



Reports

Dennis P. Petri

Religious Regulation and Discrimination in Venezuela

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International Institute
for Religious Freedom



International Institute
for Religious Freedom

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Religious Regulation and Discrimination in Venezuela

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Introduction

This essay seeks to illustrate the state of religious freedom in Venezuela by analyzing the factors that affect its free exercise. First, it describes the presence of religious communities in the country and their relationship with the government. Second, it reviews the regulatory framework and the impact of recent government regulations on religious freedom. Finally, it describes the actions of government and non-state actors that undermine the free exercise of religious freedom.

Venezuela is a predominantly Christian country,¹ with Catholicism being the most predominant religious group. The Catholic Church is one of the oldest institutions in the country, as well as the only one with legal status. Another group with broad representation is the Protestant community, although with a rather heterogeneous composition. A majority Evangelical sector makes up the Evangelical Council of Venezuela. Other Protestant groups include the Unión Evangélica Pentecostal Venezolana, the Network of Christian Churches of Venezuela, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Protestant churches have on many occasions requested the same recognition granted to the Catholic Church, above all, the possibility of registering as a church and not as a civil association. Naming these denominations is important since the Protestant community is diverse and their affiliation in Venezuela can determine their relations with the government, as we will detail below. Along with these Christian denominations, we can mention the presence of minority religious groups in the country, which include Jews, Bahamians, Muslims, Buddhists, and indigenous religions.

Generally speaking, Venezuelan society has been characterized by a large degree of religious tolerance and the virtual absence of interreligious conflict,² even though there was—until very recently—no formal interreligious dialogue platform. The enmity between Catholic and non-Catholic Christian groups (and between Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews)³ that is characteristic of most Latin American countries does not apply to Venezuela, or to a limited degree. Established religious groups in the country have been welcoming to new religious movements, as well as to Muslim migrants, and indigenous religious expressions command broad respect in Venezuelan society.

Nonetheless, there is still great diversity within religious groups in Venezuela, caused by internal divisions on issues such as the level of participation in development initiatives, level of organization and institutionalization, progressive or conservative ideological orientation, and political stance toward the govern-

¹ Open Doors International / World Watch Research. (2020). *Venezuela: Country dossier*. <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Venezuela-WWL-2020-Country-Dossier-March-update.pdf>

² Arenas, M. (2017, October 28). *¿Hay libertad religiosa en Venezuela?* Aleteia.org. <https://es.aleteia.org/2017/10/28/hay-libertad-religiosa-en-venezuela/>

³ Blank, L. (1993). THE INTEGRATION OF ASHKENAZI AND SEPHARDI JEWS IN VENEZUELA THROUGH THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS IN THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM. *Jewish Political Studies Review*, 5(3/4), 209–47. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25834280>.

ment.⁴ These dividing lines cut through denominational groups. This diversity may in part be the consequence of a deliberate divide-and-rule strategy by the Venezuelan regime.

In April 2020, the Interreligious Social Council of Venezuela was established, a non-governmental body with representatives of various Christian denominations,⁵ the Jewish community, and other social organizations. In response to this effort, the government created the government-controlled National Interreligious Council,⁶ made up of Evangelical groups that are aligned with the regime and various indigenous religions. Because these bodies are recent, it is difficult to assess their impact.

While some religious groups have shown support for the regime, others are clearly opposed⁷ and have been subjected to reprisals.⁸ This has caused division among Protestant churches and confusion among Christian citizens. President Maduro has accused the Catholic Church and some Protestant denominations of being allied with opposition forces and of spreading violence instead of peace.⁹ It has been observed that internal differences between religious groups are beginning to constitute an obstacle to interreligious collaboration. The main points of disagreement are related to their stance toward the government and their preferred strategy to defend human rights and democracy, with some recommending caution and others being more outspoken and uncompromising. The issue of LGBTQ+ rights,¹⁰ which the Venezuelan government has recently decided to support, possibly following Cuba's example, is potentially divisive. Observers suspect that this issue is not only about differences between progressive and conservative religious doctrines, but a strategy by the Venezuelan government to further widen internal divisions within religious denominations.

⁴ *Venezuela – The World Factbook*. (n.d.-b). <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/venezuela/>

⁵ Fides, A. (n.d.). *AMERICA/VENEZUELA – Interreligious Council set up: working together for the good of the Venezuelan family – Agenzia Fides*. http://www.fides.org/en/news/67802-AMERICA_VENEZUELA_Interreligious_Council_set_up_working_together_for_the_good_of_the_Venezuelan_family

⁶ *2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Venezuela*. (2023b, December 7). United States Department of State. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/venezuela/>

⁷ Lozano, D. (2021, January 11). *La Iglesia católica demanda nuevas elecciones ante el ‘notorio deterioro’ de Venezuela*. El mundo. <https://elmundo.es/internacional/2021/01/11/5ffc8f5821efa0024f8b4592.html>

⁸ Guedez, S. (2019, August 6). *Perversa campaña del gobierno contra las iglesias evangélicas*. El Informador Venezuela. <https://elinformadorve.com/?p=35018>

⁹ Lozano, D. (2020, January 14). *Nicolás Maduro arremete contra la Iglesia Católica en su discurso anual a la nación*. El mundo. <https://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2020/01/14/5e1e09d321efa01c678b457a.html>

¹⁰ Francismar Loyo (2021, March 27). *Matrimonio igualitario: una realidad que no pasa de ser una consigna en Venezuela*. Radio Fe y Alegría Noticias Venezuela. <https://radiofeyalegrianoticias.com/?p=135283>

Regulatory Framework

The Constitution of Venezuela,¹¹ which is known officially as the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, guarantees freedom of religion and worship as long as it does not oppose morality, good customs, and public order. It guarantees the independence of churches and religious confessions. Similarly, it recognizes the right of parents to choose, in accordance with their convictions, the religious education of their children. It also specifically prohibits promoting religious intolerance.

The Venezuelan Criminal Code¹² establishes that the minister of any cult who, in the exercise of his functions, treats the institutions, laws of the republic, or acts of authority with public contempt or vilification, or that promotes such disobedience will be punished with jail. Additionally, regulations such as the “Law against Hate for Peaceful Coexistence and Tolerance”¹³ are used to establish fines, sanctions, and penalties of up to 20 years in prison for those who promote or commit “hate crimes” on radio, television, or social networks. This regulation is applied arbitrarily to censor any message that criticizes the ruling party. These laws limit freedom of speech, including faith-based manifestations. Although there have been few arrests against religious leaders who openly oppose the regime,¹⁴ it is a risk to which they are permanently exposed to, especially when they express their rejection of the party, or the measures adopted by the government.

The recent Administrative Ruling ONCDOFT-001-2021,¹⁵ which resulted in the Regulations for the Unified Registry of Obligated Subjects before the National Office Against Organized Crime and Terrorism Financing (RUSO-ONCDOFT), obliges national and foreign nonprofit civil organizations domiciled in Venezuela to register with the ONCDOFT registry. This would imply making public not only the donor organizations for the development of their activities but also the beneficiaries of said activities, in addition to requiring the provision of personal information about the members, under the presumption of committing crimes such as terrorism. Civil society organizations dedicated to the defense of human rights, including faith-based organizations,¹⁶ have expressed concern that

¹¹ Asamblea Nacional de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela. (1999). *Constitución de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela*. <https://www.asambleanacional.gob.ve/storage/documentos/botones/constitucion-nacional-20191205135853.pdf>

¹² República Bolivariana de Venezuela. (2017). Código Penal de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela. *Gaceta Oficial*, (41.276). <https://ghm.com.ve/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/41276.pdf>

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America. (2020, April 9). *Sacerdote es arbitrariamente detenido en Venezuela*. <https://olire.org/es/?p=6034>

¹⁵ LEÇA (2021, April). *LEÇA Letters*, (191). LEÇA. <https://lega.law/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/lega-lettersN191.pdf>

¹⁶ Scalabrini International Migration Institute (2020). *Declaración de las Organizaciones Basadas en la Fe del SIMN y RED CLAMOR*. <https://www.simieducation.org/?p=3134>

their members or their activities are related to some type of activism that the government considers contrary to its interests, or considers terrorist.

Government Action

The Venezuelan government follows elements from what can be referred to as the “communist handbook”¹⁷ to regulate religion, such as the governments of Cuba, Bolivia, and Nicaragua. The government seeks the imposition of communist ideology in the country. In this process, all state and social institutions are forced to follow the party’s guidelines.

The Directorate of Justice and Religion (DJR) has imposed arbitrary registration requirements on religious groups. The only denomination with full legal status is the Roman Catholic Church, and other denominations often experience year-long delays when registering churches with the authorities. The government provides greater benefits to those churches allied to the regime,¹⁸ not only in matters of registration, but also in the issue of permits, authorizations, and use of basic services. There is a close relationship between the Venezuelan president and some factions of the Evangelical churches, as can be seen with the approval of the proposal to create the First Evangelical Theological University of Venezuela,¹⁹ and the approval of a decree that declares January 15th as National Pastor Day. These provisions in favor of the Evangelical Christian Movement can be translated as forms of acceptance towards said denominations, but also of control and manipulation to satisfy political interests.

Among the latest measures taken,²⁰ it is important to highlight the recent creation of the Vice Presidency of Religious Affairs of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV)²¹, an office created to strengthen control mainly over non-Catholic groups. The expansion of the “Government Pastoral Councils throughout the national territory” has also been promoted to “integrate” religious groups with local and regional governments. Another measure taken was the inclusion of an Evangelical chaplain of the Presidential Guard, a relevant change because the military chaplain corps used to be entirely Catholic.

¹⁷ Bukharin, N. (1920). *The ABC of communism – Chapter 11: Communism and Religion*. Marxists Internet Archive. <https://marxists.org/archive/bukharin/works/1920/abc/11.htm>

¹⁸ Singer, F., & Singer, F. (2023, February 7). Nicolás Maduro estrecha sus vínculos con las iglesias evangélicas. *El País*. <https://elpais.com/internacional/2023-02-07/nicolas-maduro-estrecha-sus-vinculos-con-las-iglesias-evangelicas.html>

¹⁹ Blanco, N. (2019, December 5). *Ejecutivo creará la Universidad Teológica Evangélica de Venezuela*. Últimas Noticias. <https://ultimasnoticias.com.ve/?p=2028250>

²⁰ Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada. (2016, March 14). *Venezuela: Whether Colombian guerrillas are present in Venezuela and whether they are involved in kidnappings, particularly in Caracas and in other cities, or in the eastern part of the country; measures taken by the Venezuelan authorities against the guerrillas (2004–February 2006)*. VEN101127.FE. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/45f147c42.html>.

²¹ Venezolana de Televisión (2022, July 23). *Nicolás Maduro Guerra asume la vicepresidencia de Asuntos Religiosos del PSUV*. <https://vtv.gob.ve/?p=548641>

There is a violent record against religious leaders described as “opponents.”²² Both Catholic and non-Catholic Christian leaders have been pressured with arbitrary registration or permit requirements, threatened, had their property vandalized, arbitrarily detained, and physically attacked. Religious services have been monitored or violently interrupted for their stance in favor of democracy and respect for human rights. In addition to the co-optation of the various branches of government, the regime also exercises social control over the population. Faced with poverty and food insecurity resulting from the economic crisis, the crisis in the health sector, education, etc., the state applies social policies as forms of blackmail.

The preaching, teaching, and demands made by religious leaders or groups that contradict the core of the socialist system, or the ideology of the Bolivarian revolution, are considered betrayals that deserve to be sanctioned.²³ In addition, the right of parents to educate their children under their own convictions is also diminished as the government seeks to indoctrinate children and young people in accordance with communist principles.²⁴ Until recently, this has been most evident in the case of the Catholic Church, as it constantly questions the ideology of the party. The church has experienced some restrictions by the government and its supporters through physical and verbal attacks against Catholic leaders and churches.²⁵ During 2020, only a few attacks against Christian temples²⁶ by the regime involved the Bolivarian National Guard and Chavista groups.²⁷ In the case of the Evangelical churches, the situation varied depending on the relationship they had with the government.²⁸ Those who advocate the return of the rule of law can be the object of smear campaigns, however religious groups related to or subjected to the party and its ideology are not classified as terrorists or enemies of the nation.

²² Voz de América. (2021, April 20). *Informe: 56 países del mundo sin libertad religiosa*. Voz de América. https://vozdeamerica.com/a/noticias-internacional_informe-56-paises-mundo-sin-libertad-religiosa/6073832.html

²³ Fox, J. (2016b). *The unfree exercise of religion*. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781316459508>

²⁴ Martínez, J. G. (2020, September 14). *Maduro en los campos de concentración*. PanAm Post. <https://panampost.com/?p=311774>

²⁵ Aciprensa. (2020, May 20). *Iglesia Católica es perseguida por el gobierno de Venezuela, denuncia cardenal*. Aciprensa. <https://www.aciprensa.com/noticias/76477/iglesia-catolica-es-perseguida-por-el-gobierno-de-venezuela-denuncia-cardenal>

²⁶ Pérez, R. A. (2020, May 11). *Venezuela: Iglesia exige respeto luego que militares violentaran templo*. Aleteia. <https://es.aleteia.org/2020/05/11/venezuela-iglesia-exige-respeto-luego-que-militares-violentaran-templo>

²⁷ Morillo, Á. A. (2020, March 30). *Grafitis amenazantes en una iglesia de Carúpano, al oriente de Venezuela*. Vida Nueva Digital. <https://www.vidanuevadigital.com/2020/03/30/grafitis-amenazantes-en-una-iglesia-de-carupano-al-oriente-de-venezuela/>

²⁸ Protestante Digital. (2020, April 28). *Amplio sector evangélico en Venezuela rechaza los planes de ayuda de Maduro*. <https://protestantedigital.com/internacional/65967/amplio-sector-evangelico-en-venezuela-rechaza-los-planes-de-ayuda-de-maduro>

Religion is used as a political instrument.²⁹ Referring to the Christian doctrine, Chávez is classified as the “Christ of the poor” and elections are called “Resurrection Day.” An attempt is made to deify the authorities and present them as those who will provide happiness on earth, trying to disrupt, to a certain extent, the image of God presented by traditional religious groups. In addition to branding Jesus Christ himself as the greatest socialist in history, Chávez and his revolutionary ideology are presented as religious symbols that must unite the militants.

The Venezuelan Jewish community suffered from serious anti-Semitism during the first years of the Chávez presidency,³⁰ but the severity of the situation has diminished and was never supported by the Venezuelan population. Key people in the government hold anti-Semitic views and government radio shows include anti-Semitic messages. Many Venezuelan Jews have since left the country and the Jewish population has dwindled, with 70% of Venezuelan Jews leaving the country since the Chávez-Maduro regime started.³¹

Non-State Actors: The Role of Organized Crime

The role played by non-state actors—organized crime in particular—in restricting Freedom of Religion and Believe (FoRB) in Venezuela, and Latin America in general, is relatively unknown and generally ignored in most religious freedom instruments. This may be the result of conceptual challenges. For example, the role of organized crime in restricting religious freedom is not recognized by most religious freedom datasets, even though it constitutes an evident form of societal hostilities because it targets religious ministers who are viewed as a threat to the operations of organized crime. There also are important challenges to obtain reliable information. However, the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America³² has conducted fieldwork that explores this connection further.³³

Four types of organized crime groups can be distinguished:

²⁹ Caracol Radio. (2013, March 18). *Maduro llena su discurso de menciones religiosas y dice es apóstol de Chávez*. https://caracol.com.co/radio/2013/03/18/internacional/1363615740_861127.html

³⁰ Navarro, R. (2022, June 18). *Antisemitismo en Venezuela: La relación con Irán y sus implicaciones*. PanAm Post. <https://panampost.com/?p=372054>

³¹ Hashomer, A. (2019, January 26). *Judíos en Venezuela: el caos en el país sudamericano*. Israel Noticias. <https://israelnoticias.com/latam/judios-venezuela-caos-pais-sudamericano/>

³² Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America. <https://olire.org>

³³ Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America. (n.d.). *Country Report: Venezuela*. <https://olire.org/monitor/country-reports/venezuela/>

- Colectivos,³⁴ criminal groups acting on their own or in collusion with the government, allegedly to intimidate political opponents including religious leaders;
- Drug trafficking networks, most of which are allegedly run by high ranking government and military officials;
- Hezbollah and other Iranian-backed Islamist groups, although we have no information about the implications of their presence in the country for religious freedom;
- Colombian leftwing guerrillas, which the Venezuelan government explicitly welcomed into the country.

Venezuela is considered a narco-state,³⁵ since the regime subsists on the income from organized crime. Rampant corruption by the government elite allows these groups to operate throughout the territory with total impunity.³⁶ Terror is instilled by state security agents, gangs, paramilitary groups present in Venezuela, and other collectives, such as the so-called Integral Defense and Security Committees. The presence of Colombian guerrillas, such as the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC) dissidents and the National Liberation Army (ELN) in territories near the Colombian border must also be included.³⁷

These groups have become the arm of repression against dissidents to a greater and lesser extent.³⁸ The government uses them to intimidate and subdue the opposition, and there are indications that they pose a threat to religious leaders who are known or related to dissidents or government critics, leaving religious leaders with no one to turn to for protection when dissidents operate in favor of the government.

A phenomenon related to the presence of Colombian guerrillas in the country, especially the ELN, is the indoctrination of children by these criminal groups,³⁹ especially in rural areas and on the country's border. Teachers and authorities of various educational institutions, whether or not they are affiliated to a religion,

³⁴ Infobae. (2020, January 11). *Radiografía de los colectivos chavistas: qué bandas armadas controlan cada zona de Venezuela y quiénes son sus líderes*. <https://infobae.com/america/venezuela/2020/01/11/radiografia-de-los-colectivos-chavistas-que-bandas-armadas-controlan-cada-zona-de-venezuela-y-quienes-son-sus-lideres/>

³⁵ Insight Crime. (n.d.). *Venezuela's cocaine revolution*. <https://insightcrime.org/?p=233385>

³⁶ Ugaz, J. C. (2019). *La gran corrupción en Venezuela y su impacto en la región latinoamericana*. Transparencia Venezuela. <https://transparenciave.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/La-gran-corrupci%C3%B3n-en-venezuela-y-su-impacto-en-la-regi%C3%B3n-latinoamericana.pdf>

³⁷ International Crisis Group. (n.d.). *Latin America & Caribbean*. International Crisis Group. <https://crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean>

³⁸ Alex, G. O., & Belchi, A. (2021, August 27). *Relaciones de Maduro con disidencias de las FARC: un riesgo para la paz en Colombia*. Voz de América. https://vozdeamerica.com/a/venezuela_relaciones-maduro-disidencias-farc/6076220.html

³⁹ Redacción BLU Radio. (2019, February 6). *Fundaredes denuncia que ELN adoctrina a menores en escuelas venezolanas*. Blurradio. [https://blurradio.com/mundo/fundaredes-denuncia-que-eln-adoctrina-a-menores-en-escuelas-venezolanas](https://bluradio.com/mundo/fundaredes-denuncia-que-eln-adoctrina-a-menores-en-escuelas-venezolanas)

are forced to distribute brochures to students with content related to the political motivation, philosophy, and ideology of these groups. Many of them act against their convictions, in order not to become victims of retaliation.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, members of these guerrillas tried to force a Christian educational institution to become a refuge for migrants at the borders.⁴⁰ Churches and religious leaders were also targeted by violent robberies and, in some cases, these robberies resulted in the death of the victims. The number of educational institutions affected by this phenomenon are hard to determine, since in the country and in Latin America it is very common to see that many confessional educational institutions are state-subsidized and not clearly distinguished from public schools.

The role of the various organized crime groups in the country and their relation with the government deserves further research both in terms of its political role as well as its implications for religious freedom.

Conclusions

The protection of FoRB in indigenous communities is a controversial issue in most Latin American countries. Under the influence of a political and social movement called indigenismo,⁴¹ Latin American governments have made important steps in the 1990s to protect the cultural preservation of indigenous communities. This has led to far-reaching self-government provisions for indigenous communities, but also to bans on proselytism by foreign missionaries. In addition, the human rights situation within indigenous communities, including in the field of religious freedom, has received little to no attention, in spite of empirical evidence suggesting the prevalence of serious human rights abuses. This matter deserves further research, including in Venezuela.

Because of the many restrictions that are faced for the conduct of humanitarian aid,⁴² the international community must put pressure on the Venezuelan government to allow humanitarian initiatives to be carried out without obstacles. Allowing the import of supplies is of the utmost importance and broader possibilities to move funds through the country. All this is accompanied by the particular restrictions experienced by religious humanitarian workers, who, unlike

⁴⁰ Barráez, S. (2020, April 9). *Venezuela: Una monja enfrentó a un guerrillero del ELN que amenazó con dispararle y obligarla a que un colegio reciba a migrantes repatriados*. Infobae. <https://www.infobae.com/america/venezuela/2020/04/09/venezuela-una-monja-enfrento-a-un-guerrillero-del-eln-que-amenazo-con-dispararle-y-obligarla-a-que-un-colegio-reciba-a-migrantes-repatriados/>

⁴¹ Máiz, R. (2004). El indigenismo político en América Latina. *Revista de Estudios Políticos Núm. 123*, 1–25. <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/descarga/articulo/904725.pdf>

⁴² Agenzia Fides. (2021, September 29). *Violaciones al derecho a la información y derecho al trabajo de los periodistas denunciadas por la Arquidiócesis de Caracas*. https://fides.org/es/news/69366-AMERICA_VENEZUELA_Violaciones_al_derecho_a_la_informacion_y_derecho_al_trabajo_de_los_periodistas_denunciadas_por_la_arquidiocesis_de_Caracas

non-religious humanitarian workers from non-denominational organizations, are subject to greater obstacles in their applications.

The international community should take a broad view of FoRB: key dimensions of FoRB violations, some of which were identified in this essay, are ignored by existing religious freedom datasets as well as by Venezuelans themselves and are therefore not on the radar of international development agencies. Similarly, international development agencies should acknowledge the internal diversity of religious denominations.

Religious groups would do well to recognize the benefits of humanitarian work as a source of resilience.⁴³ Engaging in humanitarian work, provided it is done carefully, could be a valid strategy to generate goodwill with the authorities and with local communities, which in turn could provide some protection for vulnerable religious communities based on the recognition of their altruistic work. The government has repeatedly threatened to close or nationalize private schools that refuse to teach “socialist guidelines,” creating particular tension with the country’s Christian and Catholic schools.⁴⁴

It is possible to say after this analysis that there is limited religious freedom in Venezuela, given the manner government, ideological groups, and organized crime have undermined the capability of different religious communities to express their beliefs and to carry out actions motivated by their beliefs, be they humanitarian, social, or political.

⁴³ Pacheco, A., Romero, C., & Muñoz Barrera, Z. (2020, June 8). *Resiliencia en la respuesta humanitaria en el sur de Venezuela*. <https://kaluinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/ES-ResilienciaenlarespuestahumanitariaenelsurdeVenezuela-AndreaPachecoCesarRomero-200608.pdf>

⁴⁴ Libertad Digital (2009, May 26). *Chávez cerrará las escuelas privadas que no enseñen los “lineamientos socialistas”*. <https://libertaddigital.com/mundo/chavez-cerrara-las-escuelas-privadas-que-no-ensenen-los-lineamientos-socialistas-1276313484/>

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