

# NICARAGUA 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion, provides for freedom of belief, religion, and worship, and states no one “shall be obligated by coercive measures to declare his or her ideology or beliefs.” The law requires the indoctrination of “Christian values” at the community level, including in education and municipal activities. In August the government imposed increased entry requirements and changed the travel authorization processes for individuals who planned to travel to the country for religious purposes. The government said the changes reflected its concerns about territorial sovereignty and the threat of criminals penetrating religious groups to enter the country for narcotrafficking or other illicit activities. Religious groups said the requirements impeded their legal right to travel and prevented some from exercising fundamental aspects of their religious practice such as pilgrimage, charity, and missionary work. Catholic and evangelical Protestant leaders stated there was selective application of travel restrictions and customs processing based on political affiliation and favoritism by ruling party officials. Religious leaders also stated the government retaliated against religious groups in response to perceived criticism of the ruling party, including through customs seizures of imported equipment and delayed clearance of donated goods. Catholic leaders stated the government continued to use religious symbolism and language in its laws and policies in order to promote its political agenda. Government-controlled, community-level action groups known as Family Committees promoted neighborhood participation in state-sponsored religious festivities.

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

U.S. embassy officers met with government leaders to emphasize religious freedom as a universal human right. Embassy officers also met with government officials to discuss the effects of the new travel approval requirements on religious groups. Embassy representatives met regularly with a wide variety of religious groups to discuss their concerns about politicization of religion and governmental retaliation against politically active religious groups.

## Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 6 million (July 2016 estimate). According to the 2005 census (the most recent available) conducted by

the Nicaraguan Institute of Statistics and Census, 59 percent of the population is Catholic and 22 percent evangelical Protestant, which includes Pentecostals, Mennonites, Moravian Lutherans, and Baptists. A public opinion survey conducted during the year by M&R Consultants estimates Catholics at 47 percent of the population, evangelicals at 32 percent, and religious believers without affiliation at 19 percent. Groups that together constitute less than 3 percent of the population include Jehovah's Witnesses, The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints (Mormons), the Moravian Lutheran Church, Jews, Muslims, and nonbelievers.

The Moravian Lutheran Church is largely concentrated in the country's North and South Caribbean Autonomous Regions. A majority of its members are of indigenous or Afro-Caribbean descent.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion. It provides for freedom of belief, religion, and worship, and states no one "shall be obligated by coercive measures to declare his or her ideology or beliefs." The constitution states there is no official religion, but the law entrusts government-controlled, community-level action groups known as Family Committees with the responsibility for promoting "Christian values" at the community level.

The requirements for legal recognition of religious groups are similar to those for other nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Registration requires an application, articles of association, and designation of officers. The National Assembly must approve a group's application for legal standing. Following approval, the group must register with the Ministry of Government as an association or foundation. Groups must register to incur legal obligations, enter into contracts, or benefit from tax and customs exemptions.

Missionaries must obtain religious worker visas; a policy change in August requires provision of information regarding the nature of their missionary work before being authorized entry into the country by the Ministry of Interior. This process must be completed before arrival and is generally completed within a few weeks, but can take up to several months.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

## Government Practices

The additional entry requirements implemented in August for individuals who planned to travel to the country for religious purposes applied to religious travel from any country, but affected the country's free travel obligations under the Central American 4 Border Control Agreement (CA-4 Agreement). The agreement has been in place for more than 10 years and its signatory countries comprise El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua. Ministry of Government officials said an increase in evangelical Protestant groups travelling from El Salvador raised suspicion in an area they said was already known for illicit transnational activity. Representatives from the Ministries of Interior and of Foreign Affairs stated authorities' concerns that criminals and narcotraffickers could use missionary groups as cover to facilitate illicit transnational activities and threaten national sovereignty and security. Religious groups said the restrictions impeded the legal right of citizens of signatory countries to the CA-4 Agreement to cross borders without visas or other permissions. The change restricted religious workers from exercising elements fundamental to their religious practices such as pilgrimage, charity, and missionary work.

In response to the travel restrictions, Catholic and evangelical Protestant leaders sought meetings with representatives of the Ministries of Government and Foreign Affairs to establish a dialogue on the policy change. After immigration officials denied entry to several missionaries in early August before the travel requirements were officially circulated, government officials circulated a written explanation of the new requirements.

Many regional and international missionary groups said they cancelled travel plans to the country because they feared they would be unable to obtain permission from the government or would be denied entry upon arrival.

Catholic and evangelical Protestant leaders stated there was selective application of the new travel restrictions and customs processing based on political affiliation and favoritism by ruling party officials. Both groups stated religious leaders received undue scrutiny and faced retaliatory application of laws if they had not pledged their support to the ruling political party in the year's presidential elections. One evangelical leader also reported that since enactment of the new regulation, his organization stopped all politically sensitive commentary, which he stated had led to quicker travel approvals.

Catholic and evangelical Protestant leaders reported cases in which government customs agents retaliated against religious groups for perceived criticism of the ruling party. The leaders reported incidents of customs seizures of imported equipment, delayed import clearance for donated goods, and delayed tax exemptions applicable to religious organizations. Catholic and evangelical leaders stated pro-government religious groups did not experience similar retaliation. They said, however, that there was an overall decrease in such retaliatory practices over the past year, which they attributed to the central government's unwillingness to further alienate sectors of society during an election year.

Catholic and evangelical Protestant leaders stated the government provided or withheld financial support, tax, and utility subsidies for individual churches based on the political affiliation of the church's clergy. Church leaders reported cases in which church tax exemptions were not honored or were delayed based on political statements made by clergy. They stated that exceptions on imported donations were routinely delayed, sometimes leading to donated perishables reaching their expiration dates and becoming unusable. Other cases included arbitrary denial of tax exemptions for vehicles purchased by or donated to religious organizations.

Government policy continued to require religious education through civics classes and participation in state-sponsored events such as processions to commemorate religious events, such as Catholic festivals. High school students were primarily chosen for participation in these events, and government political signs with the slogan of "Christian, Socialist, and in Solidarity" were often posted around public schools. Teachers and families who opposed this policy were reportedly classified as political opponents and sometimes excluded from government assistance programs.

Catholic and evangelical Protestant leaders continued to criticize the government's use of Catholic language, tradition, and symbols to promote its political agenda, which they said undermined their religious integrity and threatened freedom of religion. The government continued to require community participation in government-hosted religious festivities. The government replicated Catholic celebrations and festivals, despite Catholic Church disapproval of this practice. The government required attendance by government workers to staff the events, leaving them unable to attend the official Catholic Church celebrations. For the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, government institutions set up altars in the city streets and distributed free goods. Senior Catholic and evangelical leaders continued to express concern about what they said was the government's use of retired Catholic clergy and Christian religious statements and symbols to promote

its ideological and political agenda and officiate at government-sponsored politico-religious events. In the national election campaign, the government used religious language in daily press conferences in connection with official issues; government-sponsored billboards throughout the country and posters in government offices portrayed images of the president with the slogan “Christian, Socialist, and in Solidarity.”

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

U.S. embassy officers met with leaders of the government to emphasize religious freedom as a universal human right. Embassy officers also discussed the effects of the new travel approval requirements on religious groups.

Embassy representatives met regularly with a wide variety of religious groups, including Catholic leaders, officials from a diverse selection of evangelical Christian groups, officials of the Moravian Lutheran Church, and officials of the Nicaraguan Islamic Association to discuss their concerns about the politicization of religion and governmental retaliation against politically active religious groups. Embassy officials also spoke with religious leaders regarding the new entry requirements for religious travelers.