



[Home](#) » [Under Secretary for Democracy and Global Affairs](#) » [Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor](#) » [Releases](#) » [International Religious Freedom](#) » [July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report](#) » [Western Hemisphere](#) » [Venezuela](#)

## Venezuela

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

### **July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report**

Report

**September 13, 2011**

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The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections. 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 generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice; however, those religious groups that criticized the government, like others who criticized the government, were subject to harassment and intimidation. There were some efforts by the government to limit the influence of religious groups in certain geographic, societal, and political areas.

There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom 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 a population of 28.8 million. According to government estimates, 92 percent of the population is at least nominally Roman Catholic and the remaining 8 percent identify themselves as Evangelical Protestants ("evangelico"), The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, or another religion, or as atheists. However, the Venezuelan Evangelical Council estimated that 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 9,500 and is centered in Caracas.

## Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

### Legal/Policy Framework

Please refer to Appendix C in the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for the status of the government's acceptance of international legal standards <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/appendices/index.htm>.

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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 serves the community's social interests.

A 1964 concordat governs relations between the government and the Vatican and provides the basis for government subsidies to the Roman Catholic Church. On July 14, President Chavez called on Foreign Minister Maduro to review the 1964 concordat, stating that the agreement was a "violation of the constitution" for granting the Catholic Church "a privilege over other churches." On July 16, the government recalled its ambassador to the Holy See. On July 29, the National Assembly called for a review of the 1964 concordat; there were no known developments by the end of the reporting period.

All registered religious groups are eligible for funding to support religious social services, but most money goes to Catholic organizations. The government continued to provide annual subsidies to Catholic schools and social programs that help 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 reporting period. Other religious groups were free to establish their own schools.

In 2009 the National Assembly passed an education law that could prohibit religious education during normal school hours, including in private schools. There were no reports of implementation of this prohibition during the reporting period.

Until the passage of the September 2010 Organic Law on Drugs, drug prevention and treatment programs run by nongovernmental organizations could receive donations from private companies if the organizations registered annually with the National Anti-Drug Office (ONA). The new law requires companies employing more than 50 workers to give 1 percent of their profits directly to ONA, which would be responsible for selecting the programs and disbursing the funds. The Venezuelan Evangelical Council did not receive any response from ONA during the reporting period to its August 2009 application to renew the registration of its drug abuse prevention program, New Life Shelter (HOVIN). As a result, HOVIN did not have access to private company funding during the reporting period.

Religious leaders noted improvements in the timeliness of the issuance of special visas required for foreign missionaries.

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

### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice; however, those religious groups that criticized the government, like others who criticized the government, were subject to harassment and intimidation. The constitution forbids the use of religion to avoid obeying the law or to interfere with the rights of others. There were some efforts by the government to limit the influence of religious groups in certain geographic, societal, and political areas.

In July President Chavez, the National Assembly, other government authorities, and the government-controlled media engaged in a campaign to discredit Cardinal Jorge Urosa Savino following his June 27 interview with the opposition-oriented daily newspaper *El Universal*, in which the cardinal alleged that the government was headed down a path of Cuban-style "socialism-Marxism" and questioned the constitutionality of nine recently enacted laws. On July 5 and 8, President Chavez publicly referred to the cardinal as a "troglydte" and a "liar." On July 11 the Supreme Court published a communiqué characterizing statements by the cardinal and the Catholic Episcopal Conference of Venezuela as "grave aggressions and injuries ... that signify an unjustified and strange intrusion into political and state government affairs." On July 12 government-controlled television stations rereleased an August 2009 commercial that claimed the cardinal had written a letter stating that only wealthy children should enjoy access to higher education and good jobs. On July 13 and 20, the National Assembly held sessions criticizing the cardinal; he appeared before a July 27 closed-door session to explain his remarks. On July 29 the National Assembly issued a resolution denouncing his "political aggression," calling for a review of the 1964 concordat, and expressing its intention to seek his removal as archbishop of Caracas.

Jewish community leaders publicly expressed concern about anti-Semitic expressions carried in official and government-affiliated media. These expressions often increased following government criticism of Israeli government policies or actions, such as the May 31 Gaza flotilla incident. On July 11 an anti-Israel advertisement produced by Tatuy TVC, a community television station, and Phantom Studios was shown on government-owned Venezolana de Television during a World Cup soccer game. On July 12 the government-owned newspaper *Diario Vea* published an article claiming that "to avenge the Shoah," the Jews commit their own genocide, [they] massacre families and perpetrate other atrocities, like starving the children of Gaza until they die." On July 13, *Diario Vea* published a political cartoon depicting Israeli Foreign Minister Lieberman with half his face as Adolf Hitler. The government-affiliated Web site *Aporrea.org* published an article on August 6 claiming that "the people are the new enemy of the degenerate neo-Zionist fascist race, who are a new edition of Hitler's Nazi thinking and his racial superiority madness, which has been recovered by Zionist Jewish and Catholic thieves and assassins."

In January 2009, 11 persons, including several police officers, were arrested for desecrating and vandalizing the Tiferet Israel synagogue. The suspects remained in prison, awaiting trial, at the end of the reporting period.

Like other private sector and nongovernmental entities, evangelical communities were subjected to property invasions by groups of squatters. The Venezuelan Evangelical Council reported that in July squatters invaded a church in Aragua State and an evangelical retreat center in Tachira State; authorities reportedly did not take actions to stop the land invasions. During an August 10 meeting with National Assembly deputies, evangelical leaders presented seven cases of land invasions and expropriations involving church property that had occurred during the previous 12 months.

The government returned one property belonging to an evangelical group that had been expropriated earlier in the year but took no actions on the other expropriated or occupied properties. The government did not return properties belonging to the Catholic Episcopal Conference of Venezuela that the government had expropriated earlier in the year.

The government continued to limit Venezuelan or foreign missionary groups from working in indigenous areas.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

On September 2 an evangelical pastor in the eastern part of the country published a letter criticizing the state governor for having "permitted invaders" to take over his church land and for having offered to buy the land from them. Police detained the pastor for three hours before releasing him without charges. Later that week the local television channel that had hosted his weekly religious television program for three years discontinued his show.

#### Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

On August 9 Foreign Minister Maduro met with representatives of the Latin American Jewish Congress, who later stated publicly that the foreign minister had promised to provide security to the Jewish community during the Jewish High Holy Days and to monitor anti-Semitism in the media. The government provided increased security to Jewish community centers in response to their concerns.

On September 16 Jewish community leaders met with President Chavez and issued a communiqué, which stated that they had expressed their "profound concern" to the president regarding the "anti-Semitic statements, practically daily, which started years ago, in the official and government-affiliated media." They noted the possible negative consequences of expressions of hate, such as threats to the security and integrity of Jewish institutions and individuals, and "officially requested the President of the Republic to intervene and stop these expressions." In a televised September 17 meeting with the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) party representatives, President Chavez declared that the Jewish community had his "respect and affection and can count on the respect of the revolution, of the PSUV, and of the Bolivarian state." With respect to the request to end anti-Semitic expressions in the media, President Chavez called "for all of us to respect the Jewish community in Venezuela as another community, as other Venezuelans." However, after a temporary lull, Jewish community representatives reported a renewed rise in anti-Semitism in the media. On October 13 the government-affiliated Web site Aporrea.com published an article recommending the anti-Semitic book *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

The government responded immediately to the November 6 invasion by squatters of a building that housed the Synagogue Beth Abraham in Caracas. The squatters had occupied the upper floors of the building, which were mostly vacant. Jewish community representatives immediately called government security contacts, who expelled the squatters within five hours.

#### Section III. Status of Societal Actions Affecting Enjoyment of Religious Freedom

There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

In the first two weeks of July, a swastika and anti-Semitic graffiti appeared on a downtown building in Caracas.

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

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights; however, embassy representatives had only limited access to government officials. In October the U.S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism visited the country and met with religious leaders and several National Assembly deputies; officials in the DJR in the Ministry of Interior and Justice did not respond to repeated requests for a meeting. Embassy officials maintained close contact with most religious communities.

[Back to Top](#)