

Freedom in the World 2023



header1 Overview

Venezuela's democratic institutions have been deteriorating since 1999, but conditions have grown sharply worse in recent years due to harsher government crackdowns on the opposition and the ruling party's use of thoroughly flawed elections to seize full control of state institutions. The authorities have closed off virtually all channels for political dissent, restricting civil liberties and prosecuting perceived opponents without regard for due process. Although the country's economy has returned to growth after years of recession, a severe, politically driven humanitarian crisis continues to cause hardship and stimulate mass emigration.

header2 Key Developments in 2022

- In January, the government-controlled National Electoral Council (CNE) effectively blocked an initiative to hold a referendum on recalling President Nicolás Maduro, giving opposition organizers just 12 hours to collect the 4.2 million signatures required for a vote to proceed.
- In April, the progovernment National Assembly that was elected in 2020 under dubious conditions appointed 20 judges to a restructured Supreme Tribunal of Justice (TSJ), implementing a law that reduced the tribunal's size from 32 judges. However, several of the 20 were already serving on the old court, raising concerns about the violation of constitutional term limits.
- The authorities continued to suppress independent civil society groups and human rights activists, with more than 200 attacks—including smear campaigns, harassment, and acts of intimidation—documented during the first half of the year.
- In November, government and opposition representatives meeting in Mexico reached a tentative agreement to release funds that were held in frozen international accounts and use them for humanitarian purposes. However, substantive talks on political reform remained stalled.

A Electoral Process

A1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?

0.000
4.004

The president serves six-year terms and is not subject to term limits. Incumbent Nicolás Maduro was awarded a new term after winning the 2018 snap presidential election with nearly 68 percent of the vote, according to the government-controlled CNE. The poll featured a record-low turnout of 46 percent, leading opposition figures were barred from competing, and regional observers generally considered the process to be illegitimate.

In January 2022, the opposition attempted to initiate a referendum to recall Maduro as president, as permitted by the constitution. However, the CNE gave petitioners just 12 hours to collect the signatures of at least 20 percent of registered voters, or about 4.2 million people. It then declared that the initiative had failed to meet that threshold, meaning a referendum could not proceed.

In December 2022, the remaining members of the opposition-controlled National Assembly that had been elected in 2015 voted to formally dissolve an interim government it had created in January 2019 to challenge Maduro's legitimacy. That government, headed by interim president Juan Guaidó, had received recognition from a number of democratic countries, but it was never able to displace Maduro or gain control over state institutions in practice.

A2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?

0.000
4.004

The unicameral National Assembly is popularly elected for five-year terms, using a mix of majoritarian and proportional-representation voting. The major opposition parties refused to participate in the 2020 National Assembly elections, citing the regime's control over the CNE and recent attempts to replace the parties' own leaders. A coalition led by the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) won 253 of the assembly's 277 seats, or 91 percent, according to official results. Meanwhile, the opposition-controlled National Assembly that had been elected in 2015 continued to operate and repeatedly voted to extend its term, notwithstanding its December 2022 decision to dissolve Guaidó's interim government.

Regional and local elections held in November 2021 were marred by the abuse of state resources and judicial interference in the government's favor. A European Union (EU) election observation mission reported that turnout stood at 42.5 percent, the lowest in 25 years. Progovernment candidates won 20 out of 23 governorships and 212 out of 335 mayoralities. In late November, the TSJ ordered the CNE to hold a new gubernatorial election in Barinas State after finding that an opposition candidate who appeared to have won should have been disqualified. Nevertheless, another opposition candidate won the repeat election in January 2022. The EU observers were forced to leave the country in early December and were not permitted to return for the release of their final report in February 2022.

A3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies?

0.000
4.004

The electoral system is heavily influenced by political manipulation and pro-PSUV institutional interference. The opposition had no influence over the slate of CNE commissioners selected ahead of the 2020 legislative elections; opposition members were granted two seats on the five-member panel announced in May 2021, due in part to civil society pressure, but the CNE retained a progovernment majority.

Recent polls have been characterized by the disqualification of prominent opposition candidates, government abuse of public resources, uneven access to the state-dominated media, the diminished presence of international observers, and intimidation of state employees. In 2022, the opposition and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) warned that millions of eligible citizens were not on the voter rolls ahead of the 2024 presidential election and criticized the CNE for failing to facilitate registration, particularly for the growing number of Venezuelans living abroad.

B Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?

0.000
4.004

While opposition coalitions and parties exist, and some less confrontational groups have been tolerated by authorities, the ruling PSUV uses state resources as well security forces and the judiciary to disrupt parties that directly challenge its dominant position. In March 2022, the CNE nullified the leadership elections of the opposition party Avanzada Progresista (Progressive Advance), creating a rift within the group. The TSJ had similarly suspended and replaced the leaders of two other opposition parties, Acción Democrática (Democratic Action) and Voluntad Popular (Popular Will), in 2020.

Opposition leaders have long been harassed, attacked, imprisoned, and otherwise impeded from participating in political processes. Juan Guaidó was physically assaulted by government supporters in June 2022 while he was meeting with residents in Cojedes State. Five members of the political party Bandera Roja (Red Flag) were arrested in July. In August, opposition leader and former lawmaker Juan Requesens was sentenced to eight years in prison for supposedly participating in an assassination plot against Maduro in 2018.

According to the NGO Foro Penal (Criminal Forum), there were 246 political prisoners in Venezuela as of August 2022, and more than 9,000 others were not incarcerated but subject to arbitrary restrictions on their liberty. Multiple human rights groups have documented the use of torture and forced disappearances to control dissidents.

Former allies of the government have also been targeted. In 2022, the Communist Party of Venezuela alleged that since 2018, five of its members had been murdered after denouncing government corruption.

B2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?

0.000
4.004

While discontent with the Maduro regime remains widespread, the government has cut off virtually all avenues for political change at a national level, and it has used a variety of tactics to create divisions within the opposition movement. Mediated negotiations between the government and

opposition, on issues including the conditions for the 2024 presidential election, made little progress during 2022.

B3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means?	0.000
	4.004

The Maduro regime relies on the military, paramilitary forces, and opaque support from foreign states to retain political power. Military leaders have taken control of numerous offices, and Maduro has continued to strengthen the Bolivarian Militia, a millions-strong civilian militia group established in 2008 to support the military. Separately, irregular, state-affiliated armed groups known as *colectivos* routinely commit acts of violence against civilians and carry out government-backed voter intimidation efforts.

B4 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities?	1.001
	4.004

The PSUV's political dominance leaves little opportunity for ethnic and other groups to advocate independently for their interests. Indigenous people in Venezuela are poorly represented in politics, and members of these groups struggle to bring government attention to their concerns. In 2020 reforms to the National Assembly, the total number of legislators was significantly increased from 167 to 277, but the number of seats reserved for Indigenous representatives remained the same at three.

Though several women hold senior positions in government, there is a lack of policy discussion regarding issues that primarily affect women. Almost no openly LGBT+ people hold senior political or government positions in Venezuela. The first openly transgender member of the National Assembly, Voluntad Popular member Tamara Adrián, held a seat in the assembly elected in 2015. In 2022, she declared that the LGBT+ community was unlikely to gain more rights under the current political leadership.

C Functioning of Government

C1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government?	0.000
	4.004

Venezuela does not function as a representative democracy. The most recent presidential election was widely regarded as illegitimate, and the opposition-controlled legislature had no practical ability to carry out its constitutional mandate between 2015 and 2020, when it was replaced by a PSUV-dominated National Assembly.

The Maduro regime has become increasingly dependent on economic, medical, military, and other assistance from foreign allies, particularly the governments of Russia, Cuba, Turkey, and Iran. In addition, leftist guerrilla groups from Colombia have increased their influence in Venezuelan cities near the border. According to UN investigators, the National Liberation Army (ELN) guerrilla group operates in the state of Bolívar and has an agreement with the government to control illegal mining activity.

C2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? | 0.000 4.004

Corruption is rampant in Venezuela. The government's economic policies—particularly its currency and price controls—offer significant opportunities for illicit market activity and collusion between public officials and organized crime networks. Authorities in jurisdictions including the United States, Canada, Panama, and the EU have imposed sanctions on Venezuelan officials for corruption and other offenses that go uninvestigated in Venezuela. A journalistic investigation published in 2022 found that more than 20 individuals linked to corruption schemes involving the state-owned oil company held assets worth at least \$273 million in Swiss bank accounts.

C3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency? | 0.000 4.004

There is virtually no transparency regarding government spending. The Maduro regime has also consistently failed to publish reliable crime and economic data, including monthly inflation statistics, the balance of payments, and annual gross domestic product.

Observers have raised serious doubts about the veracity of government COVID-19 data, with NGOs and educational institutions calling official pandemic death figures noncredible. In May 2022, the World Health Organization estimated that more than 22,000 people had died in the country by the end of 2021—more than four times the total acknowledged by the government.

CL Civil Liberties

D Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media? | 1.001 4.004

The media operate within a highly restrictive regulatory and legal environment. Venezuela formerly benefited from vibrant newspaper, television, and radio sectors, but many outlets have been forced to close or narrow their operations over the past decade. The country had just 22 print newspapers as of 2021, down from 121 in 2013, and dozens of radio stations were closed by the government during 2022 alone. The Maduro regime maintains a state-controlled media infrastructure that promotes its political and ideological program.

In February 2022, PSUV vice president Diosdado Cabello took possession of the headquarters of the newspaper *El Nacional* after the courts awarded him ownership as part of a defamation suit against the outlet. The website of *El Nacional* has repeatedly been subjected to blocking and censorship.

Independent journalists are at risk of government pressure, arbitrary arrest, and physical violence. In February 2022, journalists Ramón Centeno and Gabriel Guerra were arrested and held without trial after interviewing people who were allegedly involved in drug trafficking. Photographer Carlos Debíais remained in detention after being arrested in 2021 for flying a drone over an oil refinery. The NGO Public Space (Espacio Público) documented 157 violations of freedom of expression, including censorship and intimidation, during the first nine months of 2022. Another media freedom group, Press and Society Institute (IPYS), reported in 2022 that there had been 452 alerts related to press freedom, freedom of expression, and access to information during 2021, with restrictions on access to information and aggression against journalists among the most common types of violations.

D2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private?	3.003 4.004
--	----------------

Constitutional guarantees of religious freedom are generally respected, though relations between the government and the Roman Catholic Church remain tense. According to the 2021 edition of the US State Department's *Report on International Religious Freedom*, Roman Catholic and evangelical Christian groups alleged government harassment, intimidation, and retaliation against their members, including members of the clergy. The report also noted a pattern of antisemitic content in regime-affiliated media outlets and social media posts.

D3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination?	1.001 4.004
--	----------------

Academic freedom has come under mounting pressure in recent years, as budget cuts and other funding problems have undermined universities' autonomy and prompted an exodus of academics from the country.

The regime continued to exert political influence over university leadership during 2022. The Universidad Central de Venezuela, the largest institution of higher education in the country, held elections in July to choose members of the governing bodies for its different faculties and schools. The progovernment candidates lost in all the faculties and in 44 of the 49 schools, but the TSJ partially suspended the results, and the winners were unable to take their posts.

D4 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution?	1.001 4.004
--	----------------

The freedom of personal expression is severely constrained in Venezuela, due in part to the deterrent effect of extensive government surveillance. In June 2022, the Spanish telecommunications firm Movistar, which operates in Venezuela, reported that Maduro's government had made more than 860,000 requests for telephone interceptions during 2021, affecting over 1.5 million phone numbers. These requests, nearly all of which were accepted, have increased dramatically from just 380,000 in 2016. The government has also used social service and health care systems to surveil Venezuelans; the Fatherland Card, an electronic identification document, is used both to distribute social aid and influence citizens' online activity.

Social media users have faced various threats and punishments for posts that are unfavorable to the authorities. In April 2022, for example, a 72-year-old woman was arrested for a TikTok video in which she mocked the regime. She was released on the condition that she post an apology video and remain under court supervision.

E Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly?	0.000 4.004
-------------------------------	-------------

While guaranteed by the constitution, freedom of assembly is severely restricted in practice, and violent clashes between protesters and security forces are known to occur. The Venezuelan

Observatory of Social Conflict (OVCS) nevertheless counted 3,892 protests on a variety of topics in the first half of 2022—a 15 percent increase from the first half of 2021, when the government was using pandemic-related public health rules to curb demonstrations. The OVCS reported that 52 protests held in the first half of 2022 were violently suppressed. In March 2022, the International Criminal Court (ICC) announced that it would open an office in Venezuela as part of an investigation into allegations that the government had committed crimes against humanity while cracking down on opposition protests since 2017.

E2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work?	1.001 4.004
---	----------------

Harassment, threats, and legal and administrative sanctions against human rights activists and NGOs have generally increased over the past several years. According to the Center for Defenders and Justice (Centro para los Defensores y la Justicia), the number of attacks on human rights defenders and organizations rose every year between 2018 and 2021, when it reached 743. Another 214 attacks were documented in the first half of 2022. The director of Fundaredes (Foundations), Javier Tarazona, remained in detention during 2022, having been arrested in 2021 after discussing possible links between the government and leftist Colombian guerrillas operating in the country. In May 2022, the governor of Carabobo State sued two human rights NGO officials, Marino Alvarado of the Venezuela Program Education-Action on Human Rights (Provea) and Alfredo Infante of the Gumilla Center, for defamation after they called for an investigation of extrajudicial executions by police. In July, human rights and labor activist Gabriel Blanco was arrested as part of a broader crackdown on leftist and union groups.

E3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations?	1.001 4.004
--	-------------

Workers are legally entitled to form unions, bargain collectively, and strike, with some restrictions on public-sector workers' ability to strike. Control of unions has shifted from traditional opposition-allied labor leaders to new workers' organizations that are often aligned with the government. The competition has contributed to a substantial increase in labor violence as well as confusion and delays during industry-wide collective bargaining.

According to a 2022 report from the Observatory for the Defense of Life (Odevida), at least 44 union leaders were killed between 2015 and 2020. Several trade unionists were arrested along with opposition figures in July 2022, prompting a statement of concern from the UN special rapporteur on freedom of peaceful assembly and association. Another union leader, Douglas González of the state-owned aluminum firm Venalum, was detained in August.

F Rule of Law

F1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary?	0.000 4.004
------------------------------------	-------------

The politicization of the judicial branch, which increased dramatically under former president Hugo Chávez, has progressed further under Maduro. In April 2022, the PSUV-controlled National Assembly chose 20 new judges for the TSJ under legislation that reduced the court's size from 32 judges. Of those selected, several were already serving on the old court, raising concerns that they would violate a constitutionally limited term of 12 years. The TSJ has issued numerous decisions that favored the Maduro regime in recent years, and UN experts have repeatedly criticized the judiciary's lack of independence.

F2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? | 0.000 4.004

Perceived opponents of the government and the PSUV are routinely detained and prosecuted without regard for due process, including civilians and service members who are brought before military courts. As of May 2022 there were a reported 191 members of the military in detention on charges such as treason or incitement to rebellion. The military has also assumed roles previously reserved for civilian law enforcement institutions.

Victims of violence at the hands of the state have no realistic avenue for redress. A 2021 UN report noted that prosecutors and judiciary members have effectively aided the regime's human rights abuses.

F3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? | 0.000 4.004

Venezuelans face physical insecurity and violence from several sources, including irregular armed groups, security forces, and organized gangs.

Provea and the Gumilla Center reported in 2022 that they had documented 1,414 alleged extrajudicial executions by police and military forces in 2021, and the NGO Citizen Control accused security personnel of preferring to execute suspected criminals rather than arrest them.

NGOs and local political leaders called on the government to address the threat of Colombian guerrilla groups and criminal organizations that continued to operate on the Venezuelan side of the border in 2022. Fundaredes documented dozens of kidnappings, disappearances, and murders in the border states during the year.

The Venezuelan Violence Observatory (OVV) found that the country's overall rate of violent death—including homicides by civilians, deaths at the hands of the authorities, and other suspicious deaths—was 35.3 per 100,000 people in 2022—or 40.4 if disappearances with a significant suspicion of death are included. The country has consistently registered one of the highest rates of violent death in Latin America.

Prison conditions in Venezuela are also among the worst in the region. The Venezuelan Observatory of Prisons (OVP) found that of 126 prisoners who died in 2021, most succumbed to malnutrition and tuberculosis. A total of 773 inmates had died of malnutrition in the preceding four years, the group reported. Security conditions in detention facilities are also poor. *Pranes*, or gang leaders who operate from prisons, freely coordinate criminal networks throughout Venezuela.

F4 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? | 1.001 4.004

Constitutional protections against discrimination based on sex, race, and other characteristics are not well enforced in practice. Women continue to face significant disparities in education, compensation, and employment, and they have been disproportionately affected by the country's politically driven economic crisis.

The rights of Indigenous people, who make up 2.5 percent of the population, are guaranteed by the constitution but poorly protected by authorities. Indigenous groups often experience discrimination, especially in the states of Bolívar and Amazonas, where they are subject to labor exploitation,

extortion by military and paramilitary groups, sex trafficking of some women, and land grabs related to illegal mining, which has resulted in the destruction of forests and other natural resources on which Indigenous residents depend. In September 2022, UN investigators reported “arbitrary deprivation of life, disappearances, extortion, corporal punishment, and sexual and gender-based violence” in the mining region of Bolívar State. Virgilio Trujillo, an Indigenous leader in Amazonas, was assassinated in June 2022, and a group of three Indigenous people were murdered in Bolívar in July, allegedly by illegal armed groups that operate in the area.

Although discrimination based on sexual orientation is prohibited in employment and some other areas, LGBT+ Venezuelans face widespread intolerance and violence. Same-sex sexual activity remains criminalized within the military.

G Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education?	2.002
	4.004

Internal movement is limited by threats to physical security in some parts of the country, and Venezuelans continue to flee abroad to escape political persecution, insecurity, and overlapping social and economic crises. According to the Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela (R4V), a total of more than 7.1 million Venezuelan migrants and refugees had left the country as of December 2022.

A COVID-19-related state of emergency, in effect between March 2020 and March 2021, placed harsh movement restrictions on Venezuelans. Authorities and paramilitary groups arbitrarily detained, physically attacked, and tortured civilians who did not follow quarantine and other security instructions during the state of emergency. While some public health measures remained in place during 2022, they were not strictly enforced or accompanied by similar abuses.

Score Change: The score improved from 1 to 2 because the government's previously harsh enforcement of COVID-19-related movement restrictions was not repeated in 2022.

G2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors?	1.001
	4.004

Property rights have been damaged by years of price controls, nationalization, overregulation, and corruption. Maduro's government has begun to return some nationalized properties to the private sector in an effort to revive the economy, but progress remains limited. Illegal land seizures and extortion by armed groups also continue to undermine property rights and private business activity.

G3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance?	2.002
	4.004

Personal social freedoms pertaining to marriage, divorce, and child custody are generally upheld, but members of the LGBT+ community still lack equal access to fundamental rights like legal marriage, child adoption, and recognition of one's gender identity.

The politically driven economic collapse in Venezuela has reduced the availability of reproductive health care. Maternal and infant mortality has increased. Because abortion is illegal unless the

patient's life is at risk, many women and girls resort to frequently unsafe and unsanitary clandestine abortions or travel abroad.

A 2007 law was designed to combat violence against women, but domestic violence and rape remain common and are rarely punished in practice. Women who have been political prisoners have reported abuses by security forces including sexual violence, threats of rape, and forced nudity. Women relatives of political prisoners have faced gender-based violence and humiliation during visits to detention centers, security operations, and house raids.

G4 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?	0.000
	4.004

The country's prolonged economic crisis has left the population extremely vulnerable to human trafficking and labor exploitation, including forced labor in mining operations run by criminal groups. Women and children are also subjected to sex trafficking within Venezuela and abroad, and armed groups in the country reportedly engage in forced recruitment of children.