



FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2021

Venezuela

14
/100

NOT FREE

<u>Political Rights</u>	1 /40
<u>Civil Liberties</u>	13 /60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

16 /100 **Not Free**

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. [See the methodology.](#)



Overview

Venezuela's democratic institutions have deteriorated since 1999, but conditions have grown sharply worse in recent years due to harsher crackdowns on the opposition and the ruling party relying on widely condemned elections to control all government branches. The authorities have closed off virtually all channels for political dissent, restricting civil liberties and prosecuting perceived opponents without regard for due process. The country's severe humanitarian crisis has left millions struggling to meet basic needs, and driven mass emigration.

Key Developments in 2020

- In January, the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) attempted to undercut the legitimacy of Juan Guaidó, the interim president backed by the democratic opposition, by engineering the election of Luis Parra as National Assembly president. Military forces barred opposition members from entering the chamber to participate in the vote, and the Constitutional Chamber of the Nicolás Maduro-aligned Supreme Tribunal of Justice (TSJ) ratified Parra's election in May.
- Tightly controlled National Assembly elections went forward in December despite an opposition boycott, leading to a new body with a ruling-party majority. The old opposition-led legislature in response extended its own term, in an attempt to keep control of the legislative branch. At the end of the year, Venezuela had rival presidents and legislatures, with Maduro firmly in control and the democratic opposition severely weakened.
- Opposition figures, journalists, activists, protesters, and others perceived as dissidents faced relentless repression, including arbitrary arrests and extrajudicial executions.
- A state of emergency was enacted in March in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, upending everyday life. Authorities and armed groups enforced movement restrictions with violence, while alongside the pandemic, Venezuelans suffered from an acute shortage of gasoline that exacerbated widespread

misery. Venezuelans continued to flee the country in massive numbers due to the country's worsening crises; in August, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) released a report estimating that 10 million people could emigrate by the end of 2023.

Political Rights

A. Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?	0 / 4
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Venezuela's president serves six-year terms, and is not subject to term limits. In January 2019, incumbent president Nicolás Maduro was sworn in for a new term after winning the 2018 snap presidential election. The poll saw record-low turnout, with only 46 percent of voters participating, and by most international accounts lacked even a veneer of competitiveness. That month, Venezuela's democratically elected National Assembly declared its head, Juan Guaidó, to be Venezuela's interim president as a constitutional response to Maduro's reelection in a fraudulent poll.

The ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) attempted to undercut Guaidó's legitimacy by engineering the election of Luis Parra as National Assembly president in January 2020, with military forces barring opposition members from entering the chamber to participate in the vote. The Constitutional Chamber of the Maduro-aligned Supreme Tribunal of Justice (TSJ) ratified Parra's election in May. Meanwhile, more than 50 countries that had recognized Guaidó as Venezuela's acting president in 2019 continued to do so, but some critics have begun to express concerns about Guaidó's capacity to challenge *chavismo*. Maduro is recognized by fewer than 20 countries, generally Venezuela's historical allies and governments with an economic or other interest in the country—most prominently Russia, China, and Cuba.

During the year, the Lima Group, composed of mostly Latin American governments; the International Contact Group, which brings together a number of European and Latin American governments; the United States; and the European Union (EU) called for a transitional government to organize free and fair presidential elections, to little effect.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?	0 / 4
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The unicameral National Assembly is popularly elected for five-year terms, using a mix of majoritarian and proportional-representation voting. Three seats are reserved for Indigenous representatives. Ahead of the December 2020 elections, electoral authorities announced that the new National Assembly would have 277 seats, up from 167.

The major opposition parties refused to participate in December's vote for the 2021–26 National Assembly term, saying they had no reason to believe the Maduro administration would oversee a fair election, and pointed in particular to the installation of new election commissioners without input from opposition lawmakers in the National Assembly. The ruling party and its allies won 91 percent of seats, though most of the world's democracies, including the United States, rejected the results as illegitimate. In late December, the outgoing, opposition-controlled National Assembly voted to extend its term into 2021 in an effort to keep control of the legislative branch. Also in December, Maduro announced that the National Constituent Assembly—a body established in 2017 to supplant the National Assembly, and filled with regime loyalists elected in a nondemocratic process—would be shuttered.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies?	0 / 4
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Venezuela’s electoral system is heavily influenced by political manipulation and institutional interference in favor of the PSUV. The new members of the National Electoral Council (CNE), appointed by the TSJ in 2020 without input from opposition lawmakers, are all aligned with the PSUV or minor parties that are not aligned with the main opposition parties. In September, the United States sanctioned Indira Alfonso Izaguirre, the new president of the CNE, and other state officials, citing their efforts to prevent free and fair elections.

Recent polls, including the 2018 presidential election and the 2020 legislative elections, have been characterized by disqualifications of prominent opposition candidates, government abuse of public resources, uneven access to the state-dominated media, the diminished presence of international observers, and intimidation of state employees.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

<p>Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?</p>	<p>0 / 4</p>
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Opposition leaders have long been harassed, attacked, imprisoned, and otherwise impeded from participating in political processes or leading political parties in peaceful activities. In September 2020, an independent UN fact-finding mission concluded, after investigating over 200 cases since 2014 and reviewing thousands more, that the Venezuelan government had ordered the arrest and torture of numerous dissidents, and that “even conservative estimates suggest that Venezuela has one of Latin America’s highest rates of killings by state agents.”

A slew of further violations, apparently intended to impede party activities and competition, were recorded in 2020. In late February, chavismo supporters shot at an opposition demonstration in Barquisimeto. Six people were injured, and Guaidó's vehicle was shot at.

In June and July, the TSJ suspended the leaders of the most prominent opposition parties—Acción Democrática (Democratic Action) and Voluntad Popular (Popular Will)—and placed in charge figures who had previously been suspended from the parties for supporting Parra's election as president of the National Assembly, and negotiating with the Maduro regime.

Former chavistas also continued to be targeted in 2020. According to Provea (Provide), a Venezuelan rights organization, 44 former government loyalists have faced persecution including violations of their rights to association, but also to their personal freedom and integrity, since 2017. Among them was Alí Domínguez, an activist and journalist, who was murdered in 2019.

There were 351 political prisoners in Venezuela at the end of 2020, according to rights group Foro Penal (Criminal Forum). Leopoldo López, founder of two opposition parties who in 2019 had taken refuge in the house of the Spanish ambassador to Venezuela after escaping from house arrest, fled to Spain in October.

In May 2020, 82 people were arrested for being part of an alleged plan to kidnap Maduro to take him to the United States, where officials in March had offered a \$15 million reward for information leading to his capture or conviction. Seventeen of the detainees confessed and gave information about opposition leaders that were related to the plot, according to the national prosecutor's office, which is controlled by the ruling party.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?

0 / 4

While discontent with the Maduro administration remains widespread, the government has cut off virtually all avenues for political change. The opposition has boycotted recent national elections after claiming that the international criteria of competitiveness could not be met. Both López and Henrique Capriles Radonski, a prominent opposition figure and former governor of Miranda State, remain banned from holding public office.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people’s political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means?	0 / 4
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The Maduro regime increasingly relies on the military, paramilitary forces, and opaque support from foreign states in order to retain political power. Military leaders have taken control of numerous offices, and Maduro has continued to strengthen the Bolivarian Militia, a civilian militia group established by the late president Hugo Chávez Frías in 2008 to support the military; the government claimed the group had over 4 million members in 2020. In January, the National Constituent Assembly approved legislation to consider the militia a part of Venezuela’s official military and Maduro claimed that every member of the militia should be provided with a gun.

Separately, irregular, state-affiliated armed groups known as *colectivos* routinely commit acts of violence against civilians, particularly at antigovernment protests, and carry out government-backed voter intimidation efforts. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) attributed a number of deaths that occurred during protests between January and May 2019 to colectivos.

The Maduro regime has become increasingly dependent on economic, medical, military, and other assistance from foreign allies to maintain power, particularly from Russia, Cuba, Turkey, and Iran.

B4 0-4 pts

	1 / 4
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Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities?	
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The PSUV's increasing political dominance leaves little opportunity for ethnic, minority, and other groups to advocate for their interests.

Indigenous people in Venezuela are poorly represented in politics, and members of these groups struggle to bring government attention to issues of importance, including economic inequality and destructive incursions on ancestral lands. Indigenous people were further marginalized in 2020 through changes to the structure of the National Assembly: while the total number of legislators was significantly increased from 167 to 277, the number of seats reserved for Indigenous representatives remained the same. Separately, in July, the CNE revoked Indigenous groups' right to vote directly and secretly to choose their representatives to the National Assembly, passing the changes without consulting Indigenous communities. Under the new rules, the three seats reserved for Indigenous representatives would be chosen by previously selected delegates of the Indigenous groups in an open assembly, which in effect was likely to hand the seats to PSUV allies. After an outcry, the reform was rolled back in August.

Though several women hold senior positions in government, there remains a lack of policy discussion regarding issues that primarily affect women. Almost no LGBT+ people living openly hold senior political or government positions in Venezuela.

Score Change: The score declined from 2 to 1 due to the marginalization of Indigenous representatives in the legislature.

C. Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government?	0/4
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Venezuela does not function as a representative democracy. The opposition-controlled legislature had no practical ability to carry out its constitutional mandate between 2015 and 2020 and since August 2017 was supplanted by the National Constituent Assembly, a body packed with regime loyalists who were elected under undemocratic conditions. After the opposition announced that it would boycott the 2020 National Assembly elections, effectively securing PSUV control of the chamber, Maduro announced the closure of the National Constituent Assembly.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?	0/4
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Corruption is rampant in Venezuela. The government's economic policies—particularly its currency and price controls—offer significant opportunities for black-market activity and collusion between public officials and organized crime networks. The United States, Canada, Panama, the EU, and others continue to sanction Venezuelan officials for corruption and other offenses that go uninvestigated in Venezuela. For example, in March 2020, then US Attorney General William Barr, accused Maduro and other high-ranking officials of drug trafficking.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency?	0/4
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There is virtually no transparency regarding government spending. The Maduro regime has moreover consistently failed to publish reliable crime and economic data, including monthly inflation statistics and annual gross domestic product.

In 2020, watchdogs and others raised serious doubts about the veracity of government data on the COVID-19 health crisis. According to opposition lawmakers, there had been 1,412 COVID-19-related deaths as of October 5th, more than two times the number reported by the government at the time. In a report released in August, Amnesty International denounced authorities for failing to disclose the number of

health workers who had died of COVID-19; the Medical Union of Venezuela put the number of deaths at 295 at the end of the year. Amnesty International also expressed doubts about the veracity of the official number of COVID-19 cases, while Human Rights Watch and Johns Hopkins University called the official death count “absurd” and “not credible” in May.

Civil Liberties

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media?	1/4
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Venezuela’s independent journalists operate within a highly restrictive regulatory and legal environment, and risk arrest and physical violence in connection with their work. Most of the country’s independent newspapers have shut down or moved to an exclusively digital format, where they are subject to frequent blocking.

In the first half of 2020, there were at least 12 arbitrary arrests of journalists in connection with their coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to the Institute of Press and Society in Venezuela (IPYS). Journalists were also detained for other reasons during that period, mostly related to media coverage of a gasoline shortage. The nongovernmental organization (NGO) Public Space documented 112 freedom-of-speech violations in Venezuela through May, including intimidation and censorship, mostly against journalists and mostly committed by security forces or other state agents. In August, two journalists from the television channel Guacamaya TV were killed by members of the Special Action Forces (FAES) of the Bolivarian National Police. The public prosecutor’s office is investigating the crime. In July, political

scientist Nicmer Evans was arrested and accused of “hate speech” over comments on social media that were critical of Maduro’s policies.

The Maduro regime maintains a state communications infrastructure used to propagate its political and ideological program. Maduro had made 151 televised appearances in the first ten months of 2020. In contrast, live-streamed speeches by Guaidó are frequently blocked.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private?	3/4
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Constitutional guarantees of religious freedom are generally respected, though tensions between the government and the Roman Catholic Church remain high. Government relations with the small Jewish community have also been strained at times.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination?	1/4
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Academic freedom has come under mounting pressure since chavismo arrived to power. Budget cuts and other funding problems have undermined universities’ autonomy and prompted an exodus of academics from the country. In 2020, public universities in many cases received as little as 10 percent of their requested funding for various programs for the whole year.

In August 2019, the TSJ suspended the head of the Central University of Venezuela, the biggest and highest-ranked university in the country, changed voting rules for the election of school authorities, and ordered elections at nine public universities that are considered opposition strongholds. Under the directive, if elections were not held within six months of the decision, the court will choose the new authorities. However, after a series of student protests, the TSJ in February 2020 allowed more time to hold

the elections. A March 2020 TSJ ruling contained related directives that university leaders characterized as confusing, and which rights advocates said could further damage universities' autonomy.

Classes have been conducted virtually since March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and largely abandoned universities have been subsequently targeted with vandalism. NGO Aula Abierta (Open Classroom) counted 112 security incidents at universities during the year.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution?	1 / 4
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Free private expression is severely constrained in Venezuela. In August 2020, IPYS detailed concerted government efforts to control information on social networks and suppress protected speech. According to the report, authorities employ cybertroops to disseminate purportedly false news and hack adversaries to gather information and use it against them, especially on Twitter and Facebook.

The government increased surveillance of the population in 2020 through social service and health-care systems. Health-related measures were linked to the Fatherland ID card, which is required to access social services. Between July and August, the government activated so-called Popular Prevention Brigades to identify people potentially infected with COVID-19 and to monitor their adherence to health advice. According to the government, the brigades have over 70,000 members, all of them community leaders with close ties to the PSUV. In July, Maduro alleged that the number of COVID-19 cases was increasing because of Venezuelans who returned to the country using illegal pathways. Maduro urged Venezuelans to denounce returnees, whom he labeled "bioterrorists."

Health workers were arrested for publishing information on social media about possible COVID-19 cases, and for protesting against the lack of proper equipment and working conditions. Meanwhile, Diosdado Cabello Rondón, president of the National

Constituent Assembly, threatened health experts on public television for questioning the official number of COVID-19 cases.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly?	0/4
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While guaranteed by the constitution, freedom of assembly is severely restricted in practice. While protests were nevertheless common despite government restrictions and the threat of deadly crackdowns by security forces, their numbers fell dramatically due to the state of emergency and lockdowns declared to prevent the spread of COVID-19. More than half of the roughly 4,400 protests recorded by the Venezuelan Observatory of Social Conflicts in the first half of the year were motivated by the lack of public services, especially electricity, water, and gasoline; others were explicitly related to politics, and some were related to a lack of protective or medical equipment. The group reported that 221 of those were repressed by security forces or paramilitary groups, that 129 people were arrested, and 2 were killed.

In recent years, there have been violent clashes between protesters and security forces. In 2017, there were more than 1,900 protest-related injuries and 136 deaths, with at least 102 people apparently killed by security forces or state-affiliated colectivos.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights- and governance-related work?	1/4
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Activists and NGOs are routinely harassed, threatened, and subject to legal and administrative sanctions for their work. Dozens of civil society activists have been physically attacked in recent years and the government has attempted to delegitimize rights organizations by accusing them of conspiring with foreign governments.

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations?	1/4
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Workers are legally entitled to form unions, bargain collectively, and strike, with some restrictions on public-sector workers' ability to strike. Control of unions has shifted from traditional opposition-allied labor leaders to new workers' organizations that are often aligned with the government. The competition has contributed to a substantial increase in labor violence as well as confusion and delays during industry-wide collective bargaining.

In December 2018, Ruben González, head of the union for workers at the public company Ferrominera Orinoco, was arrested and sentenced to almost six years in prison by a military tribunal. In 2020, he was one of 110 political leaders pardoned by the government.

F. Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary?	0/4
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Politicization of the judicial branch increased dramatically under Chávez and has progressed further under Maduro. Political control of the judiciary was reinforced through the appointment of new, regime-loyal judges in 2010 and again in 2015.

In recent years, the TSJ has issued numerous decisions that have bolstered Maduro's power. In 2020, the reelection of Juan Guaidó as president of the National Assembly

was overruled, the leadership of major opposition political parties was changed, and the court choose the new members of the CNE without legally required input from the opposition-led National Assembly.

A 2020 UN report on rights in Venezuela noted that the lack of judicial independence contributes to authorities' inability to protect human rights.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters?	0 / 4
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Opponents of the government and the PSUV are routinely detained and prosecuted without regard for due process, and victims of violence at the hands of the state have no realistic avenue for redress.

In September 2020, a UN report claimed that Maduro and his government committed at least 223 human rights violations since 2014, including torture and extrajudicial executions. The report identified three police and intelligence forces as primarily responsible: the Body of Penal, Criminalistic, and Scientific Investigations; the Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (SEBIN); and FAES. In 2019, the UN had asked Venezuela's government to dissolve FAES, but the body is still operating. In recent years, SEBIN has increasingly carried out policing functions and arrested opposition politicians and journalists without informing the Public Ministry or presenting official charges.

The military has also assumed roles previously reserved for civilian law enforcement institutions. According to Venezuelan human rights groups, hundreds of civilians have been tried in military court proceedings since 2017.

Many courts were closed in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in significant delays of trials and other proceedings.

F3 0-4 pts

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Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies?

0/4

Statistics for 2019, released in January 2020 by the Venezuelan Violence Observatory, placed the country's homicide rate at 60.3 per 100,000 people, a decline from 2018 but still among the highest in the world.

Prison conditions in Venezuela remain among the worst in the Americas. *Pranes*, or gang leaders who operate from prisons, freely coordinate criminal networks throughout Venezuela. In May 2020, 46 people were killed and more than 70 were wounded, most of them inmates, during unrest at a prison in the state of Portuguesa that broke out over new, pandemic-related restrictions on the food visitors were allowed to bring in.

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population?

1/4

The rights of Indigenous people, who make up 2.5 percent of the population, are upheld by the constitution but poorly protected by authorities. In practice, Indigenous groups face discrimination and unequal treatment, especially in Bolívar, where Indigenous people experience labor exploitation, extortion by paramilitary groups, sex trafficking of some women, and land grabs related to illegal mining, which also results in the destruction of forests and other natural features on Indigenous lands. The OHCHR documented seven instances of deadly violence against Indigenous people in the first five months of 2019.

Although discrimination based on sexual orientation is barred, LGBT+ Venezuelans face widespread intolerance and are occasionally subjected to violence.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education?

1 / 4

The government declared a COVID-19-related state of emergency in March 2020, placing harsh restrictions on Venezuelans. Authorities and paramilitary groups arbitrarily detained, beaten, and tortured civilians who did not follow quarantine and other security instructions. Venezuelans returning home from neighboring countries by foot were subject to harsh restrictions on their mobility upon arrival. According to human rights organizations, they were forced to quarantine for 25 days in squalid public centers that lack health and other basic supplies, and were guarded by the military and colectivos.

Venezuelans continued to flee the country in massive numbers due to the country's ongoing social and economic crises. In August 2020, the IMF reported that Venezuelan emigration could reach 10 million people by the end of 2023.

Score Change: The score declined from 2 to 1 because security forces and government-allied militias used abusive methods to enforce COVID-19 movement restrictions, using disproportionate punishments including arbitrary detention, assault, and torture.

G2 0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors?

1 / 4

Property rights have been damaged by years of price controls, nationalizations, overregulation, and corruption. Accusations of mismanagement, underinvestment, graft, and politicized hiring practices within state-owned enterprises are common.

G3 0-4 pts

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Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance?

2/4

The politically driven economic collapse in Venezuela has reduced the availability of reproductive health care. Maternal and infant mortality has increased. Due to restrictive legislation on abortion, many women and girls resort to clandestine abortions that are frequently unsanitary and unsafe.

Women relatives of political prisoners are subjected to sexual and gender-based violence and humiliation during visits in detention centers, security operations, and house raids. Women who have been political prisoners have reported attacks by security forces including sexual violence, threats of rape, and forced nudity.

A 2007 law was designed to combat violence against women, but domestic violence and rape remain common and are rarely punished in practice. COVID-19 lockdowns increased the risk of gender-based violence. During the first quarter of 2020, 137 women were killed, 67 percent more than during the same period in 2019, according to NGO Femicide Monitor.

The LGBT+ community in Venezuela still lacks fundamental rights like legal marriage, child adoption, and the right to one's gender identity.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?

0/4

Venezuelan women and children are increasingly vulnerable to sex trafficking within Venezuela and in neighboring countries, as well as in Europe, with the problem exacerbated by worsening economic conditions and the COVID-19 crisis.

With job opportunities growing even scarcer during the COVID-19 pandemic, and hyperinflation outpacing wages, more Venezuelans have sought employment in the informal sector, where they are exposed to dangerous or exploitative working

conditions. Among businesses that are legally registered, sanctions for labor law violations, when levied, generally target private-sector operations instead of those that are state-run.



On Venezuela

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Country Facts

Global Freedom Score

14/100 Not Free

Internet Freedom Score

28/100 Not Free

Other Years

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