



Nicaragua

International Religious Freedom Report 2008

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

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The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. Government discusses 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 a 2005 census conducted by the governmental Nicaraguan Institute of Statistics and Census (INEC), 58.5 percent of the population is Roman Catholic and 21.6 percent is evangelical Protestant including Assembly of God, Pentecostal, Mennonite, and Baptist. Groups that constitute less than 5 percent include the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), the Moravian Church, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Both Catholic and evangelical leaders view the census results as inaccurate; according to their own surveys Catholics constitute approximately 75 percent of the population and evangelicals 30 percent. The most recent 2008 public opinion survey from the private polling firm M&R indicates that 58 percent are Catholic and 28 percent evangelical. The Assembly of God claims to be the largest evangelical denomination with more than 860 churches and 200,000 baptized members.

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 such as Passover. 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. During a special ceremony in December 2007, the community celebrated the return of the Torah which had been absent since the Sandinista Revolution in 1979.

There are approximately 1,200 to 1,500 Muslims, mostly Sunnis, who are resident aliens or naturalized citizens from the Palestinian Occupied Territories, Libya, and Iran. The Islamic Cultural Center in Managua serves as the primary prayer center for Muslims in the city, with approximately 320 men attending regularly, including Muslims from Granada, Masaya, Leon, and Chinandega. The Muslim community reportedly had plans to build a mosque in Managua; Granada, Masaya, and Leon have smaller prayer centers in homes. In November 2007 a new Sunni leader trained in Egypt was appointed to lead the Managua prayer center.

Small religious groups include Baha'is, the Church of Scientology, and Buddhists. 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 January 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 report 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 where the Catholic Church was not present.

Section II. Status of 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 law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors. 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; however, the Catholic Church enjoys a close relationship with the Government due to its historical presence. The dominance of the Catholic Church did not have a negative effect on religious freedom. It is the most politically active religious group and wields significant influence. Some human rights nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and members of minority religions maintained that the current Government, more than previous administrations, used the Catholic Church to advance its political agenda. Catholic Church leaders routinely meet with senior government officials, unlike leaders of other churches who reportedly are denied the same privilege. The controversial appointment of retired Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo to head the cabinet-level Council of Peace and Reconciliation continued to be criticized as a violation of the separation of church and state. The Vatican did not endorse the appointment.

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.

Although the Catholic observance of the Immaculate Conception on December 8 is a historical, cultural, and religious tradition known as "La Purísima," the media, NGOs, and some evangelical groups criticized the Government for politicizing the 2007 festivities and for conducting religious services within ministry buildings. They accused the Government of funding festival activities and related publicity that juxtaposed patriotic symbols and partisan slogans with religious imagery on public posters.

The Government's requirements for legal recognition of a religious group are similar to requirements for other NGOs. A group must apply for "personería jurídica" (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 and enter into contracts; however, a number of groups did not register and continued to operate without penalty.

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, 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 donated for

humanitarian purposes and eligibility for tax exemption on the purchase of vehicles.

Some churches and other nonprofit religious organizations reported delays in obtaining customs exemptions. A 2003 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; however, some maintained that the Catholic Church continued to receive preferential treatment and did not have to meet the same requirements as other religious and humanitarian organizations. 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.

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. The Government also directly funds two Catholic universities. Evangelical churches operated four private universities.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report, aside from concerns voiced by some evangelicals of preferential treatment toward the Catholic Church.

The controversial 2006 amendment to the Law against Special Crimes against the Environment and Natural Resources, also known as the "noise law," continued to cause friction between some minority religious and secular groups. The law ostensibly prohibits noise pollution near hospitals, clinics, and schools, and noise that exceeds the maximum safe level of decibels established by the Pan American Health Organization and the World Health Organization. Article 9 of the law allegedly exempts religious activities occurring under the roof of the house of worship. Pentecostals regarded the law as a restriction of their form of worship, which included lively services, often held in homes that also served as places of worship. Citizen rights and environmental groups charged that the elevated noise levels caused by some evangelical congregations, especially Pentecostals, disrupted neighborhoods and caused psychological and physical damage. Another contentious element of the law concerns the requirement for organizers of large outdoor evangelical events and other proselytizing activities to obtain a permit from the police or town council.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees 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 of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. 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 central regions, ecumenism was less common and competition existed between the Catholic and evangelical churches. A prominent representative of the Jewish community asserted that there was no anti-Semitism in the country.

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.

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