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## Nicaragua

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

### **International Religious Freedom Report 2010**

**November 17, 2010**

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the general free practice of religion.

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 reporting period. The government showed intolerance toward those who commented on sociopolitical matters, including religious groups.

There were some 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 the 2005 census by the government's Nicaraguan Institute of Statistics and Census, 58.5 percent of the population was Catholic and 21.6 percent was evangelical Protestant, a category that included Assemblies of God, Pentecostals, Mennonites, and Baptists. An April 2010 public opinion survey from independent private polling firms indicated that 56.2 percent of the population is Catholic and 24.9 percent is evangelical. Both Catholic and evangelical leaders view these results as inaccurate. Based on other sources, the Catholic Church estimates that approximately 80 percent of the population is Catholic, and some evangelical groups estimate that approximately 35 percent of the population is evangelical. The Assemblies of God claims to be the largest evangelical denomination, with more than 1,100 churches and 500,000 baptized members. Smaller religious groups include The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), the Moravian Church, Baptist Convention, Church of God, Church of the Nazarene, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Baha'i Faith, the Church of Scientology, and Buddhists.

Immigrant groups include Palestinian Christians, whose ancestors came to Central America primarily in two cycles: the early 1900s and the 1960s. There is also a Chinese immigrant presence, many of whom arrived as Christians or

converted to Christianity. Some immigrant communities, including the South Korean community, formed their own Protestant churches.

Non-Christian communities are few and small. Although the Jewish community numbers only 40 permanent members, many of whom are foreign residents, visitors often join them for holy days. The community does not have an ordained rabbi or synagogue. There are approximately 300 Muslims, mostly Sunnis, who are resident aliens or naturalized citizens primarily from the Occupied Territories, Libya, and Pakistan. Shi'ite Muslims also are present. There is one mosque in Managua, inaugurated in 2009.

Some Moravian churches along the Atlantic coast continue to allow indigenous Amerindian spiritual expression. The Catholic Church frequently incorporates 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 are more likely to belong to the Moravian or Episcopalian Churches. Some evangelical churches enjoy a strong presence in the remote towns of the central south Atlantic region. Smaller evangelical churches grew 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 his 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 and favors, including prompt access to government services.

On December 21, 2009, the National Assembly reformed the Law of Fiscal Equity, law 453, to treat all donations to religious groups as revenue and thus subject to income tax "in the manner, opportunity and amount that is determined by the Executive." Previously, donations to religious groups were tax exempt. Both Catholic and evangelical churches reported arbitrary application of the law.

In addition, the tax authority issued administrative directives imposing tariffs on imported religious goods. Shipments of sacramental wine for the Catholic Church, for example, have been delayed in customs for more than a month. The perceived unequal treatment toward different religious groups made exemption a contentious issue. According to representatives from both the Catholic Church and various evangelical churches, the reform of the fiscal equity law created confusion and uncertainty, since it allowed for the arbitrary application of the law for political purposes. The Catholic Church, whose mandate dictates commentary on social and political matters, seemed to be most affected by the new law.

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

The government's requirements for legal recognition of religious groups are similar to requirements for other nongovernmental organizations. 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 incur legal obligations or enter into contracts.

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The law does not prohibit government use of religious symbols; in fact, the government often uses religious symbols and makes reference to religious values to further its ideological and political agenda. Government-sponsored billboards throughout the country portrayed images of President Daniel Ortega with the slogan "Cristiana, Socialista, y Solidaria" (Christian, Socialist, and in Solidarity). Both Catholic and evangelical leaders expressed concern over the government's use of religious rhetoric and symbols to influence the population. Some evangelicals drew parallels between the Sandinista government of the 1980s and the current government.

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

The government directly funded two Catholic universities and one evangelical university. Evangelical churches operated four additional private universities but did not request government funding lest it infringe upon their autonomy. Religion is not taught in public schools, but private religious schools operate and accept students of all religious affiliations. The government supported a number of Catholic and Protestant-affiliated primary and secondary schools by paying teacher salaries; however, the Catholic Church reported that the government withheld many teachers' salaries. In addition, the government did not grant private school teachers some benefits afforded to public school teachers, such as optical care.

The government continued to reduce subsidies to the Catholic Church, which the church had spent on education. In 2008 these subsidies were used in remote areas of the Atlantic coast. In 2009 the reduction affected schools throughout the country. The government officially increased teachers' salaries while simultaneously reducing the share of the budget assigned to Catholic schools. The Catholic Church was forced to fund the difference in salary by its own means. The church reported an increase in the demand for private religious schooling; however, it was unable to meet the demand due to financial constraints. Church authorities reported delays in the transfer of funds from the government in some parts of the country in April and May 2010.

In May 2010 the Ministry of Education announced a new education policy that would focus on the values of "Solidarity, Christianity and Socialism," the first expressly politicized education policy in more than 20 years. At the end of the reporting period, it was unclear whether and how the government would require these new curricula to be incorporated in private primary and secondary school classrooms.

Evangelical churches reported that the government had not indicated a willingness to finance evangelical private schools. They contended that lack of assistance for evangelical groups amounted to discrimination. However, the group expressed more concern over the lack of government interest to meet with them and discuss their concerns.

#### 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 reporting period. The government showed intolerance toward those who commented on sociopolitical matters, including religious groups.

On April 23, 2010, the Catholic Episcopal Conference denounced the use of religious institutions for political purposes and demanded respect for the rule of law. Religious leaders also felt constrained when expressing negative commentary on government structures. A Baptist Church representative from the Council of Protestant Churches of Nicaragua (CEPAD)

reported that there was an inverse relationship between expressing thoughts and ideas that denounce government wrongdoing and the level of access to government services. He noted that there were denominations that "negotiated" a share of the government's budget and whose "principal leaders were manipulated." Some groups, including the Catholic Church, reported difficulties conducting community service programs. Catholic officials reported that they required permission from the government-sponsored and FSLN-affiliated Citizen Power Councils (CPCs) in order to distribute medicine through church dispensaries. CPCs, which First Lady Rosario Murillo oversees, were set up by the FSLN in 2007 to serve as parallel local structures to elected municipal councils.

There were no reports of any official action limiting the physical practice of religious worship and church attendance during the reporting period. However, FSLN activity, sometimes expressed in official government activities or carried out by government workers, disrupted church functions and the freedom to worship. CPCs organized protests to disrupt religious activities and harassed religious leaders when they encroached upon the government's political agenda. Catholic authorities reported that the CPCs continued a systematic strategy of harassment whenever clergy publicly criticized the government. Often following critical remarks, the clergy received visits from local political leaders or CPC coordinators, who asked for explanations regarding their public statements. Evangelical church representatives also expressed concern regarding the power of the CPCs, specifically the requirement to obtain permits from the CPCs in order to hold public meetings. However, both groups noted that the CPCs' degree of control varied from community to community at the discretion of local CPC community leaders.

CEPAD, which is composed of 32 mainly Pentecostal and Baptist denominations, reported that the CPCs attempted to disband neighborhood committees that CEPAD organized for community outreach and development. The CPCs refused to allow the existence of a mechanism to distribute resources or a space for dialogue and political participation.

Members of evangelical churches reported that the 30 radio stations they owned were forced to operate clandestinely because the government refused to grant them licenses. The government contended that it could not grant licenses while a new law on telecommunications has not entered into force.

#### Abuses of Religious Freedom

On August 9, 2009, followers of President Ortega attacked members of the opposition civil society group Coordinadora Civil (Civil Coordinators or CC) who were closing their annual general assembly with a walk and a cultural event in the church-owned fields around Managua's Catholic cathedral. President Ortega justified the action, stating that the youths responded to CC members who had provoked the FSLN crowd by shouting cries in favor of the coup d'état in Honduras. Human rights groups such as the Nicaraguan Center for Human Rights denounced the violence, stressing the inaction of the National Police, who acted in favor of the attackers by ensuring their impunity. The vicar of the cathedral assisted the injured, who included worshippers at the cathedral. After the Archdiocese of Managua issued a statement condemning the violence, three bishops received death threats. In addition, the Human Rights Ombudsman, Omar Cabezas, called two of the bishops CIA agents during a television program on Channel 4, which is widely considered a progovernment channel. At the end of the reporting period, no action had been taken against the attackers.

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

#### Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion.

#### 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.

A representative of the Jewish community reported the destruction of a statue of a prominent menorah in Managua--the second time the statue had been destroyed in less than two years.

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 the 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 and faith-based organizations in the country to discuss religious freedom concerns.

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