News



A poster featuring Bishop Rolando Álvarez and Pope Francis hangs inside the Cathedral in Matagalpa, Nicaragua, Aug. 19, 2022. Five Catholic priests were sentenced to 10 years in prison in Managua, on Monday, Feb. 6, 2023, accused of "conspiracy", including four who worked alongside the also detained bishop of the diocese of Matagalpa, Álvarez. (AP Photo/Inti Ocon, File)

by The Associated Press

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A Nicaraguan court has sentenced four Roman Catholic priests to 10 years in prison on conspiracy charges stemming from long-standing government allegations that the church backed illegal pro-democracy protests.

A human rights group in the Central American country quickly denounced the sentences handed down Feb. 6 and made known by lawyers of the Legal Defense Unit.

It was the latest chapter in a crackdown on the church by President Daniel Ortega.

On Feb. 5, a fifth priest was sentenced to 10 years in prison on the same charges.

The priests were convicted in closed-door trials in which government-appointed defenders acted as the priests' attorneys.

Those sentenced Feb. 6 had worked with Matagalpa Bishop Rolando Álvarez, and one had been rector of the privately run Juan Pablo II University in the capital of Managua.

Álvarez is under house arrest on charges of conspiracy and "damaging the Nicaraguan government and society," and is set to be sentenced soon.

Two seminary students and a cameraman who worked for the diocese were also sentenced Monday. All six of the defendants were arrested last year, and all were stripped of the right to ever hold political office.

The Nicaraguan Human Rights Center described the sentences as "a legal aberration."

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"This is an insult to the law, an insult to people's intelligence, an insult to the international community and the international agencies for the protection of human rights," the center said in a statement Feb. 7.

Álvarez, the bishop, had been a key religious voice in discussions of Nicaragua's future since 2018, when a wave of protests against Ortega's government led to a sweeping crackdown on opponents.

On Feb. 5, Fr. Óscar Danilo Benavidez, a priest in Mulukuku in northern Nicaragua, was sentenced for conspiracy and spreading false information. He had been arrested Aug. 14.

The government arrested dozens of opposition leaders in 2021, including seven potential presidential candidates. They were sentenced to prison last year in quick trials that also were closed to the public.

Ortega has contended the pro-democracy protests were carried out with foreign backing and with the support of the Catholic Church. Last year, he expelled the nuns from Mother Teresa’s Sisters of Charity religious order and the papal nuncio, the Vatican’s top diplomat in Nicaragua.

Last August, Pope Francis told thousands of people gathered in St. Peter’s Square that he was closely following with "worry and sorrow" events in Nicaragua that involve "persons and institutions." He didn’t mention the detentions of the priests or Álvarez.

"I would like to express my conviction and my hope that through means of open and sincere dialogue, one can still find the bases for respectful and peaceful co-existence," the pope said.

Ortega, a former Marxist guerrilla who first came to power in 1979 after the Sandinista revolutionary group he helped lead overthrew the dictatorship of President Anastasio Somoza, infuriated the Vatican in the 1980s. But he gradually forged an alliance with the church as he moved to regain the presidency in 2007 after a long period out of power.

Then just days before he was elected to a fourth consecutive term last year, he accused the nation’s Catholic bishops of having drafted a political proposal in 2018 on behalf “of the terrorists, at the service of the Yankees.” He also labeled the bishops themselves as terrorists.