



Written by [Angeline Tan](#) on January 10, 2024

Nicaragua's Persecution of Catholics Continues

On January 4, members of the U.S. government's global religious freedom watchdog joined their voices to a rising number of pleas for the liberation of imprisoned Catholic leaders in Nicaragua, arguing that it was time to take legislative action against the Caribbean nation.

Frank Wolf, Commissioner of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), urged Congress to pass the "Restoring Sovereignty and Human Rights in Nicaragua Act of 2023." In part, the bill would increase the American government's ability to sanction officials involved in religious freedom and human-rights breaches.

"We urge the US Congress to help stem these egregious religious freedom violations and hold violators accountable by passing the bipartisan Restoring Sovereignty and Human Rights in Nicaragua Act of 2023," Wolf declared in a statement.

At this point, the bill has only been introduced in the Senate and is sponsored by Republican Senator Marco Rubio of Florida. The bill's co-sponsors are Democratic Senator Tim Kaine of Virginia, and Republican Senator Bill Cassidy of Louisiana.

Kaine urged the Senate to take up the bill in a January 2 statement.

"Bishop [Rolando] Álvarez and others were unjustly detained for standing up for basic freedoms," Kaine posited. "The Senate should take up my bipartisan bills to support the unjustly detained, and hold the Ortega regime accountable for corruption, human rights abuses, and the targeting of faith leaders."

Furthermore, Cassidy on January 3 nominated Bishop Rolando José Álvarez Lagos of Matagalpa, who has been jailed by the Nicaraguan government for more than 500 days, and Nicaraguan opposition leader Félix Maradiaga for the Nobel Peace prize in acknowledgement of their defense of religious freedom.

"For many years, Bishop Álvarez and Félix Maradiaga have been persecuted and falsely imprisoned for being firm and enduring voices for faith and freedom against the Ortega-Murillo regime," Cassidy declared in a statement. "I am honored to stand in support of them as they sacrifice their own freedoms to help preserve the rights of others."

Álvarez was [sentenced to 26 years in prison](#) by the dictatorship of President Daniel Ortega last February on charges of being "a traitor to the country" for the allegedly "undermining national security and sovereignty, spreading fake news through information technology, obstructing an official in the



Ramírez 22 nic/Wikimedia Commons
Bishop Rolando José Álvarez



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performance of his duties,” and “aggravated disobedience or contempt of authority.” Apart from staged photos released by the communist dictatorial regime, little of his health or the conditions in which he is being kept are known, other than what’s seen in staged photos published by the Nicaraguan government.

On January 2, Álvarez was seen receiving a medical checkup in a pink button-down shirt and gray slacks.

Despite international calls for restraint, the Ortega dictatorship has persisted in its crackdown against Catholicism. In the last weeks of 2023, Bishop Isidoro del Carmen Mora Ortega of Siuna, Nicaragua, was arrested allegedly for offering prayers for Álvarez, along with 15 other priests and two seminarians.

According to USCIRF, on Christmas Eve, six former employees of Caritas, an international Catholic charitable group, were handed six-year jail sentences for “dubious” money-laundering charges.

In turn, USCIRF Vice Chair Frederick Davie remarked that the commission was “outraged” by what had taken place. In its 2023 yearly report, the commission recommended the U.S. Department of State to reclassify Nicaragua as Country of Particular Concern for its “systematic, ongoing, and egregious” religious freedom violations.

“USCIRF is outraged that the Nicaraguan government has chosen to continue its brutal crackdown on members of the Catholic Church for speaking out about the religious freedom and human rights violations occurring in the country,” Davis said in a January 4 statement.

“It has become increasingly clear that President Daniel Ortega and Vice President Rosario Murillo are intent on silencing the voice of any individual peacefully following the dictates of their conscience,” he said.

Archbishop Thomas Wenski of Miami, who earlier slammed the Ortega regime as “[off the rails](#),” told the *Crux* news outlet on January 4 that it was hard to comprehend the end goal of the Nicaraguan government’s actions, other than possibly to inculcate fear in the rest of the population.

“You have the Nicaraguan regime hitting the Catholic Church, and probably the reason they’re going after Catholics is that’s a good way to terrorize the population,” Wenski stated. “Because if priests and religious [people] are not protected because of their status in a Catholic country, then the average guy on the street certainly has no protection from oppressive moves.”

Wenski elaborated that it was tough for the government, or anyone, to respond when the goal is unclear.

“If you understood the end game you could say they’re doing this and this because of that. But it doesn’t make any sense what they’re doing, so like I said they’re off the rails,” Wenski said.

Following protests in 2018, the Ortega regime has ousted religious leaders and a Catholic religious order from the country, while Catholic charitable organizations and educational institutions have been forced to shut down.

On August 23, Ortega proclaimed the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), founded by St. Ignatius of Loyola, to be [illegal](#) in Nicaragua. The government also [confiscated](#) all properties belonging to the missionary order.

Additionally, the government forcibly seized control of the Jesuit University of Central America (UCA), blasting it as a “center of terrorism” and alleging that the Jesuits had not adhered to tax laws. The university, situated in the nation’s capital city of Managua, had protected thousands of students who took part in the 2018 protests against the Ortega regime. Together with other universities in Managua,



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UCA served as an epicenter of the demonstrations against Ortega, leading to a harsh government crackdown that killed more than 300 civilians before the protests were quelled.

Opposing the confiscation of their properties and their effective expulsion from Nicaragua, the Jesuits of Central America published a statement from their regional headquarters in El Salvador. “This is a government policy that systematically violates human rights and appears to be aimed at consolidating a totalitarian state,” they announced. “These grave accusations are totally false and unfounded.”

“The de facto confiscation of the UCA is the price to pay for the search for a more just society, for the protection of life, truth and the liberty of the Nicaraguan people, in consonance with the motto: The truth will set you free,” the order declared.

Father Arturo Sosa, S.J., the superior general of the Society of Jesus, [wrote](#) in a letter to Central American provincial Father José Domingo Cuesta, S.J, that with regard to the government seizure of the university, “a fair trial — with impartial justice — would bring to light the truth of the whole plot that the government has been executing, since the youth protests of 2018, against the UCA, against many other works of the Catholic Church and against thousands of institutions of civil society, with the aim of suffocating, closing or appropriating them.”

Besides, the U.S. State Department’s senior Latin America official Brian Nichols condemned Ortega’s confiscation of the university, posting on X: “The confiscation of the Central American University, a symbol of academic excellence and hope for the future of Nicaragua, represents a major erosion of democratic norms and the closing of civic space.”

Twenty-six universities in Nicaragua have now been shut down by the government, with assets seized, since December 2021. UCA purportedly serves around 9,500 students and is one of the country’s most prestigious institutions of higher education.

In another assault on the Catholic religion, Ortega demanded that the bank accounts of several Catholic priests and dioceses [be frozen](#), signifying yet another act in a long track record of persecuting the Catholic Church.

Regarding the bank freeze, Nicaraguan lawyer and researcher Martha Patricia Molina [remarked](#), “This is one more arbitrary action of the dictatorship against the Nicaraguan Catholic Church.... It’s something that is going to be common for more priests and even laypeople.”

Molina explained that since the accounts were suspended, the Nicaraguan police have begun probing targeted priests for alleged money laundering, a charge the dictatorship has spuriously accused the Catholic Church of.

“Although they were not charged at the time their accounts were frozen, the priests are being investigated and possibly in the future they will be charged with the crime of money laundering, which is what the police are investigating at this time,” Molina asserted.

The government’s effort to undermine the Catholic Church financially intensified quickly at the end of May when the government froze all the accounts of the Diocese of Estelí, managed by Bishop Álvarez.

Reportedly, Ortega “took advantage of Alvarez’s link to extend the order to freeze bank accounts to the Diocese of Matagalpa.” From there, “the freeze was extended to the Archdiocese of Managua, and then to the national level, while the Government has not said what the cause is or what it is investigating,” as per reports by the *Havana Times*.

The Nicaraguan National Police issued a statement on May 27 last year lambasting the Catholic Church



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for money laundering and other crimes, which human rights advocates have said have no grounds.

Nicaragua's persecution of the Catholic Church and its own citizens has become so serious that the UN-established Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua (GHREN) [declared](#) that the country's government has perpetuated and persists in perpetuating "crimes against humanity" by perpetrating acts of torture, extrajudicial executions, arbitrary detention, deportation, rape, sexual violence, and repression of political, social, and religious freedoms.

In testimony given in a congressional hearing in the United States in March last year, Sebastian Chamorro — a former presidential candidate in Nicaragua who was kidnapped by police at his house during the night in front of his wife and daughter and who shared prison with Bishop Álvarez — stated that Ortega's regime was bent on suppressing the Catholic Church as it was a voice for justice against Ortega's crimes.



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