

# VENEZUELA

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom. 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. Those religious groups that criticized the government, like others who criticized the government, were subject to harassment and intimidation. Instances of anti-Semitism in the government-controlled media were a particular concern. There were some efforts by the government to limit the influence of religious groups in certain geographic, societal, and political areas.

There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, including desecration of religious buildings and symbols.

Despite efforts at dialogue, the U.S. government was not able to hold a discussion with the government on religious freedom issues because of an overall chill in the bilateral relationship. However, the U.S. embassy maintained close contact with most religious communities.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

According to government estimates, 92 percent of the population is at least nominally Roman Catholic. Groups that constitute less than 5 percent of the population include evangelical Protestants, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and Jehovah's Witnesses. However, the Venezuelan Evangelical Council estimated that Protestants constitute approximately 15 percent of the population.

There are small but influential Muslim and Jewish communities. The Muslim community of more than 100,000 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.

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

### **Legal/Policy Framework**

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. 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 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 and Justice is charged with maintaining a registry of religious groups, disbursing funds to religious organizations, and promoting awareness and understanding among religious communities. Each group must register with the DJR to have legal status as a religious organization. Requirements for registration are largely administrative, with the additional provision that the group serve the community's social interests.

All registered religious groups are eligible for funding to support religious social services, but most funding goes to Catholic organizations. The government continued to provide annual subsidies to Catholic schools and social programs that help the poor. The government continued to approve funding for the Catholic Episcopal Conference of Venezuela at levels reduced from previous years but did not disburse funds during the year. Other religious groups were free to establish their own schools but did not receive subsidies.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Christmas.

### **Government Practices**

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom. However, those religious groups that criticized the government, like others who criticized the government, were subject to harassment and intimidation. Government actions limited access to some religious sites. There were some efforts by the government to limit the influence of religious groups in certain geographic, societal, and political areas, and instances of anti-Semitism in government-controlled media.

On September 17, in a letter to UN Secretary General Ban-Ki Moon in support of Palestinian statehood, President Hugo Chavez criticized Israel for committing “genocide” and “ethnic cleansing” against the Palestinians and called Zionism “racism.”

On July 31, the government-owned newspaper *Diario VEA* published an opinion piece by journalist Basem Tajeldine that called Norwegian mass murderer Anders Breivik a “Sabbath goy,” a non-Jew who assists Jews in activities that are prohibited from being performed on the Sabbath, for having killed “pro-Palestinian activists” as part of the “global strategy of international Zionism.”

On July 14, a court sentenced six of 11 defendants to 10 years in prison for the 2009 vandalism and desecration of the Tiferet Israel synagogue in Caracas. The trial of the remaining five defendants began on July 15 and continued at year’s end. The defendants were accused of conspiracy, aggravated theft, concealing weapons, religious disrespect, and embezzlement.

Jewish community leaders publicly expressed concern about government support for anti-Semitic expressions in public buildings and government-controlled media. For example, in April the Ministry of Science and Technology hosted a pro-Palestine exhibition with displays that claimed the creation of Israel was part of a “genocidal plan” by “Aryan Zionist Jews” who wanted to “ethnically cleanse” the land of the native Palestinians. The exhibit compared pictures of the West Bank security barrier and an Auschwitz gas chamber.

On May 24, Jewish leaders filed a formal protest with the Prosecutor General’s Office over the “incitement to hate” contained in an April 4 broadcast on the government-owned Radio del Sur in which the station’s director, Cristina Gonzalez, promoted the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* as a “must-read.” On May 9, the government announced that Gonzalez had been replaced as the director for unspecified reasons, but she continued to host two programs on the state-owned Radio Nacional de Venezuela.

Like other private sector and nongovernmental entities, religious communities were subjected to property expropriations as well as invasions by squatters. Government authorities responded inconsistently. Refugees forcefully occupied Mormon chapels in Ocumare del Tuy, Charallave, and La Grita with government support. The local police seized the properties and turned them over to the Ministries of Nutrition and Sports. The government returned the property in Charallave by year’s end and donated painting supplies to refurbish the building,

but the mayor of Ocumare del Tuy refused to return control of the seized chapel even though the refugees were relocated. Local police continued to guard and restrict access to the property. Refugees still occupied the property in La Grita, but religious services were allowed on Sundays for local members.

On May 30 a group of squatters to whom the local mayor previously had promised housing occupied a building owned by the Jewish community. The building, which had rental apartments undergoing renovation, also housed the Beit Abraham synagogue. The synagogue was not desecrated, and the police evacuated the squatters in a peaceful manner.

The government increasingly restricted the issuance of religious visas, especially for visiting priests and religious teachers. It also continued to limit Venezuelan or foreign missionary groups from working in indigenous areas.

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

There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

There were reports of desecration of religious buildings and symbols during the year. In June unknown assailants splashed red paint on or mutilated several Catholic statues and murals of the Virgin of Coromoto in the states of Lara, Portuguesa, and Yaracuy. There was no publicly available information that the government had identified or arrested the perpetrators by year's end.

On June 7, as protesters marched past the Tifereth Israel synagogue on their way to a rally to denounce recent government actions, some participants vandalized the walled perimeter of the synagogue with graffiti saying "Death to Zionism" and "Down with Zionism."

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

It was not possible to conduct a dialogue with the government on religious freedom issues because of an overall chill in the bilateral relationship. Officials in the Directorate of Justice and Religion in the Ministry of Interior and Justice did not respond to the embassy's request for a meeting. However, the U.S. government and the U.S. embassy maintained close contact with most religious communities and regularly met with religious authorities.