



Venezuela

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. However, there were some efforts by the Government, motivated by political reasons, to limit the influence of churches in certain social and political areas.

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. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 352,144 square miles, and its population is approximately 24.5 million. According to government estimates, 70 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, 29 percent is Protestant, and the remaining 1 percent practices other religions or is atheist. The Venezuelan Evangelical Council estimates that Protestants are approximately 9 percent of the population, or approximately 2 million persons. There are small but influential Jewish and Muslim communities. The country's Jewish community numbers approximately 20,000 and is very active in the capital, Caracas. The Muslim community is concentrated among citizens of Lebanese and Syrian descent.

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 mandated to maintain a registry of religious groups, disburse funds to the Roman Catholic Church and other religious organizations, and promote awareness and understanding among religious communities. Each group must register with the DJR to have legal status as a religious organization and to own property. Requirements for registration are largely administrative, the key exception being that groups serve the community's social interests. Some groups have complained that the process is slow and inefficient. The Government refused to register several groups in 2004, citing primarily administrative reasons.

A 1964 concordat underscores the country's historical ties to the Roman Catholic Church and provides the basis for government subsidies to the Church. All registered religious groups are eligible for funding to support religious services, but most money goes to Catholic organizations because their assigned shares are fixed. During 2004, the Government disbursed approximately \$169,000 (363 million bolivars) to religious organizations. Catholic dioceses and archdioceses, as well as the Episcopal Conference of Venezuela (CEV), which is comprised of the country's Catholic bishops, received approximately \$96,000 (207 million bolivars). The Government estimated that funding for the Catholic Church would substantially decrease in 2005, due to stricter reporting procedures. In 2004, approximately 10 other religious organizations received an estimated total of \$72,000 (156 million bolivars).

The Government estimates that there are approximately 3,000 foreign missionaries in the country. They require special visas. Missionaries generally are not refused entry, but many complain that the process of obtaining a visa often takes months or years due to bureaucratic inefficiency.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The Constitution forbids the use of religion to avoid obeying the law or interfere with the rights of others; however, there were some efforts by the Government, motivated by political reasons, to limit the influence of the Catholic Church in certain social and political areas.

The Government provides annual subsidies to Catholic schools and social programs that help the poor. Other religious groups are free to establish and operate their own schools; however, the only official subsidies that these schools receive are in the form of building repairs.

The military chaplain corps is comprised exclusively of Roman Catholic priests. Although service members of other religious groups are allowed to attend services of their faith, they do not have the same access to clergy members that Catholic service members enjoy.

In 2000, the Supreme Court ruled that religious organizations are not part of "civil society" and therefore may not represent citizens in court or bring their own legal actions. Although the Catholic Church expressed concern with the ruling, the decision has had no effect on the conduct of Church activities.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Public confrontation between Catholic bishops and government officials subsided in the immediate aftermath of the August 2004 presidential recall referendum but then reemerged as Cardinal Castillo, supported by the Catholic Bishops' Conference, criticized government actions directed against civil society and the press. The Government's response has been harsh and is designed to intimidate Church officials and sow division within the Church.

In July 2004, the CEV called on voters to participate in the August 2004 presidential referendum as an "exercise of conscience." Chavez supporters, including Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel, protested that the Church was taking an inappropriate role in politics.

The Catholic leadership continued to press the Government on human rights and democracy issues. Prior to the October 2004 regional elections, the CEV issued a statement urging free and fair elections. At the CEV's biannual conference in January 2005, the bishops criticized recent government legislation as prejudicial to the conduct of an open society and petitioned for the release of those condemned or accused of crimes in relation to the recent political crisis.

The country is a historically open society without significant anti-Semitism; however, the Government and its supporters occasionally demonstrated possible anti-Semitism. In December 2004, during the Second Bolivarian Congress, placards signed by the government political party MVR (Movement for a Fifth Republic) and the Venezuelan Communist Party, among other groups, were placed in front of the area where the congress took place. Some placards carried statements accusing Israel of having terrorist commandos in the country.

In November 2004, after the assassination of well-known prosecutor Danilo Anderson, the Government used satirical comments made by journalist Orlando Urdaneta on a U.S. television program to allude to possible Israeli participation in Anderson's killing. The Israeli Embassy in Caracas denied any Israeli involvement in the assassination and warned that such representations by the Government were misleading. On November 29, 2004, members of the country's investigative police searched the Hebrew Center of Caracas at the beginning of the school day as part of the Anderson investigation. Jewish community leaders expressed outrage and indicated doubt regarding the authorities' explanation for the search. Newspaper reports suggested that rumors of Israeli involvement in the assassination might have been behind the investigation.

In August 2004, several incidents of anti-Semitism occurred during the time of the presidential referendum. The pro-government daily newspaper VEA published an article containing accusations that Jewish leaders in the country had participated in the 2002 coup against the Government. During a political rally, graffiti labeling Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon an assassin and condemning the Zionist movement was painted on a Caracas synagogue. A few days after his electoral victory, President Chavez gave a speech in which he compared the opposition to "wandering Jews."

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.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report

Section III. Societal Attitudes

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

In May 2004, small explosive devices went off near two Mormon churches, one in Valencia and the other in San Cristobal. Damages were slight, and there were no injuries. Anti-U.S. and anti-Mormon propaganda pamphlets were found at each site. There was limited government followup to the bombings after an initial police investigation.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Embassy maintains close contact with various religious communities. The Ambassador meets regularly with religious authorities, and the Embassy facilitates communication between U.S. religious groups and the Government.

Released on November 8, 2005

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