

Nicaragua 2024 Human Rights Report

Executive Summary

The human rights situation in Nicaragua worsened during the year. The government intensified attacks on civil liberties and also violated religious liberty by harassing and detaining churchgoers and religious leaders.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: arbitrary or unlawful killings; disappearances; torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; arbitrary arrest and detention; transnational repression against individuals in another country; serious restrictions on freedom of expression and media freedom, including violence or threats of violence against journalists, unjustified arrests or prosecution of journalists, censorship, and serious restrictions on internet freedom; restrictions on religious freedom; trafficking in persons, including forced labor; significant restrictions on workers' freedom of association; and worst forms of child labor.

The government did not take credible steps to identify and punish officials who committed human rights abuses.

Parapolice – nonuniformed, armed, and masked units with marginal tactical training and loose hierarchy that acted in coordination with government security forces and reported directly to the Nicaraguan National Police and

individuals linked to the government of President Daniel Ortega Saavedra – carried out a campaign of harassment, intimidation, and violence toward perceived enemies of the regime, such as former political prisoners and their families, farmworker activists, prodemocracy opposition groups, human rights defenders, private-sector leaders, clergy, other religious actors, and church-affiliated civil society groups, as well as members of the ruling party who expressed dissent or the will to defect. Authorities did not investigate or prosecute these actions.

Section 1. Life

a. Extrajudicial Killings

There were several reports the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings during the year. Ruling party and parapolice harassment and persecution hindered human rights groups from obtaining information. Nonetheless, human rights organizations and independent media alleged some killings were politically motivated, an allegation difficult to confirm because the government refused to conduct official inquiries.

Reports of killings were common in the North Caribbean Autonomous Region. Human rights groups stated these killings illustrated a continuation of a campaign of terror against Indigenous groups by members or affiliates of the ruling Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) seeking to encroach on and seize land and natural resources from autonomous Indigenous

territories. On March 22, 30 *colonos* (non-Indigenous armed outsiders) attacked an Indigenous community in Amtrukna in the Mayangna Sauni As territory. Colonos fired on unarmed civilians and set fire to several houses. It was difficult to assess the severity of the attack due to the lack of an official investigation.

b. Coercion in Population Control

There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities.

Section 2. Liberty

a. Freedom of the Press

The law provided for freedom of expression, including for members of the press and other media, but the government did not respect this right. Violations concerning press freedom, the absence of an independent judiciary, and a nondemocratic political system combined to obstruct freedom of expression, including for members of media. Independent media faced official and unofficial restrictions. The government penalized arbitrarily those who expressed views counter to the ruling party's ideology.

The government used reprisals and the law to shut down the ability of individuals to criticize the government. Police and parapolice subjected

persons who criticized the government, the ruling party, or its policies, including in discussion of matters of public interest, to surveillance, harassment, imprisonment, and abuse. Favorable expressions of the Catholic religion were severely attacked.

Physical Attacks, Imprisonment, and Pressure

Journalists were subject to government violence, harassment, cyberattacks, and death threats. In addition, the government exiled some media owners and journalists and stripped them of their nationality. Authorities blocked others from leaving or re-entering the country, withdrew their passports, or purposefully did not renew them. According to a July report by the Nicaraguan Independent Journalists and Communicators Group, surveillance, harassment, and persecution by police, parapolice, or FSLN members forced 10 journalists into exile, bringing the total number of journalists in exile to 276 since 2018. According to the same report, no independent news was produced in more than half the country.

On July 9, Nicaraguan National Police (NNP) officers raided the house of Nohelia González, former editor of *La Prensa* newspaper and former contributor to the Catholic television channel and expelled her from the country without a formal accusation or legal process against her.

Authorities detained briefly and released other journalists with the threat they would be imprisoned unless they ceased publishing news counter to

official narratives.

The government seized the property and equipment of media whose licenses had been canceled. The government continued to occupy the offices of *La Prensa*, the weekly newspaper *Confidencial*, and the 100% Noticias television channel.

Censorship by Governments, Military, Intelligence, or Police Forces, Criminal Groups, or Armed Extremist or Rebel Groups

Although the law providing the right to information did not permit censorship, the government and actors under its control retaliated against the press and radio and television stations by blocking transmissions, confiscating recording equipment, blocking reentry to the country, imprisoning journalists and citizens for expressing news and opinions on social media, and committing violence against journalists. Many independent news outlets reported from exile; the few journalists remaining in the country operated clandestinely to avoid censorship, assaults, and threats.

Restrictions on acquiring broadcast licenses and equipment and arbitrary cancellation of licenses prevented media from operating freely.

Independent news outlets, a few of which operated from inside the country but a majority from exile, faced restrictions on gathering information, such as not being permitted to attend official government events, being denied

interviews by government officials, and receiving limited or no direct access to government information. Official media were not similarly restricted.

The government cancelled the operating licenses of six media outlets, including Radio Maria, a radio station with nationwide coverage linked to the Catholic Church. According to the Nicaraguan Independent Journalists and Communicators Group, in the preceding six years the government closed 56 media organizations; in addition, 22 news programs and 13 opinion talk shows ceased operations due to harassment and persecution.

The state exercised considerable influence, ownership, and control over most media outlets. The ruling party merged all official media and private media under their direct ownership under a Communication and Citizenry Council headed by the president and vice president's son, Daniel Edmundo Ortega Murillo. The council served to coordinate targeted messaging by the ruling party and to procure training for staff of these media in China and the Russian Federation or by their in-country "experts." Business associates of the president or his family members largely controlled or directly owned and administered national television outlets. Eight of the 10 basic channels available were under direct FSLN influence or owned and controlled by persons with close ties to the government. Media stations owned by the presidential family generally limited news programming and served as outlets for progovernment or FSLN propaganda and campaign advertisements. Other media operating in the country significantly self-

censored to avoid official retaliation.

A decree obliging all private cable stations to broadcast official television and radio emergency and special interest messaging was in effect and was used regularly, even for nonemergencies. The government obligated independent press to use official media to cover presidential activities and used troll farms – groups of internet commenters paid to manipulate political opinions – both inside and outside the country to amplify its own messaging or attack independent media websites. There were credible reports the government censored online content. A September cybercrime law barred anyone, including those outside the country, from disseminating information that could produce “anxiety” in the public.

Press and human rights organizations claimed the use of state funds for official media, as well as biased distribution of government advertising dollars, placed independent outlets at an extreme disadvantage. Some independent-media owners also alleged the government exerted pressure on private firms to limit advertising in independent media, although other observers believed the lack of advertising resulted from self-censorship by private companies. Many journalists practiced self-censorship, fearing economic and physical repercussions for investigative reporting on crime or official corruption. In addition, media outlet owners exercised self-censorship by choosing not to publish news that affected public perceptions of the government or the FSLN.

Parapolice under the control of the FSLN worked in tandem with the NNP and FSLN neighborhood committees to target, surveil, and curtail any form of expression critical of the ruling party or its policies and interests. In March, NNP officers and parapolice targeted and detained Catholic laypeople participating in Holy Week events, often for publicly expressing the desire for Monsignor Rolando Álvarez's release from prison.

There were credible reports the government monitored private online communications without appropriate legal authority and in some cases censored online content or restricted or disrupted access to the internet. Independent media reported the government provided logistical support for troll farms that routinely carried out cyberattacks against opposition media websites and social media accounts. Trolls and bots reportedly tracked opposition social media accounts to retaliate against users deemed opponents of the ruling party. Paid government supporters used social media and website commentary spaces to harass prominent members of civil society, human rights defenders, individuals affiliated with Catholic dioceses and evangelical churches, and well-known journalists. Indigenous women human rights defenders were attacked online. Anecdotal evidence indicated cases of image-based abuse, doxing, cyberbullying, online gender and sexual harassment, and cyberstalking.

b. Worker Rights

Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining

The law provided for the right of all workers, except the military and police, to form and join unions without prior authorization, to bargain collectively, and to conduct strikes. Nonetheless, workers lived in what the International Labor Organization's Committee of Experts called a "persistent climate of intimidation and harassment of independent workers' and employers' organizations." The government's control of all major unions effectively nullified the right of workers to join independent unions of their own choice. The ruling party used its control over major unions to harass and intimidate workers in several sectors, including construction, education, health care, the public sector, and free trade zones.

Collective bargaining agreements lasted up to two years and were renewed automatically if neither party requested their revision. Collective bargaining agreements in the free trade zone regions, however, were for five-year periods. Companies in disputes with their employees were required to negotiate with the employees' union if one existed. By law, several unions could coexist at any one enterprise, and the law permitted management to sign separate collective bargaining agreements with each union. Although the law established a labor court arbitration process, it was subject to long wait times and lengthy, complicated procedures, and many labor disputes

were resolved out of court.

The constitution recognized the right to strike, with restrictions. The law prohibited antiunion discrimination and provided for the right to reinstatement for workers dismissed for union activity. Burdensome and lengthy conciliation procedures and government control of all major unions impeded workers' ability to call strikes. In smaller businesses where major unions were not present, the government created government-aligned unions to diffuse efforts to organize strikes or other labor actions. In addition, if a strike continued for 30 days without resolution, the Ministry of Labor could suspend the strike and submit the matter to arbitration.

Freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining were not respected, and the government often intervened for political reasons. For example, the government suspended one union and arrested its leader for questioning because the union planned a conference in the country that would have included attendees from an international labor organization. The government did not effectively enforce the laws. The law did not establish specific fines for labor law violations; penalties imposed at the discretion of Ministry of Labor officials were commensurate with those for other laws involving denials of civil rights, such as discrimination. Penalties were sometimes applied against violators.

Politically motivated firings occurred. FSLN party affiliation or letters of recommendation from party secretaries, family cabinet coordinators, or

other party officials allegedly were required from applicants seeking public-sector jobs or retain employment in the public sector. By law, during a strike, employers could not hire replacement workers. Observers noted a sense of impunity when ruling party-aligned employers or unions interfered in the functioning of workers' organizations and committed other violations related to freedom of association and collective bargaining. Labor leaders noted employers routinely violated collective bargaining agreements and labor laws with impunity. Observers accused government-affiliated union federations of protecting employer interests by identifying and isolating workers who attempted to organize independent unions. The government was accused of frustrating attempts to form independent unions through arbitrary procedural delays.

Many employers in the formal sector continued to blacklist or fire union members and did not reinstate them. Many of these cases did not reach the court system or a mediation process led by the Ministry of Labor. Employers also avoided legal penalties by organizing employer-led unions that lacked independence and by frequently using contract workers to replace striking employees. There were reports FSLN party dues were automatically deducted from paychecks. Public-sector staff reported being forced to take weapons training, supposedly to defend the country against another attempted coup.

Forced or Compulsory Labor

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Acceptable Work Conditions

Wage and Hour Laws

The law established a statutory minimum wage for 10 economic sectors. According to independent analysts, the average legal minimum wage covered less than 50 percent of the cost of basic goods.

The standard legal workweek was limited to 48 hours, with one day of rest. The law dictated an obligatory year-end bonus equivalent to one month's pay, proportional to the number of months worked. The law mandated premium pay for overtime, prohibited compulsory overtime, and set a maximum of three hours of overtime per day not to exceed nine hours per week.

Employers often ignored legal limitations on hours worked and would claim workers readily volunteered for extra hours for additional pay. Compulsory overtime was reported in the private-security sector, where guards often were required to work excessive shifts without relief.

Employers often delayed severance payments to fired workers or omitted the payments altogether.

Occupational Safety and Health

There were occupational safety and health (OSH) standards for the countries' main industries. The Ministry of Labor's OSH experts actively identified unsafe conditions and responded to workers' complaints. The Ministry of Labor, through its Office of Hygiene and Occupational Safety, was responsible for enforcing OSH laws. By law, workers could remove themselves from situations that endangered their health or safety without jeopardy to their employment. It was unclear whether authorities effectively protected employees in such cases. The National Council of Labor Hygiene and Safety, as well as its departmental committees, was responsible for implementing worker safety legislation and collaborating with other government agencies and civil society organizations in developing assistance programs and promoting training and prevention activities. According to labor representatives, the council was inactive throughout the year. Companies were required to form worker-management OSH committees.

Safety and health accidents most often occurred in manufacturing, agriculture, and ranching.

Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement

The government generally enforced minimum wage laws in the formal sector but did not effectively enforce overtime and OSH laws. Penalties for

violations of minimum wage and overtime laws were commensurate with those for similar crimes, such as fraud. Penalties were rarely applied against violators.

The law allowed labor inspectors to conduct unannounced inspections and initiate sanctions for violations. There were reports of inspector corruption. The Ministry of Labor was the primary enforcement agency. The government did not allocate adequate staff or other measures to enforce compliance with wage, overtime, or OSH provisions. Penalties for violations of OSH laws were commensurate with those for crimes such as negligence but were rarely applied.

Independent groups estimated the informal sector to be more than 80 percent of the workforce. The government did not enforce labor laws in this sector.

c. Disappearance and Abduction

Disappearance

There were reports of enforced disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities. Various human rights organizations reported the NNP and prison authorities forcibly disappeared political opposition members. These organizations cited many cases in which authorities detained political opponents without informing family members or legal

counsel, without providing information regarding where they were held, without presenting the prisoners in a public court of law and denying all access to legal recourses such as habeas corpus. In at least nine cases, security forces kept political prisoners incommunicado for up to three months, occasionally transferring them to different prisons and to and from hospitals and medical clinics without securing an order from civilian authorities or informing the prisoners' legal counsel or families. Authorities did not publish many of the cases against political prisoners in the judiciary's online information system. Authorities detained, imprisoned, and banished to Rome at least nine priests without informing family members or legal counsel or formally pressing charges against them.

Prolonged Detention without Charges

The law prohibited arbitrary arrest and detention and provided for the right of persons to challenge the lawfulness of their arrest or detention in court. The government, however, generally did not allow those deemed political opposition to challenge the lawfulness of their arrest or detention. In these cases, judges regularly denied or ignored constitutional protections for detainees, including habeas corpus. According to independent nongovernmental organizations, authorities made many detentions based on political decisions made by the president and vice president or a small group of intelligence officers working under their command with the help of FSLN neighborhood committees.

Lengthy pretrial detention was a problem. Many opposition leaders and prodemocracy protesters were detained and held with no charges and without being granted due process. Observers noted that in several instances authorities deliberately imposed lengthy pretrial detentions against specific protest leaders and Catholic clergy.

Police could hold a suspect legally for 48 hours before arraignment or release and the Public Prosecutor's Office could request a judicial order for the NNP to hold suspects for 15 to 90 days if the judge deemed the case complex. A judge then was required to order the suspect released or transferred to jail for pretrial detention. Human rights organizations reported police and parapolice agents routinely detained persons deemed as opposition to the ruling party for longer than the 48-hour window, without fulfilling the requirement of requesting the extension limited to no more than 90 days to continue its investigation. The NNP and penitentiary guards held several prisoners for three to five months before they were arraigned.

The government detained several members of the Roman Catholic Church for extended periods without formal charges. Experts on security affairs claimed a small group of intelligence officers under the direction of Ortega and Murillo led monitoring activities that informed the arbitrary arrests of opposition members, party members who could defect, or disgruntled public-sector staff. On January 1, authorities arrested Carlos Bojorge after

he shouted “Viva la Iglesia Católica” at the end of Sunday mass in Managua. His family was able to identify his place of detention only in June after searching for him throughout the detention centers in the city.

Human rights organizations indicated delays in the release of prisoner after they finished prison terms led to many cases of arbitrary continuation of a state of arrest. On September 5, the government released 135 political prisoners who had been held for prolonged periods and expelled them from the country.

d. Violations in Religious Freedom

See the Department of State’s annual *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

e. Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State’s annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Section 3. Security of the Person

a. Torture and Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

Although the law prohibited such practices, government officials carried out

acts that resulted in severe physical or mental suffering for the purposes of securing information, inflicting punishment, and psychologically deterring other citizens from reporting on the government's actions or participating in civic actions against the government. Torture and mistreatment against prisoners bore similarities to treatment against prisoners released in 2023 that the UN Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua concluded "reached the threshold of torture."

Prison authorities subjected more than 150 prisoners held in the Jorge Navarro "La Modelo" prison to cruel and degrading treatment. Human rights organizations reported the prisoners were intentionally underfed and fed spoiled food, continually interrogated after conviction, subjected to extended periods of darkness or light, deprived of sunlight or kept outside in extreme heat, prevented from speaking, subjected to psychological torment, denied access to reading material and religious objects such as rosaries and bibles, and kept in solitary confinement for extended periods.

A human rights organization that tracked political prisoners reported cell block Captain Rosa Velásquez of the La Modelo prison allowed inhuman treatment of at least 50 political prisoners held in two cell blocks under her custody. The same organization reported prison guards beat prisoners in cell block 300 on August 12-18 for celebrating the news of a public outcry against the flawed elections in Venezuela and named Roberto Guevara, director of La Modelo, as the leader of the guards who attacked the

prisoners.

Human rights organizations reported parapolice forces, prison officials, and police regularly subjected women prisoners to strip searches, degrading treatment, threats, and other violence against women while in custody. One human rights organization reported that in 2023, one of every four women prisoners had been raped while in custody. Family members of prisoners also suffered degrading treatment by police and prison guards during visits, including strip searches, forced squats, and body cavity searches. Prison authorities threatened family members with loss of visiting opportunities or further punishment of the prisoners if they reported acts of torture.

Impunity was a significant problem among police and parapolice forces in reported cases of torture or other abuses. The government made no effort to investigate allegations regime opponents were tortured or otherwise abused.

b. Protection of Children

Child Labor

See the Department of Labor's *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/findings/>.

Child Marriage

The minimum legal ages for marriage were 18 for men and women and 16 with parental authorization. There were credible reports of forced early marriages in some rural Indigenous communities. No information was available on government efforts to address or prevent forced and early marriage.

c. Protection to Refugees

The government did not cooperate with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to refugees, returning refugees, or asylum seekers, as well as other persons of concern. The government provided no updated information on refugees or asylum seekers since 2015.

Provision of First Asylum

The law provided for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and the government had a system for providing protection to refugees. Only the executive branch or the country's embassies abroad could grant political asylum.

d. Acts of Antisemitism and Antisemitic Incitement

The country had a very small Jewish population. There were few reports of

antisemitic incidents.

e. Instances of Transnational Repression

The government engaged in acts of transnational repression.

Threats, Harassment, Surveillance, or Coercion

Exiles in Costa Rica and elsewhere reported harassment and political oppression by parapolice and FSLN sympathizers who crossed the border to target exiles, as well as by intelligence officials within the Nicaraguan embassy in Costa Rica. Certain organizations created by exiles in Costa Rica reported being surveilled outside their offices, with unknown individuals taking photographs of persons entering and exiting their offices.

Additionally, staff members from these organizations reported receiving threatening text messages reminding them of past aggressions against Nicaraguans in Costa Rica.

Family members of opposition members in exile were surveilled, harassed, detained, and wrongfully convicted as part of government attempts to force exiled opposition members to return to the country and face arrest. The government routinely denied these family members access to public documents such as birth certificates of children under joint guardianship or passports. In several cases, authorities demanded that a parent previously exiled by the government be present to request public documents for

children.

Misuse of International Law Enforcement Tools

There were credible reports the regime attempted to misuse Interpol Red Notices for politically motivated purposes as reprisal against individuals it deemed opposition, including against clergy going into exile. For example, opposition leader Douglas Gamaliel Álvarez Morales was extradited to the country from Costa Rica in February after the government entered a Red Notice against him.

Efforts to Control Mobility

There were credible reports authorities attempted to control mobility to exact reprisal against citizens abroad by denying them consular services. Migration authorities inside the country and consular offices abroad denied access to passports to perceived political opponents and their family members, preventing them from traveling to a third country. Migration authorities analyzed incoming flight manifests and international bus line occupant lists to prevent citizens from returning to the country, requiring airlines and bus lines to notify those citizens that authorities would not allow them to return.