

# NICARAGUA 2015 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. Government policy requires public school civics curricula to be based on Christian values.

Religious leaders stated the government retaliated against religious groups in similar ways as with others for perceived criticism, 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. The government required attendance by government workers to staff government-hosted religious festivities, leaving them unable to attend the official Catholic Church celebrations. There were reported incidents of anti-Muslim statements by evangelical leaders after the government said the country was open to Middle Eastern refugees.

U.S. embassy officers met with government leaders to emphasize religious freedom as a universal human right. The embassy raised concerns about retaliation against religious groups, including the seizing of donated goods by customs agents. They also raised concerns regarding reports of retaliation against politically active religious groups and discussed accounts of favoritism towards Catholic groups over evangelical denominations. Embassy representatives met regularly with a wide variety of religious groups to discuss religious freedom and 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 5.9 million (July 2015 figures). According to a 2005 census conducted by the Nicaraguan Institute of Statistics and Census, 59 percent of the population is Catholic and 22 percent

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evangelical, which includes Pentecostals, Mennonites, Moravian Lutherans, and Baptists. A public opinion survey conducted during the year by M&R Consultants estimates Catholics at 46 percent of the population, evangelicals at 33 percent, and believers without affiliation at 11 percent. Other groups that together constitute 5 percent of the population include Jehovah's Witnesses and The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints (Mormons). Jews and Muslims make up less than 5 percent of the population.

The Moravian Lutheran Church is largely concentrated in the country's North and South Caribbean Autonomous Regions. The Moravian Lutheran Church estimates its membership at 100,000. 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 law entrusts government-controlled, community-level action groups known as Family Committees with the responsibility of promoting "Christian values" at the community level. Government policy requires education through civics classes and municipal activities in state-sponsored religious events.

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 or enter into contracts.

Missionaries must obtain religious worker visas, which the authorities routinely provide. The standard process must be completed before arrival and can take several months.

#### **Government Practices**

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Catholic and evangelical leaders reported cases in which government customs agents retaliated against religious groups in similar ways as with others for perceived criticism. They stated pro-government groups did not experience similar delays. Evangelical leaders stated they were unable to take possession of donated vehicles after customs agents withheld the vehicles for months and then charged additional fees disguised as taxes that were too high to pay. Evangelical leaders also reported customs agents in February withheld clearance on radio transmission equipment donated to a religious radio station and were still holding it at the end of the year. Catholic groups reported at least two shipping containers of donated food and medicine expired while retained in customs due to agents' delays in granting import clearances.

Catholic and evangelical church leaders reported the government provided or withheld financial support and 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 delayed based on political statements made by clergy.

The government continued to require public school civics curricula on Christian values and required students and school staff to participate in government-sponsored religious events, such as Catholic festivals. Teachers and families who opposed this policy were reportedly classified as political opposition and sometimes excluded from government assistance programs.

One evangelical official stated the government showed preference toward the Catholic Church, discriminating against evangelical groups. Other evangelical leaders stated it was hard to generalize regarding the entire evangelical community, given the large number of evangelical denominations. In remote communities without access to public education, the government provided limited subsidies to religious schools. Evangelical leaders stated the government provided larger subsidies to Catholic schools in underprivileged communities than to evangelical denominations. According to information reported by independent newspaper *La Prensa*, direct national budget subsidies to both Catholic and evangelical groups decreased significantly since 2007. According to a research study, both Catholics and evangelicals were able to lobby for additional funding from individual members of congress who had assigned budgets for social projects in their constituencies. The study indicated Catholic groups received greater appropriations than evangelicals through this source of funding.

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Catholic leaders stated the government's use of Catholic language, tradition, and symbols to promote its political agenda violated their religious authority. The government also continued to require community participation in government-hosted religious festivities. The government duplicated Catholic celebrations and festivals, despite Catholic Church disapproval of this practice. The government required attendance by government workers to staff the politico-religious events, leaving them unable to attend the official Catholic Church celebrations. For the festival of the Immaculate Conception, government institutions were required to set up altars in the city streets and distribute free goods. Senior Catholic and evangelical leaders continued to express concern over 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 run-up to the 2016 national elections the government continued to use 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." Evangelical leaders stated they found it offensive when Catholic Church language was used for government-sponsored politico-religious events, and Catholic leaders made similar comments regarding the use of evangelical imagery.

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

A representative of the Nicaraguan Islamic Association reported an evangelical pastor used offensive language against Muslims. In a separate incident, an evangelical leader expressed concern about the potential migration of Muslims to the continent in light of government statements saying the country was open to Middle Eastern refugees.

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

U.S. embassy officers met with leaders of the governing party to emphasize religious freedom as a universal human right. The embassy raised concerns about retaliation against religious groups, including the seizing of donated goods by customs agents. They also expressed concern about reports of retaliation against politically active religious groups and discussed reports of favoritism towards Catholic groups over evangelical denominations.

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Embassy representatives met regularly with a wide variety of religious groups, including Catholic leaders, officials of the largest evangelical Christian groups, officials of the Moravian Lutheran Church, and officials of the Nicaraguan Islamic Association to discuss religious freedom and concerns about the politicization of religion and governmental retaliation against politically active religious groups.