leveled against them. Such measures have led to civil society almost disappearing. The regime’s control of media and social media allows for the portrayal of Christians as terrorists and traitors planning a coup, intended to promote a climate of intolerance towards the Church. Attacks against Christians see no legitimate prosecution or punishment, ensuring impunity for perpetrators and stability for the regime.

### **Church life**

Many churches and their affiliated organizations constantly risk being stripped of their legal status, with permits and authorizations denied. This is a calculated move to undermine the Church’s role as a distributor of humanitarian and medical aid and increase dependence on the state. With constant harassment (including travel restrictions) and reprisals against religious leaders, mainly Catholics, it is very risky to denounce the government as the instigator of persecution against the Church.



# International obligations & rights violated

Nicaragua has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights under the following international treaties:

1. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)
2. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)
3. Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT)
4. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
5. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

Nicaragua is not fulfilling its international obligations by regularly violating or failing to protect the following rights of Christians:

- Christians and their activities are monitored by the authorities and the surrounding community (ICCPR Art. 17)
- Christian leaders are monitored, and their activities are actively watched (ICCPR Art. 17)
- Perpetrators of violence against Christians are sometimes left unpunished (ICCPR Art. 2)

## Situation of other religious minorities

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2022 Nicaragua) and USCIRF 2023 Nicaragua, no information on cases of persecution of non-Christian religious groups was reported.



## Open Doors in Nicaragua

Open Doors strengthens the persecuted church in Nicaragua through:

- Discipleship of pastors in training centers
- Distribution of Christian literature
- Training in teaching skills
- Emergency aid for the relief of persecution
- Preparation for basic primary and secondary education for pastors who have not completed their studies





#### About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the Full Country Dossier produced annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2024 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 01 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- All brief country profiles can be accessed under 'Advocacy resources' on the research pages of the Open Doors International website, along with the more detailed Full Country Dossiers and the latest update of [WWL Methodology](#). These are also available at the [Open Doors Analytical](#) website (password: freedom).

*Most of the photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.*

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