

2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Venezuela

Executive Summary

(References to a “regime” or “Maduro regime” below are not intended to indicate that the United States considers such entity a government. In 2019, the Department of State announced the temporary suspension of operations of the U.S. Embassy in Caracas and the withdrawal of diplomatic personnel, and it subsequently announced the opening of the Venezuela Affairs Unit (VAU), located at the U.S. Embassy in Bogota, Colombia.)

The constitution provides for freedom of religion on the condition its practice 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. An antihate law criminalizes political party activities promoting “fascism, intolerance, or hatred.”

The regime at times extended the antihate law to include religious figures. In May, the governor of Carabobo State sued Father Alfredo Infante, Superior of the Jesuits in Venezuela and the human rights coordinator of a Jesuit-run nongovernmental organization (NGO), for defamation following the March 14 release of the NGO PROVEA’s annual human rights report, to which the Jesuit NGO contributed. Representatives of the conference of Roman Catholic bishops, officially known as the Catholic Episcopal Conference of Venezuela (CEV), and the Evangelical Council of Venezuela (ECV), said regime leaders and loyalists verbally harassed clergy and other members of their religious communities for continuing to call attention to the country’s humanitarian crisis and for other criticisms of the regime. The Catholic Church expressed concern for the country’s migration crisis and continued to press for a negotiated solution to social and political issues.

According to Jewish community representatives, the regime and those sympathetic to it, including some regime-affiliated media outlets, increased their antisemitic rhetoric during the year. Diosdado Cabello, vice president of the regime-affiliated political party United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), called David Smolansky, Organization for American States (OAS) Commissioner for the Venezuelan Migrants and Refugee Crisis, a “Zionist” and a “fascist” during his television program in which Cabello showed “wanted” posters of several opposition leaders. In August, the regime’s Ministry of Communication and Information published a video calling the 1994 terrorist attack in Buenos Aires against the Argentine Israelite Mutual Association (AMIA) Jewish Center a “false positive,” suggesting it was not actually a terrorist attack. In August, Esteban Trapiello, president of two regime-linked regional television stations, called the Holocaust a “tale” and expressed a desire to meet Adolf Hitler and ask him why he did not “finish everything he started.” The Confederation of Jewish Associations of Venezuela (CAIV) issued a statement on August 22 condemning Trapiello’s comments. In October, the National Telecommunications Commission (CONATEL) ordered the closure of at least four evangelical Christian radio stations in the opposition-held municipality of Cabimas in Zulia State. In March, the regime announced its “Good Pastor” plan to begin registering evangelical Protestant churches and providing a bonus for evangelical pastors participating in the process, which the ECV characterized as a regime attempt to increase “control and inspection” of religious groups. On July 23, Nicolas Maduro Guerra, the son of regime leader Nicolas Maduro, assumed the position of vice president of religious issues for the regime’s PSUV party.

On July 25, a priest in Barinas State reported receiving death threats for working on a project to build a new chapel. The independent, civil society-led Venezuelan Interreligious Forum, founded in 2020, continued to meet and build consensus around human rights, democratic institutions, and the

rule of law. On August 11, youth representatives from various religions came together for the civil society-convened Nostra Aetate Interreligious Forum Youth Cooperation program in Miranda State.

During the year, the Venezuela Affairs Unit (VAU), which is the U.S. Mission to Venezuela, continued to engage with the interim government led by Juan Guaido and with independent civil society. The VAU also continued to maintain close contact with a wide range of religious groups, including the Jewish, Muslim, evangelical Protestant, and Catholic communities. VAU representatives and members of these groups discussed repression of religious communities and antisemitic posts in social media and in regime-associated media.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 30 million (midyear 2022), although according to the Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants, the number may be considerably lower, given the exodus of more than seven million citizens since 2015. The U.S. government estimates, based on the most recent available official statistics, that up to 96 percent of the population is Catholic; however, the growth of evangelical Protestant and nonbeliever communities is likely to have considerably reduced this percentage. The non-Catholic population includes evangelical Protestants, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslims, and Jews. The ECV estimates 17 percent of the population is Protestant, the majority of whom are members of evangelical Protestant churches. The Church of Jesus Christ estimates its numbers at 168,500, or approximately 0.5 percent of the population. Observers estimate many persons follow practices of the Afro-descendant religions Santeria and Spiritism concurrently with Christianity. Muslim community leaders estimate there are between 100,000 and 150,000 followers of Islam (between 0.3 and 0.5 percent of the population), consisting primarily of persons of Lebanese, Syrian, and Libyan descent living in Nueva Esparta State and the Caracas metropolitan area, as well as in Valencia and Maracaibo. Sunnis are the majority, with a minority Shia community, primarily in Margarita Island in Nueva Esparta State. According to CAIV, the Jewish community numbers approximately 10,000, with most members living in Caracas. This represents a decline from approximately 30,000 in 1999.

Section II. Status of Regime 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. In 2017, the now-dissolved National Constituent Assembly (ANC), considered illegitimate by the democratically elected 2015 National Assembly, the Guaido-led interim government, and much of the international community, passed an antihate law criminalizing acts of incitement to hatred or violence. Individuals who violate the law face 10 to 20 years in prison. The antihate law includes 25 articles stipulating a wide array of directives, restrictions, and penalties, and criminalizes political party activities promoting "fascism, intolerance, or hatred." 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. The law does not make exceptions for religious speech. The criminal code establishes that any actions that impede or disturb the exercise of licit religious ceremonies will be punished with imprisonment from five to 45 days. If the act is accompanied by threats, violence, or assaults, imprisonment increases to 15 months.

The Directorate of Justice and Religion (DJR) in the Maduro-controlled Ministry of Interior, Justice, and Peace maintains a registry of religious groups, disburses funds to religious

organizations, and conducts liaison with religious communities. Each religious group must register with the DJR to acquire legal status as a religious organization. Registration requires the declaration of property belonging to the religious group, identification of any religious authorities working directly for it, and articles of incorporation. Religious groups are required to demonstrate how they will provide social services to their communities and to receive a letter of acceptance from the regime-controlled community council in the neighborhood(s) where the group will work. The ministry 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. An agreement between the CEV and the state allows catechists to teach Catholic and sacramental values in public schools in preparation for First Communion, but the regime does not consistently honor this agreement.

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

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

Regime Practices

At times, the regime applied the antihate law that criminalizes political party activities promoting “fascism, intolerance, or hatred” to religious actors. In other instances, the regime targeted religious leaders with the penal code. In May, Carabobo State governor Rafael Lacava from the PSUV party sued Father Alfredo Infante, Superior of the Jesuits in Venezuela and the human rights coordinator of *Centro Gumilla*, an NGO run by the Society of Jesus in Venezuela, for defamation following the release of PROVEA’s annual human rights report, to which *Centro Gumilla* contributed information. According to the annual report released on March 14, there were 221 extrajudicial killings in Carabobo in 2021, the highest rate in the country. In a press briefing for the report rollout, Father Infante and PROVEA director Marino Alvarado called for an investigation of the National Police’s role in the extrajudicial killings. In June, Father Infante’s lawyer reached an agreement with pro-Maduro lawmakers, under which the priest publicly clarified that the intention of the report and the activists’ statements was not to accuse Lacava directly or indirectly for the extrajudicial killings, but rather to encourage investigation of the cases so that victims would have access to truth, justice, and effective protection.

The Catholic Church continued to express concerns regarding the political and social state of the country. On February 21, Archbishop Jesus Gonzalez de Zarate, President of the Venezuelan Episcopal Conference of Catholic Bishops, issued a statement expressing concern for the growing migration flows due to the economic and humanitarian crisis in the country. On June 15, the Apostolic Administrator of the Archdiocese of Caracas and Metropolitan Archbishop of Merida, Cardinal Baltazar Porras, said during a press interview that the country’s political leadership “does not value Venezuelan society” and “lacks the criteria to generate proposals and seek solutions for the current situation in the country.” The Cardinal noted that contact with citizens was inadequate on the part of both the regime and the opposition. Porras said the church had promoted numerous rapprochement efforts between the political, academic, business, and union sectors, while making clear that the responsibility for seeking solutions and generating proposals ultimately rested with political leaders.

According to a Catholic Church representative, the regime paused or completely stopped funding some Catholic schools, which are typically located in impoverished areas. The representatives described this as part of the regime’s attempt to limit the actions and influence of the church.

Catholic Church representatives also cited difficulties in securing religious visas for priests. They said many international Catholic Church personnel were unable to obtain religious visas and had to enter the country with tourist visas, which require renewal fees that represented a financial burden for the church.

In June, the *Washington Post* published an article that said that at least half of the priests in the country who were convicted of sexual abuse of children or adolescents from 2001 to 2022 did not serve their full sentences or served no prison time, and that in at least three cases, convicted priests returned to work in churches and continued to exercise their ministry. According to the children's rights NGO Cecodap, these cases reflected a high level of impunity in the country. On June 19, PSUV vice president Cabello said this was the sole responsibility of the Catholic Church, and the justice system was not to blame.

Some members of the Jewish community again stated the regime and those sympathetic to it, including some regime-affiliated media outlets, used anti-Zionist rhetoric to mask antisemitism, saying they avoided accusations of antisemitism by replacing the word "Jewish" with "Zionist." For example, on January 27, during a broadcast of his weekly television show in which he showed "wanted" posters of various opposition leaders, PSUV vice president Diosdado Cabello called David Smolanky, OAS Commissioner for the Venezuelan Migrants and Refugee Crisis, a "Zionist" and a "fascist." Following backlash for his comments, Cabello denied his statements were related to Smolansky's Jewish roots but instead concerned the "Zionist mafia he represented."

In August, the regime's Ministry of Communication and Information released a series of videos calling for the return of an Emtrasur airplane belonging to state-owned airline Conviasa and grounded in Argentina in June by a court order for alleged links to terrorism. In one video, the regime labeled the 1994 terrorist attack in Buenos Aires against the AMIA Jewish Center a "false positive," suggesting it was not actually a terrorist attack. In response to the video, which was also broadcast on the regime-owned television channel VTV, the Simon Wiesenthal Center issued a statement calling the characterization of the attack an "unspeakable outrage."

In August, during a podcast interview, Esteban Trapiello, president of regime-linked regional Tlearagua television stations and the Aragueña radio station, questioned the "tale" of the Holocaust and expressed a desire to meet Adolf Hitler and ask him why he did not "finish everything he started." CAIV issued a statement on August 22 condemning Trapiello's comments as "delusional antisemitism."

According to the Simon Wiesenthal Center, in February, the cities of Chacao, Baruta, and El Hatillo, all in Miranda State, issued a "Joint Manifesto against Anti-Semitism," which included approval of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism. The manifesto also urged Holocaust education in primary schools.

In October, the National Union of Press Workers reported CONATEL ordered the closure of at least four Christian radio stations: Renuevo, Celestial, Jerusalem, and Gilgal Estereo. All four stations were in the opposition-led municipality of Cabimas in Zulia State.

The Maduro regime continued to promote the National Religious Council that it created in 2020. As part of this effort, members of the regime helped organize meetings throughout the year with the Evangelical Christian Movement for Venezuela (MOCEV), a pro-Maduro organization. On January 20, Maduro met with MOCEV in commemoration of "National Pastor Day."

In March, the regime announced its "Good Pastor" Plan, to begin registering evangelical Protestant churches through the Government Pastoral Councils that the regime expanded in 2019 in cooperation with MOCEV. These nationwide councils are made up of evangelical Protestant pastors designated by local authorities to collaborate with the regime on social projects. Under the Good Pastor Plan, participating pastors would receive a bonus if they registered in the Homeland System, a regime-controlled virtual platform on which many individuals must register to collect their salary and receive economic assistance. On April 21, the ECV issued a statement expressing concern over the "control and inspection" carried out by the regime through the pastoral councils and clarified the councils were not representative of most evangelical Christians in the country. Specifically, the ECV expressed concern that pastoral councils were performing census work, an activity that the ECV said should be limited to government institutions.

A law that the regime's National Assembly proposed in 2021 requiring NGOs and other nonprofit groups, including religious organizations, to register within a regime-controlled registry to receive financial contributions from abroad did not pass by year's end.

On July 23, Nicolas Maduro Guerra, Maduro's son, was appointed vice president of religious issues for the PSUV political party. Representatives from the Catholic Church stated since his appointment, Maduro Guerra did not make significant statements related to religion and said his appointment was limited to the PSUV party.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In May, media reported that unknown assailants attacked evangelical Christian parishioners Evert Zambrano, his wife and child as they were leaving a church located in San Mateo, in Aragua State. Zambrano died of gunshot wounds, and his wife and child were wounded. Reportedly, the Scientific, Criminal and Criminalistic Investigation Service Corps (CICPC) opened an investigation of the incident. In August, unidentified individuals killed municipal councilman Ronald Soto when he was leaving the evangelical Christian La Cañada Church. According to media reports, the CICPC initiated an investigation following the killing of Soto.

Media outlets reported that on July 25, a priest, Father Marcos Galvis, of the Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in Barinas State, published a video in which he stated that he and five women received death threats for their work on a project to build a new chapel in their neighborhood without the authorization of Barinas PSUV mayor Rafael Paredes. In July, the priest resigned from his position.

Throughout the year, media outlets reported various incidents of church robberies, including in Zulia, Falcon, Sucre, and Miranda States. In several cases, unidentified persons stole religious objects of little material but great historical value. In March, thieves burglarized the Diocesan Curia of Guarenas, belonging to the Copacabana Cathedral in Miranda, and stole chalices and ciboria, including one chalice that was more than 200 years old. In April, individuals broke into the church of San Benito de Palermo in Zulia, damaged the tabernacle, and stole the chalices, the monstrance, wine bottles for consecration, and copper wire. Police searched the area surrounding the parish and arrested three individuals after finding consecration wine and other stolen religious objects in their possession.

On October 18, media reported a man held a Nazi-themed birthday party in a restaurant in the Las Mercedes area of Caracas. Images and videos shared from the party showed Nazi symbols, such as the swastika, and attendees performing Nazi salutes. Tarek William Saab, whom the regime characterized as "Attorney General," announced he appointed a prosecutor specializing in human rights to lead an investigation of the man responsible for hosting the party.

Religious leaders reported that the independent, civil society-led Venezuelan Interreligious Forum, founded in 2020 and consisting of Catholic, evangelical Protestant, and Jewish representatives, continued to coordinate throughout the year on dialogue and building consensus around human rights, democratic institutions, and the rule of law. According to a report by the Christian-associated NGO Outreach Aid to the Americas entitled *Venezuela's Humanitarian Crisis and the Role of Faith-based Organizations*, in addition to the efforts of faith-based organizations in mitigating the country's humanitarian crisis, these groups were one of the remaining components of an independent civil society.

On August 11, 194 persons from various religious groups came together for a civil society-convened Nostra Aetate (In Our Time) Interreligious Youth Cooperation Forum in Miranda State. The forum brought together youth representing Catholicism, evangelical Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Sikhism to "promote dialogue, fraternity, and respect for others." The forum created an Interreligious Youth Cooperation group made up of the religious groups present.

In February, Indigenous Pemón representatives denounced the desecration of a *tepuy* (a flat-topped mountain with unique flora and fauna) sacred to the community following the birthday celebration of businessman Rafael Oliveros, whose guests arrived by helicopter. The tepuy, known locally as Kusari and located in Canaima National Park, is home to several Pemón Indigenous communities. According to Pemón representatives, the mountain is revered for its ancient history and extremely rare and fragile plant life, which partygoers denuded “as if it were a raked yard.” In Pemón culture, it is forbidden to go to the summit of Kusari, where Oliveros held the party. On February 10, “Attorney General” Saab announced he had ordered an investigation of the environmental damage caused.

Throughout the year, Indigenous representatives condemned the destruction of sacred land by legal and illegal mining in Yapacana and Canaima National Parks. According to the *Washington Post*, Cerro Yapacana, a sandstone tepuy located in Yapacana National Park that the Indigenous Pemón call the “House of God” and which they consider sacred, had become a center for illegal gold mining.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In 2019, the Department of State announced the temporary suspension of operations of the U.S. Embassy in Caracas and the withdrawal of diplomatic personnel, and it subsequently announced the opening of the VAU, located at the U.S. Embassy in Bogota, Colombia. The VAU continued engagement with the Guaido-led interim government, as well as outreach to the citizens of the country. During the year, the VAU discussed with the Guaido-led interim government actions by the Maduro regime that infringed upon religious freedom and other human rights.

VAU officials also communicated regularly with a wide range of religious communities and leaders in the country to discuss the treatment of religious groups, antisemitic rhetoric by the Maduro regime and its supporters, and reprisals on some faith groups that disagreed with Maduro’s political agenda. VAU officials held meetings with representatives from the CEV, ECV, CAIV, and the Muslim community. Each community expressed interest in maintaining communication and exploring possible outreach programs in the future. The VAU also highlighted the value of religious freedom in interviews with media outlets and on social media.