

# VENEZUELA 2018 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. Roman Catholic Church and evangelical Protestant leaders stated President Nicolas Maduro used a 2017 antihate law to persecute clergy who espoused views challenging his policies or highlighting the country's humanitarian crisis. Several religious organizations described continued difficulties with government bureaucracy when seeking to register, requesting approval for new internal statutes, or applying for religious visas for foreign clergy. Representatives of the Catholic Episcopal Conference of Venezuela (CEV) and the Evangelical Council of Venezuela (ECV) said the government retaliated against their clergy and other members for continuing to call attention to the country's humanitarian crisis. Catholic Church leaders reported President Maduro ordered criminal investigations of two bishops for violating the antihate law after they delivered homilies highlighting hunger and government corruption. CEV representatives reported that a woman, characterized by media as a government sympathizer, attacked Father Miguel Acevedo during Mass in Caracas. According to a local reporter, the woman interrupted Acevedo's homily, shouted insults at him, and then rushed toward him in an attempt to hit him. Representatives of the Confederation of Jewish Associations of Venezuela (CAIV) said criticism of Israel in government-owned or -affiliated media continued to carry anti-Semitic overtones, sometimes disguised as anti-Zionist messages. They said government-owned or -associated media and government supporters again denied or trivialized the Holocaust, citing media reports of President Maduro's comparing migrant Venezuelans to Jews persecuted by Hitler.

CAIV representatives said many citizens and government officials continued to believe members of the Jewish community maintained direct lines of communication with the White House and placed U.S. interests above those of the country, which made them concerned their community could become targets of anti-Semitic acts. On June 6, after the United States announced it would to move the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, pro-Palestinian groups accompanied by progovernment representatives protested the decision. Media interviewed protesters in Caracas who proclaimed they repudiated Zionism and supported the Palestinian cause. Some members of the Jewish community cited this protest as an example of the use of anti-Zionist rhetoric to avoid overt anti-Semitic messages.

Government officials again did not respond to U.S. embassy requests for meetings on religious freedom and related issues. The embassy maintained close contact with a wide range of religious groups, including the Jewish, Muslim, evangelical Protestant, and Catholic communities. Embassy representatives and these groups discussed government registration procedures and delays; harassment by progovernment and armed civilian gangs; the media environment; and anti-Semitism.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 31.7 million (July 2018 estimate). This number, however, does not reflect the UN November 8 estimate that approximately three million Venezuelan refugees and migrants had left the country during the past few years. The U.S. government estimates that 96 percent of the population is Catholic. The remaining population includes evangelical Protestants, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslims, Baha'is, and Jews.

The ECV estimates 17 percent of the population is Protestant, the majority members of evangelical Protestant churches. The Church of Jesus Christ estimates its numbers at 168,000. 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 metropolitan area. Sunnis are the majority, with a minority Shia community primarily in Margarita Island in Nueva Esparta State. According to the Baha'i community, its membership is approximately 5,000. According to CAIV, the Jewish community numbers approximately 9,000, with most members living 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 for government funding for Catholic Church-run schools. In 2017 the National Constituent Assembly (ANC), which the opposition and much of the international community considers illegitimate, 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 law includes 25 articles that stipulate a wide

array of directives, restrictions, and penalties. The law criminalizes political party activities promoting “fascism, intolerance, or hatred” regarding numerous factors, including religion. 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. Among the violations are those committed by individuals or media outlets, including by members of religious groups or media associated with a religious group.

The Directorate of Justice and Religion (DJR) in the Ministry of Interior, Justice, and Peace (MOI) maintains a registry of religious groups, disburses funds to religious organizations, and promotes 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. The government requires religious groups to demonstrate how they will provide social services to their communities and to receive a letter of acceptance from the government-controlled community council in the neighborhood(s) 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 neither prohibits nor promotes religious education in public schools. An unenforced 18-year-old agreement between the CEV and the state allows catechists to teach Christian and sacramental values (in preparation for First Communion) in public schools.

The law provides for Catholic chaplains to minister to the spiritual needs of Catholics serving in the military. There are no similar provisions for other religious groups.

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

### **Government Practices**

CEV and other Catholic Church leaders and ECV representatives said the government continued to retaliate against church leaders and clergy members who made statements critical of the government, including by imposing arbitrary registration requirements, threatening and detaining clergy, and denying religious visas to foreign visiting clergy.

CEV representatives reported a woman, characterized by media as a government sympathizer, had attacked Father Miguel Acevedo during a Mass on February 2 at Nuestra Senora de la Candelaria parish in Caracas. According to witnesses, the woman interrupted Acevedo's homily, shouted insults at Acevedo, and then rushed toward him in an attempt to hit him. Church personnel disrupted her attack.

Catholic Church leaders said President Maduro ordered criminal investigations of two bishops for violating the 2017 antihate law after they delivered homilies highlighting hunger and government corruption. Bishop Victor Hugo Basabe of San Felipe, Yaracuy State, which is associated with the Barquisimeto Archdiocese in Lara State, asked during his January 14 homily that the "Divine shepherdess free Venezuela of the curse of political corruption that has led to moral, economic, and social ruin." During the homily, Basabe referred to the country's crisis, stating, "Thousands of Venezuelans rummage through garbage searching for scraps to satisfy their hunger." In a separate homily the same day, Archbishop of Barquisimeto Antonio Lopez Castillo urged the "Divine shepherdess to free us from hunger; free us from corruption." In his State of the Union speech the following day, President Maduro called for the attorney general to investigate Bishop Basabe and Archbishop Lopez Castillo for instigating "hate with the intent to generate confrontation, violence, death, exclusion, and persecution."

Lopez Castillo reported to news media that on January 19, Bolivarian National Intelligence Service officials detained him after Mass, then released him after an interview and threatened that if he persisted in speaking against the Maduro government, they would charge him with violating the antihate law. On January 16, the CEV issued a statement denouncing the investigation order against Lopez Castillo and Basabe. The CEV said the antihate law, promulgated by the ANC, was "conceived to criminalize all that upsets the government and its views." Neither Basabe nor Lopez Castillo was charged. While CEV leaders reported Lopez Castillo had received no further threats, on October 9, progovernment Lara State legislators declared Basabe "persona non grata," which then Governor Carmen Melendez endorsed. Legislators and Governor Melendez cited Basabe's January 14 homily as the reason. CEV leaders said Basabe remained in his position as apostolic administrator and no new threats occurred after he was declared persona non grata.

On February 19, the MOI summoned Father Acevedo and Bishop Tulio Luis Ramirez Padilla, Auxiliary Bishop of Caracas, to appear before the court for "inciting hate" during their Mass in Caracas on February 2. Media reported that

according to some of the parishioners, who had interceded on behalf of Acevedo and Ramirez, both were “treated” well and released with a warning.

Catholic leaders said Maria Albarran, a Zulia State government official, brought charges against Father Santiago Dominguez for “instigating hate” during a February 2 Mass over which he presided at the Church of La Consolacion in Maracaibo State. Albarran stated in media interviews she was offended by Dominguez’ comparison of Venezuelans who left the country to lepers. CEV leaders reported the government took no further action against Dominguez.

A CEV representative stated the government still had not fulfilled an 18-year-old agreement between the CEV and the state allowing catechists to teach Christian and sacramental values (in preparation for First Communion) in public schools. The same CEV representative said the government had removed catechism from the classroom and at times threatened to sanction principals of schools that attempted to teach it. The CEV representative said government representatives denied his petition to establish catechism courses in a local public school, violating the CEV agreement permitting schools to teach catechism upon a parent’s request. He stated the government’s decision violated freedom of religion for parents whose children could not receive catechism locally when there was no available transportation to distant schools where catechism was available.

The ECV said the DJR imposed arbitrary registration requirements on religious groups. According to the ECV, after several years delay, the MOI approved the ECV’s new registration in March; however, the MOI restricted the number of ECV board members to five, despite previously permitting 15. ECV leaders said this restriction violated its “freedom to associate,” because the ECV, a network of approximately 1,300 evangelical Protestant churches, needed to assign 15 board members to oversee its 1,300 churches and 650 pastors. ECV leaders said the limit on board members would leave it vulnerable should the government nullify church statutes made by its nonregistered board members.

According to the ECV, the government retaliated against its organization because it opposed some government policies, including the antihate law, which the ECV leader said repressed religious expression and led to self-censorship. ECV leaders stated the government denied religious visas to visiting clergy after it held a July 24 church assembly in the city of Valencia. They said that during the event, a progovernment individual monitoring the assembly approached the pastor of the church in Valencia and said he would report him to government security officials for instigating hate and violating the antihate law. An ECV representative later

stated the government had denied the ECV a religious visa for a pastor planning to travel to the country to lead a national conference. Regarding the ECV's distribution of food to needy parishioners, an ECV representative said National Police agents regularly confiscated a portion of food boxes, stating the food was "contraband" and the ECV was selling it for profit. The ECV representative said a private NGO had donated the food boxes, which ECV personnel would then distribute to needy parishioners. Clergy said they felt intimidated and frequently were required to give the police agents a portion of the food boxes as a "commission" in exchange for allowing clergy to distribute the remainder.

Jewish leaders stated that to avoid accusations of anti-Semitism, government and some progovernment media continued to replace the word "Jewish" with "Zionist." During his September 9 television broadcast, ANC President Diosdado Cabello stated that former Mayor of El Hatillo David Smolansky was leading a political project to impose a "Zionist Venezuela" in response to Smolansky's designation to lead an OAS working group on the migratory crisis in Venezuela. Cabello categorized Smolansky as a "violent Zionist."

In September President Maduro compared the situation of migrant Venezuelans to that of "Hitler's persecution of Jews, resulting in the death of six million Jews." Media widely reported that during a September 18 press conference in China, Maduro stated there was an "inquisition campaign" against Venezuelans by "oligarchic media" from Colombia, Panama, Brazil, Argentina, Ecuador, and Peru, which he likened to Hitler's persecution of Jews. He went on to say, "The oligarch media in those countries launched an inquisition campaign that I compare to, excuse me if someone is bothered by my comparison, I compare it to the persecution campaign against the Jewish people that Hitler initiated that ended with six million dead Jews." Maduro continued, stating, "Many of the things said against Venezuela and Venezuelans in those countries are similar to what was said of the Jews, the Venezuelans are guilty of this, this, this and Venezuelans are guilty of everything."

CAIV representatives stated the government supported anti-Semitic media. In February progovernment television outlet Venezolana de Television (VTV) broadcast an interview with Walter Martinez, a political analyst. During the interview, Martinez said media companies, including Warner Music, CNN, and HBO Ole, whose artists call to "Free Venezuela," are manipulated by Zionism. Martinez said, "Judaism has been hijacked by Zionism." CAIV representatives said this incident was typical of the government's anti-Semitic leanings.

On February 2, Roberto Hernandez Montoya, moderator of government-owned VTV television and the Radio Nacional de Venezuela radio program, retweeted, “Capriles is a Zionist agent menial slave of the Empire, who is nothing more than a political corpse who belongs in the [expletive]-hole of history and never shall a repulsive idiot like him (that did military service in Israel) be elected as president of the Bolivarian people.” A prominent Venezuelan opposition politician and practicing Catholic of Jewish ancestry, Henrique Capriles was a presidential candidate in 2012 and 2013.

CAIV’s president stated that CAIV leadership made a concerted effort to maintain communication with the government to avoid escalating tensions. He said Delcy Rodriguez, the country’s vice president, had cooperated with requests to import kosher products essential to Jewish religious practices.

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

CAIV representatives said many citizens and government officials continued to believe members of the Jewish community maintained direct lines of communication with the White House and placed U.S. interests above those of Venezuela, which made them concerned their community could become targets of anti-Semitic acts. On June 6, after the United States announced it would to move the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, pro-Palestinian groups accompanied by progovernment representatives protested the decision. Media interviewed protesters in Caracas who proclaimed they repudiated Zionism and supported the Palestinian cause. Some members of the Jewish community stated this protest was an example of the use of anti-Zionism to mask anti-Semitism. The CEV, CAIV, and Muslim League continued to meet informally, holding periodic interreligious panels, including a discussion on differences and similarities among Islam, Judaism, and Catholicism.

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

The government again did not respond to the U.S. embassy’s requests for meetings to discuss religious freedom and related topics such as freedom of assembly, conscience, and expression.

Embassy officials communicated regularly with a wide range of religious communities and religious leaders to discuss government treatment of religious groups, registration issues, and government and societal reprisals on some faith groups not in line with the government’s political agenda. In September embassy

officials held meetings with representatives from the CEV, ECV, CAIV, and Muslim community. Each community expressed interest in maintaining communication and exploring possible outreach programs in the future. The embassy continued to develop outreach opportunities with the various faith groups.