

VENEZUELA 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

The United States continues to recognize the authority of the democratically elected 2015 National Assembly and of Juan Guaido as the interim President of Venezuela. References to a “regime” or “Maduro regime” below are not intended to indicate that the United States considers such entity a government. In 2019, the Department of State announced the temporary suspension of operations of the U.S. Embassy in Caracas and the withdrawal of diplomatic personnel, and it announced the opening of the Venezuela Affairs Unit (VAU), located at the U.S. Embassy in Bogota, Colombia.

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion on the condition its practice does not violate public morality, decency, or public order. Representatives of the conference of Catholic bishops, officially known as the Catholic Episcopal Conference of Venezuela (CEV), and the Evangelical Council of Venezuela (ECV) said clergy and other members of their religious communities were harassed, intimidated, and retaliated against for continuing to call attention to the country’s humanitarian crisis. In April, officers of the Bolivarian National Guard (GNB) detained Father Geronimo Sifontes, coordinator of the Catholic NGO Caritas, in Monagas State. Roman Catholic and evangelical Protestant leaders stated the Maduro regime and its aligned groups disrupted church services, attacked churchgoers, and destroyed church property. Media reported nonstate armed groups (NSAGs), called *colectivos*, aligned with Nicolas Maduro continued to attack churches and their congregants during the year. On January 15, a group of Maduro-aligned *colectivos* led by regime-controlled security forces assaulted teachers attending Mass prior to a planned protest in Caracas, launching bottles, urine, and feces at them. Church leaders reported Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (SEBIN) officials continued to intimidate priests who criticized Maduro in their sermons. There were reports that regime officials continued to prevent clergy opposing Maduro from holding religious services. According to media reports and other sources, throughout the year, members of the Maduro regime attempted to discredit religious organizations for criticizing the regime. Editorials in pro-Maduro media outlets continued to accuse interim President Juan Guaido and other interim government officials 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 Maduro-controlled or -associated media and supporters again denied or trivialized the

Holocaust and promoted conspiracy theories linking Israel and Jews to the COVID-19 pandemic.

On April 22, representatives of the CEV, ECV, Seventh-day Adventist Church, Anglican Church, Jewish community, and other religious groups and other social organizations announced the creation of the Venezuelan Interreligious Social Council. Representatives said the purpose of the council was to build consensus and dialogue based on respect for human rights, democratic institutions, and the rule of law.

During the year, the VAU continued to engage with the Guaido-led interim government. The VAU also continued to maintain close contact with a wide range of religious groups, including the Jewish, Muslim, evangelical Protestant, and Catholic communities. VAU representatives and members of these groups discussed repression and attacks on religious communities committed by the Maduro regime; harassment by the regime's aligned and armed civilian gangs; and anti-Semitic posts in social media and in regime-controlled media.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 28.6 million (midyear 2020 estimate), compared with 32.1 million in the 2019 midyear estimate – a decrease attributable to the outmigration of millions of Venezuelans. 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. Observers estimate as much as 30 percent of the population follows practices of Afro-descendant religions Santeria and Espiritismo, some of which also influence Catholic practices in the country, including in Catholic Church music and festivals.

The ECV estimates 18 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 168,500. 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. Media estimate there are 5,000 Jews, compared with 30,000 in 1999.

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 National Assembly, democratically elected in 2015, and the Guaido-led interim government 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 Maduro-controlled 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 regime-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

CEV and ECV representatives said the Maduro regime harassed, intimidated, and retaliated against their clergy and other members of their religious communities for continuing to call attention to the country’s humanitarian crisis. On April 8, GNB officers detained Father Geronimo Sifontes, coordinator of the Catholic NGO Caritas, in Monagas State on the grounds that he lacked permission to hold a public gathering under COVID-19 quarantine restrictions. Sifontes installed an improvised altar in front of the Santo Domingo de Guzman Church, which included a cross and a tattered Venezuelan flag. Sifontes then led a procession, remaining in his vehicle the entire time, with a statue of Jesus bearing the cross atop his car through the streets of Las Cocuizas, Monagas State. Parishioners denounced Sifontes’ detention as illegal and arbitrary. Sifontes was released later the same day.

Media reported that NSAGs aligned with the Maduro regime continued to attack churches and their congregants during the year. On January 15, members of the teachers union gathered at the Cathedral of Caracas for Mass prior to a protest against Maduro. Colectivos attacked the teachers in the church, launching bottles, urine, and feces at them. Teachers and journalists covering the protest reported the colectivos involved in the attack were led by members of the GNB. According to sources, on February 11, members of a colectivo linked to the regime attacked a Catholic soup kitchen and health services clinic in Los Teques, Miranda State. The armed and masked colectivos threatened the occupants, robbed them of their valuables, and beat the soup kitchen’s coordinator so severely she was hospitalized.

There were reports that Maduro representatives continued to prevent clergy opposing the regime from holding religious services. On October 5, the mayor of Barbacoas, in Aragua State, closed down and fired the staff of Catholic radio station The Singing Revolutionary. The station director’s son, Anthony Gonzalez,

previously a seminarian at a local seminary, led a religious service on October 4, during which he criticized Maduro for the lack of ambulances, biosafety equipment, and supplies at medical centers needed to transport and treat COVID-19 patients as well as combat the disease.

Church leaders reported SEBIN officials continued to intimidate priests who criticized Maduro in their sermons. The leaders said SEBIN officers followed and harassed Catholic laity involved in delivering humanitarian aid or participating in public demonstrations and photographed their homes.

According to media reports and other sources, throughout the year, members of the Maduro regime attempted to discredit religious organizations for criticizing the regime. In a January 14 homily, Bishop Victor Hugo Basabe – Bishop of the Diocese of San Felipe and Apostolic Administrator of the Archdiocese of Barquisimeto – denounced what he called the abuse of power and use of force against the population. Later the same day, Maduro responded to Basabe’s remarks in his annual address to the ANC, in which he accused Basabe of using the homily to manipulate faith for “retrograde, reactionary, and right-wing politics,” and he demanded bishops not conduct politics from the pulpit.

During a July 27 television broadcast, Maduro called on the Catholic Church to use its churches and other places of worship, closed during the COVID-19 pandemic, to house Venezuelans returning from abroad who had contracted COVID. The CEV responded that church facilities, while engaged in the distribution of medicine and humanitarian aid, lacked the necessary equipment and medical infrastructure to provide lifesaving care to COVID patients. CEV representatives stated that Maduro’s demand was an attempt to deflect criticism from his mistreatment of Venezuelans afflicted by the virus. Mariano Parra Sandoval, Archbishop of Coro, Falcon State, suggested Maduro use military installations instead of churches because the former were better equipped to care for COVID-19 patients. According to humanitarian aid organizations, the Maduro regime instead forcibly detained returning COVID-positive Venezuelans in makeshift camps under terrible conditions.

Media reported the Maduro regime regularly accused Catholic laity of being “perverts” and perpetrators of pedophilia who acted with the complicity of Church leadership. On January 22, then-Interior Minister Nestor Reverol, an active-duty National Guard general who later became Minister of Electrical Energy, stated, “Instead of devoting themselves to politics, Catholic authorities should focus on removing priests who engage in these aberrant activities.” He cited the case of

Father Jesus Manuel Rondon Molina, of Rubio, Tachira State, killed on January 16 by an individual who said the priest had sexually abused him. On January 20, the CEV issued a statement denying the Church had attempted to cover up abuse allegations and stating the Church had initiated an investigation of Rondon Molina and prohibited him from meeting with minors.

According to media, on March 29, colectivos spray-painted words threatening to attack “the damned opposition” on the walls of the Saint Catalina Church in Carupano, Sucre State, signing the messages with “Bolivarian Fury.” Colectivos adopted the phrase from a March 26 speech by Maduro to launch an intimidation campaign against perceived opponents.

CAIV representatives said Maduro regime representatives continued to believe members of the Jewish community maintained direct lines of communication with the White House and that the community placed U.S. interests above those of the country. 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 regime and those sympathetic to it, including some media outlets, used anti-Zionism to mask anti-Semitism, saying they avoided accusations of anti-Semitism by replacing the word “Jewish” with “Zionist.” During the year, editorials in state-owned and pro-Maduro media outlets accused Guaido and Guaido-nominated representatives of being agents or lobbyists for Zionism. During a September 2 television broadcast, ANC president Diosdado Cabello called opposition politician David Smolansky “an agent of Zionism, the most murderous of Zionist assassins.”

Regime-controlled news media and regime-friendly social media posts circulated theories that linked the COVID-19 pandemic to Israel and Jews. In a May 15 social media post, Basem Tajeldine, an analyst for state-owned media outlet TeleSur, characterized Israel as a virus, calling the “IsraHell virus as much of a killer as COVID-19, eating the lungs of the Palestinian people from the 1947 Nakba to today.”

Members of the Maduro regime continued to trivialize or deny the Holocaust. On June 12, the Maduro-controlled Supreme Court appointed Luis Fuenmayor Toro, known for his statements questioning the existence of the Holocaust, to the National Electoral Council.

On October 19, the CEV released a pastoral letter, “On the social, economic, moral and political situation of the country,” that stated “both the ruling party and the

opposition do not present a project for the country that is able to bring together and convince the majority of the Venezuelan people to live in justice, freedom and peace” and that called for “a change of attitude in all the political leaders.” According to the CEV letter, and in reference to what it termed the fraudulent December 6 legislative elections, “The electoral event scheduled for next December 6, far from contributing to the democratic solution of the political situation we are experiencing today, tends to worsen it,” and, “It is immoral to hold elections when people suffer the consequences of the pandemic, lack the minimum conditions necessary for their survival, and there are no transparent rules and verification mechanisms that should characterize an electoral process.”

In response to the creation in April of the Venezuelan Interreligious Social Council by religious groups not associated with Maduro, the regime created its own National Religious Council that included representatives of the Muslim, Jewish, evangelical Protestant, and Afro-descendant communities, as well as the Anglican and Russian Orthodox Churches. Observers criticized the move as an attempt to politicize religious communities and create the appearance of support for the Maduro regime.

Throughout the year, members of the Maduro regime met with the Evangelical Christian Movement for Venezuela (MOCEV), a pro-Maduro organization. Leaders of the Evangelical and Baptist Churches said members of MOCEV were unknown to them and did not speak for their religious communities. ECV Vice President Jose Pinero said he believed MOCEV may have received benefits from the regime in exchange for its political support.

The Evangelical Theological University of Venezuela, whose foundation Maduro announced in December 2019, had not opened by year’s end. Members of the Catholic and Evangelical communities rejected the initiative, stating it was an attempt to “buy their conscience,” and they voiced concern that any such institution would demonstrate an ideological bent in favor of the Maduro. On February 13, Jose Vielma Mora, Maduro’s Vice President for Religious Affairs, called for the creation of religious workshops and educational programs at universities to build religious tolerance. Observers criticized the announcement as “political interference” and an attack on the independence of the religious and university sectors. Student leaders pointed out the impracticality of such programs, given the regime’s refusal to fund university budgets, combined with the COVID-19 pandemic, all of which, they said, limited the ability of universities to hold classes of any type.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Articles published on the online newspaper *Aporrea* stated COVID-19 was a biological weapon developed by Israel, and that Zionists used the pandemic to destabilize the country and foment a coup against Maduro.

On April 22, representatives of the CEV, ECV, Seventh-day Adventist Church, Anglican Church, Jewish community, and other religious groups and social organizations announced the creation of the Venezuelan Interreligious Social Council. According to its founding members, the purpose of the council was to build consensus and dialogue based on respect for human rights, democratic institutions, and the rule of law. Auxiliary Bishop of Caracas and CEV Secretary General Jose Trinidad Fernandez said the council was “a structure of reflection and action based on plurality, whose contribution will generate consensus to mitigate the serious problems that our society is experiencing.”

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The United States continues to recognize the authority of the democratically elected 2015 National Assembly and of Juan Guaido as the interim President of Venezuela and does not recognize the Maduro regime as a government. In 2019, the Department of State announced the temporary suspension of operations of the U.S. Embassy in Caracas and the withdrawal of diplomatic personnel and announced the opening of the VAU, located at the U.S. Embassy in Bogota, Colombia. The VAU is the U.S. mission to Venezuela, which continues engagement with the Government of Venezuela and outreach to the Venezuelan people. During the year, the VAU maintained close contact with the Guaido-led interim government to discuss actions by the Maduro regime that infringe upon religious freedom and other human rights.

VAU officials communicated regularly with a wide range of religious communities and leaders in the country to discuss the treatment of religious groups, anti-Semitic rhetoric by the Maduro regime and its supporters, and reprisals on some faith groups that disagree with Maduro’s political agenda. In conversations with embassy officials, religious leaders expressed their concern that the continued presence of the Maduro regime would only further the political, economic and humanitarian crisis in the country, and that criticism of Maduro would increase hostility towards faith communities. VAU 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. The VAU also communicated the value of religious freedom in interviews with media outlets and on digital media.