

Legal framework

Constitutional protections for freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in Venezuela are limited by the condition that the practice of any religion may not violate ‘public morality, decency, or public disorder’. In 2017 the Constitutional Law against Hatred, for Peaceful Coexistence, and Tolerance (usually referred to as the Law Against Hatred) was adopted. Although the government has claimed that the purpose of the law is to combat hate crimes, terminology has been criticised as overly general or undefined and open to abuse targeting political dissidents.

Religious groups are required to register with Vice Minister of Religious and Cult Affairs, attached to the Ministry of Interior, Justice and Peace. The registration process requires that the petitioning group declare any property, identify the individuals involved in leadership, provide its articles of incorporation, demonstrate in what way they will provide social services to the community, and produce a letter of support from neighbourhood ‘community councils’ aligned with the government.

Articles 209, 210 and 212 of the Criminal Code, modified in 2005, criminalise expression interpreted as critical of the government and Article 211 allows the state to interfere in the internal affairs of churches, limiting their autonomy and freedom to govern according to their own principles.

The Law on the Oversight, Regularization, Operation, and Financing of Non-Governmental Organisations and Non-Profit Social Organisations, enacted on 15 November 2024, has raised significant concerns regarding its impact on FoRB. The legislation imposes severe restrictions on civil society organisations, including religious groups, affecting their autonomy, freedom of expression, and ability to operate independently. Religious organisations are prohibited from engaging in political activities or receiving funding from foreign sources without government approval, restricting their ability to address social and humanitarian issues.

In 2024 the Venezuelan government passed the Simón Bolívar Law Against the Imperialist Blockade and in Defence of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, imposing severe restrictions on freedom of expression, political participation, and access to information under the banner of national sovereignty. Some articles directly threaten FoRB, including Article 7 which prohibits ‘collaboration’ with foreign organisations and could criminalise legitimate communication between religious leaders and human rights groups, and Article 21 which threatens religious media and communities with fines, shutdowns, or the loss of licences if they oppose the government.

Venezuela and the Vatican maintain a concordat from 1964 that provides state funding for Roman Catholic run schools. An agreement with the Roman Catholic Bishops’ Conference (CEV) and the state allows the teaching of Roman Catholicism in public schools in preparation for First Communion, but this is implemented inconsistently. Roman Catholic chaplains in the military are guaranteed under the

law; other religious groups do not enjoy the same privilege. The Roman Catholic Church and other religious groups are not permitted to visit political prisoners.

Venezuela is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

Context

On 3 January 2026 the United States (US) forcibly removed Nicolás Maduro from power in Venezuela in what many hoped would signify an end to the second of successive authoritarian regimes, under the leadership of Hugo Chávez and then Maduro. Despite the removal of Maduro, however, leaders in the Socialist Union of Venezuela Party (PSUV) and allied parties remain entrenched in power, including former vice-president and now acting president Delcy Rodríguez, her brother Jorge Rodríguez, the president of Venezuela’s National Assembly, and Interior Minister Diosdado Cabello.

Rule of law and the right to a fair trial do not exist in the country. This has established a culture of impunity leading to increased fear and reluctance to report crimes to local justice mechanisms. Religious leaders who are threatened and intimidated by the authorities often prefer to remain silent or, in extreme cases, emigrate.

The PSUV strategy to entrench its power, in the context of rampant corruption and a collapsing economy, have included steady attacks on independent civil society, including human rights defenders, pro-democracy groups and members of the political opposition, who are routinely targeted with harassment, violence, arbitrary detention and in some cases enforced disappearance. Indigenous groups have suffered serious human rights violations including massacres and forced displacement at the hands of the government, and fundamental human rights including freedom of assembly, freedom of expression and freedom of conscience, all of which overlap significantly with FoRB, are systematically and often egregiously violated.

In 2020 the Inter-Religious Social Forum of Venezuela (IRSFV) was established, bringing together the Roman Catholic Episcopal Conference, the Evangelical Council of Venezuela, and smaller and more vulnerable minorities including the Jewish community (which has been subjected to antisemitic rhetoric, harassment and abuse in Venezuela). In response to the creation of the IRSFV, the government created the National Interreligious Council (NIC), comprised of religious groups supportive of President Maduro.

In 2023 several government benefit programmes were launched to reward religious groups, primarily Protestant, aligned with Maduro. These initiatives included the Good Pastor Bonus, Church Social and My Well-Equipped Church, with the latter operating under the broader Mission Beautiful Venezuela initiative created in January 2019. This signalled a shift in the government’s official strategy to the active engagement and cultivation of ties with faith communities. In March 2024, the 2023 programmes were placed under the new overarching framework of the Hugo Chávez Great

Mission for Equality and Social Justice, centralising the distribution of resources.

The government has also repeatedly attempted to hijack or orchestrate other high-profile religious events. On 15 June 2024 Maduro declared a national 'Day of Repentance in Christ and Day of Hope' involving a public ceremony asking God to forgive sin in general terms, and in January 2025 Maduro declared the first Saturday of each August as the 'Day of the National March for Jesus', effectively co-opting an existing initiative created and previously led by the Protestant sector. In response, several movements and organisations withdrew their support from the initiative.

The government has also strengthened or developed links with other religious groups, including those with Afro-Venezuelan roots such as the Federación Venezolana de Religiones Ancestrales Aganju Sola y Yanza and the Consejo Nacional Espiritista de Venezuela. Both organisations belong to the NIC, and high-ranking government figures, including Maduro, have appeared at or participated in religious ceremonies organised by the two groups.

Freedom of religion or belief

Religious leaders from all groups, including those who benefit from government programmes and other forms of preferential treatment, are under constant surveillance. Government informants in congregations are common. There is a constant threat of possible violence, arbitrary detention, or the loss of specific rights. Religious leaders who say the 'wrong' thing, as interpreted by the government, are treated as traitors and sometimes attacked by illegal armed groups supported by the regime.

Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (SEBIN) officers harass and threaten religious leaders viewed as unsupportive of the government. This strongly discourages pastors from preaching or speaking, even in informal meetings, on topics that could be sensitive for the government. Freedom of expression concerns extend beyond religious groups to associated media outlets. In October 2022 four local Protestant Christian radio stations were shut down by the National Telecommunications Commission (Conatel) without any explanation or prior notice.¹

Over the past two decades Roman Catholic leaders have pointedly criticised the government, calling for rights to be respected and commenting on the humanitarian situation. In return, Roman Catholic leaders, including lay leaders, have been harassed and subjected to intimidation tactics. This includes verbal and physical attacks, threats of arrest, and in some cases arbitrary detention.

In July 2025 Cardinals Baltazar Enrique Porras Cardozo, Archbishop of Caracas, and Diego Padrón Sánchez, Archbishop Emeritus of Cumaná, issued a joint position paper analysing the country's situation following the

July electoral results and expressing concerns and fears held by members of the clergy. In response, Minister of the Interior and secretary general of the PSUV Diosdado Cabello accused Cardinal Porras Cardozo of having 'placed himself at the service' of the opposition to conspire against the government, and alleged that the cardinal and other Venezuelan Catholic Church leaders had attempted to block the canonisation of Venezuelan physician José Gregorio Hernández.

In October Maduro amplified similar accusations against Cardinal Porras Cardozo, and he was physically prevented from travelling to Isnotú, Trujillo State, where he had intended to preside over a mass in honour of Hernández. In December 2025 the bishop was prevented by Venezuelan migration authorities at Maiquetía International Airport from travelling to Spain. In addition, his passport was seized and cancelled, allegedly for 'noncompliance with regulations'.

Protestant denominations have been divided, as is typical in much of Latin America, and the government has played on those divisions. The Evangelical Christian Movement for Venezuela (MOCEV) and the National Religious Council publicly support the Maduro regime and receive preferential treatment in return. Protestant groups outside of the favoured circle, including the Evangelical Council of Venezuela (part of the UN-accredited World Evangelical Alliance) have been subjected to intimidation and pressure tactics and have experienced discriminatory treatment and direct attacks on their leaders.

One long running and emblematic case is that of Reverend Nelson Sevilla and the New Covenant Christian Orientation Centre Church in the Venezuelan capital of Caracas. On 12 August 2006 the local government confiscated land belonging to the church. In 2008, after the intervention of new mayor and a legal battle, Pastor Sevilla, who is also a member of the political opposition, was able to recover the property. However, on 6 November 2010 then President Chavez issued a decree ordering the confiscation of the theatre in which approximately 400 church members would regularly meet, and out of which 500 meals every day were provided to unhoused people. After confiscation, the building was put in the hands of then vice-president Maduro and later became the headquarters of a privately owned production and recording company. To date, the church has not received any compensation for the loss of their meeting place and Pastor Sevilla's pleas to the government to return the church's place of worship have been met with silence.

In June 2024 Pastor Gricelia Josefina Solórzano Malpica was arrested and falsely charged with terrorism, as well as embezzlement and conspiracy. The Protestant pastor was transferred over 400km away from her home to a prison in Caracas, isolating her from her family and church. Pastor Solórzano's arrest orders were issued by Interior Minister Diosdado Cabello, the second most powerful person in the

¹ Monitoreamos, 'Reports that Conatel ordered the closure of four Christian radio stations in Cabimas, Zulia', 13 October 2022 (Spanish) <https://monitoreamos.com/venezuela/denuncian-que-conatel-ordeno-cierre-de-cuatro-emisoras-cristianas-en-cabimas-zulia>

Bolivarian Revolution and a close friend of Pastor Solórzano Malpica's accuser, Colonel Ramón Alonso Carrizález Rengifo.

On 14 August 2026 Dr Jylman Red Jurado Farfán, a bishop of the Latin American Anglican Church,² was released from Rodeo III Prison in Miranda State. Bishop Jurado Farfán was arrested on 30 July 2021 after being summoned under false pretences. He was subsequently charged with terrorism, criminal association and conspiracy, based on the authorities' accusation that his civic education work was an attempt to destabilise the state.

Prior to his detention, Bishop Jurado Farfán led an active social ministry that included providing free legal assistance to political prisoners and managing community soup kitchens, activities that the authorities characterised as 'political confrontation'. The judicial process against him was marred by serious irregularities, including the withholding of his case file for nearly ten months and the suspension of his trial after almost two years of hearings without any conclusive evidence being presented. He was also subjected to restrictions on access to religious materials and spiritual support, and to inhumane and degrading treatment for advocating for the religious rights of other inmates.

In June 2026 Bishop Jurado Farfán reported to CSW that he was suffering from severe health concerns, including atypical pneumonia, intercostal neuritis, and both upper and lower gastrointestinal bleeding. Since his release the bishop has also elaborated on the torture he was subjected to whilst in detention, including having his toenails pulled out and the use of electricity directly applied to his chest.

Government officials also have a history of antisemitic statements which have led to increased social hostility targeting members of the Jewish community. This has, in part, contributed to the departure of a significant proportion of the Jewish population, which has dropped from 25,000 in the 1990s to around 6,000 today.

The provision of humanitarian aid and social programmes by religious groups has been a particular flashpoint over the years and the government has increasingly attempted to restrict religious groups from providing aid, in some cases using violence to prevent them from doing so. Religious leaders told CSW that members of their congregations involved in social outreach programmes or humanitarian work led by their religious groups are regularly followed and harassed by SEBIN officers, and some have reported being photographed in their homes.

Religious organisations operate under serious administrative and judicial restrictions, such as revoked permits and heavy fines, limiting their operations. Religious leaders have been subjected to persecution, including threats, arbitrary arrests, and violence aimed at silencing dissent and blocking human rights reporting. Repression intensifies

during elections, with the UN noting that the government's repressive machinery remains a constant threat.³

Illegal armed and criminal groups

Illegal mining and the presence of armed groups have led to the destruction of sites considered sacred by indigenous communities. In Amazonas State, the Cerro Autana geological formation and waterways and rainforest essential to the spiritual life of the Piaroa and Ye'kwana peoples have been polluted and severely damaged by illegal mining. Canaima National Park in Bolívar State, home to the Pemón people, has been invaded by illegal miners, causing damage to sacred geological formations known as tepuis. The Kamarata River, another site of profound spiritual significance, has also been contaminated, further threatening traditional religious practices.

In addition, Colombian illegal armed groups – including right-wing paramilitary and narco-criminal groups as well as left-wing guerrilla organisations, particularly the National Liberation Army (ELN) and dissident factions of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP) – have operated in Venezuela for decades, but their presence has intensified significantly in recent years. The government has repeatedly been accused by Colombian authorities, security analysts and independent organisations of allowing – and in some cases facilitating – the presence and operations of these groups on Venezuelan territory, with particular support reported for the ELN.

The presence of these groups has created a climate of violence and intimidation, forcing entire communities to flee and depriving them of access to their sacred places. The destruction of these sacred lands prevents indigenous peoples from performing their rituals and severs their spiritual, cultural and ancestral connection to their territory. This constitutes both a grave violation of their right to FoRB as well as a form of spiritual ethnocide and highlights the lack of state protection for the spiritual and religious rights of indigenous peoples, who face intersecting threats: environmental destruction of their territories and obstacles to their right to practice their religions or beliefs.

In some areas along the border with Colombia, Protestant leaders report that the groups have placed a ban on the construction of churches and prohibitions on meeting in private homes for religious purposes. Religious groups in these areas are not permitted to appoint leaders or pastors from outside the immediate community, and in many cases they are not allowed to receive visits from co-religionists from other areas. Religious leaders are expected to turn over a proportion of donations given by members of the religious group to the illegal armed or criminal groups. Religious leaders who refuse to cooperate or who simply try to remain neutral often receive threats to them or members of their family, and many have been forcibly displaced as a result.

² The Latin American Anglican Church is not associated with the Church of England or the Global Anglican Communion.

³ Comité des Familiares de Víctimas de los Sucesos (COFAVIC), 'Report on religious freedom 2001-2023', 13 May 2024 (Spanish) https://cofavic.org/cofavic_informe-sobre-libertad-religiosa-2001-2023/

Recommendations

To the government of Venezuela:

- Amend provisions for FoRB and freedom of conscience in the constitution, and bring civil, administrative and penal law and regulations into line with both international law and the San José Pact.
- Reform the registration process to ensure that it is fair and transparent, including the elimination of an endorsement from neighbourhood councils and requirement for the provision of overly intrusive information.
- Guarantee freedom for religious leaders to carry out their work without harassment, threats or government pressure targeting them or their families and allow all religious groups to engage in social work and to hold peaceful public events free from interference and intimidation.
- End the targeting of human rights defenders, including FoRB defenders, and their families by harassment, threats and imprisonment.
- Issue a standing invitation to all UN Special Procedures, ensuring they have unhindered access to all areas of the country, and ensure that members of civil society, including religion or belief communities, can freely meet with these independent experts without reprisal.

To the government of the United States:

- The US should raise the issue of human rights, including FoRB, in any interactions with the representatives of the Venezuelan government, and, at every opportunity, urge them to implement the above recommendations.
- The State Department and the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) should add Venezuela to the Special Watchlist for religious freedom violations. Additionally, USCIRF should add Pastor Gricelia Josefina Solórzano Malpica to the Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List.
- The State Department should add the ELN to the list of Entities of Particular Concern for severe religious freedom violations in both Colombia and Venezuela.
- The Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, once nominated and confirmed, and USCIRF commissioners should request an invitation to visit Venezuela with unhindered access to all parts of the country and the ability to freely meet with representatives of diverse religious groups and indigenous groups.

- Given the absence of an embassy in Venezuela, the State Department should seek creative ways to engage with representatives of diverse religious and indigenous groups, as well as independent civil society organisations and human rights defenders to inform the annual report on religious freedom in Venezuela.
- Actively engage in and provide support to international efforts to stop the activities of illegal armed and criminal groups across the country and especially along its borders with Colombia and Brazil.
- The US Congress and the State Department should provide support for efforts in Venezuela to move towards democracy and establish rule of law with respect for fundamental human rights, including FoRB.
- Urge the government of Venezuela, at every appropriate opportunity, to make the reforms highlighted in the recommendation section above 'To the government of Venezuela'.

To the United Nations and Member States:

- Urge Venezuela to guarantee the right to FoRB for all in law and in practice, including for indigenous groups, in line with the ICCPR to which the state is party.
- Utilise the Universal Periodic Review process to raise FoRB violations in Venezuela and offer recommendations to advance FoRB.
- Urge the OHCHR and all relevant UN mechanisms, including the Special Procedures and Treaty Bodies, to include the right to FoRB in their reporting on Venezuela, addressing the specific vulnerabilities and violations faced by religion or belief communities, indigenous groups, and those seeking to defend them.
- Ensure that members of independent civil society can freely meet with UN experts and participate in UN meetings without fear of reprisal.
- Continue to support the UN Fact-Finding Mission on Venezuela, ensuring that it is fully resourced to fulfil its mandate.
- Urge the government of Venezuela, at every level and appropriate opportunity, to make the reforms highlighted in the recommendation section above 'To the government of Venezuela'.

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free to believe