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## Venezuela

### **International Religious Freedom Report 2003**

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS AND LABOR

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. Embassy discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights.

### **Section I. Religious Demography**

The country has a total area of approximately 350,000 square miles, and its population is approximately 24.5 million. According to the latest government figures, in 2001 approximately 70 percent of the population were Roman Catholic, approximately 29 percent were Protestant, and the remaining 1 percent practiced other religions or were atheists. There are small but influential Muslim and Jewish communities. The capital city of Caracas has a large mosque, and the country's Jewish community is very active. According to the Government, Protestant churches are the country's most rapidly growing religious community.

There are approximately 4,000 foreign missionaries working in the country.

### **Section II. Status of Religious Freedom**

#### *Legal/Policy Framework*

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion on the condition that the practice of a religion does not violate public morality, decency, and the public order, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

The Directorate of Justice and Religion (DJR) in the Ministry of Interior and Justice is the government office responsible for maintaining a registry of religious groups, disbursing funds to the Roman Catholic Church, and promoting awareness and understanding among the various religious communities. Each local church must

register with the DJR to hold legal status as a religious organization and to own property. The requirements for registration are largely administrative. However, some groups have complained that the process of registration is slow and inefficient.

In 1964 the Government and the Holy See signed a concordat that underscores the country's historical ties to the Roman Catholic Church and provides government subsidies to the Church, including its social programs and schools. Other religious groups receive monetary assistance for the repair of buildings for religious use. However, the amount available to non-Catholic groups is less than 7 percent of the 2002-2003 religious subsidy budget.

#### *Restrictions on Religious Freedom*

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion. However, the Catholic Church receives subsidies not granted to other churches, and there are some restrictions on the legal rights of religious groups.

The Government annually has provided the equivalent at the time of more than \$1.5 million (approximately 1.2 billion bolivars) in subsidies to the Catholic Church's schools and social programs that help the poor. Other religious groups are free to establish and run their own schools, which do not receive subsidies from the Government, except in the form of building repairs.

The military chaplain corps is made up exclusively of Roman Catholic priests, and although service members of other faiths are allowed to attend church services of their own religion, they do not have the same access to clergy members that Catholic service members do.

In May 2001, representatives of the Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Protestant Churches rejected participation in the newly created "Interreligious Parliament of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela" (PIV), a Government-organized group of numerous religious organizations whose stated purpose is to coordinate their social programs. Catholic Church representatives had expressed concerns for the Church's autonomy and had claimed that the PIV appeared to be an effort to centralize unduly the social work of various churches and religions. However, in the period covered by this report, the PIV was inactive.

In November 2000, as part of a broader ruling on whether certain entities qualify as members of the Government's definition of civil society, the Supreme Court ruled that religious organizations are not part of civil society, and that as such they may not represent Venezuelan citizens in court nor bring their own legal actions. Although the Catholic Church expressed its concern, the ruling had no impact in practice on Church activities during the period covered by this report.

Foreign missionaries require a special visa to enter the country, which is obtained through consulates in the missionary's home country. Missionaries generally are not refused entry, but many complain that the process of obtaining a visa often takes months or years due to general bureaucratic inefficiency.

#### *Abuses of Religious Freedom*

In May, Archbishop of Merida, Baltazar E. Porras, accused the Government of seeking to destroy the Catholic Church's credibility by manufacturing scandals aimed at priests and bishops. He described a series of attacks on churches, cathedrals, and priests' houses, whose apparent aim was to create fear, rather than steal

allegedly claimed it was a privilege the Catholic Church should not enjoy. The Archbishop believes the Government wishes to diminish the Church or any institution that the Government perceives as a competitor.

In a speech in June to the Organization of American States General Assembly, Foreign Minister Roy Chaderton, linked Christianity with ethnic persecution, slavery, and mass murder.

In April 2002, the National Guard harassed missionaries from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), by conducting unnecessary strip searches and intimidating them. The authorities investigated the incident and disciplined the personnel involved. There have been no further incidents of this nature.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

#### *Forced Religious Conversion*

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

### **Section III. Societal Attitudes**

Relations between the various religious communities generally are amicable. However, in February, the Israeli Association of Venezuela photographed graffiti on a Caracas synagogue that labeled the members of the Jewish Community fascists and murderers of the Palestinian and Iraqi people. The Government did not investigate the graffiti incident.

The Catholic Church has been a vocal participant in the national political debate.

There are numerous ecumenical groups throughout the country.

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

The U.S. Embassy discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights. The Embassy maintains close contacts with the various religious communities and meets periodically with the DJR. The Ambassador meets regularly with religious authorities, and the Embassy facilitates communication between U.S. religious groups and the Government

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