



Religion

Population

Area

- Christians : **95%**
- Agnostics : **2.6%**
- Spiritists : **1.5%**
- Others : **0.9%**

6,150,000

130,373 Km²

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

The preamble of the constitution^[1] states that it emanates from the Nicaraguan people and in the name, among others, of Christians who, based on their belief in God, have committed themselves to fight for the oppressed.

Article four declares that the state is tasked with promoting human development inspired by Christian values?.

As regards Nicaragua's foreign policy: "All forms of political, military, economic, cultural, or religious aggression and the interference in the internal affairs of other states are forbidden and proscribed."

The nation's principles include recognition of indigenous peoples and those of African descent and respect human dignity and for Christian values.

According to article 14, the state has no official religion.

All people are equal before the law, according to article 27, and the state does not discriminate, among other things, on religious grounds.

Article 29 states: "Everyone has the right to freedom of conscience and thought and to profess or not profess a religion. No one shall be the object of coercive measures which diminish these rights or be compelled to declare his/her creed, ideology or beliefs."

Among various social groups, male and female religious have, according to article 49, the right to establish organisations in order to fulfil their aspirations.

"All persons, either individually or in a group, have the right to manifest their religious beliefs in public or private, through

worship, practices and teachings.” Article 69 states that no one can fail to respect the law by invoking religious beliefs or dispositions.

Education is secular but article 124 recognises the right of private religious schools to teach religion as an extracurricular subject.

Article 134 states that members of the clergy cannot run for president, vice-president or parliament unless they resign their ministry at least twelve months before the election.

Minority communities on the Caribbean coast are guaranteed a high level of autonomy to develop according to their historical and cultural traditions. The preservation of their cultures, languages, religions and customs is also guaranteed in article 180.

Incidents

In August 2016, the government, led by Daniel Ortega, adopted a measure restricting access to the country by religious and cultural groups. “Any cultural mission, Christian group, pastor or other religious who want to enter Nicaragua, must be reported in advance to the immigration authorities. In addition to providing comprehensive information about their visit to the country, they will have to wait to see if they are allowed to enter the territory.” As a result of this, Catholic and Evangelical pilgrims were not allowed into the country.^[2]

That same month, the Nicaraguan Centre for Human Rights filed a complaint with the Minister of the Interior because 41 Franciscan friars from El Salvador were barred from entering the country. The delegation, consisting mostly of older adults, had to stay overnight in the open air on the pretext that under “higher orders, no one coming for religious purposes is allowed to enter the country”.^[3]

In December 2016, Nicaragua’s Catholic bishops met with Luis Almagro, the Secretary General of the Organisation of American States.^[4] The bishops expressed concerns about the country’s socio-political situation.^[5] Monsignor José Silvino Báez said concerns were expressed at the meeting about the deterioration of the country’s institutions and democracy.^[6]

In February 2017, a young woman, Vilma Trujillo García, died from burns after being thrown into a fire in an effort to drive “demons from her”. A group led by Juan Gregorio Rocha, pastor of the Celestial Vision sect, had reportedly ordered the fire to be lit and had thrown her into it to expel “demons from her”. Evangelical pastor Saturnino Cerrato and Monsignor Silvio Fonseca condemned fanaticism and religious extremism.^[7] The monsignor said followers of such groups should know that their leaders cannot manipulate them and that the state cannot allow life to be taken in the name of religion. This is the second case of religious fanaticism in less than two years.^[8]

The government responded in May 2017 by submitting a draft bill to reform the criminal code by adding an article on aggravated murder that would include a penalty for murder committed as a result of group rituals, beliefs or religious fanaticism.^[9]

In December 2017, the Catholic Church rejected a government bill to add Marian festivities to the nation’s historical and cultural heritage, including the day in honour of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, because it would reduce “... the dogma of faith towards the Virgin Mary to the state of popular folklore.”^[10] Eventually, the government gave up on the project.^[11]

In March 2018, the results of a survey by the CCK Central America agency conducted between April and June 2017 on “Who do Central Americans Believe?” were made public. The study found that in the case of Nicaragua, the level of credibility of the Church as the most trusted institution by Nicaraguans stood at around 17 per cent with two members of the clergy picked as the most trusted public figures.^[12]

Following the violent repression of demonstrations against the government in May 2018, there were reports of mortar attacks against Catholic churches that were being used as emergency dispensaries, as well as harassment against the medics who were caring for the injured inside.^[13]

Prospects for Freedom of Religion

Unlike during the previous period, tensions have risen between the government and the Catholic Church. Acts of overt discrimination have occurred, including the measure to restrict access to the country by religious and missionary groups. The violence of May 2018 is another sign of the social tension growing, and of where the churches were playing a mediating and conciliation role, with mixed success. Therefore, the state of freedom of religion has perceptibly deteriorated and the outlook for the future is negative.

Sources / Endnotes

[1] Nicaragua's Constitution of 1987 with Amendments through 2014, [constituteproject.org, http://www.asamblea.gob.ni/informacion-legislativa/](http://www.asamblea.gob.ni/informacion-legislativa/), (accessed 18th May 2018).

[2] 'Daniel Ortega ataca las libertades religiosas y culturales', *Diario Las Américas*, 1st September 2016, <https://www.diariolasamericas.com/america-latina/daniel-ortega-ataca-las-libertades-religiosas-y-culturales-n4101969>, (accessed 9th March 2018).

[3] 'CENIDH solicita aclaración a Ministra de Gobernación', *Centro Nicaragüense de Derechos Humanos (CENIDH)*, 9th August 2016, <https://www.cenidh.org/noticias/920/>, (accessed 16th March 2018).

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[6] I. González, 'Báez; "La represión, igual que en los tiempos de la dictadura de Somoza"', *Religión Digital*, 3rd December 2016, <http://www.periodistadigital.com/religion/america/2016/12/03/baez-la-represion-igual-que-en-los-tiempos-de-la-dictadura-de-somoza-religion-iglesia-nicaragua-ortega-oea.shtml>, (accessed 27th March 2018).

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[8] 'Los peligros del fanatismo religioso', *El Nuevo Diario*, 13th March 2017, <https://www.elnuevodiario.com.ni/opinion/421506-peligros-fanatismo-religioso/>, (accessed 9th March 2018).

[9] Iniciativa de ley de reforma a Ley 641, Código Penal, Costa Rica, article two, <http://legislacion.asamblea.gob.ni/SILEG/Iniciativas.nsf/F83D1B6D44C339A406258133005BC558/%24File/Iniciativa%20d%20Ley>, (accessed 17th March 2018).

[10] L. Navas, 'La Iglesia católica rechaza ley sobre Virgen en Nicaragua', *La Prensa*, 3rd December 2017, <https://www.laprensa.com.ni/2017/12/03/politica/2341039-la-iglesia-catolica-rechaza-ley-sobre-virgen-en-nicaragua>, (accessed 9th March 2018).

[11] 'La religión, el poder y la política', *La Prensa*, 8th December 2017,

<https://www.laprensa.com.ni/2017/12/08/editorial/2343211-la-religion-el-poder-y-la-politica>, (accessed 9th March 2018).

[12] I. González, 'La Iglesia es la institución mejor valorada por los nicaragüenses', Periodista Digital, 11st March 2018, <http://www.periodistadigital.com/religion/america/2018/03/11/religion-iglesia-america-nicaragua-centroamerica-iglesia-institucion-confianza-nicaraguenses-brenes-baez.shtml>, (accessed 12th March 2018).

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