

WORLD WATCH LIST 2026

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

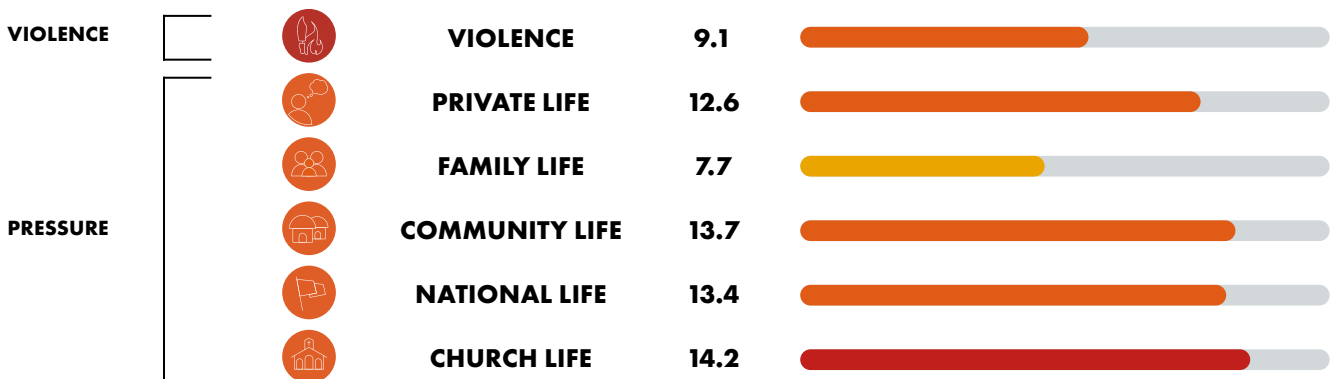
NICARAGUA

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
32



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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

Religious freedom in Nicaragua continues to deteriorate under the dictatorial rule of President Daniel Ortega and Co-President Rosario Murillo. Churches and Christians who express disagreement with the government are viewed as destabilizing agents and are subjected to intimidation, harassment, surveillance, legal prosecution, and the closure or expropriation of Christian institutions, including churches, universities, and charities. These measures have intensified since the 2018 protests, as many religious leaders continue to denounce human rights violations. The repression escalated further following the November 2021 elections and the manipulation to the legal framework, including the 2025 constitutional reform, which were both used to justify increased restrictions on dissenting religious voices. Christians advocating for justice, the release of political prisoners, or democratic restoration are especially vulnerable. The regime aims to silence the Church and weaken its influence by forced exile (including denationalization and revocation of citizenship), arbitrary detention, and the cancellation of legal status.

Quick facts

LEADER

Co-Presidents Jose Daniel Ortega Saavedra and Rosario Maria Murillo Zambrana (*under the 2025 Constitutional reform*)

POPULATION

7,237,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

6,832,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Christianity

GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic



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Context

Religious context	Number of adherents	% of adherents in country
Christians	6,832,000	94.4
Agnostics/Atheists	231,700	3.3
Ethnic religionists	35,400	0.5
Others	137,900	1.8
	Total	100%

Source²

Under Daniel Ortega's leadership, particularly since his return to power in 2006, Nicaragua has undergone a steady erosion of democratic norms and a shift toward dictatorial rule. The violent crackdown on the 2018 civic protests ([La Vanguardia, 09 October 2019](#)), initially sparked by pension reforms but driven by widespread discontent, marked a turning point. Since then, the rule of law has deteriorated, and independent oversight has been dismantled. The Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) has consolidated control over government branches ([BBC, 09 November 2021](#)), effectively eliminating political pluralism. Recent elections were marred by arbitrary arrests, repression of dissent, and closures of political parties and councils. Repressive laws entrench state power, criminalize opposition, restrict civil society, censor free expression, revoke citizenship, and limit foreign support. The 2025 constitutional reform has solidified this dictatorial trajectory ([OACNUDH, 30 January 2025](#)).

According to WCD 2025, around 75.3% of Nicaraguans identify as Catholic, while Protestant and evangelical communities also hold significant presence. During the 2018 crisis, Catholic leaders participated in national dialogue as mediators, but withdrew in March 2019 amid ongoing human rights abuses and the government's refusal to negotiate in good faith ([Havana Times, 08 March 2019](#)). Since then, the Church has been treated as an enemy of the state, targeted for its moral authority and willingness to denounce injustice ([Observatorio, 04 May 2023](#)).

Religious leaders and communities have faced systematic persecution, including harassment, imprisonment, denationalization, and exile. A notable case is Bishop Rolando Álvarez, sentenced to over 26 years in prison and later expelled ([ADF International, 15 January 2024](#)). Evangelical leaders, including Mountain Gateway members, have also been imprisoned ([Confidencial, 05 April 2025](#)). Female religious orders engaged in education and humanitarian work have faced hostilities and have even been expelled ([Nicaragua Investiga, 29 January 2025](#)). The broader strategy includes revoking the legal status of hundreds of religious organizations, confiscating property, censoring religious media, banning public religious expressions, imposing economic restrictions, and infiltrating places of worship. While many detained religious figures were released, exiled and expatriated, repression continues, less visible but no less severe. The appearance of calm masks intensified intimidation, where fear and censorship have replaced open brutality.

¹ Gina A. Zurlo, ed., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2025

² Other refers to all the rest to make up 100%: Gina A. Zurlo, ed., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2025

How the situation varies by region

Persecution is present nationwide and affects all regions and levels of society. However, higher concentrations of documented incidents have been reported in cities such as: Bluefields, Chinandega, Estelí, Granada, Jinotega, Jinotepe, León, Masaya, Managua, Matagalpa Región Autónoma del Atlántico Sur and Rivas.

Who is affected?

COMMUNITIES OF EXPATRIATE CHRISTIANS

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

HISTORICAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

The Roman Catholic Church, Nicaragua's largest Christian group, has faced sustained repression since 2018. Harassment, surveillance, and vilification intensify when Church leaders denounce government abuses. It remains a primary target, clergy have been imprisoned, exiled, or placed under house arrest, others face travel bans and legal threats for pastoral and humanitarian work.

CONVERTS TO CHRISTIANITY

Often former regime sympathizers or officials, converts are seen as opposition figures and face similar hostility from the regime.

NON-TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

This group, mainly evangelicals, Baptists, and Pentecostals, faces pressure when critical of the regime. They are coerced into political alignment under threat of reprisals such as legal status loss, surveillance, permit denials, or leaders' imprisonment.



Main sources of persecution and discrimination

DICTATORIAL PARANOIA

Church leaders and Christian groups, especially Catholics, face systematic retaliation for denouncing the regime and defending human rights. They are harassed, defamed, arbitrarily detained, and labeled as enemies of the state. Churches are vandalized, services disrupted, and activities closely monitored. Christian organizations have been shut down, assets confiscated, and leaders expelled to suppress the Church's public presence and economic capacity. Evangelical and Protestant churches are pressured to show political loyalty to avoid reprisals and retain legal status.

COMMUNIST AND POST-COMMUNIST OPPRESSION

Socialist-Communist ideology is promoted through the education system and state institutions. In parallel with surveillance, censorship, and harassment, the regime selectively appropriates certain religious celebrations and biblical references to project legitimacy and suggest alignment with compliant religious leaders. Local surveillance by the Family, Community, and Life Brigades (formerly CPC) has increased. Administrative control has intensified over churches and leaders seen as disloyal. The constitutional reform has entrenched legal mechanisms to restrict religious expression under the pretext of protecting public order, enabling arbitrary repression. These practices resemble those used in Cuba and Venezuela, Nicaragua's close ideological allies.

ORGANIZED CORRUPTION AND CRIME

Corruption is deeply rooted in Nicaragua, alongside drug and human trafficking networks. The judicial system, security forces, and public institutions systematically serve to protect the regime through bribery, coercion, and political manipulation. Violent paramilitary groups, known as "Ortega's death squads", criminal networks and Sandinista mobs, act with impunity in coordination with state actors to suppress dissent. Christians are particularly vulnerable, especially when dealing with public officials, as no independent institutions offer protection or justice.

How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

Compared to other Latin American countries, women and girls experience relatively few gender-specific forms of religious persecution. Those most at risk are female dissidents of the regime, human rights activists, or relatives of political opponents. They then easily find themselves at the mercy of allies of the government who keep them under constant surveillance. Due to a lack of confidence in the justice system, many victims have not reported crimes against them. Christian women and girls also suffer the loss of Christian men and boys, who are then more vulnerable to being imprisoned, abducted, or forced to flee Nicaragua.

Female typical pressure points:

- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual
- Violence – verbal

MEN

From verbal insults, death threats, and vandalism of religious items, a significant portion of hostilities by government and pro-government groups are targeted at Catholic church leaders. Politicians have described the Catholic clergy in Nicaragua as “killers” and “coup plotters” who promote “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. Relatives of church leaders have reportedly been prevented from delivering medicines to those imprisoned, representing a violation of their human rights. They are further denied Bibles and, in many instances, any contact with their families.

Male typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Denied access to Christian religious materials, teachings and rites
- Denied access to social community/networks
- Economic harassment via work/job/business
- Economic harassment via fines
- Forced to flee town/country
- Imprisonment by government
- Travel bans/restrictions on movement
- 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
2026	32	71
2025	30	71
2024	30	70
2023	50	65
2022	61	56

The overall score for Nicaragua remained at the level of 71 points. The total score decreased slightly due to a reduction in the Violence score (from 9.6 to 9.1 points), but this was offset by very small rises in pressure in all spheres of life except the Community sphere. During the reporting period, government repression against the Church was less visible in terms of the number and public profile of incidents than in previous years; however, the dictatorial regime increased its hostile targeting of Christians who refused to demonstrate political loyalty. This reflects an intensifying systematic pattern of pressure aimed at keeping the Church silent through threats to restrict or shut down its activities and encouraging self-censorship among church leaders and members. For WWL 2026, this dynamic is reflected in a slight increase in the average pressure score, from 12.2 to 12.3, compared to the previous reporting period.

Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **28 January 2025:** The police forcibly seized the monasteries and properties of the Franciscan Clarisse nuns in Managua and Chinandega, evicting around thirty nuns ([CNA, 30 January 2025](#)). Their whereabouts remain unknown.
- **18 April 2025:** On Good Friday, the Stations of the Cross at Managua's cathedral took place under heavy police surveillance ([La Prensa, 18 April 2025](#)). Armed officers blocked exits, restricting the procession to church grounds. A 6:00 p.m. curfew on religious activities further curtailed freedom of worship and movement.
- **17 July 2025:** Pastor Rudy Palacios Vargas was arbitrarily detained and transferred to La Granja maximum-security prison ([Premier CN, 05 August 2025](#)). A rushed virtual hearing imposed treason and conspiracy charges without credible evidence. He criticized abuses in 2018, and his church's legal status was revoked in 2019.



WWL Year	Christians sentenced	Christians detained	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians forced to leave the country
2026	7	13	55	55
2025	38	73	317	94

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period – for full results see the violence section of the country's corresponding WWL Persecution Dynamics. 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. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000*, 100,000* and 1,000,000*.*

PRIVATE LIFE

Christians critical of the regime face threats, especially for online activity or supporting imprisoned/exiled Church leaders. The Special Cybercrime Law criminalizes such expressions, leading to self-censorship. In Masaya, Matagalpa, and León, non-worship meetings—especially in homes—are seen as conspiratorial, monitored or disturbed by police, and participants' cars photographed. Family members of dissidents may be interrogated or pressured to report on Christian relatives. In detention, Bibles are banned, and religious materials can trigger mistreatment or be deemed subversive.

FAMILY LIFE

Children in public schools are indoctrinated with regime ideology, taught to revere the presidential couple, and forced to carry FSLN symbols or attend rallies. Christian parents who resist are labeled as opponents and face risk of reprisals. Their children are bullied or called “coup heirs,” sometimes by teachers. Many families suffer long-term separation due to arbitrary detention, exile, or surveillance. Some Christians are barred from returning, further isolating them from loved ones.

COMMUNITY LIFE

Christians face constant surveillance in neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces, especially if linked to dissident church leaders. They are pressured to attend state events and remain silent about their faith, particularly in public employment, where church affiliation may be seen as betrayal. Christian students risk expulsion, record erasure,

or arrest, and are pressured to show loyalty. Some laypeople are regularly interrogated to extract information about persecuted church leaders.

NATIONAL LIFE

Christians who denounce injustices or remain neutral are labeled traitors and face threats, surveillance, or prosecution. Laws 1040, 1055, 1115, 1155 and the Cybercrime Law, reinforced by the 2025 constitutional reform, underpin repression when the Church acts independently. The ruling party operates alone, while Christian political or civil efforts are criminalized as coup attempts. State-controlled media depict vocal church leaders as agitators who deceive the people and deserve exile, aiming to discredit the Church and promote social intolerance. Civil society has nearly disappeared, and attacks against believers go unpunished, reinforcing regime stability.

CHURCH LIFE

Churches and affiliated organizations face increasing risk of legal status cancellations, administrative obstacles, and financial suffocation when they show no loyalty to the regime. Most Catholic clergy now live in exile, severely weakening pastoral life. Church activities, including prayers for peace in Israel, political prisoners and for clergy in exile, are closely monitored and arbitrarily banned. Religious leaders face defamation, prosecution, and forced exile (inc. denationalization and revocation of citizenship), while state-run events mimic religious practices to confuse and discredit. Many churches no longer speak out, fearing reprisals as violent as seen in previous reporting periods.



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

In October 2024, Nicaragua cut off diplomatic relations with Israel over its actions in Gaza ([TJP, 12 October 2024](#)). This move contributes to a hostile climate that may impact the small Jewish community in Nicaragua. The lack of institutional support could limit their ability to freely practice their faith and exercise broader civil rights in an increasingly restrictive environment.



Open Doors in Nicaragua

Open Doors provides targeted assistance to strengthen the Church in the face of persecution, including:

- Leadership care support
- Provision of theological materials
- Educational assistance for pastors
- Support for theological studies
- Faith-strengthening under persecution
- Income-generating support for pastoral work
- Assistance with legal documentation to meet government demands



ABOUT THIS DOSSIER

- The content of this Country Dossier is based on detailed analysis carried out by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. This dossier may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2026 Open Doors International.
- All 50 Country Dossiers – along with the latest update of WWL Methodology – can be accessed [here](#).
- The WWL 2026 reporting period was 01 October 2024 - 30 September 2025.

Most of the images in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.