



World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Venezuela

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Updated December 2017

Minorities and indigenous peoples

Main languages: Spanish, indigenous languages

Main religions: Christianity (majority Roman Catholic), African-derived and indigenous religions

According to the 2011 National Census, there are 725,128 indigenous people living in Venezuela. This is a 41.8 per cent increase from the last count completed in 2001. The census recorded declarations of individuals belonging to 51 distinct groups, the largest of which was the Wayuú. The majority of indigenous peoples live in urban areas, which is an 8 per cent increase from the time of the last census in 2001. There are many indigenous languages spoken in Venezuela and the extent to which indigenous peoples speak Spanish varies widely.

Until 2011 Venezuela had not collected data on its black population since 1920, meaning estimates have ranged from 7 to 60 per cent of the total population. While the 2011 census allowed community members to self-identify for the first time, the reported figures -- 0.7 per cent of the total population identified themselves as Afro-descendant and 2.9 per cent as black, compared to 51.6 per cent as brown and 43.6 per cent as white -- were far lower than the likely actual proportion.

Current issues

President Hugo Chavez died in 2013 and was succeeded by the democratically elected President Nicolás Maduro. In January 2016, Maduro declared a state of general and economic emergency. During this time, there was an increase in food and medicine shortages that led to protests across

the country. In August 2016, there was a large anti-Maduro protest called the 'Taking of Caracas' that 100 indigenous people took part in.

Despite Venezuela's Ministerio del Poder Popular para los Pueblos Indígenas (Ministry of Popular Power for Indigenous Peoples) being in place for over ten years, many feel the Ministry has done little to improve the lives of indigenous peoples. Though the 1999 Constitution of Venezuela recognizes the land rights of indigenous peoples to their ancestral lands, policies surrounding the demarcation of land have yet to be fully implemented. Regional Demarcation Commissions are responsible for validating and delimiting land before passing it on to the National Demarcation Commission for confirmation. However, as of November 2016 only 102 collective property titles have been issued.

Large swathes of land claimed by indigenous communities as communal territory are currently occupied by ranchers, frequently leading to disputes, threats and violent confrontations. One of the worst incidents took place in 2013 when Chief Sabino Romero of the Yukpa was murdered after leading a campaign to reclaim Yukpa ancestral lands in the Perijá Mountains. While the murderer, a contracted killer, as well as a number of police accomplices eventually received prison sentences, Romero's supporters continue to call for justice for the ranchers they believe commissioned the attack.

Another driver of land rights abuses is natural resource extraction. Despite official recognition of the right of indigenous peoples to be consulted regarding any exploitation of natural resources on their land, these consultations are rarely held in practice. Indeed, in 2015, President Maduro authorized the National Army to begin coal and other associated mineral exploitation in land inhabited by the Wayúu. This action was protested by the Frente de Resistencia Ecológica del Zulia (Zulia Environmental Resistance Front), a group comprised of environmental associations and indigenous communities. These protests successfully led to the government reducing the area of land affected by the exploitation. Nevertheless, there have been reports of indigenous environmental activists being criminalized for their activities and even of human rights abuses by the military: in February 2015, a commander of the Bolivarian National Armed Forces burned down houses in two indigenous communities in response to protests calling on the army to improve the distribution of fuel.

These incidents have taken place against a broader backdrop of discrimination, with indigenous communities routinely experiencing limited access to essential services such as education: 21 per cent of the total indigenous population is illiterate compared to an illiteracy rate of only 4 per cent for the general population. This situation has been exacerbated by the decline of native languages within Venezuela. While the government officially recognizes 37 indigenous languages and there have been recent efforts towards multilingual education, such as the creation of the Institute of Indigenous Languages in 2015 to promote the use of native languages throughout Venezuela, only one in ten indigenous Venezuelans now speak a language other than Spanish.

The Department of Indigenous Health was created in 2006 but has been rendered largely ineffective since 2010 due to budget cuts. This has most seriously affected Warao, who live in the remote Orinoco Delta. They have an infant mortality rate that is 20 times higher than that of the general population, and tuberculosis and malaria remains one of their primary causes of death.

Background

Environment

Venezuela is located on the northern coast of South America and is bordered by Guyana to the east, Brazil to the south, and Colombia to the south and west. The geography of Venezuela consists of mountainous regions that extend to the Colombian border, plains delineated by the Orinoco River, and the coastal region. Venezuela has dozens of distinct minority and indigenous communities inhabiting all 23 states. Afro-Venezuelans are highly concentrated along the Caribbean coast, and indigenous peoples are the majority in the Amazonian region.

History

Upon arrival in Venezuela, the Spanish conquerors found a diverse array of settled as well as nomadic and semi-nomadic indigenous communities. During the Spanish colonial regime the indigenous population retained their '*resguardos*', communally held reserved land, but these were largely destroyed after independence.

Venezuela also imported a considerable number of enslaved Africans to work on the cocoa plantations, starting in the 16th century. Inter-ethnic sexual relations, marriages and families resulted in a complex system of ethnic inclusion and exclusion.

For a large part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Venezuela had a series of military authoritarian regimes. In 1958, the military regime was overthrown in a coup and a democratic election process was established. A fall in oil prices and the resulting economic crisis led to Colonel Hugo Chavez leading two unsuccessful coup attempts in 1992. Hugo Chavez was later elected president in 1998 and launched a 'Bolivarian Revolution' that established a new Constitution and what some call populist economic and social policies, including the gradual privatisation of the oil industry. While Chavez and his administration attracted accusations of corruption and authoritarianism, his rule was also seen by many as auguring in a period of emancipation for the country's indigenous peoples.

Governance

An attempted military coup in 1992 and a series of general strikes due to discontent with economic and agricultural policies threatened Venezuela's democratic government. Although Chavez was elected to the presidency by popular vote in 1998, his rise to power followed his participation in the 1992 attempted coup in which many were killed. Operating on a populist platform, Chavez enjoyed overwhelming support of the majority of the Venezuelan population, among them many Afro-Venezuelans and indigenous people.

One of the first positive steps under Chavez was with the recognition in the 1999 Constitution of indigenous peoples' rights -- a welcome step in a country that until then was well behind many of its neighbours in its respect for indigenous rights. Other measures followed, such as the declaration in 2002 that 12 October (traditionally celebrated as 'Columbus Day') would be henceforth known as 'Indigenous Resistance Day', and the ratification of the International Labour Organization's Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention 169 in 2002. The Ministerio del Poder Popular para los Pueblos Indígenas (Ministry of Popular Power for Indigenous Peoples) was founded in 2007, granting it responsible for implementing government policies regarding indigenous peoples, such as welfare provisions. In 2008, the Law on Indigenous Languages was also passed with the aim to support their revitalization.

However, Venezuelan politics became increasingly polarised under the Chavez administration. Sharp divides between the *Chavistas* (supporters of Chavez) and *anti-Chavistas* (the opposition) led to ethnic and racial undertones pervading Venezuela's political environment. And although indigenous peoples' rights were at the forefront of Chavez's political agenda, his government did little in the way of guaranteeing official recognition of rights for Afro-Venezuelans. Nevertheless, Chavez's acknowledgment of his own African heritage paired with his campaign to improve the

living conditions of the poor more generally has resonated with the majority of Afro-Venezuelans. In March 2005, for example, Chavez re-designed the Venezuelan flag; among the changes was the inclusion of indigenous symbols and a machete, which has been interpreted as a symbol of the noble peasant and in some cases as representative of Afro-Venezuelans.

Following Chavez's death in March 2013, Nicolás Maduro served as interim president and was subsequently elected after a narrow electoral victory the next month that was subsequently contested by the opposition. While Maduro has largely continued his predecessor's policies, he has faced an intensifying economic crisis within Venezuela and mounting calls from political opponents pushing for his recall. These divisions show little sign of abating in the near future.

Minorities

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Contacts

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General

Amnesty International
Website: www.amnistia.org.ve

Indigenous

Consejo Nacional Indio de Venezuela (CONIVE)
Website: <http://www.conive.org>

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