

INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM



Nicaragua targets Catholics while Brazil Hosts a Ministerial on Religious Freedom

Latin America is seldom mentioned when violations of religious freedom are raised. So it was welcomed news when Brazil offered to host the fourth Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in Brasilia in mid-November 2021. The first two were in-person events held in Washington, DC in 2018 and 2019, hosted by the U.S. Department of State with government and civil society participants coming from about 100 countries. The third ministerial was a virtual event, hosted by Poland in November 2020. The ministerial in Brazil is expected to be a hybrid event with participants engaging in-person and virtually. USCCB is encouraging episcopal conferences in Latin America, particularly Brazil, to engage in this ministerial in order to advance discussion of international religious freedom in the region. Guatemala and El Salvador have launched International Religious Freedom Roundtables and are expected to actively participate in the ministerial.

But problems concerning religious freedom do occur in Latin America. Nicaragua is a case in point. When peaceful protests began in April 2018 in response to a decision to raise taxes and decrease pension benefits, the government's forceful response left at least 19 dead and over 100 missing. Demonstrations continue until today, perhaps reflecting long-standing grievances against the government of President Daniel Ortega as he has taken complete control of the country's military, police, and security forces. Protests have been met with government-sanctioned violence to repress dissent and increasingly the government is targeting the Catholic Church.

Why? President Ortega, who won his fourth term in office in 2016, views the Catholic Church as one of the main institutions resisting his increasingly authoritarian control over the whole country. With elections slated for November 2021, he wants to squelch any opposition so that he and his Vice President and wife, Rosario Murillo, can maintain power.

Catholics make up 46 percent of the population but the Church has played a key role in providing sanctuary, aid, and support to protesters. Initially, given its prestige and well regarded presence, the Church was asked to mediate a National Dialogue between the protesters and the government. During talks, when the Church insisted that it could not turn away demonstrators in need of aid, the Ortega administration began attacking the Church and the mediation failed.

In 2018, the government began harassing clergy, arbitrarily arresting some, defaming the Church as "coup mongers" and "terrorists." In one case, paramilitaries laid siege for 15 hours on a church where priests, students, and media had taken refuge. Bishop Silvio Jose Baez of Managua and other clergy were assaulted while trying to shield protesters. With death threats mounting against him for speaking out in support of human rights, Bishop Baez was recalled to Rome for his safety. Since then, Ortega supporters continued to desecrate Catholic churches, and threaten religious and the faithful. In 2019, the government shut off electricity and water to a church where hunger strikers protesting the detention of family members had sought sanctuary. With mobs surrounding churches and security forces filming, parishioners are now afraid to go to Mass. The government also withheld the delivery of sacramental wine and other goods donated to the Church.

In 2020, for the first time, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom recommended that Nicaragua be added to the Special Watch List. The State Department did the same and its 2019 International Religious Freedom report states that President Ortega and Vice President Murillo "used hateful rhetoric, condoning and inciting harassment, intimidation and physical attacks targeting Roman Catholic clergy, worshippers, and places of worship."



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