

2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Venezuela

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.

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion on the condition its practice does not violate public morality, decency, or public order. Representatives of the conference of Catholic bishops, officially known as the Catholic Episcopal Conference of Venezuela (CEV), and the Evangelical Council of Venezuela (ECV) said clergy and other members of their religious communities were harassed, intimidated, and retaliated against for continuing to call attention to the country’s humanitarian crisis and for other criticism of the regime. On June 23, the CEV issued a statement rejecting “the gradual implementation of a totalitarian system” in the country. It stressed that the humanitarian, political, and economic crisis in the country was a period of adversity that must be met and overcome. In August, authorities blocked religious groups from providing aid to families affected by massive flooding in several parts of the country, including Aragua State, according to Catholic Bishop Luis Enrique Rojas. After the CEV condemned the actions of the security forces, regime President Nicolas Maduro defended the regime’s actions and described the bishops as “devils in cassocks.” In July, Maduro accused Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican Secretary of State, of meddling in national affairs after the Cardinal sent a letter to the Venezuelan Federation of Chambers of Commerce (FEDECAMARAS) calling for it to support serious negotiations to resolve the country’s current crisis. Regime Vice President Delcy Rodriguez told the business leaders, “Priests that want to do politics, let them take off their cassocks and do politics.” Church leaders reported Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (SEBIN) officials continued to intimidate priests who criticized Maduro in their sermons. Representatives of the Confederation of Jewish Associations of Venezuela (CAIV) said criticism of Israel in regime-controlled or -affiliated media continued to carry antisemitic overtones, sometimes disguised as anti-Zionist messages. The Catholic Church continued to urge the regime to accept international aid to fight the COVID-19 pandemic and declared its willingness to collaborate with the vaccination process.

According to media, on February 16, individuals reportedly associated with gangs assaulted four men with knives, pipes, and sticks at an evangelical Protestant-run drug rehabilitation center in Merida State. The gang members reportedly opposed the work of the center and forced their victims to eat pages of the Bible. Articles published in the online newspaper *Aporrea* carried anti-Zionist messages and called for the destruction of Israel. The Venezuelan Interreligious Forum, consisting of Catholic, evangelical Protestant, and Jewish representatives, coordinated throughout the year on dialogue and consensus building around human rights, democratic institutions, and the rule of law.

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 and attacks on religious communities committed by the Maduro regime, and antisemitic posts in social media and in regime-associated media.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 29 million (midyear 2021). The U.S. government estimates, based on the most recent available official statistics, that 96 percent of the population is Catholic; however, the growth of evangelical Protestant and nonbeliever communities is likely to have reduced this percentage. The remaining 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. Observers estimate as much as 30 percent of the population follows practices of Afro-descendant religions Santeria and Espiritismo. 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. 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 number represents a decline from approximately 30,000 in 1999.

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. In 2017, the now dissolved National Constituent Assembly (ANC), which the National Assembly, democratically elected in 2015, and the Guaido-led interim government and much of the international community considered illegitimate, 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 law includes 25 articles stipulating a wide array of directives, restrictions, and penalties. The law criminalizes political party activities promoting "fascism, intolerance, or hatred," which comprise 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. Among the violations are those committed by individuals or media outlets, including by members of religious groups or media associated with a religious group.

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 liaises with 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 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 Christian and sacramental values in public schools in preparation for First Communion, but the regime did not consistently honor this agreement. According to church leaders, regime authorities did not allow religious representatives access to some public schools, preventing them from teaching these courses.

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 (ICCPR).

"Government" Practices

CEV and ECV representatives said the Maduro regime harassed, intimidated, and retaliated against their clergy and other members of their religious communities for continuing to call attention to the country's humanitarian crisis. According to press reports, on August 23-24 in the Mocoties Valley, Merida State, heavy rains caused flooding and mudslides, leaving at least 20 persons dead and more than 14,000 families affected in Merida and nearby states. Auxiliary Bishop of Merida Luis Enrique Rojas officiated at a Mass in Tovar Municipality, Aragua State, one of the municipalities most affected by the flooding. When Rojas returned to deliver food, medicine, household goods, and other humanitarian aid to the affected inhabitants, officials from the Bolivarian National Guard confronted him and prevented him from entering the town. The CEV condemned the actions, stating in a public letter, "We regret and condemn the attitude of some civil authorities, as well as the Bolivarian National Guard, who, far from cooperating, not only prevented access to a large part of the aid sent from various parts of the country, but have also maintained an attitude of indifference and offense towards members of the Church and other institutions." In a September 2 television appearance, Maduro defended the regime's actions and described the bishops as "devils in cassocks." On September 8, ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) Vice President Diosdado Cabello further criticized Rojas' actions and labelled the Catholic Church in the country a "political party."

Church leaders reported SEBIN officials continued to intimidate priests who criticized Maduro in their sermons. The leaders said SEBIN officers followed and harassed Catholic laity involved in delivering humanitarian aid or participating in public demonstrations and photographed their homes.

According to media reports and other sources, throughout the year, Maduro and members of his regime attempted to discredit religious organizations for criticizing the regime. On May 25, during a Venezuelan Television broadcast, Maduro called Father Arturo Sosa, Superior General of the Society of Jesus and a citizen, a "mercenary of the pen" after Sosa said in an interview with the Argentinian newspaper *La Nacion* that Maduro was the head of a dictatorship.

During a July 21 television broadcast, Maduro accused Cardinal Parolin, Vatican Secretary of State, of meddling in national affairs after the Cardinal sent a letter to FEDECAMARAS, a business chamber, calling for its support towards serious negotiations to resolve the current crisis. Maduro said the letter was a "compendium of hatred, of venom" and described it as full of poison, hatred, intrigue, cynicism, and attacks. Regime Vice President Rodriguez, who was present at the FEDECAMARAS annual assembly, also responded to the Parolin letter, telling the business leaders, "Priests that want to do politics, let them take off their cassocks and do politics."

The Catholic Church continued to urge the regime to accept international aid to fight the COVID-19 pandemic and declared its willingness to collaborate with the vaccination process. According to the organization Outreach Aid to the Americas, the Catholic Church, working through Caritas, provided food donations and operated feeding programs and health and nutrition services. On May 31, Monsignor Mario Moronta, Bishop of San Cristobal, Tachira State and the First Vice President of the Venezuelan Episcopal Conference, requested that authorities not politicize COVID-19 vaccinations. Moronta said there was discrimination when individuals requested the regime-issued

“homeland card” (*carnet de la patria*) to get vaccinated, a card that required the holder to maintain a PSUV (regime political party) political affiliation.

Some members of the Jewish community stated the regime and those sympathetic to it, including some regime-affiliated media outlets, used anti-Zionism to mask antisemitism, saying they avoided accusations of antisemitism by replacing the word “Jewish” with “Zionist.” CAIV members reported that on May 25, regime “shadow governor [protectorate]” of Tachira State Freddy Bernal called for the downfall of the “murderous Zionist State of Israel” during a speech at a rally that followed fighting between Israel and Hamas that month.

The Catholic Church continued to express its concern regarding the political and social state of the country. On January 7, Bishop of San Felipe and Apostolic Administrator of the Archdiocese of Barquisimeto Victor Hugo Basabe referred to the country’s political crisis and expressed concern about what he said was politicians disconnecting from the reality of the country’s citizens and their problems, such as deteriorating public services.

On January 11, the CEV released a pastoral letter on the occasion of its annual assembly expressing concern about what it stated was the regime’s illegal assumption of control of the legislative branch, human rights violations, and the deterioration of basic services and the economy. The CEV called for a “radical change in political leadership” to find solutions for all Venezuelans.

On June 23, the CEV issued a statement rejecting “the gradual implementation of a totalitarian system” in the country. It stressed that the humanitarian, political, and economic crisis in the country was a period of adversity that must be met and overcome. The CEV also expressed concern about the increase in the number of migrants leaving the country and urgently called for generating a “radical change” involving all sectors. The CEV stressed that political leaders must once again connect with the needs of Venezuelans and not make agreements that only favor their own interests.

On July 9, the CEV condemned violence in the Caracas neighborhood of La Cota 905. In a statement it declared, “Once again it shakes us and it saddens us to see how fear, barbarism, abuse, [and] hatred take over the streets of our country, our cities, our popular areas.” The statement highlighted what the conference said was the failure of the Maduro regime to guarantee peace and security and citizens’ loss of confidence in regime authorities.

The Maduro regime promoted 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. Evangelical Protestant leaders said members of MOCEV did not speak for their religious communities and lacked credibility among their followers due to MOCEV’s tendency to focus on politics rather than religion and spirituality.

On March 30, the Ministry of Interior, Justice and Peace proposed a new antiterrorism requirement that nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and other nonprofits, including religious organizations, provide information on the activities, contributions, and names of beneficiaries, which religious communities and NGOs said was sensitive. Under its broad definition of “beneficiaries,” the measure proposed the requirement that humanitarian NGOs provide the identities of the victims and vulnerable communities that they served. The measure had not been implemented as of November, but NGOs expressed concern regarding the possibility it could be and expressed fear the regime was developing a registry to begin implementation.

Independent bodies, including the UN Human Rights Council Independent Fact Finding Mission in its September report, found the regime regularly violated core tenants of the ICCPR.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to media, on February 16, individuals assaulted four men with knives, pipes, and sticks at an evangelical Protestant-run drug rehabilitation center, located in El Arenal, Jacinto Plaza Parish of Libertador, Merida State. Two of the victims had serious stab wounds and fractured bones, and, according to media accounts, the assailants forced their victims to eat pages of the Bible and etched crosses in the victims' skin. Pastor Cristian Dugarte, who ran the center, told press that the attackers seemed to be local gangs that disagreed with the church's work to help individuals with drug rehabilitation. No arrests had been made by year end.

Articles published in the online newspaper *Aporrea* carried messages calling for the destruction of Israel.

Religious leaders reported that the Venezuelan Interreligious Forum, founded in 2020 and consisting of Catholic, evangelical Protestant, and Jewish representatives, coordinated throughout the year on dialogue and building consensus around human rights, democratic institutions, and the rule of law. According to the Christian-associated Outreach Aid to the Americas' report entitled *Venezuela's Humanitarian Crisis and the Role of Faith-based Organizations*, in addition to the efforts of faith-based groups in mitigating the country's humanitarian crisis, these groups were one of the remaining components of an independent civil society. Religious leaders expressed concern that the continued presence of the Maduro regime would only further the political, economic, and humanitarian crisis in the country, and that criticism of Maduro would increase hostility towards faith communities.

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 interim government led by Juan Guaido, 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 Muslim community. Each community expressed interest in maintaining communications and exploring possible outreach programs in the future. The VAU also communicated the value of religious freedom in interviews with media outlets and on digital media.