

Nicaragua trying to silence the church

Ortega-Murillo dictatorship fears limitations to its power

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In [Nicaragua](#), praying for national freedom can land you in jail. So can publicly supporting an imprisoned priest.

The best-known case is that of Bishop [Rolando Alvarez](#) of Matagalpa. After publicly condemning the regime's human rights abuses, he was sentenced to 26 years in prison. He refused to leave [Nicaragua](#) when first offered exile, becoming an international symbol of peaceful resistance.

Vatican negotiations later secured his release into exile.

His story is not an exception. It is the pattern.

The latest victims of the Ortega-Murillo regime's campaign against the Catholic Church are Bishop Emeritus Juan Abelardo Mata and the Rev. Wilfredo Arauz. In June, Bishop Mata, 80, was detained and later placed under house arrest after celebrating Mass and praying for the persecuted church, Bishop [Rolando Alvarez](#) and the Rev. Frutos Valle.

Days later, Father Arauz, the parish vicar of Esteli, was arrested by hooded political police.

Their cases are part of a systematic campaign to silence the Catholic Church, one of the few institutions in [Nicaragua](#) that still has the moral authority to challenge the regime. As democratic institutions have been dismantled and dissent criminalized, the church has remained a rare independent voice.

Tyrants so often fear faith leaders because they profess their loyalty to one beyond the reach of the state. The church provides people with a place where conscience can resist coercion and truth can still be spoken.

Following the Marx-Lenin-Mao playbook, [Nicaragua](#) has imprisoned and exiled clergy, expelled religious sisters, confiscated Catholic schools and charities, banned religious processions and subjected worshippers to surveillance and intimidation. Rather than demonstrating strength, these actions reveal a government increasingly fearful of independent voices.

The crackdown accelerated after the nationwide protests of 2018, when demonstrations were met with widespread reports of killings, torture, disappearances and arbitrary detention. As churches sheltered protesters and bishops condemned the violence, the regime accused clergy of "terrorism," which is code for denouncing human rights violations and then criminalizing dissent.

These actions have been so outrageous that even the secular world has taken notice, thanks to the important work of human rights activists like Nicaraguan lawyer Martha Patricia Molina. Ms. Molina

meticulously documented hundreds of attacks against the church in her landmark report, “[Nicaragua: A Persecuted Church](#).”

Her work has been presented before the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and cited by the United Nations, the U.S. State Department and leading human rights organizations.

Yet religious persecution is still too often treated as a secondary concern.

That is a mistake.

A government that claims authority over conscience will rarely stop there. Freedom to worship protects the freedom to speak, assemble, educate, serve others and dissent without fear of political retaliation. America’s Founders recognized this when they placed religious liberty at the top of the First Amendment, recognizing that individual rights do not come from government.

Defending religious liberty is not only a concern for believers. It should also matter to anyone who values freedom. The Ortega-Murillo regime shows that when the government denies freedom of conscience, every other liberty is at risk because the persecution of the church is not simply an attack on religion. It is an assault on the principle that there are limits to state power, something authoritarians will never acknowledge.

• *Helen Aguirre Ferre is administrator for government and public policy at Florida International University’s Adam Smith Center for Economic Freedom. This is an updated excerpt of her presentation for the closing panel of the U.S. Department of Justice Religious Liberty Commission in April 2026.*