nicaragua

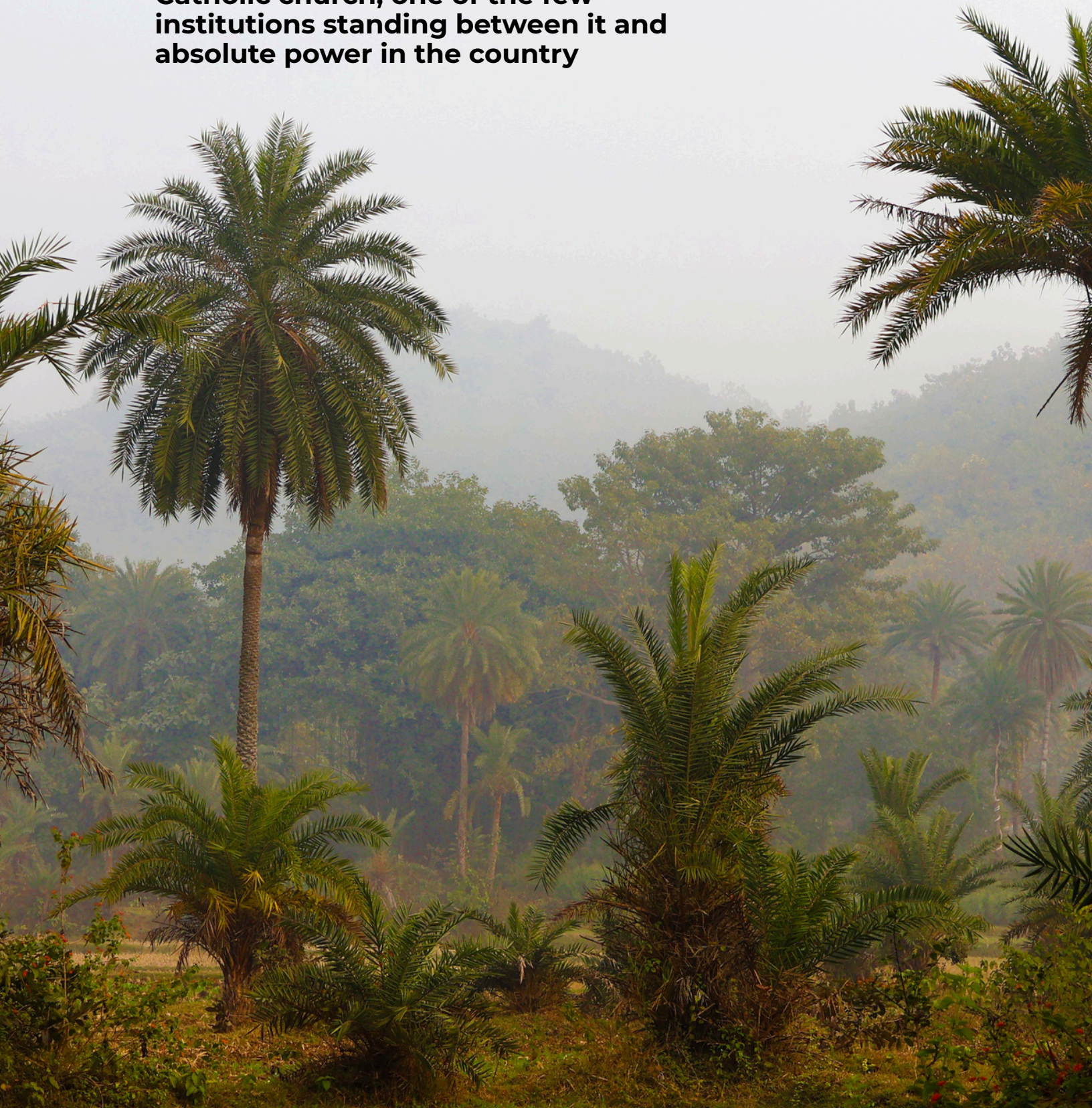
PERSECUTION 101



nicaragua

PERSECUTION 101

The Nicaraguan government has launched an all-out assault on the Catholic church, one of the few institutions standing between it and absolute power in the country



QUICK FACTS

Type of Government
Presidential Republic

Head of Government
President Daniel Ortega

Total Population
Approx. 6.35 million

Religious Demography
50% Catholic - 3.17 mil
33.2% Evangelical Christian
16.8% Other

Ethnic Demography
69% Mixed
15% White
9% Black
5% Indigenous



TYPES OF PERSECUTION

Government Restrictions

The authoritarian Ortega regime has extended its campaign for control to the religious community—especially the Catholic church—which it sees as aligned with pro-democratic forces.



ICC IN NICARAGUA

While ICC does not conduct programming on the ground in Nicaragua—it falls outside ICC's geographic focus area—ICC does participate in networks that help to promote religious freedom in the Central American country.

As one of the lead organizing partners of the 2024 International Religious Freedom Summit in Washington, D.C., ICC helped to highlight persecution issues in Nicaragua to a large audience of civil society organizations and policymakers. Specifically, ICC organized a session dedicated to religious freedom challenges in the region and was able to highlight Nicaragua as an especially concerning case study.



Backgrounder on Religious Freedom in Nicaragua

Nicaragua's Ortega regime has a long list of human rights violations under its belt, not all in connection to religion. In fact, its current crackdown on the Catholic church stems from its violent attempts to quell pro-democracy protests in 2018 and the years following. At that time, government forces were brutally cracking down on student protestors who, seeking respite from the violence, turned to local churches for shelter. The church chose to shield them from the police in many instances, creating tension between the church and the government that continues to worsen to this day.

While the pro-democracy protests have come and gone, the Nicaraguan government's persecution of the Catholic church has steadily increased and only more so in response to the church's outspoken criticism of the regime's sordid human rights record.

In January 2024, days after the regime arrested a bishop, fourteen priests, and two seminarians, Pope Francis issued a condemnation of the Ortega government, a regime he referred to as a "Hitlerian dictatorship" in his remarks. The comments were some of the strongest from the Catholic church and the highest-level condemnation up to that point.

In many cases, the government disbands religious organizations and harasses, arrests, or deports its workers. Though thousands of nongovernmental organizations have lost their legal status due to a murky 2018 law on funding, the Catholic church has been particularly targeted.

In July 2022, Nicaragua expelled 18 nuns from the Missionaries of Charity order, founded by Mother Theresa and active in Nicaragua since 1988. According to the BBC, the nuns were bussed under police escort to the country's southern border and made to walk across into Costa Rica. The Missionaries of Charity were stripped of their legal status in late June, an administrative measure that laid the groundwork for their later expulsion.



Earlier in 2022, the Ortega government expelled the Vatican's ambassador to Nicaragua in a move that drew pointed condemnation from the church.

The U.S. Department of State added Nicaragua to the Special Watchlist (SWL) of countries with particularly severe violations of religious freedom in 2019, a designation that continued until 2022 when it was raised to the Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) list. The latter designation indicates increased concern about the state of religious freedom in Nicaragua and normally carries with it certain legislatively-mandated consequences in the form of sanctions.

"Catholic clergy and laity continued to experience government harassment," said a 2022 State Department publication citing media reports, "including slander, arbitrary investigations by government agencies based on charges that clergy and laity said were unfounded, withholding of tax exemptions, and denial of religious services for political prisoners."

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) similarly began including Nicaragua in its report in 2020, recommending that it be added to the SWL then and upgrading its recommendation to the CPC list in 2023.

Arguing for its CPC recommendation in a 2023 report, USCIRF noted that "despite the high level of persecution against Catholic leaders since protests in 2018, 2022 was the first year in which the government imprisoned members of the clergy."

Resources and Reports

State Department 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom – Nicaragua Chapter

USCIRF 2023 Annual Report – Nicaragua Chapter



PERSECUTION.ORG
INTERNATIONAL CHRISTIAN CONCERN