



Religion

Population

Area

- Christians : **92.5%**
- Agnostics : **4.4%**
- Spiritists : **1.1%**
- Others : **2%**

31.519.000

921.050 Km²

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

The preamble to the constitution^[1] invokes God's protection with regard to the establishment of a democratic society that upholds rights including freedom from discrimination. Article 59 of the constitution declares that "the state guarantees freedom of cult and religion." The article states that everyone has the "right to profess their religious faith or creed and to manifest their beliefs, in private or in public, through teaching or other practices, provided they are not contrary to morality, good customs and public order." The independence and autonomy of churches and religious denominations are also guaranteed. Parents have the right to educate their children according to their beliefs.

Article 61 upholds freedom of conscience and expression. That said, it states that conscientious objection cannot be invoked to avoid complying with the law.

All forms of discrimination at work are prohibited on the basis of creed, according to article 89.

The state recognises the rights of indigenous peoples under article 119 of the constitution including their right to religious liberty. According to article 121, indigenous people also have the right to maintain and develop their customs and values, including their spirituality and places of worship. These rights are also upheld elsewhere in the country's constitution and legislation.^[2]

The constitution, in article 97, also acknowledges the spirituality and creed of indigenous communities as fundamental components of their worldview. Imposing religious beliefs on indigenous peoples is not allowed, nor is denying their practices and beliefs, according to article 98. Under article 100, the religious education of indigenous children and adolescents is the responsibility of their parents, relatives and members of their people. Article 107 protects indigenous people against political and religious fanaticism.

Other laws^[3] recognise the right of children and adolescents to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. Their parents or guardians have the right and duty to guide them in the exercise of this right. Minors have the right to their own cultural life, to profess and practise their own religion or beliefs, and use their own language, especially those who belong to ethnic, religious or indigenous minorities. In the field of education,^[4] the state declares itself to be secular, preserving its independence with respect to all religions. Parents are given the right to choose their children's religious education.

In accordance with the fiscal reform of 2014,^[5] tax exemptions for institutions dedicated to religious, artistic, scientific and other activities have been eliminated. Such exemptions are now restricted to charity and social welfare organisations. The Penal Code^[6] categorises types of conduct that threaten freedom of worship. Article 168 concerns punishment of people who attempt to prevent or disturb religious services or ceremonies or intentionally damage items used in worship. Churches are also recognised as legal entities.^[7] Under an agreement with the Holy See, signed in 1964, the Catholic Church is recognised as an international and public legal entity.^[8] In 1994, another agreement was signed with the Holy See regarding the provision of spiritual assistance in the Armed Forces.^[9]

Incidents

In July 2016, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Venezuela (CBCV) stated that the country was on the verge of a crisis because of food shortages and lack of medicine and other healthcare. The bishops declared that the rule of law had been weakened and that democracy had broken down. It called on the government to allow medicines into the country, offering its facilities as collection and distribution points.^[10]

In December 2016, the CBCV president criticised the government's economic policies. Noting that the poor and marginalised were the most disadvantaged, it called for solidarity and peaceful protests.^[11] The Andrés Bello Catholic University said in April 2017 that it could not remain silent about the violation of human rights, calling on the government to end its repression of peaceful demonstrations.^[12]

In May 2017, the CBCV rejected President Nicolás Maduro's proposal to set up a National Constituent Assembly, considering it unnecessary and dangerous for democracy. The bishops called instead for non-violent solutions. Religious leaders were invited to participate in the assembly, with some Church leaders agreeing to take part and others turning down the opportunity. The Confederation of Jewish Associations of Venezuela stated that it had an apolitical position, and called for initiatives to be taken in accordance with the law, ethics and morals.^[13]

In August 2016, the Vatican Secretary of State, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, responded to a request made by the Union of South American Nations (USAN), which includes Argentina, Peru, Guyana, Suriname, Chile, Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia, asking the Pope Francis to facilitate dialogue between the government and the opposition. Jesús Torrealba, secretary general of the Democratic Unity Roundtable (DUR), an alliance opposed to the government, said that he was happy for the Pope to mediate. The Vatican's special envoy to Venezuela, Monsignor Claudio Maria Celli, met with President Maduro in November 2016, stressing that the crisis could only be resolved through dialogue.^[14] The following June, through the Apostolic Nunciature, President Maduro's government requested the mediation of Pope Francis.^[15]

During the period under review, there have been acts of vandalism, although the motives behind the violence is not entirely clear. In June 2016, the parish priest in Guarenas was hurt during a raid on his church in which some sacred objects were desecrated and others were stolen.^[16] In January 2018, the Sagrada Familia Church was robbed and sacrilegious acts were carried out. The aggressors forced open the tabernacle containing the Blessed Sacrament and

stole valuable items used in daily services. According to a media report, the attack may have been carried out by so-called santeros or spiritualists, who use these objects in their ceremonies.^[17] In the days leading up to Holy Week 2018, a 500-kilogram bell was stolen from a church in the city of Cumaná.^[18]

In July 2016, five students from the Mérida Catholic Seminary were beaten and stripped of their belongings and clothes as they travelled near the site of a rally which was due to be held shortly. The wife of a political prisoner was thought likely to take part in the protest. Archbishop Baltazar Porras of Mérida denounced the attack, criticising pro-government groups.^[19] In August 2017, at dawn one morning, members of State Security burst into the Cristo Rey student residence run by the religious community of the Daughters of Christ the King.^[20]

In November 2017, a group of people entered the Basilica of Our Lady of Consolation, in Táriba, and prevented Mass from taking place. They used the High Altar to count votes.^[21]

In September 2017, President Maduro accused some Catholic bishops of being complicit in violence. During his regular Sunday broadcast, the president said: “violent people acted with the blessing of some bandit bishops who do not protect the people, who do not walk like Christ in the streets of the people, who do not suffer, who do not share solidarity with the people, but who are part of a permanent conspiracy and wear the robe to conspire and damage the country.”^[22]

In January 2018, the president also accused Catholic leaders of boycotting the canonisation of Dr José Gregorio Hernández, known as “the saint of the poor”.^[23]

That same month, a group of people representing civil society, protested peacefully in Barquisimeto, rejecting the government’s accusations against the representatives of the Catholic Church.^[24] President Maduro accused two bishops of “hate crimes”, asking the Supreme Court of Justice to open an investigation against the prelates.^[25]

In February 2017, representatives of the Confederation of Jewish Associations of Venezuela met with President Maduro. They told him anti-Semitic sentiment was increasing. They also highlighted the disparaging comments made about Israel in the media close to the ruling party and insisted on the need to re-establish relations with the State of Israel.^[26]

In September of 2017, Venezuelan bishops met with Pope Francis during his visit to Colombia. They informed him about the worsening crisis and the threats against priests and nuns.^[27]

In October of 2017, a media opinion piece looked at the situation of religious freedom in Venezuela. It noted that there were no restrictions with respect to attending Mass, visiting a place of worship or taking part in processions. The media piece claimed that “the Church has been systematically denouncing the various forms of violation of religious freedom, sometimes brutal or veiled, in the entire world.” The author added that “Pressures are imposed on parishes and dioceses, judicial proceedings are initiated against representatives of the Church, images of Catholic worship are demolished, profaned or mutilated and threats are threatened in all forms”^[28]

Christians from different traditions continued their dialogue. Various initiatives took place in October 2017 to mark the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation.^[29] Reports emerged in November 2017 that prisons had been ordered from “high up” to prevent clergy from visiting inmates.^[30]

In November 2017, a news report highlighted the renewed emigration of Venezuelan Jews. More than half of the Jewish community has reportedly left as a result of the country’s financial crisis. The exodus had increased in response to the anti-Semitism present at the highest echelons of government as well as from state agencies including officials working at the tax administration office.^[31] David Bittan, lawyer and former president of the Confederation of Israelite Associations of Venezuela (CAIV), said: “There is no census. It is irresponsible to give a figure, but the perception is that in the last 10 or 12 years more than 50 percent have left.” A former president of CAIV, Abraham Levy said: “The decision to migrate is always personal. Migration can occur in the same proportion among non-Jews, who are affected by insecurity, concerns about their children, political instability and inflation. However, there is no reason why relations with Israel have been broken, and that it is an element of weighty concern”. The report also refers to the actions of Mr Maduro, the president, when he was foreign minister in January 2009. At that time, he expelled the ambassador of Israel in Venezuela and

declared him a persona non grata.

In March 2018, Father José Palmar became the third priest of Venezuelan origin to go into exile. The other clergymen forced to leave are Pedro Freites, in April 2017, and Alexander Hernández, in January 2018.^[32]

Several religious organisations have criticised government bureaucrats for not approving their statutes promptly. Some religious groups have received preferential treatment because of their support for government policy.^[33]

In March 2018, Sam Brownback, the US Ambassador-at-large for International Religious Freedom, referred to the difficulties facing Venezuela's Catholic bishops who were criticised by President Maduro for talking about the country's crisis.^[34]

Prospects for freedom of religion

Despite having largest oil reserve in the world, Venezuela is mired in deep political, social and economic crisis, including shortages of food and medicine and crime at record levels. The Catholic Church has persistently spoken out, calling for an end to government repression and violence. This has led to ongoing confrontation with the authorities who have responded by accusing some bishops of being involved in conspiracies to commit violence. Some bishops have been investigated against by the government. Priests have been threatened, attacked and prevented from performing their pastoral duties such as visiting those who have been detained. A few priests have been forced into exile. Delays and bureaucratic obstacles have been reported in relation to the registration of religious entities not supported by the government.

The government has also been accused of anti-Semitism. Furthermore, in light of attacks and sacrilegious acts against places of worship, there is a perception of less tolerance and respect for the beliefs of others. There are reports indicating that a large number of Jews have left the country seeking a better life and because of rising intolerance directed at their community.

Compared to the previous period, the situation of freedom of religion in Venezuela has ostensibly worsened and the outlook for the coming years is negative.

Endnotes / Sources

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