

# VENEZUELA 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion on the condition its practice does not violate public morality, decency, or public order. The Directorate of Justice and Religion (DJR), an office in the Ministry of Interior, Justice, and Peace (MOI), is charged with maintaining a registry of religious groups, disbursing government-controlled funds to religious organizations, and promoting awareness and understanding among religious communities. Several religious organizations described difficulties and delays with government bureaucracy when seeking to register or gain approval for new internal statutes; one religious group attributed a four-year delay in official approval of its statutes to political factors. The Evangelical Council of Venezuela and representatives of the Catholic Church reported preferential government treatment of religious groups friendly to government policies. Jewish leaders stated that criticism of Israel in government-owned or affiliated media was frequently anti-Semitic. On February 14, individuals broke into the house and stole several items from El Hatillo Mayor David Smolansky, a vocal opponent of the government and well-known member of the Jewish community. They also painted a Star of David on a wall. Smolansky accused the government of being ultimately responsible for the incident and asserted the act was politically motivated.

Catholic Church leaders condemned social media and press attacks on members of the clergy by pro-government sympathizers and cases of vandalism of church property.

Government officials did not respond to U.S. requests for meetings on religious freedom issues. The U.S. embassy maintained close contact with a wide range of religious communities.

## Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 30.9 million (July 2016 estimate). The 2015 Pontifical Yearbook estimates 79 percent of the population is Catholic. Other sources place the number at over 90 percent. The remaining population includes evangelical Christians, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslims, Bahais, and Jews.

The Evangelical Council of Venezuela estimates 17 percent of the population is Protestant with a majority attending evangelical churches. Mormons estimate their numbers at 165,500. The Muslim community numbers more than 100,000 and consists primarily of persons of Lebanese and Syrian descent living in Nueva Esparta state, and the Caracas area. The Bahai community numbers approximately 20,000. The Jewish community numbers approximately 9,000 and is centered in Caracas.

## **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 the basis for the government's payments to the Catholic Church for education programs.

The Directorate of Justice and Religion (DJR), which is accountable to the MOI, is charged with maintaining a registry of religious groups, disbursing funds to religious organizations, and promoting awareness and understanding among 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 the group, and articles of incorporation. Religious groups are required to demonstrate how they will provide social services to their communities and must receive a letter of acceptance from the government-controlled community council in the neighborhood where the group will work. The MOI reviews applications and may delay approval indefinitely. Religious groups must register any new statutes with the DJR.

The law provides for Catholic chaplains to minister to the spiritual needs of Catholics serving in the military. There is no provision for other religious services in the military.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

### **Government Practices**

Several religious groups reported difficulties in identifying appropriate individuals within the DJR to handle their registration applications and were thus unable to register or had their registrations delayed. High civil servant turnover at the DJR contributed to delays in some cases. At the end of the year, the MOI had not approved new internal statutes of the Evangelical Council of Venezuela (ECV), although the application had been submitted approximately four years earlier. ECV sources stated the MOI withheld approval because it objected to the presence of the New Tribes Mission (NTM) within the Council. The NTM has been banned from the country since 2005 when then-president Hugo Chavez expelled them. In August, the ECV formally denounced the application process as unconstitutional and discriminatory.

The ECV stated the government continued to favor religious organizations amenable to its policies. According to ECV sources, in 2014 the government hosted a meeting in the wake of political violence, but only invited those evangelical churches perceived as supportive of its policies. From that time, religious leaders said the government policy had not changed and those | pro-government religious groups received a heightened profile, particularly in government-controlled media. Church leaders perceived as politically active said their organizations were sidelined. For example, some religious groups perceived as pro-opposition were excluded from government-organized events or disregarded by government-run media outlets.

In February, individuals broke into the house of El Hatillo Mayor David Smolansky, a vocal opponent of the government and well-known member of the Jewish community. The intruders stole a computer, among other items, and painted a Star of David on a wall. Although Smolansky asserted that the primary motivation for the act was political, rather than religious, he held the government to be ultimately responsible for creating an environment of intolerance.

During an informal United Nations Security Council meeting on the Palestinian people and anti-Semitism in May, Venezuelan Ambassador to the United Nations Rafael Ramirez asked if Israel was seeking “to wage a final solution” against the Palestinians, which many observers interpreted as a direct connection to the Nazis’ “Final Solution” policy. He later apologized to Israel’s U.N. envoy and said he regretted his remarks and said he stood against any form of anti-Semitism and fully respected the millions of victims of the Holocaust.

Jewish leaders stated criticism of Israel in government-owned or affiliated media was frequently anti-Semitic. Many of the articles in question were reprints from

HispanTV, an Iranian government-sponsored outlet. TeleSur regularly published articles by blogger Pablo Jofre Leal, who accused Israel of ethnic cleansing, compared Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to Hitler, and referred to Israeli leadership as Judeo-Nazi. In March, several government-affiliated outlets published an interview in which Jihad Yusef, a member of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, compared Israeli government activity in the West Bank and Gaza to the Holocaust. In August, the Confederation of Jewish Associations of Venezuela (CAIV) condemned the magazine *Las Verdades de Miguel* for its anti-Semitic undertones. The cover of the weekly magazine, which has a circulation of 5,000, had a caricature of an Orthodox Jew and blamed individuals of “Israelite origin” for a corruption scheme in the Foreign Exchange Administration Commission. In *La Razon*, an independent media outlet, Ambassador to Qatar Julian Rivas published articles accusing the United States and Israel of a global colonialist conspiracy, and used the term “Anglo-Zionism.”

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

In January, vandals attacked several churches in Merida ahead of the papal nuncio’s visit to the city. According to press reports, the vandals attempted to burn some buildings and defaced others with anti-church and pro-government graffiti. The police did not pursue an investigation or press charges.

In July, media outlets reported that pro-government sympathizers in Merida assaulted four young Catholic seminary students, accusing them of participating in an opposition rally. The assailants took their clothing, and forced them to run naked through the streets. The Archbishop of Merida condemned the attack saying, “This is not the way to resolve differences,” and the seminary hosted a well widely attended Mass in support of the students.

Catholic Church representatives said some social media postings were aimed at undermining the standing of the Church. They said that in July unknown individuals created false Twitter accounts under the names of two bishops, and the accounts disseminated insulting messages and false phone recordings. Church sources stated the then-minister for prisons retweeted the recordings.

Catholic Church sources denounced cases of gravesite desecration and an attempted invasion of church property by squatters. In the latter case, the National Guard eventually dislodged the squatters.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

The government did not respond to the U.S. embassy's request for meetings to discuss religious freedom.

The embassy met regularly with a wide range of religious communities and religious leaders to discuss the government's disparate treatment of faith groups in the registration process. All groups expressed concern about acts of vandalism. In September, the Ambassador and embassy officials held meetings with the papal nuncio and representatives from the ECV, CAIV, and Caracas' Muslim community.