News



Bishop Rolando José Álvarez Lagos of Matagalpa, Nicaragua, a frequent critic of Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega, prays at a Catholic church in Managua May 20, 2022. Álvarez was arrested in August and was formally charged during an unannounced Dec. 13 court date. (CNS photo/Maynor Valenzuela, Reuters)

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Imprisoned Nicaraguan Bishop Rolando Álvarez has been nominated for the European Parliament's top human rights award, reflecting the international attention the prelate has received for defending religious freedom and becoming the face of resistance in an increasingly totalitarian country.

Álvarez, along with Nicaraguan lawyer and human rights defender Vilma Núñez de Escorcia, were nominated for the 2023 Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought.

The prize honors "exceptional individuals and organizations defending human rights and fundamental freedoms," according to the European Parliament. It was awarded in 2022 to the people of Ukraine.

The pair of Nicaraguan nominees were backed by Tilly Metz, a member of the European Parliament from Luxemburg, and 42 colleagues.

The Sept. 20 nomination announcement said: "Núñez has been fighting for the human rights of Nicaraguans for decades. Despite persecution, she remains in her country. Álvarez, Bishop of Matagalpa, has been one of the most outspoken critics of President Daniel Ortega’s regime. In February 2023, after refusing to leave the country, he was sentenced to 26 years in prison and his nationality was suspended."

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Núñez, 84, founded the Nicaraguan Human Rights Center in 1990 and sat on the country’s high court. But she has battled both the dictatorship of Anastasiao Somoza, who was toppled by the Sandinistas in a 1979 revolution, and later the Ortega regime. She remains in Nicaragua, but had her nationality revoked in February.

Álvarez remains in prison after being sentenced in February to 26 years behind bars on charges of conspiracy to undermine national integrity and spreading false information.

The sentence followed a trial held in secret in which he was unable to choose his own lawyer. It also followed the expulsion of 222 political prisoners, who were sent

to the United States Feb. 10. Álvarez refused to go into exile.

The bishop continues refusing to abandon the country – with media reporting in July that he had been removed from prison for a possible exile but he didn't want to leave Nicaragua.

His exact condition remains uncertain.

The Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought – named for the Soviet physicist, dissident and Nobel laureate Andrei Sakharov – was first awarded in 1988 and comes with a 50,000 euro ($52,674) endowment.

The European Parliament will name the winner Oct. 19 – with the award bestowed Dec. 13 in Strasbourg, France.

Other 2023 nominees included businessman Elon Musk for championing "freedom of expression”; the late Mahsa Amini, an Iranian women protesting her death at the hands of the authorities for not wearing the hijab correctly; Afghan education activists Marzia Amiri, Parasto Hakim and Matiullah Wesa, who have challenged prohibitions on schooling for girls and founded Afghanistan's largest network of secret home schools.