



Nicaragua

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

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The U.S. Government discussed religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 49,998 square miles and a population of 5.7 million. More than 80 percent of the population belongs to Christian groups. Roman Catholicism remains the dominant religion. According to the latest census conducted in 2005 by the governmental Nicaraguan Institute of Statistics and Census, 58.5 percent of the population is Catholic and 21.6 percent is evangelical Protestant, including Assemblies of God, Pentecostal, Mennonite, and Baptist. The most recent 2009 public opinion survey from the private polling firm M&R Consultants indicates that 54.4 percent of the population is Catholic and 27.7 percent evangelical. Both Catholic and evangelical leaders view these results as inaccurate. Based on other sources, the Catholic Church believes that approximately 70 percent of the population is Catholic, and some evangelical groups believe approximately 35 percent of the population is evangelical. The Assemblies of God claims to be the largest evangelical denomination, with more than 860 churches and 200,000 baptized members. Small religious groups include The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), the Moravian Church, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Baha'is, the Church of Scientology, and Buddhists.

Non-Christian communities are few and small. Although the Jewish community numbers only 40 permanent members (including expatriates), visitors often join them for holy days. Although small in number, the Jewish community is heterogenous and includes members from a variety of countries of origin. It does not have an ordained rabbi or synagogue, primarily due to lack of resources.

There are approximately 500 Muslims, mostly Sunnis, who are resident aliens or naturalized citizens from the Occupied Territories, Libya, and Iran. The Islamic Cultural Center in Managua serves as the primary prayer center for Muslims in the city. The Muslim community is building a mosque in Managua; Granada, Masaya, and León have smaller prayer centers in homes.

Immigrant groups include Palestinian Christians, whose ancestors came to Central America in the early 1900s, and Chinese, many of whom arrived as Christians or converted to Christianity. Some immigrant communities, including South Koreans, formed their own Protestant churches. In 2008, the first native-born Buddhist nun was announced;

a Buddhist Center has existed in the country since 2000.

There are no longer any pre-Columbian religions known to be actively practiced in the country. Some Moravian churches along the Atlantic Coast continued to allow indigenous Amerindian spiritual expression, often through music. The Catholic Church frequently incorporated syncretic elements.

Moravian, Episcopalian, Catholic, and Baptist communities are the main traditional religious groups associated with the Atlantic coast, while Catholic and evangelical Protestant churches dominate the Pacific and central regions where the majority of the population resides. There is a strong correlation between ethnicity and religion along the Atlantic Coast, which has a higher concentration of indigenous and Afro-Caribbean populations. Amerindians and Creoles, for example, are more likely to belong to the Moravian or Episcopalian Churches; however, both churches reported losing some adherents to the growing evangelical movement. Some evangelical churches enjoy a strong presence in the remote towns of the central south Atlantic region. Smaller evangelical churches increased in rural areas of the interior and areas where the Catholic Church was not present.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The Constitution also states that no one "shall be obligated by coercive measures to declare their ideology or beliefs." The Constitution prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion.

There is no official state religion. The Catholic Church traditionally enjoyed close relationships with past governments due to its historical presence, but the dominance of the Catholic Church does not have a negative effect on religious freedom. It is the most politically active religious group and wields significant influence. Some religious groups reported the Government's increasing support for certain evangelical groups linked to the governing Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) political party, and there were reports of preferential treatment to these party-affiliated groups in the distribution of state funds. In a September 28, 2008, speech (prior to the November 2008 municipal elections), President Ortega promised to suspend any government fines levied against evangelical churches. He stated, "To fine these groups is to fine God, and you can't fine God."

The Government observes Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter Sunday, the Immaculate Conception, and Christmas as national holidays. The Festival of Santo Domingo (August 1 and 10) is also celebrated, but only in Managua. Many cities and towns also celebrate their patron saint's day.

The Government's requirements for legal recognition of a religious group are similar to requirements for other non-governmental organizations (NGOs). A group must apply for "personeria juridica" (legal standing), which the National Assembly must approve. Following approval, the group must register with the Ministry of Government as an association or foundation. Groups that do not register cannot obtain tax-exempt status (exoneration) and technically cannot incur legal obligations or enter into contracts.

Goods donated to established churches and other registered nonprofit religious organizations that are intended for the exclusive use of the church or organization are eligible for tax exoneration. Groups must receive approval from the Office of External Cooperation of the Foreign Ministry, the Ministry of Finance, the Customs Office, and the municipality where the donated goods would be used before a tax exemption may be approved and the goods released. Because of perceived unequal treatment of different religious groups, exoneration remained a contentious issue, particularly regarding exemption from customs duties on imported goods and eligibility for tax exemption on the purchase of vehicles.

Some churches and other nonprofit religious organizations reported delays in obtaining customs exemptions. A tax equity law, designed to facilitate the process, required all groups to requalify for exoneration. Many churches and other nonprofit religious organizations reported that the law generally streamlined the process. Some evangelical church-affiliated NGOs claimed they were denied certain exoneration privileges because the Government applied the law to churches only, rather than extending the benefit to religious-affiliated organizations operating nonprofit social services.

The law does not prohibit the use of religious symbols. The Government attempted to use religious symbols for political purposes. From September 2008 to April 2009 the government-sponsored and FSLN-affiliated Citizen Power Councils (CPCs) continually occupied, without legal authorization, the rotundas of Managua in a campaign entitled "prayer against hatred--love is stronger than hate." In this campaign, the CPCs first appropriated evangelical symbols followed by Catholic symbols, including placing statues of the Virgin Mary in rotundas, in an attempt to attract wider support for the governing party.

Missionaries were required to obtain religious worker visas, which were routinely provided; however, the process, which must be completed before the missionary arrives, continued to take several months.

Religion is not taught in public schools, but private religious schools operate and accept students of all religious affiliations. The Government provides financial support to a number of Catholic and Protestant-affiliated primary and secondary schools by paying teacher salaries. There were reports that the Government substantially reduced subsidies to the Catholic Church, which the Church had used to provide education in schools in remote regions of the Atlantic Coast. The Government directly funds two Catholic universities. Evangelical churches operated five private universities.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. However, the Government showed increasing intolerance toward religious groups and others that commented on sociopolitical matters.

Following the November 2008 municipal elections, domestic and international civil society organizations, media organizations, and the private sector reported widespread irregularities with the local contests. The Episcopal (Bishops') Conference of the Catholic Church joined these groups in denouncing the irregularities and called for a resolution. As a result of its public stance, the Government attempted to discredit or promote intolerance toward the Church's hierarchy.

On April 30, 2009, the Government distributed electronically a letter from a presidential advisor that alleged the Vatican criticized the Catholic Church in the country and members of its clergy, calling the bishops corrupt and having lax morals. On May 5, 2009, the Government denied responsibility for the letter and accused computer hackers of disseminating it.

On April 6, 2009, Attorney General Estrada reported that he was the victim of an "attempted assassination" when unknown assailants "shot at him." Estrada blamed the "attempted assassination" on bishops of the Catholic Church, stating that some bishops were inciting violence by mentioning that groups were beginning to arm themselves as a result of the November 2008 electoral irregularities and the aftermath. The Government's Human Rights Ombudsman supported Estrada's claim in his public statement entitled *Secular or Religious Terrorism is Treason Against Nicaragua*, which argued that opposition politicians and Church leaders should accept the results of the elections and stop promoting violence. The police investigation and media reports later indicated that Estrada was likely the victim of common street crime and his injury the result of a scratch rather than a gunshot.

In November and December 2008, the Government, through media organizations affiliated with the governing party, attempted to foster intolerance toward the Church's hierarchy based on the Catholic bishops' public statements on the election irregularities. Government-affiliated media characterized the Church as selling out for money and being part of a conspiracy to destabilize the Government and the country.

There was no evidence of discrimination by the Government against members of religious groups; however, some groups reported difficulties in conducting community service programs. They reported that CPC approval for community activities was required (in practice if not in law), but was contingent on participation in CPC activities.

Religious groups reported that the controversial 2006 amendment to the Law against Special Crimes against the Environment and Natural Resources, also known as the "noise law," was not enforced in practice. The law ostensibly prohibits noise pollution near hospitals, clinics, and schools, and noise that exceeds the maximum safe level established by the Pan American Health Organization and the World Health Organization. Pentecostals regarded the law as a restriction of their form of worship. By contrast, citizen rights and environmental groups charged that the elevated noise levels disrupted neighborhoods and caused psychological and physical damage.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners in the country.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States or who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

On January 7, 2009, demonstrators in Managua protested the conflict in Gaza, removing the statue of a menorah on Jerusalem Avenue and replacing it with the Palestinian flag. Previously, on December 28, 2008, President Ortega publicly exhorted Israel to "stop the criminal acts" in Gaza, and government-affiliated media referred to Israel as "fascist" and its acts as "genocide."

Following the November 2008 elections, vandals desecrated statues of the Virgin Mary that the CPCs had installed in the rotundas during their "prayer against hatred" campaign. Civil society groups attributed the vandalism to criticism by the Catholic bishops of the Government's conduct of the elections.

Relations among religious groups differed between the two coasts. There was a strong ecumenical presence on the Atlantic coast, attributed to the long history and mutual respect of four predominant Christian groups (Moravian, Episcopalian, Catholic, and Baptist). On the Pacific coast and in the central regions, ecumenism was less common and competition existed between the Catholic and evangelical churches.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Embassy continued to maintain regular dialogue and outreach with the principal leaders of diverse religious groups, church officers, and faith-based organizations in the country to discuss religious freedom concerns.