



Nicaragua

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues 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 approximately 5.5 million. More than 90 percent of the population belonged to Christian groups. According to a 1995 census, 72.9 percent of the population was Roman Catholic, 15.1 percent was evangelical Protestant, 1.5 percent belonged to the Moravian Church, and 0.1 percent was Episcopalian. Another 1.9 percent was associated with other religious groups, including the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Amish and Mennonite communities, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Approximately 8.5 percent professed no religious affiliation or were atheists. The Episcopal Church claimed a membership nearly twice that indicated in the census, and evangelical churches also made credible claims of higher current membership ranging between 20 and 30 percent of the population.

According to a March 2005 CID-Gallup poll, 57 percent of respondents were Catholic, 29 percent were members of evangelical or other Protestant churches, 3 percent belonged to other groups, and 11 percent claimed no religious affiliation.

Non-Christian communities were few and small. The Jewish community counted fewer than fifty persons (including expatriates). They gathered for religious holidays and Sabbath dinners but did not have an ordained rabbi or a synagogue. In March the Jewish community established the Israelite Community of Nicaragua with a board of directors. The new organization aimed to eventually reestablish a synagogue in Nicaragua and was seeking a rabbi. According to community members, the last synagogue was firebombed by the Sandinistas in 1978.

There were approximately 1,200 Muslims, mostly Sunnis and primarily resident aliens or naturalized citizens from Iran, Libya, and Palestine who immigrated in the 1980s. There was a mosque and an Islamic cultural center in Managua, the capital, with approximately 200 members.

Minority religious groups also included the Baha'i Faith and the Church of Scientology. Other immigrant groups included *Turcos*, Palestinian Christians whose ancestors came to Central America in the early 1900s, and Chinese, who either arrived as Christians or frequently intermarried with citizens and converted to Christianity.

There were no longer any pre-Columbian religions in the country, although there was a "freedom movement" within some Moravian churches to allow indigenous Amerindian spiritual expression, often through music. The Catholic Church frequently incorporates syncretic elements and does not criticize or interfere with pre-Colombian aspects of Christian religious festivals.

Moravian and Episcopal communities were concentrated on the Atlantic coast, while Catholic and evangelical churches dominated the Pacific and central regions. There was a strong correlation between ethnicity and religion; blacks and Amerindians, who generally lived along the Atlantic coast, were more likely to belong to the Moravian or Episcopal Church. Some evangelical churches focused on the remote towns of the central South Atlantic Region and had a strong presence there.

Evangelical churches were growing rapidly, particularly in poor or remote areas. In 1980 the Assemblies of God had 80 churches and fewer than 5,000 members, but according to Church leader Saturnino Cerrato, as of April 2006 there were more than 860 churches and 200,000 baptized members. The evangelical churches operated two private universities without interference from the Government.

Anecdotal evidence pointed to proportionally higher church attendance among members of the new evangelical churches than in Catholic and traditional Protestant churches. In poorer neighborhoods, the small evangelical churches were filled to capacity nearly every evening. According to a Catholic official, the Catholic Church was growing numerically but losing ground proportionally.

Foreign missionaries were active. The Mormons had 191 missionaries and 42,000 members in the country, and the Mennonites had a handful of missionary families and close to 8,000 members, mostly in the central Boaco region and rural areas around Waslala in the north. Nearly all of the non-Catholic denominations had at least one missionary family present.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. The Government at all levels sought to protect this right in full and did not tolerate its 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. It is the most politically active religious group and has significant political influence. Catholic Church leaders routinely meet with senior government officials. There were allegations that state funds have been used to support purely religious Catholic Church activities; however, under the current administration the Government and Catholic Church maintained more distant relations. The historical position of the Church is such that most religiously affiliated monuments, memorials, and holidays are Catholic-related. However, the dominance of the Catholic Church did not have a negative effect on the religious freedom of others.

The following holy days are recognized as national holidays: Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter, Immaculate Conception, and Christmas. The Festival of Santo Domingo (August 1 and 10) is also celebrated, but only in Managua.

The Government's requirements for legal recognition of a religious group are similar to requirements for other nongovernmental organizations. A church must apply for *personeria juridica* (legal standing), which the National Assembly must approve. Following approval, a church must register with the Ministry of Government as an association or a foundation. Groups that do not register cannot obtain tax-exempt status and technically do not have standing to incur legal obligations and make contracts. However, a number of groups did not register and continued to operate without penalty.

A recognized church may be granted tax-exempt status, known as exoneration. Because of perceived unequal treatment for different religious groups, exoneration was a contentious issue. This was particularly true with regard to exemption from customs duties on imported goods donated for humanitarian purposes. Goods donated to established churches and other nonprofit religious organizations recognized by the Government that are intended for the exclusive use of the church or organization are eligible for exoneration. Groups must receive clearance from the Office of External Cooperation, the Ministry of Finance, the Customs Office, and the municipality in which the donated goods would be used before a tax exemption is approved and the goods are released.

In the past some churches and other nonprofit religious organizations, among them the Assemblies of God, reported bureaucratic delays in obtaining customs exemptions, and some complained that the Catholic Church received preferential treatment and did not face the same requirements applied to other religious and humanitarian organizations. However, some Catholic groups, including Catholic Relief Services, reported similar bureaucratic problems in obtaining customs exemptions. A 2003 tax equity law, designed to facilitate the exoneration process, required all groups to requalify for exoneration. Many churches and other nonprofit religious organizations reported that the law generally streamlined the process in practice; 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.

Missionaries did not face special entry requirements other than obtaining religious worker visas, which were routinely provided. During the period covered by this report, there were no reports of difficulties in obtaining religious worker visas. 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 in the country. The Government provides financial support to a number of Catholic primary and secondary schools by paying teacher salaries.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

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

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom. Relations among religious groups differed between the two coasts. On the Atlantic side, where the three dominant churches were the Moravian, Episcopal, and Catholic, there

was an ecumenical spirit, which many observers attributed to the long history and mutual respect of the three predominant Christian groups on the Atlantic side of the country. However, on the Pacific side, ecumenism was rare, and there was continuing and energetic competition for adherents between the Catholic and evangelical churches.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. embassy continued to maintain a regular dialogue with the principal religious leaders and organizations.

Released on September 15, 2006

[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](#)