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USDOS – US Department of State

2017 Report on International Religious Freedom - Venezuela

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion on the condition its practice does not violate public morality, decency, or public order. On November 9, the government’s recently established Constituent Assembly, which the opposition and much of the international community considers illegitimate, passed an “anti-hate” law. Some members of religious groups said the government could use the law to persecute dissidents, including those who had encouraged their parishioners to exercise their voting rights in a July 16 “national consultation” (referendum) rejecting the Constituent Assembly. Several religious organizations described continued difficulties and delays with government bureaucracy when seeking to register or gain approval for new internal statutes. One religious group attributed a five-year delay in official approval of its statutes to political factors; the application was still pending by the end of the year. Evangelical Council of Venezuela (ECV) and Catholic Church-affiliated National Laity Council (CNL) representatives said the government retaliated against their personnel and facilities because of the ECV’s and CNL’s stance against the government’s plans to rewrite the constitution and for continuing to call attention to the country’s humanitarian crisis. Representatives from the Confederation of Jewish Associations of Venezuela (CAJV) stated that criticism of Israel in government-owned or -affiliated media carried anti-Semitic overtones, sometimes disguised as anti-Zionist messages. Government-owned or -associated media and government supporters at times denied or trivialized the Holocaust.

Catholic Church leaders said progovernment, armed civilian gangs took hostage the Archbishop of Caracas, Cardinal Jorge Urosa, and a group of parishioners celebrating Mass in El Carmen Church in Catia, a Caracas neighborhood, on July 16, the day the political opposition organized a “national consultation” (referendum) vote. The Episcopal Conference of Venezuela and national media reported the gang shot and killed Xiomara Scott, a woman waiting to vote at a polling station located on the same church’s grounds. Catholic Church representatives described the attack as retaliation for the Church’s opposition to government policies.

Government officials did not respond to U.S. embassy requests for meetings on religious freedom issues. The embassy maintained close contact with a wide range of religious groups including the Jewish, Muslim, evangelical Protestant, and Catholic communities, who provided embassy personnel with frequent updates and news alerts.

Embassy representatives and these groups discussed government registration procedures and delays, harassment by government and progovernment, armed civilian gangs, the media environment, and anti-Semitism.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 31.3 million (July 2017 estimate). The U.S. government estimates that 96 percent of the population is Roman Catholic. The remaining population includes evangelical Christians, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah’s Witnesses, Muslims, Bahais, and Jews.

The ECV estimates 17 percent of the population is Protestant, with a majority being members of evangelical churches. Mormons estimate their numbers at 167,000. The Muslim community numbers more than 100,000 and consists primarily of persons of Lebanese and Syrian descent living in Nueva Esparta State and the Caracas area. Sunnis are the majority, with a minority Shia community primarily in Margarita Island in Nueva Esparta State. According to the Bahai community, its membership is approximately 20,000. According to CAIV, the Jewish community numbers approximately 9,000, with most members living in Caracas.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion on the condition that the practice of a religion does not violate public morality, decency, or public order. A 1964 concordat governs relations between the government and the Holy See and provides for government funding for Catholic Church-run schools. On November 9, the Constituent Assembly, which the opposition and much of the international community considers illegitimate, passed the “Constitutional Law against Hate, for Political Coexistence and Tolerance,” criminalizing acts for incitement to hatred or violence. The government published the law in its official gazette on November 11. Individuals who violate the law face 10 to 20 years in prison. For businesses, including media outlets, penalties run from large fines, to the revocation of licenses, or the blocking of web pages. Political parties violating the law will lose their registration before the National Electoral Council. The law includes 25 articles that stipulate a wide array of directives, restrictions, and penalties. Press coverage focused primarily on the law’s impact on the media, but artists, activists, and civil society and religious leaders may be affected. The law criminalizes political party activities promoting “fascism, intolerance, or hatred” regarding numerous factors including religion. It also criminalizes individual acts promoting violence or “hatred;” the publication or transmission of any messages promoting violence or hatred by any media outlet; and the publication of messages promoting violence or “hatred” on social media by individuals or media outlets.

The Directorate of Justice and Religion (DJR) in the Ministry of Interior, Justice, and Peace (MOI) maintains a registry of religious groups, disburses funds to religious organizations, and promotes awareness and understanding among religious communities. Each religious group must register with the DJR to acquire legal status as a religious organization. Registration requires declaration of property belonging to the religious group, identification of any religious authorities working directly for the group, and articles of incorporation. The government requires religious groups to demonstrate how they will provide social services to their communities and to receive a letter of acceptance from the government-controlled community council in the neighborhood(s) where the group will work. The MOI reviews applications and may delay approval indefinitely. Religious groups must register any new statutes with the DJR.

The law neither prohibits nor promotes religious education in public schools.

The law provides for Catholic chaplains to minister to the spiritual needs of Catholics serving in the military. There are no similar provisions for other religious groups.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

ECV and CNL representatives said the government retaliated against church leaders and clergy members who made antigovernment statements, including imposing new registration requirements and delaying the processing of registration applications.

The ECV stated that the DJR imposed arbitrary requirements that delayed registration. The MOI had not approved the ECV's new internal statutes by the end of the year. ECV sources identified the U.S.-based religious group New Tribes Mission's (NTM) status as the basis for the MOI's actions and noted the MOI continued to withhold ECV's registration approval even after the ECV removed NTM from the ECV's council membership, redesignating NTM simply as an ECV member. The government banned the NTM in 2005 when then president Hugo Chavez expelled it, claiming the CIA supported it and provided cover for its activities.

The ECV also said the government retaliated against its organization because it opposed some government policies. In January the ECV declined an invitation from the minister of education to attend a meeting that the ECV said the government had organized as a show of support for its plan to establish a constituent assembly, an institution with broad governing powers, including the authority to rewrite the constitution. The ECV afterward denounced the government's plan on social media. ECV sources said the government subsequently denied the visa applications of foreign ECV pastors coming to visit the country and continued to block ECV's registration request. ECV sources reported that in March, President Nicolas Maduro presented a draft decree to ECV

representatives to change all churches from private to public entities, which the ECV source said would increase the government’s control over them. The government did not enact the decree.

Some members of religious groups, including the ECV and Catholic Church, said the government could use the new “hate law” to persecute anyone who opposed the Constituent Assembly. Despite the law’s stated intent to protect against acts of religious hatred, both ECV and CNL sources expressed concern the government would use the new law to persecute religious leaders who took a political stance counter to the government, including those who publicly encouraged the rejection of the Constituent Assembly.

Speaking during a November 20 interview, Caracas Archbishop Cardinal Urosa stated that the government would target him and other Catholic priests who had encouraged their parishioners to participate in an opposition-led July 16 referendum against the Constituent Assembly. Catholic Church sources stated that after the CNL criticized the government’s holding of what it termed a flawed election process to create a constituent assembly on July 30, the government revoked the visas of foreign priests assigned to the Guarenas diocese in Caracas. CNL sources also said officers of the government intelligence service (SEBIN) threatened the Archbishop of Barquisimeto on January 20 as he officiated at a Mass in Altagracia Church in Barquisimeto, Lara State. They said SEBIN officers moved to the vicinity of the Altagracia Church, presumably awaiting Archbishop Lopez Castillo, the Archbishop of Barquisimeto. Speaking during an interview following the January 20 events, Castillo said, “I presume they did this because I said [during a January 14 homily] there are Venezuelans eating from the trash and that most of our country does not believe in this failed socialist communism. They want me to silence my voice.” According to the CNL source, the Observatory for the Rights to Religious Freedom and Worship in Venezuela, a nongovernmental organization, reported Castillo’s statement caused concern among government officials. The source stated First Vice President of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) Diosdado Cabello said, “You [priests] cannot go to a Mass as you were going to a political rally, they cannot, they should not do it. It is very ugly and will provoke someone to stand up in the middle of Mass to tell them off.”

Representatives of the Archdiocese of Caracas reported government security forces arrested 20 youths from the San Rafael Parish in Libertador municipality in Caracas on April 6 for participating in a protest highlighting the humanitarian crisis in the country.

CNL sources stated that on April 12, the Wednesday before Easter, a progovernment group threatened and shouted profanities at Cardinal Urosa in Caracas as he officiated at a Mass at Saint Teresa Basilica.

A CNL source stated that despite the existence of a Ministry of Education school religious education program established pursuant to the terms of an agreement between the Venezuelan Episcopal Conference and the state allowing catechists to teach Christian and sacramental values (preparation for First Communion) in public

schools, in the last 18 years, the government had not fulfilled the agreement. The CNL representative said the government had removed religious practices from the classroom and at times threatened to sanction principals of schools that attempt to teach it. The representative also stated that in some cases teachers maintained religious training and practices in their classrooms, arguing that they enjoyed autonomy in their classroom if the curriculum met the Ministry of Education’s academic standards.

Jewish leaders stated that to avoid accusations of anti-Semitism, government and some progovernment media began replacing the word “Jewish” with “Zionist.” In September former Mayor of El Hatillo David Smolansky, a vocal government opponent and well-known member of the Jewish community, fled the country. In August the Supreme Court tried and sentenced Smolansky to 15 months’ imprisonment for inciting violence during spring and summer opposition-led street protests; it also disqualified him from running for public office. CAIV said it believed anti-Semitism was an element in the government’s actions against Smolansky, and provided documentation in which several media characterizations during the year described Smolansky as a “Zionist agent.”

In May mayor of Libertador and Socialist Party member Jorge Rodriguez tweeted, “Deborah Goldberg Solomovic, who is Jewish, did to my daughter what the Nazis did to her grandparents.” The statement referred to an incident in which opposition-associated Solomovic was recorded verbally confronting Rodriguez’s daughter in Australia. The video, in which Solomovic accused the young woman of living an extravagant lifestyle, went viral on social media. President Maduro then called for the chief rabbi of Venezuela and the World Jewish Federation to condemn this action “committed by a Jewish woman.” He added that government supporters “are the new Jews of the Twenty-First Century,” implying they were victims, and comparing the verbal altercation in Australia to the Nazi’s attempt to systematically exterminate European Jews during the Second World War. In response, on May 17, CAIV issued a statement reiterating its rejection of any comparisons or references that contributed to the campaign to trivialize or deny the Holocaust. CAIV stated its “absolute repudiation of any reference of the genocide of more than six million Jews by the Nazi regime, to equate it with recent incidents.”

In August progovernment media outlets Aporrea (a website founded in 2002) and the La Iguana website published reports that SEBIN had thwarted “Operation David,” which they described as a “terrorist plot” to attack the Miraflores presidential palace. Reports claimed SEBIN had uncovered the plot by following a route marked by Stars of David leading to the palace. CAIV sources said this incident was typical of the government’s anti-Semitic leanings.

CAIV sources stated the government supported anti-Semitic media. On January 27, TeleSur, a government-owned and -operated television station, showed a program comparing the wartime Nazi genocide of European Jews to political violence between Israelis and Palestinians.

Jewish leaders said criticism of Israel in government-owned or -affiliated media amounted to anti-Semitism. Jewish leaders also said some media outlets trivialized or denied the Holocaust. In May *Aporrea*, a pro-government website, published an article by Asdrubal Marquez, a government supporter, in which he estimated the number of Holocaust victims to be 800,000. Marquez also said there was no evidence of gas chambers and that \$50,000 had been offered to anyone who would provide contrary proof.

In another May *Aporrea* article, Oscar Heck, self-proclaimed “truthseeker for the Bolivarian Revolution,” alluded to opposition leader Henrique Capriles’ Jewish heritage and added, “Capriles Radonski seems to me to be a ‘supreme leader’ Hitleresque psychopath.”

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

CNL sources said that on July 16, the day of the opposition-led referendum, progovernment, armed civilian gangs entered El Carmen Church in Catia, a Caracas neighborhood, while Cardinal Urosa officiated at a Mass. Gang members shot into the congregation, killing a woman, Xiomara Scott, and injuring others in the congregation. The assailants held the churchgoers, including Urosa, hostage for several hours. Earlier that day the cardinal had publicly criticized government plans to rewrite the constitution. Catholic Church sources stated in similar incidents that other progovernment, armed civilian gangs threatened worshipers at masses in Zulia and Merida in January and April. They said that in April gangs spray-painted the Trujillo Church in Tachira with a graffiti statement “death to priests - PSUV,” PSUV being the acronym for the ruling coalition United Socialist Party of Venezuela.

ECV sources stated that a progovernment, armed civilian gang entered the ECV Church of the Acacias in Tachira State on July 16 and interrupted the pastor as he gave a sermon encouraging churchgoers to exercise their right to vote in a nationwide opposition-led referendum. ECV sources stated a gang member stood up and shouted at the pastor, “Religion or politics, you choose.”

CAIV sources said both government officials and many citizens think members of the Jewish community have direct lines of communication with the White House. In April *Aporrea* published an article stating that international Zionism has absolute control within the White House. CAIV sources stated this misperception promoted a false sense that the Jewish community is an extension of the U.S. government and places U.S. interests above those of Venezuela, which led to concerns their community could become targets of anti-Semitic acts.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The government again did not respond to the U.S. embassy’s request for meetings to discuss religious freedom.

Embassy officials communicated regularly with a wide range of religious communities and religious leaders to discuss government treatment of religious groups, registration issues, and government and societal reprisals against some faith groups not in line with the government’s political agenda. In September embassy officials held meetings with representatives from the ECV, CAIV, CNL, and Muslim community. Each community expressed interest in maintaining communication and exploring possible outreach programs in the future. The embassy continued to develop outreach opportunities with the various faith groups.

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Austrian Red Cross

Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation (ACCORD)

Wiedner Hauptstraße 32, 1041 Wien

T (Telefon) +43 1 589 00 583

F (Fax) +43 1 589 00 589

info@ecoi.net

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