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Argentina's fight to hold onto religious freedom

Baptist pastor says pressure on Church is increasing

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https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2014/05/article_3125918.html/ - An Argentinian pastor subjected to death threats says his country is facing a fight to retain its religious freedom.

Marcelo Nieva, 34, leader of Pueblo Grande Baptist Church in Río Tercero, a city in Argentina's central Cordoba region, says the pressure on his church has increased following the introduction of a law last year that was supposed to safeguard religious freedom but that the pastor says is having the opposite effect.

"The law is a threat to all Christian freedom in Argentina," Nieva told World Watch Monitor. "At first it is affecting only our church, so people don't understand the danger of it. But we know how dangerous it is because we are living through it."

Although it is only a provincial law, meaning it only applies to the state of Cordoba, [Argentina's Law 9891](#) was created as 'a programme to achieve early detection and prevention of any situation of psychological manipulation, and to provide assistance to victims of manipulation.' On the surface it seems helpful but Nieva says that since the introduction of the law in August last year, the lives of his wife Janet, 23, and their one-month-old daughter Marta have been threatened, and that the pressure on his church, the majority of whose members are former drug addicts and prostitutes, has increased.

The law is intended to prevent the psychological manipulation of others, but Nieva says that it is being abused and applied to religious organisations. For example under Article 3 the law states 'Groups that use psychological manipulation techniques: [include] all organizations, associations or movements that exhibit a great devotion or dedication to a person, idea or thing, and which employ, in their dynamic recruitment or indoctrination, coercive persuasion techniques that promote the destruction of the previous personality'. Following the introduction of the law, Nieva says his church continues to be denounced by politicians, the police and local newspapers as a "controversial sect".

As a result, Nieva says "hatred" is growing against his church in the local community and that in response the police regularly attack the church, smashing windows and ransacking church property.

However, Dennis Pastoor, an analyst for Open Doors International, which works to support Christians under pressure for their faith worldwide, said in this case there is an increasing lack of understanding what religion is about, and that government authorities should not interfere too much in the church sphere.

Pastor Nieva says the pressure on his church existed before the introduction of the law, but that it has since increased. He says that in the past three years, 100 of the church's 150 members have fled because of the pressure against them.

In November last year, protests were staged by a support network for the Protestant Church in Argentina (Confederación Evangélica Bautista Argentina) against the law and

against the pressure on Pueblo Grande. But Nieva says these protests only increased the pressure on the church.

Now, the pastor says he no longer prays for an end to the pressure on his church. Rather, he says he prays for peace and joy in the midst of his anguish.

"For a long time we hoped that a miracle would happen: that the persecution would stop," he said. "But the true miracle is that we can have peace and joy in our hearts while it continues."

And Nieva, who has changed address many times to safeguard his family, says that nothing will stop his work.

"I really love people and believe that the pastor's role is to father people," he said. "There is a generation of people here without fathers. God needs people to father them, to embrace them and to cry with them."
