

VENEZUELA 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion on the condition that the practice of a religion not violate public morality, decency, or public order. The Directorate of Justice and Religion (DJR), an office in the Ministry of Interior, Justice, and Peace, 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 in order to have legal status as a religious organization. The Venezuelan Evangelical Council said that some evangelical religious organizations have waited several months, and in some cases years, to be registered. Anti-Semitism appeared in government-owned and government-affiliated media, and Jewish community leaders publicly expressed concern. Following remarks in February in which President Nicolas Maduro stated that Israel was involved in a coup attempt, the country's largest Jewish organization, The Confederation of Jewish Associations of Venezuela (CAIV), reported an intensification of anti-Semitic sentiment and a 20 percent increase in anti-Semitic speech in official media. All registered religious groups were eligible for government funding to support social services, but most funding went to Catholic groups and churches politically aligned with the government. Evangelicals expressed concern with the government's insistence on dealing with a centralized body of evangelical churches in the country, made up of only those churches the government supported. Land disputes, carried over from government expropriation of churches from years past, remained unresolved.

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

Government officials did not respond to U.S. requests for meetings on religious freedom issues. The U.S. embassy maintained close contact with most religious communities.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 29.3 million (July 2015 estimate). A 2010 survey from the Pew Research Center indicates almost 78 percent of the population is Roman Catholic while other sources place the percentage of Roman Catholics at over 90 percent. The remaining population includes evangelical Protestants, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslims, and Jews.

VENEZUELA

Estimates of the percentage of evangelical Protestants range from 4 percent to 17 percent, according to the Venezuela Evangelical Council. Mormons estimate their numbers at 158,000. 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 (down from approximately 15,000 in 2006) and is centered in Caracas.

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 not violate public morality, decency, or public order. A 1964 concordat governs relations between the government and the Holy See and provides the basis for government subsidies to the Catholic Church.

The Directorate of Justice and Religion (DJR), which is accountable to the Ministry of Interior, Justice, and Peace, is charged with maintaining a registry of religious groups, disbursing funds to religious organizations, and promoting awareness and understanding among religious communities. Each religious group must register with the DJR in order to have legal status as a religious organization. Registration requires declaration of property pertaining to the religious organization, identification of any religious authorities who would work directly for the organization, and articles of incorporation. Religious groups are required to demonstrate how they provide social services to their communities and must receive a letter of acceptance from the government-controlled community council in the neighborhood where the religious organization would carry out its work.

The law provides for a military priest who sees to the spiritual needs of Catholic military members. There is no provision for religious services for other denominations.

Government Practices

The Venezuelan Evangelical Council said that some evangelical religious organizations waited several months, and in some cases years, to be registered. Although all registered religious groups were eligible to receive funding from the government, evangelical groups not aligned with the government stated they

VENEZUELA

requested but did not receive funding from the government, while government-aligned evangelical groups received funding. Muslim and Jewish groups stated they neither requested nor received funding from the government.

According to the Venezuelan Episcopal Conference, the Catholic Church's governing body, Catholic groups received government funding despite their criticism of it. Although the government publicly criticized the country's Catholic hierarchy for its involvement in political matters in the country, the government continued to provide annual subsidies to Catholic schools and social programs that helped the poor. The government also approved funding for the Venezuelan Episcopal Conference, but at levels reduced from previous years in line with reduced government budgetary expenditures.

According to several religious groups, the DJR rejected registration for groups engaging in certain kinds of social work such as providing large-scale community health programs or food banks on the grounds that only the state could officially be allowed to do such work.

The Venezuelan Evangelical Council said the government's insistence in dealing with a centralized body of all evangelical churches in the country when these evangelical organizations were independent from one another was unfair. For example, when the government called upon religious groups to engage in dialogue in the wake of 2014 political protests, the Venezuelan Evangelical Council stated the government invited only those evangelical churches already friendly to its policies, excluding the larger body of evangelical churches from the dialogue.

The Venezuelan Evangelical Council continued negotiations with the government seeking the return to affected churches of more than 10 million square meters (108 million square feet) of property it stated the government seized over the past decade. The negotiations remained unresolved.

Jewish organizations stated they faced long waits for visas for religious leaders, theologians, and clergy from abroad.

Jewish community leaders said anti-Semitism in government-owned and government-affiliated media was frequent. After the January Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris, the government-affiliated daily newspaper *Aporrea* published opinion pieces linking the terrorist attacks to a "Zionist conspiracy to discredit Islam and Arab immigrants to Europe." The same newspaper accused Israel and

VENEZUELA

the Israeli intelligence organization Mossad of founding Da'esh (Islamic State in Syria and the Levant) to turn people away from Islam. On February 14, President Maduro appeared before the nation on all television and radio channels to announce he had foiled a coup attempt by the right wing opposition and several international actors, including Israel, which Maduro named as a key plotter and supporter.

In March, following Maduro's remarks against Israel, CAIV reported an intensification of anti-Semitic sentiment and a 20 percent increase in anti-Semitic speech in official media. The group noted several instances where government officials participated in or supported potentially anti-Semitic activities and said anti-Semitic comments by government officials created a hostile environment.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The government did not respond to the embassy's request for meetings to discuss religious freedom.

The embassy maintained close contact with most religious communities and regularly met with religious leaders. The Charge d'Affaires held meetings with the Papal Nuncio, Venezuelan Evangelical Council, CAIV, and Caracas's Muslim community; his interlocutors frequently stated that government respect for the rights of religious minorities was inadequate. Representatives of the Catholic Church said that political concerns involving the country's human rights situation sometimes caused friction with local priests.