



## Human Rights and Democracy Report 2017 - Venezuela

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The human rights situation in Venezuela deteriorated markedly in 2017. A wide range of civil and political rights violations, against a backdrop of reduced access to food and healthcare, were issues of particular concern.

The economic crisis, with hyper-inflation and continuing shortages of food and medicines, severely reduced the capacity of Venezuelans to meet their basic needs. According to Caritas International, the Global Acute Malnutrition Index, which measures the percentage of children under the age of five with acute to severe malnutrition, stood at 15.6% in November. Medical and pharmaceutical associations reported a sharp increase in cases of malaria, diphtheria, measles, and a lack of medication. Criminal violence remained a serious problem. One local NGO, Venezuelan Observatory of Violence, estimated more than 26,000 violent deaths in 2017. UNESCO figures suggest that nearly 50% of girls are not in primary education.

The International Migration Laboratory of the Simon Bolivar University calculated that the number of Venezuelans living overseas doubled between 2015 and 2017, growing from an estimated 1.4 to 3.2 million. UNHCR reported that the number of Venezuelan asylum-seekers increased from 34,200 in 2016 to 52,000 in 2017.

In March, Venezuela accepted 193 and noted 81 recommendations out of the 274 it had received from 102 countries during its Universal Periodic Review at the UN Human Rights Council in November 2016. The UK's recommendations on outcomes-based political dialogue and enhanced cooperation with the UN OHCHR were not accepted.

Political violence soared in Venezuela, especially between April and August when there were sustained protests against the government. An OHCHR report published in September reported at least 124 deaths and the arbitrary detention of more than 5,000 individuals during the protests. Patterns of ill-treatment were reported, in some cases amounting to torture. OHCHR also highlighted that more than 600 civilians had been tried at military courts for offences including treason, rebellion and theft of military equipment, following anti-government protests between April and July 2017.

Protests started following two rulings by the Venezuelan Supreme Court at the end of March. By these rulings, the Supreme Court gave itself new powers to exercise the legislative powers of the National Assembly and to restrict the parliamentary immunity of MPs. The opposition declared

this an attack on the autonomy of parliament. The Supreme Court announcements provoked strong international reactions, including from the UK and the EU.

On 1 May, President Maduro called for a Constituent Assembly to rewrite the Venezuelan Constitution. He said that the Constituent Assembly would transform the state and bring about peace, dialogue and elections. On 30 July, despite internal and international criticism, a vote took place to select the members of the Constituent Assembly. The opposition dismissed it as a fraudulent process and did not take part in the vote. Several countries, including the UK and EU member states, refused to recognise the Constituent Assembly, and called for negotiations to ensure a lasting solution to any disagreements.

Following the election, the Constituent Assembly took on a supra-constitutional authority, taking away legislative capacity from the National Assembly. It replaced the Prosecutor General who had spoken against the government during the protests, and ordered the electoral authorities to call for overdue gubernatorial and municipal elections before the end of the year.

Despite having no constitutional powers to write laws, on 8 November, the Constituent Assembly passed a Law against Hatred, which imposed further restrictions on media outlets and political parties. The Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Edison Lanza, said that the law would fuel repression and self-censorship. The NGO Freedom House ranked the internet in Venezuela as "not free". The Venezuelan press workers' union reported a total of 498 violations to freedom of expression during 2017, an increase of 26.5% compared with 2016. Venezuela continues to lack legislation and policies to protect LGBT communities, and impunity for hate crime is high.

In November, the EU Foreign Affairs Council unanimously adopted a sanctions regime on Venezuela. The EU expressed its concerns about the lack of respect for and erosion of democratically elected institutions, violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the urgent needs of the population that affected their rights such as the right to food and to health.

The UK maintained dialogue on human rights with diverse actors. In May, the then Minister for Human Rights, Baroness Anelay of St Johns, visited Caracas and held meetings with senior government representatives, including the then Foreign Minister, Delcy Rodríguez, in which she encouraged respect for civil and political rights for all Venezuelans, including the holding of free and fair elections. She also met the National Assembly's Board, as well as representatives of civil society organisations and high-profile human rights defenders. In March and November, we organised two major events: Women of the Future, Venezuela, and the inaugural meeting of the Business Forum of the Venezuelan Alliance for Women's corporate leadership.

The deteriorating humanitarian situation is likely to have increased Venezuelans' vulnerability to modern slavery, particularly to neighbouring countries (including islands in the Caribbean). These practices include sex trafficking (especially of women, girls and LGBT), domestic servitude and forced labour.

In 2018, the UK will continue to focus on concerns over the erosion of political freedoms and the adverse impact of the social and economic crisis, including modern slavery, girls' access to education and women's rights, with a special focus on eliminating violence against women and girls.

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