

World Report 2025 - Venezuela

In the lead-up to Venezuela's July 28 presidential elections, authorities intensified repression, targeting human rights defenders and opposition members with arrests and disqualifications, and tightening restrictions on civic space.

Following the election, international monitors raised serious concerns about the electoral council's claim that Nicolás Maduro was re-elected. As thousands of protesters took to the streets, authorities responded with a brutal crackdown, including killings, arrests and other broader repressive tactics.

Over 20 million Venezuelans live in multidimensional poverty with inadequate access to rights-essential goods and services, including food and essential medicines. Many are forced to adopt extreme survival strategies, including fleeing the country. Roughly 8 million Venezuelans have left since 2014.

Elections

On July 28, Venezuelans voted in the presidential election in large numbers, despite [irregular government actions and human rights violations](#), including arrests of opposition members and arbitrary [disqualifications](#) of opposition candidates, such as opposition leader Maria Corina Machado.

On the night of the election, Venezuela's electoral council [declared](#) that incumbent Nicolás Maduro had won the election with over 51 percent of the vote. To date, the council has not released the precinct-level tally sheets from the election, nor conducted the electoral audits or citizen verification processes required by law.

The [United Nations Panel of Electoral Experts](#) and the [Carter Center](#), which observed the elections in Venezuela at the request of the electoral authority, said the process lacked transparency and integrity and questioned the declared results. They granted credibility to the precinct-level tally sheets that the opposition made public which, according to the [Carter Center](#), indicated that opposition candidate Edmundo González had won the election by a significant margin.

On September 2, a judge issued an [arrest warrant](#) against González for “conspiracy,” “incitement to disobedience” and other crimes. González was forced to flee the country.

The [United Nations](#), the [Organization of American States](#), the [European Union](#), the [United States](#), and several Latin American and European governments urged Maduro to release the precinct-level tally sheets, carry out an “impartial verification” of the results, and respect the will of the people.

The governments of Colombia, Brazil, and Mexico have promoted talks with the Venezuelan government, with limited results.

Repression of Dissent

Venezuela experienced a [ramp-up in repression](#) ahead of the election, including arrests of opposition members—many of whom remain arbitrarily detained, their whereabouts unknown—arbitrary disqualifications of opposition candidates, and efforts to further restrict civic space.

In January, the government [launched](#) a so-called “Bolivarian Fury” plan with the alleged aim of preventing coup attempts. Shortly after, unidentified people vandalized the offices of media outlets, civil society groups and opposition parties. From December 2023 to March 2024, at [least 48 people](#),

including members of the military, human rights defenders, journalists, and members of the political opposition, were detained for alleged conspiracy.

Following the announcement of election results, thousands of protesters took to the streets in largely peaceful protests to demand a fair counting of the votes. People, including [in low-income areas](#) traditionally supportive of Chavismo—the political movement created by the late president, Hugo Chávez—protested in large numbers. Authorities responded with [violence and widespread abuses](#), including killings, arbitrary detention and prosecution, and harassment of critics.

Human Rights Watch received credible reports of 23 killings of protesters and bystanders and identified evidence linking security forces and pro-government armed groups known as “colectivos” with several of these killings. The local pro bono group Foro Penal, [reported](#) over 1,900 “political prisoners” who have been arrested since July 29, including 42 adolescents, aged 14 to 17, who remained behind bars by the end of November. These arrests contribute to a total of 17,882 politically motivated arrests since 2014, according to Foro Penal.

Many of the arrests occurred as part of a security forces operation that the government calls “Operation Knock Knock” ([Operación Tun Tun](#)), which involves mass detentions of protesters, targeted arrests of critics, and [the use of social media by government and security forces](#) to instill fear in the population. The government also [encouraged](#) citizens to report on demonstrators through apps like Ven App, and security forces conducted abusive raids, especially in low-income communities.

Prosecutors have charged hundreds with sometimes broadly defined crimes carrying harsh sentences, such as “incitement to hatred,” “resistance to authority,” and “terrorism.”

Detainees are often kept in incommunicado detention for weeks, have been denied the right to be represented by a private lawyer of their choosing, and have been presented at virtual hearings, which poses significant problems for the fair administration of justice. Some, including adolescents, have [reportedly](#) been beaten and subject to other ill-treatment in custody.

The office of the [UN Secretary General](#), the [UN High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) (OHCHR), the [Inter-American Commission on Human Rights](#) (IACHR), the [UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela](#) (FFM) and some [UN independent experts](#) criticized the post-electoral repression. The FFM said the government operated in a “deliberate manner” and deployed “the harshest and most violent mechanisms of its repressive apparatus” generating a “widespread climate of fear among the population.”

Impunity

The judiciary stopped functioning as an independent branch of government in 2004, when then-President Chávez passed a judicial reform and packed the Supreme Court with his supporters. The Court has since [supported](#) the executive branch in repression of critics. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) [reported](#) persistent delays in the investigations into deaths that occurred during protests and in security operations and said that investigations “have not addressed the chain of responsibility.”

On February 15, the Venezuelan government [announced](#) its decision to suspend the activities of the OHCHR in the country. This decision came after the office [expressed concern](#) regarding the detention of renowned human rights defender Rocío San Miguel, noting it could amount to an enforced disappearance.

On March 1, an International Criminal Court appeals chamber [authorized](#) the court’s prosecutor to resume his office’s investigation into alleged crimes against humanity in Venezuela. The prosecutor [set up an office](#) in Caracas to facilitate assistance to Venezuelan authorities should they carry out their own investigations.

In September, a judge in Argentina [summoned](#) and [issued arrest warrants](#) against Nicolás Maduro, his Minister of Interior, Diosdado Cabello, and over a dozen other government officials and members of the security forces, to secure their testimony in a case filed against them under the principle of [universal jurisdiction](#) for alleged crimes against humanity.

In October, the UN Human Rights Council passed a [resolution](#) proposed by several regional governments—Canada, Argentina, Chile, Ecuador, Guatemala, Paraguay, and Uruguay—[renewing the FFM’s mandate](#) for a two-year period. The Council asked the FFM to investigate post-electoral repression including violence by “colectivos.”

Attacks on Human Rights Defenders

Repressive measures against the work of human rights defenders were reported throughout 2024, with over 592 attacks [registered](#) in the first half of 2024, a 92 percent increase compared to the same period in 2023.

Since the July 28 election, authorities have canceled the passports of human rights defenders, critics, political leaders, and independent journalists, preventing them from leaving the country. By August, the IACHR [reported](#) 36 cases. The total number is likely higher.

On August 15, the government-controlled National Assembly [approved](#) a bill granting the government extensive control over the operation and financing of nongovernmental organizations. The bill, which at time of writing Maduro had yet to sign into law, requires all organizations operating in the country to register and submit detailed documents to the executive branch. It includes vague “prohibitions,” “offenses,” and grounds to dissolve these groups, severely undermining freedom of association.

At time of writing, human rights defenders Rocío San Miguel, detained at Caracas Airport in February, and Javier Tarazona, arrested in July 2021, among others, remained in prison.

Freedom of Expression

The authorities have stigmatized, harassed, and repressed the media, often closing critical outlets.

Espacio Público, a free-speech group, [registered](#) 507 violations to the right of freedom of expression occurring between January and August, including cases of intimidation (168), censorship (101) and judicial harassment (65). Most cases were registered in July, in the context of the elections. In the same period, Espacio Público reported that security forces detained at least 19 press workers, the national telecommunications authority closed 15 radio stations, and government authorities blocked at least 35 digital news and NGO websites, political content platforms, as well as [platforms](#) such as X, [Wikipedia](#) and the encrypted messaging app Signal.

Humanitarian Emergency

Over 20 million Venezuelans, out of a population of 28.8 million, live in multidimensional poverty due to economic precarity and poor public services, having irreversibly lost their means of support and subsistence, and 14.2 million face severe humanitarian needs, according to the independent platform of civil society organizations [HumVenezuela](#).

By March, the Venezuelan humanitarian organization Convite estimated that at least some essential medicines were unavailable at 28.4 percent of pharmaceutical dispensaries in the country, and several of those available were unaffordable to many.

Venezuelans face hunger, which affects [5.1 million people](#). The UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food [identified](#) economic sanctions and the political instrumentalization of state food programs as factors hindering the realization of the right to food.

The ongoing humanitarian crisis forces many to adopt extreme [survival strategies](#), such as stretching their budget, increasing their workload, skipping meals, exchanging goods for sex, or fleeing the country.

As of early December, the UN [Humanitarian Response Plan](#) remained underfunded, at less than 28 percent.

Refugee Crisis

Roughly [8 million Venezuelans](#) have left the country since 2014, of whom about 6.5 million relocated within Latin America and the Caribbean. After the election, [43 percent](#) of Venezuelans surveyed were considering leaving the country, according to a local poll. Some people have already fled the country, including politicians, members of polling stations and voters.

A mix of factors causes Venezuelans to flee, including harsh economic conditions and persecution.

[Movement restrictions](#) in other countries such as visa requirements, some promoted by the US, as well as [limited access to asylum and regularization](#), [poor integration programs and discrimination](#) and [xenophobia](#) in neighboring countries drive many into dangerous routes such as the [Darién Gap](#), a dangerous jungle on the Colombia-Panama border, where they are exposed to abuse. Between January and October, over 198,000 Venezuelans crossed the Gap.

Armed Groups

Armed groups—including the National Liberation Army (ELN), the Patriotic Forces of National Liberation (FPLN), and groups that emerged after the demobilization of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)—operate mostly in border states, brutally enforcing regulations governing everyday activities.

“Colectivos,” criminal groups, and armed groups [reportedly](#) intimidated opposition candidates and voters during the electoral campaign, particularly in border and mining areas.

Women’s and Girls’ Rights

Abortion is criminalized except when the life of the pregnant person is at risk.

Access to sexual and reproductive health services for women and girls, including maternal care, family planning, and access to contraception remains inadequate.

The Center for Justice and Peace (Cepaz), an NGO, [documented](#) 127 femicides and 51 attempted femicides between January and September. The government has not released data on femicides since 2016.

Indigenous Peoples’ Rights

Indigenous peoples continue to “lack resources and access to adequate food,” according to a [UN expert](#), and are [disproportionally](#) impacted by “malnutrition, extreme poverty, as well as exposure to diseases and environmental degradation in part due to extractive activities within their

territories.” Illegal mining activities and violence due to the presence of armed and criminal groups in their territories have forcibly displaced many Indigenous communities.

Mining, along with agriculture, is one of the most significant [drivers of deforestation](#) in the Venezuelan Amazon. Security forces reportedly collaborate with illegal miners, including by providing mercury for gold mining, and targeting civilians with disproportionate use of force. Illegally mined Venezuelan gold is [trafficked](#) to Brazil, Colombia, and the Dominican Republic and then [exported](#) to other destinations.