

2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Venezuela

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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 Venezuela and the Holy See and provides for state funding for Catholic Church-run schools. An antihate law criminalizes political party activities promoting “fascism, intolerance, or hatred.”

Religious groups said they generally enjoyed freedom of religion or belief so long as they refrained from criticizing Nicolas Maduro-aligned figures or policies. Representatives of the conference of Roman Catholic bishops (the Catholic Episcopal Conference of Venezuela (CEV)), and the Evangelical Council of Venezuela (ECV) said Maduro supporters continued to verbally harass clergy and other members of their religious communities for calling attention to the country’s humanitarian crisis and other criticisms of Maduro. In January, Jorge Rodriguez, president of the Maduro-controlled entity calling itself the national assembly, accused the Catholic Church of meddling in political issues and supporting U.S. “interventionist” actions. During the year, the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America (OLIRE) reported criminal organizations and other nonstate groups operating in the country with Maduro’s approval put at risk the security of religious leaders who attempted to prevent or denounce the recruitment of youth for armed groups or who disrupted the status quo imposed by these groups by providing humanitarian aid. In January, Maduro ordered the National Telecommunications Commission (CONATEL) to create a working group to discuss increased access for evangelical Protestant churches to radio programming. In October, CONATEL ordered the closure of Catholic-associated radio station Radio Fe y Alegria. In January, the Maduro-controlled national assembly approved in a first reading a law that, if passed, would require civil society organizations, including religiously affiliated organizations, to declare their activities, sources of financing, and relationships with national or international organizations. Speaking at a press event, Catholic priest Luis Ugalde stated if the law passed, many successful nongovernmental organization (NGO) initiatives that benefited those most in need could end. According to the online publication The National Interest, Telesur TV, the state-owned news channel, described Israel “as a modern-day genocidal Nazi regime backed by Jewish media.” In December, Rodriguez stated the Maduro-controlled entity calling itself the national assembly condemned the Holocaust “in the same way we condemn and repudiate the crimes of Netanyahu’s Zionism against the Palestinian people.”

In March, the Archdiocese of Caracas reported unknown persons stole sacred vessels from parish offices. Leaders of the Jewish community reported occasional examples of antisemitic graffiti appearing throughout the country. In October, protesters responding to the Israel-Hamas conflict chanted slogans calling for attacks on Jews. The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) reported during an October anti-Israel march in Caracas, signs were spotted with antisemitic slogans, including “Zionism = Nazism” and “Gaza = Warsaw Ghetto.” In December, members of the Jewish community reported tens of “virulently antisemitic” accounts on X (formerly known as Twitter), reportedly run by Venezuelans, which X subsequently banned. The independent, civil society-led Venezuelan Interreligious Forum continued to meet and build consensus around human rights, including religious freedom, democratic institutions, and the rule of law.

On October 24, the Chief of Mission of the VAU met with leaders from the Confederation of Jewish Associations of Venezuela (CAIV) to underscore U.S. policy to condemn threats against any person for their religious beliefs or nonbelief. Other VAU officials continued to maintain close contact with a wide range of religious groups, including the Jewish, Muslim, evangelical Protestant,

and Catholic communities. VAU officials and members of these groups discussed repression of religious communities and antisemitic posts in social media and in Maduro-associated media.

Section I.

Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 30.5 million (midyear 2023), although according to the Interagency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants, a UN body established in 2018 to coordinate regional assistance to Venezuelan refugees and migrants, the number may be considerably lower, given the exodus of nearly eight million citizens since 2015. The U.S. government estimates, based on the most recently 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 to 20 percent of the population is Protestant, the majority of whom are members of evangelical Protestant churches.

Observers estimate many persons follow practices of the Afro-descendant religions Santeria and Spiritism concurrently with Christianity. Muslim community leaders estimate there are approximately between 100,000 and 150,000 followers of Islam, consisting primarily of persons of Lebanese, Palestinian, Syrian, Egyptian, Algerian, and Libyan descent living in Nueva Esparta State and the Caracas metropolitan area as well as the cities of Valencia and Maracaibo. Sunnis are the majority, with a minority Shia community, primarily in Margarita Island in Nueva Esparta State. There may be at least 48,000 adherents of Buddhism in the country, mostly ethnic Chinese, according to Global Mapping International, which describes itself as a Christian interdenominational missionary research agency. CAIV estimates the Jewish community numbers 10,000, with most members living in Caracas. This represents a decline from approximately 30,000 in 1999.

Section II.

Status of Maduro Representatives' 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 Venezuela and the Holy See and provides for state funding for Catholic Church-run schools.

In 2017, the now-dissolved National Constituent Assembly (ANC), considered illegitimate by the democratically elected 2015 National Assembly 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 liaises 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 obtain a letter of acceptance from the Maduro-aligned community council in the neighborhood(s) where the group will work. The ministry reviews applications, with no time limit for approval. 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 Maduro representatives do 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.

PRACTICES OF MADURO REPRESENTATIVES

Religious groups reported they generally enjoyed freedom of religion or belief so long as they refrained from criticizing Maduro-aligned figures or policies. Many religious groups practiced self-censorship out of fear that Maduro's representatives would apply the penal code or the antihate law that criminalizes political party activities promoting "fascism, intolerance, or hatred" to religious actors who criticized them.

Maduro's representatives continued verbal harassment against members of the Catholic Church who expressed concerns regarding the political and social state of the country. On January 16, Diosdado Cabello, vice president of ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), called a January 14 speech in Lara State by Monsignor Victor Hugo Basabe, in which Basabe criticized the country's economy, an "ill-intentioned political speech." Cabello referred to the Catholic Church as an "ecclesiastical hierarchy that has historically turned its back on the people." Media outlets reported the PSUV-controlled local council of Lara State's Iribarren municipality voted the following day to declare Basabe persona non grata. On January 17, Jorge Rodriguez, president of the Maduro-controlled entity calling itself the national assembly, accused the Catholic Church of meddling in political issues and supporting U.S. "interventionist" actions. Rodriguez referred to members of the Venezuelan Catholic Bishops' Conference as "devils in cassocks."

On June 19, Cabello said the role of the CEV as a "political party" (in favor of the opposition) was "clear" after the opposition-run National Primaries Commission suggested some Catholic churches could be used as voting sites for the opposition-led October 22 primary election. On November 26, Cabello characterized as "an embarrassment" the CEV's November 23 statement calling on Maduro not to "manipulate for political interests" the December 3 referendum on the contested Essequibo region between Venezuela and Guyana and urging instead that Maduro deal with other problems in the country, such as the crises of fuel, public services, and health.

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

Catholic Church representatives continued to cite difficulties in securing religious visas for priests. They said many international Catholic Church personnel could not obtain religious visas and had to enter the country with tourist visas, which require renewal fees that represented a financial burden

for the Church. Maduro representatives reportedly denied members of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) entrance into the country in July. USCCB had not been able to enter the country since 2016, according to a USCCB representative.

In October, Spanish daily newspaper *La Vanguardia* reported Maduro had accused David Smolansky, former Organization of American States Commissioner for the Venezuelan Migrants and Refugee Crisis, of being one of four individuals who were “coyotes” trafficking Venezuelans into other Latin American countries and the United States for substantial sums of money. During the year, PSUV vice president Cabello called Smolansky a “Zionist” and a “fascist” during Cabello’s weekly television program *Con El Manzo Dando*, including during a May 10 program. According to Smolansky, the online insults and threats increased following the October 7 Hamas terrorist attack on Israel. Following Cabello’s October 9 show, during which he accused Smolansky of being “Zionism’s project, representing death and terror in Venezuela,” Smolansky responded that Cabello was an antisemite who since 2014 had frequently used his television show to systematically attack him for his Jewish heritage.

During the year, OLIRE reported criminal organizations and other nonstate groups operating in the country with Maduro’s support or permission put at risk the security of religious leaders who attempted to prevent or denounce the recruitment of youth for armed groups or who disrupted the status quo imposed by these groups by providing humanitarian aid. Religious leaders were also reportedly targeted for refusing to accept donations from criminal groups. According to OLIRE, there were indications these groups posed a threat to religious leaders who were well known or related to dissidents or critics of Maduro and his representatives.

According to a report of Venezuelan investigative journalism online site ArmandoInfo, entitled *Even Priests say Amen to ELN Commandments in Tachira and Apure* and based on 30 interviews conducted during the year, Colombian National Liberation Army (ELN) guerrillas had imposed “Eight Commandments” to replace the biblical Ten Commandments on all those who resided in ELN-controlled territory, including parts of Apure and Tachira States. According to the report, a priest said the ELN had warned him that if he did not comply with the ELN commandments, “he would disappear, and not exactly to heaven.” Commandments three and six refer specifically to religious figures. The third commandment states priests are forbidden from speaking about certain topics, including extortion, violence, or kidnappings, and from making any reference to the guerrilla forces (ELN). The sixth commandment prohibits religious authorities from using social networks, giving interviews, or sharing photographs that present the “reality of the community.” According to priests interviewed for the report, ELN members carefully monitored masses and other religious activities to ensure compliance with ELN commandments.

In January, Maduro ordered CONATEL to create a technical working group to discuss increased access for evangelical Protestant churches to radio programming. In October, CONATEL ordered the closure of Catholic-associated radio station Radio Fe y Alegria, citing a lack of permission to operate. Observers said CONATEL issued the order after the station interviewed a politician who opposed Maduro.

Maduro representatives continued to promote the National Religious Council they created in 2020. As part of this effort, they organized meetings throughout the year with the Evangelical Christian Movement for Venezuela (MOCEV), a pro-Maduro organization close to the PSUV. The ECV stated MOCEV was not representative of all evangelicals and that not all evangelical Protestant movements supported Maduro policies.

According to *Foreign Policy* magazine, starting in January, Maduro increased his engagement with evangelical Protestant religious groups. In February, Spanish daily *El Pais* reported Maduro was deepening his engagement with a sector of the evangelical Protestant community that had created a political movement to support him. During a January 19 meeting with MOCEV, Maduro announced new programs, including the Programa Iglesia Social (Social Church Program) and Mi Iglesia Bien Equipada (My Well-Equipped Church), to repair damaged churches and provide social services to the needy. Media outlets reported the programs were part of a pattern of offering some evangelicals benefits during electoral periods. Religious organizations criticized Maduro for instituting programs

that benefitted only certain sectors of evangelicals, particularly MOCEV. The ECV said these programs and other support to certain sectors of evangelism were “partisan, political actions,” called for separation of church and state, and reiterated the ECV’s belief that public funds should not be used to “advance the religious or ideological creeds of individuals.”

Maduro representatives continued to disburse the “Good Pastor” bonus to some evangelical pastors via the *Sistema Patria* (Homeland System), a Maduro-controlled virtual platform on which many individuals must register to collect their salary and receive economic assistance. The bonus was reportedly 360 bolivars (\$10) and benefitted an estimated 13,915 evangelical Protestant pastors.

On January 24, the Maduro-controlled national assembly approved in a first reading a law on the inspection and regularization of the activities and financing of NGOs and related organizations. If passed, the law would require civil society organizations, including religiously affiliated organizations, to declare their activities, sources of financing, and relationships with national or international organizations. Catholic priest Luis Ugalde, speaking at a press event with a federation of local organizations and network of 178 schools offering education in the most disadvantaged parts of the country, said if the law passed, many successful NGO initiatives could end.

Nicolas Maduro Guerra, Maduro’s son, continued to spearhead evangelical Protestant Church programs in his role as president of religious issues for the PSUV. According to media reports, in addition to the “Good Pastor” program, some Maduro-aligned religious leaders received privileged medical care, and some had their churches remodeled. ECV Director Nelson Sevilla said his organization did not receive similar benefits. At a November interfaith gathering focused on consolidating support for Maduro’s December 3 referendum over the contested Essequibo territory, Maduro Guerra stated Maduro’s position was based on “peace and the values of profound spirituality” and said the referendum demonstrated Venezuela was one of the main promoters of peace in Latin America. Catholic Church representatives stated since his appointment in 2022, Maduro Guerra had not made significant statements related to religion and that his appointment was intended to advance PSUV interests.

According to The National Interest, following the October 7 Hamas terrorist attack on Israel, state-owned news channel Telesur TV described Israel as a modern-day genocidal Nazi regime backed by Jewish-controlled media. The online publication reported Telesur commentators routinely compared Israel to Nazism, demonizing Israel with antisemitic tropes. In October, police deployed to ensure anti-Israel protesters did not attack synagogues in response to the latest events in the Israel-Hamas conflict.

On December 27, PSUV member Alberto Aranguibel, who is also a member of the Maduro-controlled national assembly, posted on X that “Hitler did not deserve to die so prematurely, he left much to be done with his great work to the benefit of humanity” and that Israel was committing “the atrocity of genocide” against the Palestinian people. On December 30, Jorge Rodriguez alleged Aranguibel was never actually a member of the national assembly and condemned his statement. Rodriguez stated the Maduro-controlled entity calling itself the national assembly condemned the Holocaust “in the same way we condemn and repudiate the crimes of Netanyahu’s Zionism against the Palestinian people.”

According to news reports, in September, the Bolivarian National Armed Forces (FANB) evicted approximately 14,000 illegal miners from the Yapacana National Park in Amazonas State. The FANB subsequently declared the park free of illegal miners on September 25. The park is a spiritually significant site for Indigenous communities that live in the area.

On November 15, Maduro announced the creation of the National Institute of Religious Affairs and Churches. In the same statement, Maduro approved a project for the creation of the Interreligious University of Venezuela. Maduro also said the country would conduct a first-ever religious census, without providing a date. Maduro appointed his Minister of interior, justice, and peace, Remigio Ceballos, to preside over the census.

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In March, the Archdiocese of Caracas reported unknown persons vandalized and desecrated the San Ignacio de Loyola Parish by stealing sacred vessels from parish offices. Leaders of the Jewish community reported occasional examples of antisemitic graffiti appearing throughout the country. In October, protesters responding to the Israel-Hamas conflict chanted slogans calling for attacks on Jews. The ADL reported that during an October anti-Israel march in Caracas, signs were spotted with antisemitic slogans, including “Zionism = Nazism” and “Gaza = Warsaw Ghetto.” In the first weeks of December, members of the Jewish community reported tens of “virulently antisemitic” accounts on X, apparently run by Venezuelans, which X subsequently banned.

Religious leaders continued to report that the independent, civil society-led 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.

In February, religious leaders of the Catholic, Jewish, evangelical Protestant, and Muslim communities held a meeting with youth representatives from the Interreligious Youth Cooperation Forum. In June, Buddhist-associated Soka Gakkai International of Venezuela (SGI-Venezuela), the United Religions Initiative, an international NGO whose mission includes ending religiously motivated violence, and the Central University of Venezuela held an interfaith dialogue in Caracas. According to SGI-Venezuela, various religious leaders and scholars spoke on topics such as peace, spirituality, and coexistence among religious groups.

Section IV.

U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

On October 24, the VAU Chief of Mission met with CAIV President Saul Levine and National Coordination Director Miguel Truzman to underscore U.S. policy to condemn threats against any person for their religious beliefs or nonbelief and asked how the VAU could further support the Jewish community in light of antisemitic rhetoric emanating from Maduro’s representatives and Maduro-aligned institutions. Other VAU officials also communicated regularly with a wide range of religious communities and leaders in the country to discuss the treatment of religious groups and reprisals on some faith groups that disagreed with Maduro’s political agenda. The VAU facilitated travel for several religious actors for religious freedom advocacy and outreach in the United States. 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.