

The State of Religious Freedom in: Venezuela

Country Factsheet

Fall 2023



Source: Vida Nueva Digital

- Toward Venezuela's predominantly Catholic and evangelical population, the regime of Nicolás Maduro employs a "divide and rule" strategy, luring some religious leaders with rewards and privileges and punishing those who criticize its handling of the country's humanitarian crisis and its human rights violations.
- In 2020, representatives of the Catholic Church as well as various Protestant, evangelical, and Jewish organizations created the Interreligious Social Forum of Venezuela (*Foro Interreligioso Social de Venezuela*). The group was created to better align and strengthen the capacities of various religious and social organizations to "confront the humanitarian crisis, pursue peace, and reconstruct the country." In response, the Maduro regime created the National Religious Council the same year.
- Religious groups viewed as opposing the regime are subjected to bureaucratic obstacles and delays in their dealings with the state. For example, some evangelical groups have reported delays of up to 15 years to register a particular denomination.
- The Catholic Church in Venezuela has suffered various reprisals for bringing attention to the country's humanitarian crisis and denouncing human rights abuses. For example, in 2021, the governor of the state of Carabobo (and a member of the ruling socialist party) sued Father Alfredo Infante, Superior of the Jesuits in Venezuela, for his role documenting and reporting on human rights and for calling for an investigation into extra-judicial killings by the National Police.



Venezuelan evangelicals holding a public prayer meeting in 2019.
(Photo: Evangelico Digital)

- Also, according to Catholic Church representatives, after high-ranking leaders in the Church made critical comments about the regime, including saying that the political leadership “does not value Venezuelan society,” the government paused or completely stopped funding some Catholic schools, many of which operated in impoverished areas, and made it more difficult for priests to obtain religious visas to travel into and out of the country. (Source: U.S. State Department 2022 International Religious Freedom Report)
- The Maduro government has used the Law Against Hatred, approved in 2017, to persecute and intimidate religious leaders for exercising their right to freedom of expression and opinion. 2020 was the year with the most people prosecuted under this law. (Source: Global Voices)
- Key regime figures have expressed anti-Semitic views and government radio shows often contain anti-Semitic messages. These and other expressions of anti-Semitic prejudice have led an estimated 70 percent of Venezuelan Jews to leave the country since Chávez was elected president in 1998.
- The Maduro regime has taken some troubling measures broadly viewed as attempts to tighten its grip over religious entities. Chief among these was the creation, earlier this year, of the Vice Presidency of Religious Affairs of the PSUV. Headed by the president’s son, Nicolás Maduro Guerra, this body aims to assimilate Christian groups within regional and local governance. Its strategy involves forming Government Pastoral Councils countrywide, further integrating Christian communities into the regime’s machinery through the use of official recognition and the provision of benefits and privileges.
- Overall, there is a record of violence and reprisals against religious leaders described as “opponents.” Christian leaders, both Catholic and non-Catholic, have faced pressure with arbitrary registration or permit requirements, have been threatened, arbitrarily detained, verbally and physically attacked, and their property has been vandalized. Religious services of those who have spoken out in favor of democracy and human rights have been monitored or violently interrupted.
- In particular, Venezuelans have reported that armed groups (“colectivos”) -- widely believed to be doing the bidding of the regime in targeting critics -- have intimidated, stolen from, and attacked religious leaders who are critical of the Maduro regime.