

With all eyes on Ukraine, Latin American dictators attack religious freedom

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While the world's eyes are fixed on [Russia's invasion of Ukraine](#), repressive regimes closer to the United States, including those of [Nicaragua](#) and [Venezuela](#), are using the authoritarian playbook to undermine democracy by silencing voices of independent civil society, including faith leaders who have spoken out against their destructive ruling ideologies and practices.

Both are undermining constitutional guarantees using vague and contradictory laws, decrees, and bureaucratic tactics to persecute faith communities arbitrarily.

Religious freedom in Nicaragua has come under assault in recent years by President Daniel Ortega and his Sandinista party, as they have tightened their grip on power. When Nicaraguans rose up in anti-government protests in 2018 and were met with a violent crackdown, religious leaders and the Catholic Church, in particular, criticized the excessive response and entered the fray to try to protect peaceful demonstrators, standing with them in the streets and even offering refuge in their churches.

For all of this, these leaders have been subjected to virulent attacks in the media, intimidation, and violence. These practices grossly constitute not only a flagrant assault on independent and peaceful civil society but also on international freedom of religion or belief standards, enshrined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

In Venezuela, which continues to suffer from the worst humanitarian crisis the hemisphere has seen, the Maduro regime's security forces and paramilitary groups have imprisoned, tortured, forcibly disappeared, and extrajudicially executed activists and political opponents. This conduct prompted a United Nations-appointed fact-finding mission to conclude in 2020 that the Maduro regime had perpetrated "crimes against humanity." Six million Venezuelans have left the country seeking better conditions, and of those remaining, 90% live in extreme poverty, with little external assistance reaching them.

Both regimes have used the pandemic as a pretext to repress faith actors. This is no coincidence — we have seen the same attempt to exploit the public health emergency in Cuba. The Cuban dictatorship has also employed the strategy of dividing the faith community, in part by granting privileges to churches and denominations in exchange for their silence about the regime's abuses. Indeed, the Ortega and Maduro regimes

learned many of the tactics they are using from the Cubans, who have also deployed planners, intelligence agents, and security advisers to buttress these criminal regimes.

A closer look at each country reveals more similarities between the regimes' aggression against faith communities and religious freedom in particular.

The Nicaraguan Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, and this right was largely respected through 2010, near the end of Ortega's second term in office. Before the 2006 election, Ortega and Vice President Rosario Murillo, his wife, strategically embraced Catholicism, and in 2011, the Sandinista party adopted Christian symbols in its campaign. But last year, there were numerous reports that the Nicaraguan National Police, along with parapolice groups and ruling party militants, routinely intimidated, harassed, and attacked religious leaders and damaged churches and other religious spaces. Catholic leaders reported institutional harassment and even death threats, and they continue to be subjected to a relentless campaign of defamation and demonization.

The past two years saw a failed national dialogue and the passage of three new laws, a constitutional amendment, and a criminal code reform that allowed the government to punish those with international ties or who engage in activities the state deems are anti-regime. Last year's electoral process was a complete sham that, though widely condemned as unfree and unfair, extended Ortega's hold on power.

Catholic leaders who spoke out against the tyranny or protected victims of police or paramilitaries have continued to be threatened, at times even by Murillo. Some have been forced to leave the country. Many mainstream Protestant and evangelical leaders who experienced government intimidation before 2018 remained critical of the regime, though less publicly.

As in Cuba and Nicaragua, Venezuela's ruling regime has unleashed the full weight of its repressive machinery against its opposition and civil society. As political opponents and activists are jailed, killed, or forced to flee the country, churches and religious networks have grown into the largest component of an independent civil society. And as they have done before and continue to do in other repressive contexts, the faith community has stepped into the role of speaking out against the regime's abuses while offering relief and support to those in need.

Last year, Roman Catholic and evangelical Protestant leaders claimed that the Maduro regime harassed, intimidated, and retaliated against their communities for criticizing the regime and calling attention to the humanitarian crisis. Representatives of the Confederation of Jewish Associations of Venezuela said criticism of Israel in government-controlled or government-affiliated media continued to carry antisemitic overtones, sometimes disguised as anti-Zionist messages.

Disaffected members of Venezuela's faith community have joined forces to confront the humanitarian crisis by creating the Interfaith Social Forum. Made up of Christian and Jewish representatives, it is the independent churches' alternative to the pro-regime Consejo Interreligioso. This mirrors the Cuban Council of Churches, a regime-affiliated

umbrella organization that allows the dictatorship to claim absurdly that there is religious freedom in Cuba.

In both Nicaragua and Venezuela, incompetence and corruption have done much to contribute to the humanitarian crisis. Sadly, the Ortega and Maduro dictatorships have made recovery more difficult by forcing churches and faith-based organizations to operate behind the scenes, further limiting their effectiveness as humanitarian actors.

With more training support and advocacy from regional stakeholders, such as influential neighboring countries, the Organization of American States, and the U.S., plus the European Union and the U.N., faith-based actors can play a more effective role in monitoring and reporting on human rights violations and in promoting nonviolent action and national dialogue. None of this is possible, however, without the ability to exercise religious freedom and interrelated rights such as freedom of assembly and freedom of expression.

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