

VENEZUELA 2019 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 and evangelical Protestant leaders stated the de facto Maduro government and its aligned groups disrupted church services, attacked churchgoers, and destroyed church property. Representatives of the Catholic Episcopal Conference of Venezuela (CEV) and the Evangelical Council of Venezuela (ECV) said the government harassed, intimidated, and retaliated against their clergy and other members for continuing to call attention to the country's humanitarian crisis. On October 12, the Military Counterintelligence Agency (DCGIM) arrested evangelical Protestant pastor Jose Albeiro Vivas in Barinas State as he delivered a prayer calling for the "spiritual liberation" of the country during an annual religious event. Vivas, also an active duty air force officer, was reportedly arrested for disobedience and remained in detention through year's end. Media reported armed groups (*colectivos*) aligned with de facto President Nicolas Maduro attacked churches and their congregants during the year. According to Archbishop Jose Luis Azuaje, on January 27, a group of *colectivos* forced their way into Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe Church in Maracaibo, Zulia State during Mass. The *colectivos* attacked and injured approximately 15 worshippers inside, fired their weapons, defaced and destroyed church property, and confiscated items of value. Azuaje said police officers stationed nearby did not intervene during the attack. Some members of the Jewish community stated the de facto government and those sympathetic to it used anti-Zionism to mask anti-Semitism. During the year, editorials in pro-Maduro media outlets accused Juan Guaido, president of the National Assembly and recognized by the United States as the legitimate interim president, and Guaido-nominated representatives, as agents or lobbyists of Zionism. Representatives of the Confederation of Jewish Associations of Venezuela (CAIV) said criticism of Israel in Maduro-controlled or -affiliated media continued to carry anti-Semitic overtones, sometimes disguised as anti-Zionist messages. They said de facto government-owned or -associated media and government supporters again denied or trivialized the Holocaust, citing media reports of Maduro's comparing sanctions against Venezuela to Nazi persecution of Jews.

The CAIV representatives said many private citizens in addition to 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.

The United States has no diplomatic relations with Maduro's de facto government and recognizes Interim President Juan Guaido as the legitimate president. The U.S. embassy suspended operations in Caracas on March 8 and continued to operate from Bogota and Washington, D.C. through the end of the year. Prior to March 8, Maduro administration 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 the de facto government's imposed registration procedures and delays; harassment by its aligned and armed civilian gangs; anti-Semitic posts in social media and in government-controlled media; and other anti-Semitic acts.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 32.1 million (2019 midyear estimate). This number, however, does not reflect the October UN estimate that approximately 4.5 million refugees and migrants had left the country since 2015. The U.S. government estimates 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 of whom are members of evangelical Protestant churches. The Church of Jesus Christ estimates its numbers at 167,000. 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 6,000, with most members living in Caracas. According to an article released in May by the Adam Smith Institute, a think tank located in the United Kingdom, approximately 5,000 Jews live in the country, compared with 30,000 in 1999. Media reported approximately 20,000 Jews had left the country since the 1990s.

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 consider illegitimate, passed an anti-hate 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 stipulating a wide array of directives, restrictions, and penalties. The law criminalizes political party activities promoting “fascism, intolerance, or hatred,” which comprise 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 it, and articles of incorporation. Religious groups are required 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 18-year-old agreement between the CEV and the state allows catechists to teach Christian and sacramental values in public schools in preparation for First Communion; this agreement, however, is not enforced.

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

On October 12, DCGIM arrested evangelical Protestant pastor Jose Albeiro Vivas in Barinas State as he delivered a prayer during the March for Jesus, an event held annually throughout the country since 2006. Vivas, also an active duty air force officer, was arrested for disobedience and improper use of military medals, badges and titles. Vivas' prayer called for the "spiritual liberation" of the country. He remained in detention at year's end.

Media reported armed groups aligned with the de facto government attacked churches and their congregants during the year. Archbishop Jose Luis Azuaje said that on January 27, *colectivos* forced their way into Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe Church in Maracaibo, Zulia State during Eucharist for children receiving their first communion and confirmation. *Colectivos* numbering approximately 40 individuals armed with sticks, guns, and grenades attacked and injured approximately 15 worshippers inside, discharged their firearms, defaced and destroyed church property, including the altar, and confiscated other items of value. Among the injured was a nun, who was taken to a local hospital for emergency treatment. Azuaje reported police officers stationed nearby did not intervene during the attack. Church leadership announced they would close the church until the de facto government could guarantee the safety of parishioners.

The CEV reported increased repression against the Catholic Church in the wake of the April 30 uprising against Maduro and his de facto government. On May 1, a group of 40 Bolivarian National Guard (GNB) officers attacked the Our Lady of Fatima Church in San Cristobal, Tachira State, at the end of a religious service, according to Bishop of San Cristobal Mario Moronta. According to Moronta, two officers entered the church on motorcycle, followed by a contingent of 40 GNB officers and their commanding officer. Unable to gain entry, the GNB officers fired tear gas into the church, forcing the pastor to evacuate the congregation, many of whom were elderly, from the building.

On February 8, media reported the external walls of Sweet Name of Jesus Church in the Petare District of Caracas were defaced with written expletives directed at

Father Hector Lunar, including “pedophile” and “terrorist.” The defacement occurred after Maduro followers blasted loud music outside the church in an apparent attempt to drown out Lunar’s Mass. According to media reports, Lunar came under attack by the city council, controlled by Maduro’s United Socialist Party of Venezuela, for speaking out against the country’s humanitarian crisis. In January the city council of Sucre declared Lunar *persona non grata*.

On January 23, priests, seminary students, and 700 protesters remained trapped in Our Lady of Mount Carmel Cathedral in Maturin, Monagas State for hours while *colectivos* and military personnel attempted to break into the church, according to the CEV.

CEV and other Catholic Church leaders and ECV representatives said the de facto government continued to retaliate against church leaders and clergy members who made statements criticizing it, including by imposing arbitrary registration requirements, and threatening and detaining clergy.

CEV representatives said illegal armed groups supporting the de facto government also targeted members of the clergy. On April 24, CEV denounced death threats from the National Liberation Army (ELN) that Father Richard Garcia, a priest in Tachira State, received for speaking out against the humanitarian crisis and lack of public services during a homily. Garcia’s church was sprayed with graffiti, featuring the initials of the ELN. He also received a pamphlet that stated he was a “political target and public enemy of the revolution.” Media reported a second priest, Father Jairo Clavijo, also received threats that declared him a “military target.”

Church leaders reported Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (SEBIN) officials continued to intimidate priests who criticized Maduro in their sermons. SEBIN officers followed and harassed Catholic laity involved in delivering humanitarian aid or participating in public demonstrations and photographed their homes. Archbishop Antonio Lopez Castillo reported SEBIN officials interrogated him in an attempt to convince him to stop issuing complaints against the de facto Maduro government, which the archbishop had labeled an “oppressive regime.”

There were reports that security officials prevented clergy opposing the Maduro de facto government from holding religious services. According to the CEV, on April 7, authorities attempted to block Bishop Moronta from officiating Mass at the Patrocinio Penuela Ruiz Social Security Hospital in San Cristobal, Tachira State by locking him out of the building, despite his having a letter of authorization from

the hospital board. Moronta was able to gain entry when a parishioner obtained a second key. On April 18, authorities barred Moronta, this time successfully, from holding a religious service by blocking his access to the Western Penitentiary Center in Tachira, where he was to celebrate a previously scheduled Mass with prison inmates. Maduro's Minister for Prisons Iris Varela stated she had denied Moronta's visit because he had "gotten into politics" by issuing proclamations against the Maduro de facto government; she added his diocese was guilty of protecting priests who abused children.

According to the Anti-defamation League (ADL), most anti-Semitic messaging on social media and other media continued to originate from Maduro and his supporters. Some members of the Jewish community stated the de facto government and those sympathetic to it used anti-Zionism to mask anti-Semitism. During the year, editorials in pro-Maduro media outlets accused Guaido and Guaido-nominated representatives as being agents or lobbyists of Zionism. A tweet posted in January by a self-described "revolutionary communicator" stated, "What a coincidence that the first gringos [U.S.] Senators who have come out to support Guaido are all members of the lobby Oil-Financial-Jew. Vultures begin to fly over Venezuela."

In August Maduro likened U.S. government policy towards the country to Nazi persecution of the Jews in the 1940s, stating sanctions against the country were the same as Hitler's efforts to persecute, exterminate, and prevent the Jewish people from leaving.

Jewish leaders stated to avoid accusations of anti-Semitism, the de facto government and media supporting it continued to replace the word "Jewish" with "Zionist." In a February interview, Maduro said Interim President Juan Guaido served the interests of the Zionists. During a June 26 television broadcast, president of the ANC Diosdado Cabello stated the de facto government had disrupted an alleged Zionist coup against Maduro on June 24. On August 21, Cabello called U.S. charges of narcotics trafficking and money laundering against former vice president and current Minister of Industry and National Production Tareck Zaidan El Aissami part of a campaign of the "Zionist lobby."

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

CAIV representatives said many private citizens in addition to de facto 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 August 31, the National Experimental University of the Arts held the First National Interreligious Meeting in Caracas.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The de facto government again did not respond to the 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 leaders to discuss the de facto government's treatment of religious groups, registration issues, and government and societal reprisals on some faith groups that disagreed with the de facto Maduro administration's political agenda. Embassy officials held meetings with representatives from the CEV, ECV, CAIV, and the Muslim community. Each community expressed interest in maintaining communications and exploring possible outreach programs in the future.