

Nicaraguan bishops call for peace, recount after contested elections

MANAGUA, Nicaragua – Amid recent violent protests over the results of municipal elections in Nicaragua, the country's bishops have called for peace and a recount of votes.

Archbishop Leopoldo Brenes Solorzano of Managua said that “people feel defrauded” over the Nov. 9 election results, which favored supporters of leftist Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega.

In the elections, Ortega allies were declared winners in 94 of 146 municipalities, including the capital, Managua, and the second-largest city, Leon. But government opponents have charged that results in many cities were rigged, based on irregularities in tallies and the fact that the government excluded foreign and many local election observers.

Church leaders have organized a procession for peace to coincide with the Nov. 23 feast of Christ the King.

“We oppose all types of violence, wherever it comes from, since the church is the first one who wants peace,” the Nicaraguan bishops’ conference said in a letter.

The bishops said the ongoing violence “renews deep wounds which, with much effort and good will, our people had been overcoming.”

However, pro-government radio stations called the procession a political march in disguise.

“What are they doing in politics?” Gustavo Porras, a pro-government member of parliament, asked about the bishops. “They are for spiritual things.”

Emmett Lang, vice president of the Supreme Electoral Council, said the bishops committed a “mortal sin” and promoted street violence by pointing out alleged irregularities in the vote count.

Government officials have accused critics, including the church, of obeying foreign interests. The European Union, the United States and the Organization of American States have expressed concerns about the election results.

Unlike some other leftist leaders in Latin America, Ortega began his presidency with warm relations with the Catholic Church. During his campaign, Ortega's party supported legislation banning abortion in all instances, helping it to become law. He also apologized for offenses committed against the Catholic Church during his first presidency in the 1980s.