

World Watch Research

Nicaragua: Background Information

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World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

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Map of country



Nicaragua: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
7,143,000	6,775,000	94.8

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Recent history

From 1936 to 1979, Nicaragua was a dictatorship ruled by the Somoza family, which was eventually overthrown by the Sandinista National Liberation Front (SNLF). From 1984 to 1990, Daniel Ortega became president of Nicaragua for the first time. Later in 2006, he won the presidential elections again and has held power ever since.

Over the years, acting under a socialist-communist influence, Daniel Ortega has become an authoritarian ruler. In 2018, a series of civil society claims against the pension system ended in anti-government protests demanding the president's and the president's wife (Rosario Murillo) resignation. The government's response to the protests was [violent repression](#), in which at least 328 people died, not to mention the hundreds of political prisoners and exiled Nicaraguans (La Vanguardia,

9 October 2019). Since then, Nicaragua has seen a weakening of the rule of law, nationwide corruption, and repression against any critic of the government, including human rights organizations, independent press and religious leaders, especially from the Catholic Church. State and non-state agents endorsed by the government still target these social actors and their supporters, most of the time through laws that restrict the most fundamental freedoms.

During the COVID-19 outbreak, the government made little effort to prevent the spread of the virus since authorities refused to impose confinement, social distancing and quarantine measures. Instead, the government even encouraged [street celebrations](#) and other forms of assembly which could have put citizens' health at risk (France 24, 14 September 2020). According to the BBC, the authorities did not provide [reliable](#) information on infections and vaccines related to COVID-19 (BBC News, 21 May 2020). However, according to the WHO, there were [only 245 COVID-related deaths](#) between 3 January 2020 and 2 August 2023 (WHO, accessed 7 August 2023).

During the presidential elections held in November 2021, Daniel Ortega and his allies [tightened their grip on power](#) amid allegations of irregularities and serious violations of human rights (BBC News, 9 November 2021). Multilateral organizations and the international community condemned the election process and imposed sanctions on Nicaragua.

At the end of December 2021, China [re-established](#) diplomatic ties with Nicaragua and opened an embassy in Managua after Daniel Ortega ended relations with Taiwan (The Guardian, 1 January 2022). In 2023, [a visit](#) by the president of Iran to Nicaragua, both governments known for violating human rights, raised concern about authoritarian governments around the world strengthening ties (El País, 13 June 2023). In April 2024, Nicaragua [cut diplomatic ties](#) with Ecuador, due to the arrest of former Ecuadorian Vice President Jorge Glas, in the Mexican embassy located in Quito (DW, 7 April 2024).

Political and legal landscape

The ruling party, Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN), is Socialist and has centralized all power, taking control of the entire state apparatus. For the presidential election on 7 November 2021, it was clear that there was no group [strong enough](#) to successfully stand against the Ortega dictatorship at the polls (El País, 13 May 2021). In March 2024, representatives of more than 20 Nicaraguan opposition groups met in Miami to [form](#) the “Great Opposition Confederation” alliance with the aim of generating a national program that contemplates the necessary reforms to achieve a legitimate and representative government (Artículo 66, 20 April 2024).

In the November 2021 presidential election, the government did not meet the conditions for a democratic electoral process. The OAS [pointed out](#) in October 2021 that the government had undertaken a process to eliminate all real political competition (OAS, 25 October 2021): Presidential candidates as well as opponents of the government had been arbitrarily detained on charges of conspiracy to undermine national integrity, and some political parties were forced to close down. The FSLN government was also in control of the executive branch, the electoral, judicial and legislative powers, the police, the army, and even some city mayors.

Just four months before the municipal elections in November 2022, town councils controlled by opposition party Ciudadanos por la Libertad (CxL) were arbitrarily [taken over](#) by pro-government councilors, backed by the Nicaraguan Institute of Municipal Development (INIFOM), claiming that

these local authorities did not have any party or legal status (El País, 5 July 2022). INIFOM then appointed new FSLN party authorities. These sort of events, together with the anti-democratic precedents of the presidential elections, made sure that in the November 2022 [municipal elections](#) the FSLN consolidated its power by taking control of all 153 municipalities (Abc News, 8 November 2022).

At the beginning of October 2023, the Supreme Electoral Council (CSE) [canceled](#) the legal personality of the Miskito indigenous party Yapti Tasba Masraka Nanih Aslatakanka (Yatama) and arrested two deputies from the same party in an attempt by the government to gain absolute control over regional governments (Despacho 505, 4 October 2023). In this context, in March 2024 Regional Elections were held on the Caribbean Coast and as expected, the process was marked by an [aggressive strategy](#) by the ruling party to coerce the vote (El Faro, 8 April 2024). The organization Urnas Abiertas calculated an abstention rate of [86.72%](#) (Urnas Abiertas, April 2024).

To make this possible and to keep the FSLN party in power, the regime has introduced a series of [new laws](#):

Law 996 or Amnesty Law (June 2019): Leaves crimes committed by state agents during the 2018 crackdown unpunished.

Law 976 “of the Financial Analysis Unit” (October 2019): To collect information on national or international transactions of natural or legal persons with “terrorist activities”.

Law 1042, “Special on Cybercrimes” (October 2020): Includes four types of crimes in relation to damage to systems and data and punishes certain actions carried out through the Internet or electronic media, affecting freedom of expression.

Law 1040, “On the Regulation of Foreign Agents” (October 2020): The government has the power to block funding to all civil society organizations it deems “disruptive” to the internal and external affairs of the country.

Law 1055, “Defense of the Rights of the People to Independence, sovereignty and self-determination for peace” (December 2020): It designates Nicaraguans who lead or finance a coup d'état, who alter the constitutional order, who promote or encourage terrorist acts, who carry out acts that undermine independence, sovereignty and self-determination as “Traitors to the Homeland” and therefore will not be eligible to run for elected office.

Law 1060 “Reform and Addition to Law 406, Criminal Procedural Code of the Republic of Nicaragua” (February 2021): Amended the Criminal Procedural Code to extend the detention period from 48 hours to 90 days, during which a “complementary investigation” would be carried out, without prior accusation or linkage to a formal judicial process.

Law 1057, “reforming Article 37 of the Political Constitution of the Republic of Nicaragua” (January 2021): Allows to go from the maximum penalty of 30 years to life imprisonment if “odious, cruel, degrading, humiliating and inhuman circumstances concur, which due to their impact cause commotion, rejection, indignation, disgust in the national community”.

Law 1115, “On Regulation and Control of Non-Profit Organizations” (April 2022): With this new legislation the Ministry of Interior (MINT) has greater control over NGOs, additionally it prohibits non-

profit organizations from carrying out direct or indirect activities involving political proselytism or using the organizational scheme to violate public order, promote destabilization campaigns in the country, under penalty of fine and/or cancellation of legal personality. Allows state authorities to confiscate assets of organizations whose legal personality has been cancelled.

Law 1145 “Regulating the Loss of Nicaraguan Nationality” (February 2023): Determines that any person who is convicted in accordance with the provisions of Law No. 1055 shall lose Nicaraguan nationality. That is to say, all those considered “traitors to the homeland”.

Reform of Article 21 of the Political Constitution of Nicaragua (January 2024): This strips Nicaraguans sentenced for crimes considered “treason” of their nationality. In Nicaragua, any constitutional reform requires approval in two parliamentary sessions. The National Assembly of Nicaragua approved the reform in the first legislature in February 2023 and the second in January 2024. In practice, this measure has been applied since its approval in the first legislature.

Reform to Article 97 of the Political Constitution of Nicaragua (January 2024): The National Police are now totally subordinated to the President of the Republic. The 5th National Assembly of Nicaragua approved the reform in the first legislature in July 2023 and the second in January 2024.

System to combat money laundering: The system set up to combat money laundering and the financing of terrorism (ML/FT) has been [instrumentalized](#) by the government to target political opponents and weaken any criticism from civil society (Expediente Abierto, 31 May 2023).

To investigate the impact of these repressive measures, the IACHR set up a Special Follow-up Mechanism for Nicaragua (MESENI) in 2018. However, the Ortega government banned the IACHR from working in Nicaragua, which is why [MESENI](#) has been working instead from the Commission's headquarters in Washington DC (OAS, April 2021). In November 2021, Nicaragua's government denounced the Charter of the Organization of American States (OAS) and began the process of leaving the OAS. In April 2022, announced the [closure](#) of the offices of the Organization of American States (OAS) operating in the country (DW, 25 April 2022). Two years later, in November 2023, the [definitive withdrawal](#) and resignation of said organization took place. This withdrawal "does not nullify the other legal obligations for which it is responsible by virtue of its ratification of other inter-American conventions" (DW, 08 November 2023). Recently, in April 2024, the OAS Permanent Council [finalized the mandate](#) of resolution CP/RES. 1109 (2175/18) that created the Working Group for Nicaragua, reiterating that it will continue to follow the situation in Nicaragua (OAS, 03 April 2024).

At the 53rd General Assembly of the Organization of American States (OAS), the resolution entitled "The Human Rights Crisis in Nicaragua" was [approved](#), which condemned the persistent oppression of political opponents, the media, religious entities, including the Catholic Church and charitable organizations (El País, 23 June 2023). For its part, in the Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner, about the human rights situation in Nicaragua, it is mentioned that the government has continued to [unduly limit](#) the country's civic and democratic spaces, increasing its control over institutions and public spaces, and restricting activities by individuals and critical groups (OAS, May 2024).

Various countries have imposed sanctions in an attempt to put pressure on the Ortega administration to halt the violation of human rights and force a return to democracy in the country:

- [USA \(CRS reports, 26 April 2024\)](#): Sanctions include asset blocking sanctions and visa restrictions on members of the Nicaraguan executive, legislature and judiciary, along with others determined to be undermining democracy and threatening stability in Nicaragua. The Restoring Sovereignty and Human Rights in Nicaragua Act of 2023, introduced in the House (H.R. 6954) and Senate (S. 1881), would re-authorize and amend the Nicaraguan Investment Conditionality Act of 2018 (P.L. 115-335; NICA Act) and the Reinforcing Nicaragua's Adherence to Conditions for Electoral Reform Act of 2021 (P.L. 117-54; RENACER Act), which expired in December 2023. In May 2023, the [US ambassador](#) in Managua left the country. The delegation will be in the hands of a "long-term" charge d'affaires (Rivaltimes, 2 May 2023).
- [Canada \(Government of Canada, May 2024\)](#): Sanctions related to Nicaragua have been enacted under the Special Economic Measures Act. Regulations impose a dealings prohibition, an effective asset freeze, on listed persons.
- [European Union \(European Council, January 2022\)](#): Sanctions target Nicaraguan officials, including First Lady and Vice-President Rosario Murillo, consisting of a travel ban to the EU and the freezing of assets for individuals and entities. The ambassador of the European Union in Nicaragua was declared [persona non grata](#) for an alleged "interference in national sovereignty" and was expelled from the country (France, 29 September 2022). The sanctions were [extended](#) to 15 October 2024, due to the deterioration in the political and social situation of the country (Consilium, 9 October 2023).

Additionally, recognized international civil society organizations have been highlighting the dismantling of state institutions, cases of arbitrary detention, the poor conditions detainees have to face, and the persecution of government critics. Among those active are: [Human Rights Watch](#) (HRW 2024 Nicaragua country chapter), [International Crisis Group](#) (ICG, June 2023), [Freedom House](#) (Global Freedom Index 2024 Nicaragua) and [Amnesty International](#) (AI Nicaragua, April 2023), among others.

Through all the maneuvering to stay in power, the ruling party's excesses and abuses have caused the popularity of the FSLN to [fall](#) to one of its lowest levels ever: In July 2023, only 13% of those surveyed expressed their affinity with the party (El Mundo CR, 21 July 2023). For September 2023, Cid Gallup pointed out that Daniel Ortega only had [33%](#) approval from Nicaraguans (Artículo 66, 25 October 2023). The apparent [negligence](#) in handling the pandemic (Artículo 66, 27 July 2022) - including the harassment of [health professionals](#) (OAS, 28 July 2021) -, the blocking of the distribution of humanitarian aid as a result of [closing down](#) civil society organizations (IACHR, 9 November 2023), the cases of imprisonment, torture, forced deportation, persecution for political reasons and citizenship-stripping on arbitrary grounds, have all served to exacerbate the political crisis in the country.

In February 2023, around 222 political prisoners were released by the government, immediately forced to leave the country and were then declared [stateless](#) (El País, 9 February 2023). Additionally, towards the end of 2023, various sources indicated the existence of an [internal crisis](#) in the government, as a result of disagreements between the Nicaraguan armed forces and the growing influence of Daniel Ortega's wife, Rosario Murillo, who is also Vice President, but also because the party is preparing for a possible transition of power (El País, 17 April 2024).

In contrast to the regime leaders, some church leaders have been gaining wider [acceptance](#) (Confidential, 2 December 2023). Church leaders, mostly Catholics, have suffered reprisals for their outspokenness in denouncing human rights violations and for the support given to political prisoners.

Although the political and legal context affects society as a whole, government measures have been designed to repress opposition voices in particular, which is why church leaders, as some of the main critics of the government, have become a vulnerable target for reprisals. During 2022 and 2023, government action against the Church intensified and has clearly been intended to intimidate Christians (See *Religious Landscape*).

Religious landscape

Nicaragua: Religious context	Number adherents	of %
Christians	6,775,000	94.8
Muslim	1,200	0.0
Hindu	0	0.0
Buddhist	8,400	0.1
Ethnic religionist	34,200	0.5
Jewish	230	0.0
Bahai	13,800	0.2
Atheist	3,400	0.0
Agnostic	198,000	2.8
Other	108,600	1.5
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Since social unrest began in April 2018, church leaders (mainly Roman Catholics) were involved in the official dialogue between opposition groups and the government, first as mediators and later as observers. However, in March 2019, as an act of protest at the regime's lack of commitment and continued violation of human rights, the Catholic Church decided [to cease](#) all active participation in the talks (Havana Times, 8 March 2019). Since then, the outspokenness of the Catholic Church about the situation in the country has caused it to be regarded as a 'public enemy' by the government and its allies. As a result, church leaders and churches have been [frequent targets](#) for all kinds of retaliation (Observatorio Libertad Religiosa, 4 May 2023).

The Report of the Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua (GHREN) has drawn [attention](#) to the sharp escalation in the frequency and gravity of the attacks against the Catholic Church and its

members, and has confirmed that the violations documented so far against members of the Catholic Church and other Christian denominations has moved the authorities closer to their goal of removing organized critical Christian voices against the government (HRC, 28 February 2024). Statements by the [Episcopal Secretariat of Central America](#) (Vatican News, 21 February 2023), the [Latin American and Caribbean Episcopal Council](#) (ADN, 11 February 2022) and many [other religious networks](#) have shown solidarity with the Nicaraguan Catholic Church in the face of the regime's hostility (Vida Nueva Digital, 25 August 2022). According to the United States Commission of International Religious Freedom, Nicaragua is one of the countries of [particular concern](#) due to the serious situation of religious freedom in the country (USCIRF, 29 December 2023).

In 2023 and 2024, government hostility towards church leaders (particularly Catholic bishops and priests) and towards churches and faith-based organizations has continued. The restrictions on religious freedom are supported by a legal framework tailor-made for this purpose. Some examples are:

- i. **Arrests and sentencing:** The exercise of the right to freedom of expression has become a cause for the arrest of religious leaders since 2018, especially of those most critical of the government. Arrests can lead to detainees being sent to jail or house arrest. In either case, it is usual that standard legal procedures are not followed. In many cases, arbitrary arrests and subsequent irregular judicial proceedings have resulted in exorbitant fines and prison sentences. One of the most prominent cases was that of Bishop Rolando José Álvarez Lagos, bishop of Matagalpa. Due to his criticism of the government, he was [sentenced](#) to 26 years and 4 months imprisonment on 10 February 2023. His crimes were allegedly: Undermining national integrity, propagation of false news through information and communication technologies, aggravated obstruction of functions and disobedience or contempt of authority, to the detriment of Nicaraguan society and the state. In addition to imprisonment, he lost his Nicaraguan nationality and had his citizenship rights suspended for life. He was unexpectedly [released from prison](#) and expelled from the country in January 2024 (The Pillar, 15 January 2024). At the end of 2023, there was a [wave of arrests](#) of bishops, priests, deacons and seminarians (Infobae, 2 January 2024). In December 2023, there was also the arrest - on charges of money laundering - of eleven Nicaraguan evangelical pastors associated with the Mountain Gateway Christian mission. The pastors were eventually [sentenced](#) to 12 to 15 years in prison and required to pay more than US\$80 million in fines (ADF International, 28 March 2024). Other victims of arrest included [journalists](#) (VOA, 8 April 2024) and even churchgoers who publicized the injustices faced by religious leaders or simply broadcasted religious activities on social networks or independent media outlets. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights ([IACHR](#)) (OAS, 23 June 2023), the Inter-American Court on Human Rights [IA Court HR](#) (Corte IDH, 28 June 2023), and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights for Central America and the English Caribbean ([OHCHR](#)) (IACHR, 18 August 2023), have condemned the continued violations of human rights of religious leaders.
- ii. **Forced exile:** Various priests, nuns and evangelical pastors have been [forced into exile](#) (Despacho 505, 7 October 2023), either because their residency permits were not renewed when they left the country to carry out ministerial activities and were not allowed to enter again, or on occasions, they have been forcibly transferred to the border from one moment to the next. Such expulsions have been mostly related to pastoral work and the lack of identification with govern-

- ment policies. Those expelled lose their Nicaraguan nationality. In addition, the government has instituted a new pattern of repression in which prison sentences are replaced by forced exile.
- iii. **Stripping of nationality and civil rights:** Religious leaders sanctioned under Law No.1055 lost their [nationality](#) and their citizenship rights for life. In the present reporting period, the bishops, priests, deacons and seminarians who were arbitrarily detained during 2023 and January 2024 were forced into exile and [stripped of their nationality](#), among them Bishop Rolando José Álvarez Lagos (Confidencial, 19 January 2024).
 - iv. **Cancellation of legal status:** The government has [canceled](#) the registration and legal status of hundreds of organizations linked to churches, including universities, technical institutes, church-run schools, cultural centers, associations that promote educational programs, justice and peace commissions, seminars, and human rights and humanitarian or social assistance organizations (Artículo 66, 8 March 2023). The cancellations have been deemed necessary either due to alleged non-compliance with civil society regulations or to encourage voluntary dissolution. According to the [IACHR](#), between April 2018 and August 2023, government authorities cancelled the legal status of 3,390 organizations, out of a total of 7,227 legally registered in the country in 2018. Of this total, 48 organizations were closed through voluntary dissolution. 11% were organizations of a religious nature (CIDH, 23 September 2023).
 - v. **Seizure of property:** The Ortega government has seized [Christian-owned property](#) and media outlets, especially those that lost their legal status (Euronews, 23 August 2023).
 - vi. **Overt police harassment:** House blockades carried out by government officials, paramilitaries, and party sympathizers have become common practice as a form of intimidation against church leaders. So too has the surveillance and monitoring of church activities. There have even been reports of [seminarians](#) affiliated with the regime passing on information about seminary activities to the authorities (Confidencial, 29 March 2023).
 - vii. **'Siege tactics':** Police have sometimes [completely surrounded](#) churches and church grounds (100%Noticias, 22 May 2022). Such blockades have impeded priests from holding church services. Sometimes a priest has had to celebrate a communion service with a congregation through fencing to [prevent](#) police from entering the church building (IP Nicaragua, 16 August 2022).
 - viii. **Accusations against the Church:** The Legislative Assembly of Nicaragua approved a report in which Roman Catholic priests stand [accused](#) of preparing a coup, and in which it is recommended that church leaders who supported the 2018 demonstrations should be tried in court, along with the confiscation of all assets belonging to their churches (El Espectador, 6 May 2022). President Ortega accused priests and bishops of being a [mafia](#) that has committed crimes and embezzled millions of dollars (El País, 21 February 2023), Rosario Murillo accused the Catholic Church of being [responsible](#) for the mass demonstrations that paralyzed the country in April 2018 (Despacho 505, 18 April 2024).
 - ix. **Closure of media outlets:** In many areas, Catholic [radio](#) and [television](#) broadcasting outlets have been censored and/or taken off the air; offices which were forced to close down have been taken over by the authorities and their legal status cancelled (ABC News, 2 August 2022 and Article 66, 7 July 2022). This sort of restriction also affected other Christian denominations, as was the case of [Enlace - Channel 21](#) (DW, 3 May 2023).
 - x. **Attacks on ordinary Christians:** Ordinary Christians and families of church leaders regarded as [regime opponents](#) have been monitored, attacked and detained - for instance, when they have tried to defend priests or church buildings from government interference (Confidencial, 23

September 2023).

- xi. **Infiltration:** Party sympathizers or members of paramilitary groups join church groups to [monitor the content](#) of preaching and teaching (Article 66, 10 June 2022).
- xii. **Economic pressure:** Among recent measures adopted by the regime, is the state interference of [bank accounts](#). Banking access for various church dioceses in the country has been blocked under the justification of stopping illegal activities in the management of funds and resources (money laundering). This measure has hampered the financing and operation of church activities (DW, 28 May 2023). Among the multiple consequences of this measure has been the [blocking of pensions](#) for retired priests (Aica, 25 July 2023).
- xiii. **Vandalism of places of worship:** There have been many cases of [illegal entry](#) (Elsalvador, 2 August 2022), vandalism and destruction of church property by paramilitary groups and/or the police. Multiple [thefts](#) from places of worship have also been reported (VOA, 12 February 2024).
- xiv. **Ban on Christian celebrations:** For the second consecutive year, the police prohibited [processions](#) during Easter and Holy Week (Aciprensa, 1 April 2024). In some cases, in its attempt to control the Church, the government has organized its own religious events.

Relations with the Catholic Church became so strained that the Nicaraguan government decided to [close](#) the Nicaraguan embassy to the Holy See and asked the Vatican to also close its Nunciature in Managua. Monsignor Diouf left the country in March 2023 having been in charge of the Vatican diplomatic mission for a year, ever since the government expelled the nuncio, Waldemar Stanislaw Sommertag (AP News, 18 March 2023). Despite facing such hostility, leaders and other representatives of the Catholic Church are determined to continue [serving the country](#) by speaking out about the human rights abuses which they cannot pretend not to see (Diocese of Granada, 14 July 2022).

Regarding evangelical congregations, while each denomination has a different position regarding government actions, the relationship with the government varies. Many limit themselves to carrying out activities related to their ministry, without giving an opinion or getting involved in politics. However, the recent arrest and subsequent sentencing of the pastors of church Mountain Gateway on charges of money laundering only demonstrates that churches are at risk of being targeted even when they are not involved in national politics. There are also some evangelical churches which have issued [statements](#) expressing support for the government's actions and affirming that there is freedom of religion in the country; however, these statements could well be the result of pressure and/or fear of reprisals (El 19 Digital, 21 April 2024).

Economic landscape

According to the [2023 Annual Report](#) of the Central Bank of Nicaragua, GDP growth in 2023 was 4.6 percent (3.8% in 2022). In the labor market, a low unemployment rate was maintained (3.4% on an annual average), favored by economic growth, with an increase in formal employment and signs of improvement in the labor participation rate (although it still remains below pre-pandemic levels). Domestic inflation slowed to 5.60 percent year-on-year (11.59% in 2022) (BCN, 26 March 2024) .

According to the [World Bank Nicaragua overview](#) (last updated 4 April 2024):

- **Economic growth:** "The GDP grew by 4.3 percent in 2023, driven by sectors such as electricity, mining, trade, construction, finance, transport, and communications. Consumption and investment also increased. In December 2023, the Monthly Index of Economic Activity (IMAE)

showed a year-over-year increase of 5.5 percent. GDP growth is projected at 3.7 percent in 2024 and stabilize at 3.5 percent in the medium term."

The International Monetary Fund [states](#) that Real GDP growth is expected to moderate to 3% in 2023, due to weaker external demand and tighter external financial conditions. In 2024 and over the medium term, real GDP is projected to grow by about 3½%, supported primarily by private consumption. These projected growth rates remain below historical averages (2000-17) of 3.9%, given the cautious recovery in investment, limited approved new official financing and lower labor contribution to growth due to recent emigration (IMF, 22 November 2023).

There has also been a reduction in the labor force because many citizens have emigrated, causing a brain drain, which means there has been significant emigration by highly educated or highly skilled individuals. According to World Population, Nicaragua scored [7.60](#) in brain drain (World Population, May 2024).

According to [UNDP Human Development Report Nicaragua](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **Gross national income (GNI) per capita (2022):** 5, 427
- **GNI per capita for women:** 3, 596
- **GNI per capita for men:** 7, 311
- **Inequality in income:** 35.3%
- **National Poverty Line (2011-2021):** 24.9%

Christians, as well as the entire population, face the consequences of the economic crisis and the imposition of a Socialist economy that only benefits the allies of the regime. The blocking of bank accounts of various church dioceses under the pretext of combatting money laundering (mentioned above in: *Religious landscape* and below in: *Social and cultural landscape*), is another measure which aims at stifling church activity. In addition, there are many regulations and laws that hinder, prevent or criminalize the financing of Christian organizations (especially Catholic ones) or those linked to a religious leader considered an opponent of the government.

Social and cultural landscape

According to the [World Factbook Nicaragua](#) (accessed 9 August 2024):

- **Main ethnic groups:** Mestizo (mixed Indigenous and White) 69%, White 17%, Black 9%, Indigenous 5%
- **Main language:** Spanish (official) 99.5%, Indigenous 0.3%, Portuguese 0.1%, other 0.1%; note - English and indigenous languages found on the Caribbean Coast (2020 est.)
- **Urban population:** 59.8% of total population (2023)
- **Literacy rate:** 82.6% (2015).

According to [World Bank Nicaragua data](#) (accessed 9 August 2024):

- **People using at least basic drinking water services (% of population):** 82 (2020)
- **School enrollment (gross):** For pre-primary (2020) is 69%; for primary (2021) 107% and for secondary (2010) 68%.

- **Compulsory school education:** 7 years (2022)
- **School Gender Parity Index (GPI):** 1.04 (2010). This refers to the ratio of girls to boys enrolled at primary and secondary levels in public and private schools (2010)
- **Unemployment (ILO estimate):** 5.2% (2018)

According to [UNDP Human Development Report Nicaragua](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **Human Development Index (HDI):** 0.669. Female (0.647), Male (0.682)
- **Gender Inequality Index (GII):** 0.397. Ranking #97 out of 166 countries in 2022.

According to the [UNHCR's Global Trends Report 2023](#):

- **Refugees:** “Nationals of Latin America and the Caribbean countries registered around one-third of all new individual asylum applications globally (2022-2023). Most were registered by Venezuelans, Cubans, Colombians, Nicaraguans and Haitians in the United States of America and Mexico, with asylum-seekers risking the dangerous route through the Darien jungle – a treacherous stretch of jungle that separates Colombia and Panama.”

Other factors

- **Malnutrition:** According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), in Mesoamerica, Honduras showed the highest prevalence of undernourishment, with 18.7 percent of the population facing hunger in the period 2020–2022, followed by Nicaragua (17.8 percent) and Guatemala (13.3 percent), which in absolute terms represented 1.9 million, 1.2 million and 2.3 million people respectively (FAO, 2023). The [World Food Program](#) states that due to its location in a hotspot for climate change, Nicaragua was regularly impacted by disasters and climate variability. It is ranked 21st in the 2022 World Risk Report, above all other Central American countries. This context has raised concerns over food security. According to the WFP report, 1.2 million Nicaraguans, nearly 20 percent of the population, were reported to suffer from undernourishment, the fifth highest rate in Latin America. Indigenous people in this region faced chronic poverty, a higher prevalence of food insecurity above the national average, and limited access to basic services. (WFP, Nicaragua Annual Country Report 2023).
- **Employment:** According to [Statista](#) (Employment in Nicaragua, accessed 2 January 2024): The unemployment rate in Nicaragua is forecast to reach 6.76% in 2024 (i.e., 0.39 million unemployed people). The employment rate in Nicaragua is forecasted to reach 68.62% in 2024 (i.e., 3.96 million employed people).
- **NGOs:** Despite the context of poverty and food crisis, the government has tightened control over non-profit organizations. According to the database prepared by the MESENI, between 18 April 2018 and 31 August 2023, the state [canceled](#) the legal status of 3,390 organizations out of a total of 7,227 legally registered in the country in 2018 (CIDH, November 2023). Authorities can also seize the assets of associations that commit “unlawful acts,” violate “public order,” or hinder the Interior Ministry’s “control and surveillance” ([HRW 2023 Nicaragua country chapter](#)). In the field of health, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) officially [closed](#) its offices in Managua in December 2023, ending its humanitarian mission in the country (CICR, 18 December 2023). It is worth mentioning that the government had already eliminated the ICRC's legal status

- and had created a "similar" organization, completely [controlled](#) by the government, which it called the "New Red Cross" and is currently known as the "White Cross" (Swissinfo, 7 June 2023).
- **Support for the regime:** Public employees are [obliged](#) to participate in state celebrations, to show their support for the regime (Artículo 66, 12 July 2022). They were also [expected](#) to vote for Daniel Ortega in the presidential elections, under threat of dismissal (Confidencial, 6 November 2021). It is easier to get a job in the public sector when having a [political endorsement](#) from the FSLN party (Confidencial, 12 July 2023). Further, according to the Assistant Secretary General, the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights has received [testimonies](#) about restrictions on economic, social, and cultural rights suffered in Nicaragua by those who do not possess the ruling party's membership card. Without such a membership card, many Nicaraguans have limited possibilities to obtain or maintain a job in the public sector, to access higher education (including scholarships) and health services, exemplified by a report of a person denied surgery until he registered with the party. The same restrictions are reportedly affecting people (as well as their family members) who are perceived as opponents or critics of the government (OHCHR, 3 March 2023).
 - **Indoctrination:** A matter of high concern is the [indoctrination](#) of children. There have been reports about how on the anniversary of the death of former Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, the Ministry of Education ordered classes at public schools to create posters etc. to celebrate his Communist and dictatorial ideals in a society in which the only voice promoted is that of a government following those same ideals (Voice of America, 20 March 2023). The Teachers' Union denounced the [indoctrination](#) of teachers and arbitrary dismissals of those not aligning with the ruling party (100% Noticias, 29 June 2023).

Regime influence in the education sector, especially universities

The government has sought to [undermine the autonomy](#) of universities, in particular, of those which are administered by groups or individuals perceived as political opposition. Several universities have had their legal status canceled on the grounds of financial reports allegedly missing and on account of violating money-laundering and anti-terrorism laws (Agenda Estado de Derecho, 19 April 2022). The head of the Ministry of Education was also [replaced](#) with a Sandinista sympathizer. The goal of such moves is to ensure a nationwide influence in the classroom which supports the government (Panampost, 19 January 2022). Thus, for instance, school curricula include programs to [promote](#) ruling party ideology and loyalty to the Sandinista movement (Connectas, accessed 26 August 2022). In the present reporting period, the National Assembly [approved](#) a reform and addition to Law 89 or Law of Autonomy of Higher Education Institutions and another reform to Law 582 or General Law of Education (El 19, 30 November 2023). One of the main changes is to grant the National Council of Universities (CNU) the legal capacity to manage universities, and the transfer to the Ministry of Finance and Public Credit of the responsibility for distributing the state budget assigned to universities (6%). With this measure, university autonomy is even [weaker](#) since both the CNU and the Ministry of Finance respond in practice to the interests of the Executive Branch (Artículo 66, 6 December 2023).

A notable example of state interference in 2023 was the [closure](#) of the Central American University (UCA), which was considered to be the "last center of free thought in Nicaragua". On 15 August 2023, an entry was published in the official newspaper "La Gaceta", announcing the seizure of the UCA's assets, movable and immovable property and bank accounts, and accusing the university of terrorism,

even though there was no evidence for this. Immediately, important changes were made: The name of the university was changed to Casimiro Sotelo University (Despacho 505, 18 August 2023). A few days later, the residence where the Jesuit priests of the UCA lived was [confiscated](#) and they were forced to vacate it, since regime officials argued that it was now property of the State of Nicaragua. Documentary evidence showing that the property was not actually owned by the UCA was presented but was simply ignored (Confidencial, 20 August 2023).

The Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua (GHREN) has [confirmed](#) that “the dismantling of university autonomy, together with the cancellation of the legal personality of universities and the violations of human rights against student leaders, faculty and university staff documented so far, has resulted in a university sector that no longer has autonomous institutions. The government has successfully suppressed in the long term any organized critical student and academic voices in Nicaragua, affecting the rights to education of thousands of students”. (Reliefweb, 28 February 2024).

Human rights issues

Human Rights Watch has denounced the current impunity for human rights violations committed by the police. HRW has also highlighted the severe restrictions on freedom of expression and association ([HRW 2024 Nicaragua country chapter](#)).

The US State Department's Nicaragua [2022 Human Rights Report](#) also states that there were no significant changes in the human rights situation in Nicaragua: “Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: arbitrary or unlawful killings, including extrajudicial killings; enforced disappearance; torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment by prison guards and parapolice; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; arbitrary arrest or detentions; serious problems with the independence of the judiciary; political prisoners; transnational repression against individuals located in another country; arbitrary and unlawful interference with privacy; punishment of family members for alleged offenses by a relative; serious restrictions on free expression and media freedom, including threats of violence against journalists, unjustified arrests and prosecution of journalists, and censorship; substantial interference with the freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association, including overly restrictive laws on the organization, funding, or operation of nongovernmental and civil society organizations; restrictions on religious freedom; restrictions on freedom of movement and residence within the country and on the right to leave the country; inability of citizens to change their government peacefully through free and fair elections; serious and unreasonable restrictions on political participation; serious government corruption; serious government restrictions on and harassment of domestic and international human rights organizations; extensive gender-based violence, including femicide; crimes involving violence or threats of violence targeting members of ethnic groups and Indigenous peoples such as the Mayangna and Miskito communities; trafficking in persons”, among others.

In this context, through church aid programs delivering basic necessities such as food, healthcare and education, churches are viewed by the Ortega regime as weakening its control over the population. The blocking of church bank accounts has also been a huge obstacle for churches to continue community projects helping the poor. As well as harming the population served by the Church, these are methods of intimidation with the aim of limiting the influence of Christian leaders within communities.

Technological landscape

According to [DataReportal Digital 2024: Nicaragua](#) (23 February 2024) / survey date - January 2024:

- **Internet usage:** 61.5% penetration
- **Social media usage:** 52.2% of the total population
- **Active cellular mobile connections:** **120.0%** of the total population

According to Freedom House's [Freedom on the Net 2023 Nicaragua](#):

- The Nicaraguan government and its allies have used copyright laws, including the US Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA), to secure the removal of content produced by independent media outlets. In recent years, police have also reportedly coerced government critics into deleting videos or photos that depict antigovernment protests from their devices. Nicaragua lacks independent bodies that ensure oversight of content restriction processes. Authorities do not act transparently when it comes to the removal of online content.⁵⁷ Under the 2020 Special Cybercrimes Law, decisions to block websites are to be made by TELCOR and the Foreign Ministry, both of which are effectively dominated by the presidency.
- There is a deteriorating environment for free expression in Nicaragua, worsened by a judiciary that lacks independence. In practice, the judiciary is subservient to the executive and has been used to target the political opposition, religious figures, and other critics of the Ortega regime through significant criminal sentences.
- Internet users, and journalists in particular, have been subjected to intimidation and physical assaults in connection with their online activity. Torture and ill-treatment in detention is common.

Even before the introduction of the Cybercrime Law (see above: *Political and legal landscape*), intermittent [internet outages](#) were used by the government to inhibit protesters (NPR, 5 June 2021) and key persons perceived as regime opponents. Domestic NGOs, Roman Catholic Church representatives, [journalists](#) (Connectas, 21 June 2021) and members of the political opposition all claim that the government has been [monitoring](#) their email and telephone communication (US State Department, Human Rights Report 2021). In Autumn 2022, the government was accused of installing special receivers in Managua to be used for [electronic surveillance](#), i.e., for intercepting telephone signals and capturing mobile phone traffic. Such surveillance monitors conventional calls, origin/destination of calls, text messages, SIM card code, phone location and, in some cases, involves direct listening in on phone conversations (Confidential, 17 October 2022). In 2024, the [bill](#) “General Law on Convergent Telecommunications” is under evaluation. Among other aspects, it establishes that operators and telecommunications service providers will make their facilities and services available to the government free of charge (Asamblea Nacional, 12 March 2024). Various organizations have pointed out that this law really aims at [stricter control](#) of communications (Ondalocal, 10 April 2024).

According to RSF, journalists are constantly [stigmatized](#) and face harassment campaigns, arbitrary arrest and death threats. Journalists who remain in the country work with the utmost discretion and do not sign their articles for fear of reprisals. Cameras are often confiscated and there is hardly any reporting in the field. At least four journalists who fled the county to avoid arrest were declared “traitors to the homeland” and were stripped of their citizenship (World Press Freedom 2024

Nicaragua). The Inter American Press Association has urged the international community to denounce the regime's persecution of freedom of expression and of the press (SIP, 11 May 2023).

As part of the persecution of independent media during the 2021 electoral process, non-aligned journalists faced difficulties due to the “law regulating foreign agents” which aims to prevent “crimes against state security” and requires any person or entity receiving foreign funds (including journalists working for international media) to register as a “foreign agent” with the Interior Ministry. Thus, [non-authorized voices](#) can be effectively silenced (Article 66 Facebook site, 12 May 2021). This means that if reporters mention cases of violence, raids or any government actions targeting churches and church leaders, they risk [arrest](#) (Cope, 15 July 2022).

For many Christians, church leaders, and Christian groups in exile, the use of social media networks and independent media are the only means by which they can share and receive information. Due to the government's control over the media and crack-down on non-aligned citizens, they are exposed to the risk of being monitored and publicly accused of plotting a coup. Zoom meetings organized by churches have been monitored by informers and, on occasions when something suspicious was said, police officers have suddenly appeared outside the houses of the church leaders involved. In recent years, the Nicaraguan Institute of Telecommunications and Post Office [arbitrarily closed](#) Catholic radio stations (100 Noticias, 1 August 2022), and ordered cable companies to [stop transmitting](#) Catholic channels (Swissinfo, 29 June 2022).

Security situation

The recent Report of the Group of Experts on Human Rights on Nicaragua (GHREN) has [reported](#) how the government has expanded its forms of repression, by silencing any form of criticism, targeting an ever-growing group of individuals, and forcing more and more Nicaraguans to leave their country, intimidating those who have left and depriving them of their fundamental human rights. Persecution of real or perceived opponents remaining in Nicaragua has continued in the form of incessant harassment, threats, surveillance, and arbitrary detention, causing the victims and their relatives to live in constant fear. Government repression has been directed at Catholic priests, seminarians, churchgoers and lay church staff, and has been directed at leaders of other Christian denominations too. GHREN has also documented cases of harassment, physical and verbal aggression, and criminalization of several evangelical pastors (OHCHR, 28 February 2024).

This is a harsh scenario for those perceived as voicing opposition, especially for political prisoners. As of April 2024 there are [138 political prisoners](#) in the country (Mecanismo para el reconocimiento de personas presas políticas, April 2024). The Committee against Torture has [urged](#) Nicaragua to guarantee the legal safeguards to all persons from the outset of their detention, to adopt necessary measures to prevent acts of violence, and requested those arbitrarily detained to be released, as well as asking Nicaragua to carry out an investigation into these acts and provide appropriate redress to victims (UN Geneva, 25 November 2022). Nonetheless, Human Rights Collective Nicaragua Nunca Más has [documented](#) 158 acts of torture and other forms of degrading treatment used against these prisoners in the period 2018-2022 (Nicaragua Observatory Against Torture - 8th Report, 16 June 2023):

- Extreme and inhumane conditions of detention
- Degrading verbal treatment
- Beatings

- Death threats against them and/or their families
- Temporary enforced disappearance
- Burns, electric shocks, and torture by suspension or "hanging"
- Pulling out nails, and simulated execution or murder
- Other acts such as dragging people, dry and wet asphyxiation, lacerations or cuts with knives, strangulation, threats with weapons, mutilation and similar acts, "Russian roulette," incitement to commit suicide, poisoning by tear gas or fumigation, deprivation of medical care, food and hydration, coercion to ingest drugs, overcrowding, etc.

The situation is no better for religious leaders. The degree of insecurity both outside and within the justice system is so high that many religious leaders, especially from the Catholic Church, have been [forced to flee the country](#) (El País, 31 January 2023). At the beginning of 2024, around 30 priests were [forcibly exiled](#) from the country. This situation has been condemned by organizations such as the IACHR, which has not only called on the Nicaraguan government to [cease persecution](#) against the Catholic Church (IACHR, 15 September 2023), but has also issued "Precautionary measures" in favor of [Catholic](#) (IACHR, 11 October 2023) and [evangelical leaders](#) (IACHR, 25 April 2024).

The ruling party relies on the police and other national security entities to ensure it stays in power, despite any violations of human rights committed by them. In addition to the police, the government has a network of paramilitary groups that follow [political directives](#) (Connectas, accessed 26 August 2022). Additionally, the government has carried out reforms through which greater control over the police, judiciary and the public sector in general has been possible. In the case of the national police, the National Assembly approved [reforms](#) with the goal of "guaranteeing security and preserving internal order." With these reforms, police officers who resign or disobey the orders of their superiors can be punished with a maximum of three years in prison (Asamblea Nacional, 5 July 2023).

According to Human Rights Watch, Human rights defenders, journalists, and critics are [targets](#) of death threats, assaults, intimidation, harassment, surveillance, online defamation campaigns, and, as discussed above, arbitrary detention, prosecution, and loss of nationality ([HRW 2024 Nicaragua country chapter](#)). The police frequently station themselves outside the houses of government critics, preventing them from leaving, in what amounts to arbitrary house arrest. Other tactics include the use of fake accounts with the names of opponents to incriminate them for a crime, large-scale [raids](#) (Nicaragua Investiga, 3 May 2023) and the so-called "security that guarantees peace" surveillance program, through which government officials can enter homes. Many observers believe that the ultimate intention is to implement greater citizen surveillance and to [identify](#) opponents of the government (IP Nicaragua, 9 June 2023). Among the critical voices are several church leaders and other Christians – mainly Catholics. The victims of such actions have no protection; the laws passed in recent years empower the government to criminalize any act that is considered disloyal to the regime.

Christian origins

The Roman Catholic Church was the first Christian denomination in the country, aided by the Spanish colonization. The first church was established by the Franciscans in 1524 in Granada, but the largest amount of missionary work during the colonial period was [carried out by the Jesuits](#) (Encyclopedia.com, Catholic church in Nicaragua, accessed 2 January 2024). Protestant missionary activity (mainly in the eastern part of Nicaragua) began via the Anglican Church in the 1760s, although the influence of the Anglicans dates back to the presence of a few British settlements in the 1620s. Serious efforts to evangelize the Creoles and the Indians in the eastern part of Nicaragua did not begin until the arrival of the United Brethren of Germany (Moravian Church) [in Bluefields in 1849](#) (Moravian Church in Nicaragua, accessed 2 January 2024).

Church spectrum today

Nicaragua: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	0	0.0
Catholic	5,247,000	77.4
Protestant	1,609,000	23.7
Independent	520,000	7.7
Unaffiliated	37,100	0.5
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-638,000	-9.4
Total	6,775,100	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	1,161,000	17.1
Pentecostal-Charismatic	1,477,000	21.8

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world’s 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Pentecostal-Charismatic:** Church members involved in renewal in the Holy Spirit, sometimes known collectively as "Renewalists".

The largest denomination in Nicaragua is the Roman Catholic Church, which is found throughout the country. According to WCD 2024 estimates, 77.4% of Nicaraguan Christians are Catholics. According to internal sources, although it is still very risky to be identified as a committed Catholic in the midst of the repression that exists in the country, the testimony of many religious leaders has motivated both conversion to this denomination and a much more active practice of faith. Protestants and non-traditional evangelical denominations maintain a significant presence in the country, but register a

slight drop in membership numbers, possibly associated with the divergence among some evangelical leaders due to their ambiguous position regarding government abuses; however, many of them are also recognized in society for their opposition voice and support for the most vulnerable in society.

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Nicaragua>
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External Links

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