

# VENEZUELA 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, provided that the practice of a religion does not violate public morality, decency, or order. There were several instances of anti-Semitism in government-owned and government-affiliated media, and Jewish community leaders publicly expressed concern. Evangelicals expressed concern about the government's insistence on dealing with a centralized body of evangelical churches and said they encountered difficulties when registering with the government. Persons displaced by 2011 flooding continued to occupy chapels of The Church of Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) in Ocumare del Tuy with government support, and Mormons were not allowed access to them.

Vandals painted anti-Semitic graffiti on the wall outside a Caracas metro station. Hackers placed an expletive on the main page of a Jewish Association's website.

Despite efforts at dialogue, the U.S. embassy was unable to hold a discussion with the government on religious freedom issues because the latter was not responsive to requests. The embassy maintained close contact with most religious communities and hosted religious leaders for discussions on religious freedom.

## Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 28.9 million (July 2014 estimate). The most recent Venezuelan government census does not include publicly available statistics on religious affiliation, and estimates from other sources differ. According to U.S. government estimates, 96 percent of the population is Roman Catholic. The remaining 4 percent includes evangelical Protestants, Mormons, and Jehovah's Witnesses. The Venezuelan Evangelical Council estimates evangelical Protestants constitute approximately 17 percent of the population. The Mormon Church estimates there are 158,000 Mormons in Venezuela.

There are also Muslim and Jewish communities. The Muslim community numbers approximately 100,000 and consists primarily of persons of Lebanese and Syrian descent living in Nueva Esparta State and the Caracas area. The Jewish community numbers approximately 9,000 and is centered in Caracas.

## VENEZUELA

### Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

#### Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and the right to practice and profess one's religion on the condition that the practice of a religion does not violate public morality, decency, or order.

A concordat governs relations between the government and the Vatican and provides the basis for government subsidies to the Roman Catholic Church.

The Directorate of Justice and Religion (DJR) in the Ministry of Interior, Justice, and Peace is charged with maintaining a registry of religious groups, disbursing funds to religious organizations, and promoting mutual awareness and understanding among religious communities. Each group must register with the DJR in order to have legal status as a religious organization, and organizations cannot legally operate unless they are registered. Requirements for registration specified in law are largely administrative, such as application forms, although religious groups are required to serve their community's social interests. Registered religious groups are eligible to receive funding from the government.

#### Government Practices

There were instances of anti-Semitism in government-owned and government-affiliated media, and Jewish community leaders publicly expressed concern. During the summer conflict in Gaza, President Nicolas Maduro compared Israel's actions in the Gaza Strip to the Holocaust in several public speeches. On July 23, President Maduro said: "The Gaza Strip has been turned by the Government of Israel into a huge Auschwitz, into a huge concentration camp." On August 2, the President of the National Assembly and vice president of the ruling party, Diosdado Cabello, reportedly said: "In Israel, there is a smell of sulfur, the demon is there, and imperialism is sown there to finish with the people of the world."

On July 16, an opinion piece on a government-affiliated website stated that Israeli leaders were "applying the same logistics of the Nazi extermination" and "Hitler is a baby compared to the Zionist leadership."

## VENEZUELA

Local and international Jewish groups called on the government to halt inflammatory and derogatory rhetoric comparing Israeli actions in the Gaza Strip to Nazi actions during the Holocaust. On September 29, President Maduro met with World Jewish Congress leaders in New York to discuss these concerns.

In early September Maria Uribe, a member of the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), recited an altered version of The Lord's Prayer called Our Chavez that replaced God with former President Hugo Chavez during the PSUV's Third Congress. Catholic Church leaders criticized the alteration and its recitation, saying that "Catholic symbols, prayers, and religious elements should be respected." President Maduro called the criticism a "kind of new, vulgar inquisition." National Assembly President Cabello said in his influential weekly television show that the Catholic Church represented the "bourgeoisie" and should instead speak out against church representatives' abuse of minors.

Several non-Catholic religious groups continued to express concern over government inquiries into the use of their property. They stated they perceived this government interest as a potential precursor to expropriation of their lands or facilities.

The Venezuelan Evangelical Council (VEC) stated that some evangelical religious organizations had waited several months, and in some cases years, to complete the registration process with the DJR. According to several religious groups, the DJR rejected registration applications for groups that expressly noted their social works in the application (in compliance with the statutory requirement that groups must serve their community's social interests) on the grounds that only the state was officially allowed to do social work.

The VEC also expressed concern about the government's insistence on dealing with a centralized body of evangelical churches, to which the VEC objected, given the independent nature of evangelical organizations. The VEC said that the government had denied registration to a large number of evangelical organizations on the grounds that only a centralized evangelical body met the government's registration requirements. Additionally, evangelical and Jewish organizations faced restrictions in bringing religious leaders, theologians, and clergy from abroad, since waiting for religious visa approvals could take several months.

Persons displaced by 2011 flooding continued to occupy Mormon chapels in Ocumare del Tuy with government support. They continued to use the chapel as a

## VENEZUELA

school after their relocation, and church members did not have access to the property.

The Mormon Church announced in March that it would take precautionary measures and pulled 152 missionaries out of Venezuela for their security because of unrest in the country.

All registered religious groups were eligible for funding to support religious social services, but most funding went to Catholic groups. The government publicly criticized the Venezuelan Catholic Church's hierarchy due to its involvement in political dialogue; however, it continued to provide annual subsidies to Catholic schools and social programs that helped the poor.

The government approved funding for the Catholic Church's governing body, the Venezuelan Episcopal Conference, at levels reduced from previous years; however, it had not disbursed funds to the group for the past six years. Other religious groups were free to establish their own schools but did not receive government subsidies.

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

Anti-Semitic incidents spiked during the summer conflict in Gaza and declined after a period of calm in the region. Jewish leaders expressed concern that state media disseminated anti-Semitic information, which caused an increase in anti-Semitism among Venezuelans. In July vandals painted anti-Semitic graffiti on the wall outside of a Caracas metro station. The graffiti read: "Be a patriot, kill a Jew." The same month, hackers replaced the main page of the website of the Confederation of Jewish Associations' journal with an expletive. Police did not investigate either incident.

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

The U.S. embassy could not conduct a dialogue with the government on religious freedom issues because the latter was unresponsive to requests to discuss these matters. DJR officials did not respond to the U.S. embassy's request for a meeting. The embassy maintained close contact with most religious communities and regularly met with religious leaders. In September the Charge d'Affaires hosted a discussion on issues of religious freedom that included representatives of the Catholic, Pentecostal, evangelical, Muslim, and Jewish communities.