

VENEZUELA 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year. 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. The government harassed and intimidated religious groups that criticized the government. Instances of anti-Semitism in the government-controlled media were a particular concern. The government tried to limit the influence of religious groups in certain geographic, societal, and political areas.

There were some reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, including anti-Semitic graffiti.

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 the 2011 census, the population is approximately 28.9 million. According to government estimates, 92 percent of the population is at least nominally Roman Catholic. Government estimates also show that 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 estimates that evangelical 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

VENEZUELA

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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.

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

Government Practices

Religious groups that criticized the government were subject to harassment and intimidation. Government actions limited the use of religious sites by some members of religious groups. There were instances of anti-Semitism in government-controlled media, particularly related to opposition presidential candidate Henrique Capriles Radonski, a practicing Catholic of Jewish ancestry.

On February 15, President Chavez described Capriles as a “pig,” saying that “one of my tasks...will be to take away the mask...because, as hard as you try to disguise yourself...you have the tail of a pig, you have the ears of a pig, and you snort like a pig, you are a pig.” Some in the Jewish community saw this as a thinly veiled anti-Semitic attack.

On May 31, the government-sponsored newspaper *Diario Vea* published an article containing a fictional poll of historical figures who would have supported Capriles. The list included Caiaphas, “the high priest of the court that condemned Christ,” whom the article said came from “the same stench” as Capriles, and Hitler, who shared “the same ideology” as Capriles.

VENEZUELA

Jewish community leaders publicly expressed concern about government support for anti-Semitic expressions in government-controlled media. For example, on February 13, the government-owned National Radio of Venezuela website published an article, “The Enemy is Zionism: Misleading Electoral Promise Leading to Disaster,” which claimed that Zionism was an “ideology of terror” that “threatens the destruction of the planet we inhabit.” This report was part of a smear campaign against opposition candidate Henrique Capriles, using anti-Semitism as a political tool to cast Capriles as a fascist and label him a secret follower of Zionism, which it called “the most rotten sentiments represented by humanity.”

On October 10, a district-level court sentenced a defendant to eight years and nine months in prison for participation in the 2009 vandalism and desecration of the Tiferet Israel synagogue in Caracas. Seven out of a total of 11 defendants have received prison sentences for the crime. The trial of the four remaining defendants continued at year’s end. The defendants were accused of conspiracy, aggravated theft, concealing weapons, religious disrespect, and embezzlement.

Religious groups were concerned by government inquiries into the use of their property and schools. Religious groups perceived this government interest as a potential precursor to government expropriation of their lands or facilities.

People displaced by 2011 flooding forcibly occupied Mormon chapels in Ocumare del Tuy and La Grita with government support. The chapel in Ocumare del Tuy was still being used as a school at year’s end even though the displaced persons were relocated, and church members did not have access to the property. At year’s end, displaced persons still occupied the property in La Grita, but religious services were allowed on Sundays for local members.

All registered religious groups were eligible for funding to support religious social services, but most funding went to Catholic groups. The government continued to provide annual subsidies to Catholic schools and social programs helping 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 government subsidies.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

VENEZUELA

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There were reports of anti-Semitic graffiti directed towards opposition presidential candidate Capriles, including a regional newspaper's front page picture of Capriles wearing a shirt with a Star of David on it.

On November 22, a group of approximately 50 protesters gathered outside of the Mariperez Synagogue in Caracas. The protestors chanted anti-Jewish slogans and threw fireworks towards the synagogue.

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. embassy maintained close contact with most religious communities and regularly met with religious authorities.