

NOW LIVE: Freedom in the World 2024

ENGLISH ESPAÑOL



FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2024

Venezuela

15

NOT FREE

/100

<u>Political Rights</u>	1/40
<u>Civil Liberties</u>	14/60

LAST YEAR’S SCORE & STATUS

15 /100 Not Free

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. See the methodology.



Overview

Venezuela's democratic institutions have been deteriorating since 1999, but conditions have grown sharply worse in recent years due to harsher government crackdowns on the opposition and the ruling party's use of thoroughly flawed elections to seize full control of state institutions. The authorities have closed off virtually all channels for political dissent, restricting civil liberties and prosecuting perceived opponents without regard for due process. Although the country's economy has returned to growth after years of recession, a severe, politically driven humanitarian crisis continues to cause hardship and stimulate mass emigration.

Key Developments in 2023

- In October, it was announced that the Maduro regime had agreed to make certain democratic concessions in exchange for the United States (US) government easing some sanctions on Venezuela. Among other things, the Maduro regime agreed to release a number of political prisoners and to allow independent observers to monitor elections scheduled for 2024.
- In June, opposition presidential candidate María Corina Machado was banned from running for elected office on spurious grounds, which included purported irregularities in a declaration of assets she made in 2015 while a legislator. Machado, who won the opposition's October presidential primaries, appealed the ban in December.
- Also in June, several members of the government-controlled National Electoral Council (CNE) unexpectedly resigned; the head of the National Assembly later announced that legislators would reappoint the entire 15-seat body ahead of the 2024 elections. Legislators selected new CNE members in August, preserving a progovernment majority on the council.
- The absence of a functioning CNE prevented the official administration of opposition primaries, contributing to the opposition's decision to "self-manage" its October presidential primaries. Days after the primaries, the Supreme Tribunal of Justice (TSJ) ruled that the opposition's primary process had been illegal, and suspended the results of the vote.

Political Rights

A. Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?

0 / 4

The president serves six-year terms and is not subject to term limits. Incumbent Nicolás Maduro was awarded a new term after winning the 2018 snap presidential election with nearly 68 percent of the vote. The poll featured a record-low turnout of 46 percent, leading opposition figures were barred from competing, and regional observers generally considered the process to be illegitimate.

In December 2022, the remaining members of the opposition-controlled National Assembly that had been elected in 2015 voted to formally dissolve an interim government it had created in January 2019 to challenge Maduro's legitimacy. That government, headed by interim president Juan Guaidó, had received recognition from a number of democratic countries, but it was never able to displace Maduro or gain control over state institutions in practice.

Presidential elections are scheduled be held in 2024, but no official date for the polls had been announced by year-end 2023. In October, it was announced that the Maduro regime had reached an agreement with the US government that would see the US ease some sanctions on Venezuela in exchange for—among other things—the regime allowing independent election observers to monitor the 2024 polls. The regime also agreed to create a process to allow banned opposition figures to be able to contest the 2024 elections.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?

0 / 4

The unicameral National Assembly is popularly elected for five-year terms, using a mix of majoritarian and proportional-representation voting. The major opposition parties refused to participate in the 2020 National Assembly elections, citing the regime’s control over the CNE and recent attempts to replace the parties’ own leaders. A coalition led by the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) won 253 of the assembly’s 277 seats according to official results.

Meanwhile, the opposition-controlled National Assembly that had been elected in 2015 continued to operate and has repeatedly voted to extend its term, notwithstanding its December 2022 decision to dissolve Guaidó’s interim government. In January 2023, its members voted to extend their mandate for another year and appointed three exiled legislators to replace Guaidó as head of the chamber.

Regional and local elections held in November 2021 were marred by the abuse of state resources and judicial interference in the government’s favor. A European Union (EU) election observation mission reported that turnout stood at 42.5 percent, the lowest in 25 years. The EU observers were forced to leave the country that December and were not permitted to return for the release of their final report in 2022.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies?	O / 4
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The electoral system is heavily influenced by political manipulation and pro-PSUV institutional interference. In June 2023, several government-affiliated CNE members resigned unexpectedly. Later that month, the head of the National Assembly announced that legislators would reappoint the entire 15-seat body in a move that the nongovernmental Venezuelan Electoral Observatory (OEV) deemed “legally questionable.” Legislators selected new CNE members in August; although some seats were allocated to opposition members, the newly appointed CNE retained a progovernment majority.

The shakeup of the CNE came at a critical time: the newly appointed body will administer the 2024 presidential elections. The monthslong absence of a

functioning CNE also prevented the official administration of opposition primaries in 2023, contributing to the opposition’s decision to “self-manage” its October presidential primaries. Days later, the TSJ suspended both the opposition’s primary process and the results of the vote.

Recent polls have been characterized by the disqualification of prominent opposition candidates, government abuse of public resources, uneven access to the state-dominated media, the diminished presence of international observers, and intimidation of state employees. Millions of eligible citizens that left the country due to the economic crisis have not been allowed to update their voting location. According to Venezuelan voting rights group Súmate (Join In), around 10 million voters could be prevented from voting if the CNE fails to facilitate registration ahead of the 2024 presidential election.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?	0 / 4
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While opposition coalitions and parties exist, the ruling PSUV uses state resources as well as security forces and the judiciary to disrupt parties that directly challenge its dominant position. In August 2023, the TSJ intervened to replace the leaders of the Communist Party (PCV), purportedly due to corruption allegations. In recent years, the TSJ has similarly suspended and replaced the leaders of other opposition parties, including Acción Democrática (Democratic Action) and Voluntad Popular (Popular Will).

Opposition leaders have long been harassed, attacked, imprisoned, and otherwise impeded from participating in political processes. In January 2023, judicial authorities ordered the arrest of the three new leaders of the opposition-controlled 2015 National Assembly and their homes were raided by police. Days

later, the attorney general ordered the arrest of opposition leader Julio Borges for alleged treason. In April, former interim president Juan Guaidó left Venezuela following rumors about his possible arrest. As of December, the government has issued arrest warrants for at least three members of opposition presidential candidate María Corina Machado's team.

According to the civil society group Foro Penal (Criminal Forum), there still are more than 275 political prisoners in Venezuela as of December 2023, over 100 of whom have reportedly been imprisoned for more than three years without a trial. Multiple human rights groups have documented the use of torture and forced disappearances to control dissidents.

Candidates contesting the opposition's 2023 primary elections faced threats, intimidation, and harassment, including from violent pro-Maduro groups, and government police groups regularly monitored candidates' activities. Some opposition candidates were arbitrarily disqualified from participating in elections. Venezuela's National Telecommunications Commission (Conatel) censored coverage of the opposition primaries.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?

0/4

While discontent with the Maduro regime remains widespread, the government has cut off virtually all avenues for political change at a national level, and it has used a variety of tactics to create divisions within the opposition movement.

In June 2023, opposition leader María Corina Machado was banned from participating in elections on spurious grounds, including purported irregularities in a declaration of assets she made in 2015 while a member of the National Assembly. Machado appealed the ban in December. Other prominent opposition figures were also subject to arbitrary bans on their participation in elections, and after Machado won the opposition's October primaries, the government issued arrest warrants for several opposition leaders and members of her team. The US government has asked the Maduro regime to lift these bans in exchange for the easing of US economic sanctions on Venezuela; the Maduro government had not done so as of December.

The government employed a number of tactics that rights groups say were intended to reduce participation in the opposition's primary elections. For example, in September, Venezuela's four main internet providers, including state-owned CANTV, blocked the website that listed polling locations for the opposition primaries.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means?

0 / 4

The Maduro regime relies on the military, paramilitary forces, and opaque support from foreign states to retain political power. Military leaders have taken control of numerous offices, and Maduro has continued to strengthen the Bolivarian Militia, a millions-strong civilian militia group established in 2008 to support the military.

Separately, irregular, state-affiliated armed groups known as *colectivos* routinely commit acts of violence against civilians and carry out government-backed voter intimidation efforts. During 2023, *colectivos* reportedly carried out numerous violent attacks against opposition candidates and their supporters in exchange for government resources and aid.

In September 2023, a United Nations (UN) fact-finding mission to Venezuela reported that the Maduro regime continues to commit serious human rights violations against dissidents, further warning that these violations constitute a "policy of repression" against the opposition that the government appears unwilling to change.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities?

1 / 4

The PSUV's political dominance leaves little opportunity for ethnic and other groups to advocate independently for their interests. Indigenous people in

Venezuela are poorly represented in politics, and members of these groups struggle to bring government attention to their concerns.

Though several women hold senior positions in government, there is a lack of policy discussion regarding issues that primarily affect women. Almost no openly LGBT+ people hold senior political or government positions in Venezuela. The first openly transgender member of the National Assembly, Voluntad Popular member Tamara Adrián, held a seat in the assembly elected in 2015, and contested the 2023 opposition primaries.

C. Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government?	O / 4
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Venezuela does not function as a representative democracy. The most recent presidential election was widely regarded as illegitimate, and the opposition-controlled legislature had no practical ability to carry out its constitutional mandate between 2015 and 2020, when it was replaced by a PSUV-dominated National Assembly.

The Maduro regime has become increasingly dependent on economic, medical, military, and other assistance from foreign allies, particularly the governments of Russia, Cuba, Turkey, and Iran. In addition, leftist guerrilla groups from Colombia have increased their influence in Venezuelan cities near the border. According to UN investigators, the National Liberation Army (ELN) guerrilla group operates in the state of Bolívar and has an agreement with the government to control illegal mining activity.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?	O / 4
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Corruption is rampant in Venezuela. The government’s economic policies—particularly its currency and price controls—offer significant opportunities for

illicit market activity and collusion between public officials and organized crime networks. Authorities in jurisdictions including the United States, Canada, Panama, and the EU have imposed sanctions on Venezuelan officials for corruption and other offenses that go uninvestigated in Venezuela.

In March 2023, oil minister Tareck El Aissami unexpectedly resigned during a corruption investigation into the state oil company, Petróleos de Venezuela SA (PDVSA). Prior to his resignation, El Aissami was a high-ranking member of the Maduro regime who had reportedly amassed his own power base; some analysts believe that the case against El Aissami is likely not a genuine effort to bolster anticorruption mechanisms but rather a pretext for the Maduro regime to go after political opponents.

Venezuelan authorities carried out 142 raids and arrested 44 people in March and April 2023 for their alleged involvement in various corruption cases, including the PDVSA case. One of the detainees, Leoner Azuaje, allegedly committed suicide in jail; some Venezuelan media outlets reported that Azuaje’s body bore possible signs of torture.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency?	O / 4
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There is virtually no transparency regarding government spending. The Maduro regime has consistently failed to publish reliable crime and economic data, including monthly inflation statistics, the balance of payments, and annual gross domestic product. Some civil society leaders have argued that the lack of transparency surrounding official data makes it impossible to create effective policies to combat and prevent issues like domestic violence and child abuse.

Civil Liberties

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts**Are there free and independent media?****1/4**

The media operate within a highly restrictive regulatory and legal environment. Venezuela formerly benefited from vibrant newspaper, television, and radio sectors, but many outlets have been forced to close or narrow their operations. During 2023, at least six radio stations were forced to cease operations, including Radio Caracas Radio, which had operated for more than 90 years. Additionally, more than 60 digital media outlets were arbitrarily blocked during the year. The Maduro regime maintains a state-controlled media infrastructure that promotes its political and ideological program.

Independent journalists are at risk of government pressure, arbitrary arrest, and physical violence. In September 2023, journalist Luis Alejandro Acosta was arrested for reporting on military operations against illegal mining in Yacapana National Park. Acosta was detained for several days before being released on the condition that he not publish information about the case. In January, four journalists and the editor in chief of newspaper El Nacional were temporarily detained and questioned about their work.

Nongovernmental organization (NGO) Public Space (Espacio Público) documented nearly 300 violations of freedom of expression, including censorship and intimidation, during the first nine months of 2023. Another media freedom group, the Press and Society Institute (IPYS), recorded 257 freedom of speech violations during 2022, with restrictions on access to information and aggression against journalists among the most common types of violations.

D2 0-4 pts**Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private?****3/4**

Constitutional guarantees of religious freedom are generally respected, though relations between the government and the Roman Catholic Church remain tense. According to the 2021 edition of the US State Department's Report on

International Religious Freedom, Roman Catholic and evangelical Christian groups alleged government harassment, intimidation, and retaliation against their members, including members of the clergy. The report also noted a pattern of antisemitic content in regime-affiliated media outlets and social media posts.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination?

1/4

Academic freedom has come under mounting pressure in recent years, as budget cuts and other funding problems have led to a decline in research capabilities within Venezuela, undermined universities' autonomy, and prompted an exodus of academics from the country.

The regime continues to exert political influence over university leadership. In 2022, the TSJ partially suspended the results of the internal elections held by the Universidad Central de Venezuela (UCV), the largest institution of higher education in the country, after progovernment candidates lost in all the faculties and in 44 of the 49 schools. A new rector, Víctor Rago, was elected in July 2023 following a repeat election.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution?

1/4

The freedom of personal expression is severely constrained in Venezuela, due in part to the deterrent effect of extensive government surveillance. In 2022, the Spanish telecommunications firm Movistar, which operates in Venezuela, reported that Maduro's government had made more than 860,000 requests for telephone interceptions during 2021, affecting over 1.5 million phone numbers. The government has also used social service and health care systems to surveil Venezuelans; the Fatherland Card, an electronic identification document, is used both to distribute social aid and influence citizens' online activity.

Social media users have faced various threats and punishments for posts that authorities perceive to be unfavorable to the regime. In December 2023,

firefighter Alfredo Lizcano was arrested after posting a video on social media website X in which he directly addressed the president to demand that the government pay out a holiday bonus that had been promised to public employees.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly?	0 / 4
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While guaranteed by the constitution, freedom of assembly is severely restricted in practice, and violent clashes between protesters and security forces are known to occur. The Venezuelan Observatory of Social Conflict (OVCS) counted 4,351 protests on a variety of topics in the first half of 2023—a 12 percent increase from the same period in 2022. The OVCS reported that 95 of these protests were suppressed by security forces. The authorities’ use of excessive force to break up protests, particularly those on social and economic rights, has reportedly increased in recent years. Colectivos and other progovernment armed groups are also known to use threats of violence to prevent and repress protests.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work?	1 / 4
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Harassment, threats, and legal and administrative sanctions against human rights activists and NGOs have generally increased over the past several years. According to the Center for Defenders and Justice (CDJ), the number of attacks on human rights defenders and organizations rose every year between 2018 and 2021. Despite a decline in the number of such attacks in 2022, the number soared again in 2023, with 309 attacks documented in the first half of the year. The director of Fundaredes (Foundations), Javier Tarazona, who was arrested in 2021 after discussing possible links between the government and leftist Colombian guerrillas operating in the country, remained in detention through year-end 2023.

In January 2023, the National Assembly approved the first reading of a bill that, if passed, would regulate the incomes and actions of NGOs in Venezuela, threatening their sustainability. The bill had not been passed as of September. In August, the TSJ ordered that the Venezuelan Red Cross be completely restructured and appointed a new president. The TSJ decision, which authorities claim was based on allegations that volunteers were being mistreated, came after prominent progovernment politician Diosdado Cabello publicly criticized the organization’s then president.

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations?	1 / 4
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Workers are legally entitled to form unions, bargain collectively, and strike, with some restrictions on public-sector workers’ ability to strike. Control of unions has shifted from traditional opposition-allied labor leaders to new workers’ organizations that are often aligned with the government. The competition has contributed to a substantial increase in labor violence.

According to a 2022 report from the Observatory for the Defense of Life (Odevida), at least 44 union leaders were killed between 2015 and 2020. In August 2023, 6 trade unionists were sentenced to 16 years’ imprisonment on charges of conspiracy and terrorism; the six had been arrested in 2022 after participating in protests for salary improvements. All six men were released in December 2023 as part of an agreement between the US and Venezuelan governments that saw the regime release numerous prisoners in exchange for the return of Maduro ally Alex Saab, who had been detained on corruption charges in the United States since 2021.

Also in August, two UN human rights experts expressed concern about what they deemed Venezuelan officials’ “chronic abuse” of antiterror laws to target trade unionists. More than 20 workers were arrested between January and June after protesting for better working conditions.

F. Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts**Is there an independent judiciary?****0** / 4

The politicization of the judicial branch, which increased dramatically under former president Hugo Chávez, has progressed further under Maduro. In April 2022, the PSUV-controlled National Assembly chose 20 new judges for the TSJ under legislation that reduced the court's size from 32 judges. Of those selected, several were already serving on the old court, raising concerns that they would violate a constitutionally limited term of 12 years. The TSJ has issued numerous decisions that favored the Maduro regime in recent years, and UN experts have repeatedly criticized the judiciary's lack of independence.

F2 0-4 pts**Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters?****0** / 4

Perceived opponents of the government and the PSUV are routinely detained and prosecuted without regard for due process, including civilians and service members who are brought before military courts.

Victims of violence at the hands of the state have no realistic avenue for redress. A 2021 UN report noted that prosecutors and judiciary members have effectively aided the regime's human rights abuses.

F3 0-4 pts**Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies?****0** / 4

Venezuelans face physical insecurity and violence from several sources, including irregular armed groups, security forces, and organized gangs. In April 2023, Venezuelan human rights NGO Provea (Venezuelan Program of Education–Action in Human Rights) reported that between 2013 and 2023, the organization

documented 9,465 extrajudicial executions carried out by police and military forces.

NGOs and local political leaders called on the government to address the threat of Colombian guerrilla groups and criminal organizations that continued to operate on the Venezuelan side of the border in 2023.

The Venezuelan Violence Observatory (OVV) found that the country’s overall rate of violent death—including homicides by civilians, deaths at the hands of the authorities, and other suspicious deaths—was 26.8 per 100,000 people in 2023, a significant decline from the 35.3 per 100,000 people registered in 2022. Despite this improvement, however, Venezuela remains one of the most violent countries in the region.

Prisons in Venezuela are also among the worst in the region. The Venezuelan Observatory of Prisons (OVP) found that of 76 prisoners who died in 2022, most succumbed to malnutrition and tuberculosis. *Pranes*, or gang leaders who operate from prisons, freely coordinate criminal networks throughout Venezuela.

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population?	1/4
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Constitutional protections against discrimination based on sex, race, and other characteristics are not well enforced in practice. Women continue to face significant disparities in education, compensation, and employment, and they have been disproportionately affected by the country’s politically driven economic crisis.

The rights of Indigenous people, who make up 2.5 percent of the population, are guaranteed by the constitution but poorly protected. Indigenous groups often experience discrimination, labor exploitation, extortion by military and paramilitary groups, sex trafficking, and land grabs related to illegal mining which has resulted in the destruction of forests and other natural resources on which Indigenous residents depend.

Although discrimination based on sexual orientation is prohibited, LGBT+ Venezuelans face widespread intolerance and violence. In July 2023, 33 LGBT+ men were arrested during a police raid on a private bar and sauna. Among other things, the men were charged with “lewd conduct” and noise pollution; all 33 were released on conditional parole within 10 days. A statute criminalizing same-sex sexual activity within the military was overturned in early 2023.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education?	2 / 4
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Internal movement is limited by threats to physical security in some parts of the country, and Venezuelans continue to flee abroad to escape political persecution, insecurity, and overlapping social and economic crises. According to the Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela (R4V), a total of more than 7.7 million Venezuelan migrants and refugees had left the country as of August 2023.

G2 0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors?	1 / 4
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Property rights have been damaged by years of price controls, nationalization, overregulation, and corruption. Illegal land seizures and extortion by armed groups also continue to undermine property rights and private business activity.

G3 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance?	2 / 4
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Personal social freedoms pertaining to marriage, divorce, and child custody are generally upheld, but members of the LGBT+ community still lack equal access to fundamental rights like legal marriage, child adoption, and recognition of one's gender identity.

The politically driven economic collapse in Venezuela has reduced the availability of reproductive health care. Maternal and infant mortality has increased. Because abortion is illegal unless the patient's life is at risk, many women and girls resort to unsafe and unsanitary clandestine abortions or travel abroad.

A 2007 law was designed to combat violence against women, but domestic violence and rape remain common. The Center for Justice and Peace (CEPAZ), a Venezuelan human rights NGO, recorded 282 femicides in 2022. Women who have been political prisoners have reported abuses by security forces including sexual violence, threats of rape, and forced nudity.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?

0/4

The country's prolonged economic crisis has left the population extremely vulnerable to human trafficking and labor exploitation. Women and children are also subjected to sex trafficking within Venezuela and abroad, and armed groups in the country reportedly engage in forced recruitment of children.



On Venezuela

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Country Facts

Global Freedom Score

15/100 Not Free

Internet Freedom Score

29/100 Not Free

Other Years

2023

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ADDRESS

1850 M St. NW Floor 11
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 296-5101

GENERAL INQUIRIES

info@freedomhouse.org

PRESS & MEDIA

press@freedomhouse.org

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