

Self-Censorship and Social Control: The Situation of Freedom of Religion or Belief in Venezuela

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Contents

Executive Summary	2
Recommendations	2
To the government of Venezuela	2
To the government of the United States	2
To the government of the United Kingdom	3
To the European Union and Member States	3
To the United Nations and Member States	3
Legal Framework	3
Religious Education	4
Political Context	5
Religious Context	6
Case Study: Pastor Gricelia Josefina Solórzano Malpica	7
Presidential Elections and Protests	7
Freedom of Expression	9
Case Study: Cardinal Baltazar Enrique Porras Cardozo	9
Discriminatory Treatment	10
The Co-opting of Religious Events and Institutions	11
Case Study: New Covenant Christian Orientation Centre Church	11
Civil Society Organisations and Humanitarian Work	12
Illegal Armed and Criminal Groups	12
Indigenous Peoples	14
Case Studies: Bishop Johnny Reyes and Father Josiah Asa K’Okal	14
Conclusion	15

Executive Summary

On 3 January 2026 the United States 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) remain entrenched in power in Venezuela. Rule of law and the right to a fair trial do not exist. This, alongside increased fear and reluctance to report crimes to local justice mechanisms, has established a culture of impunity.

In a context of flagrant corruption, a failing economy and a dire humanitarian situation, the government continues to repress dissent through a steady stream of attacks on independent civil society. Human rights defenders, pro-democracy groups and members of the political opposition, including religious leaders, are routinely targeted for harassment, violence, arbitrary detention, and in some cases enforced disappearance.

The United Nations (UN) Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (IFFMV), set up in 2019 and tasked with reporting human rights violations, has found that crimes committed by Venezuela's military and civil state intelligence agencies are part of a coordinated and effective plan to silence government opposition through crimes against humanity.¹

In order to downplay political and religious criticism, the government has attempted to portray itself as upholding the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) by establishing a number of religious benefit programs and sponsoring religious ceremonies. While some religious groups have accepted preferential treatment in exchange for their loyalty, others which have denounced the dictatorship and refused these incentives have faced discrimination and in some cases have been accused of 'incitement to hatred' or 'threats to public order'.

All religious leaders, even those who benefit from government programs and other forms of preferential treatment, are under constant surveillance. Government informants in congregations are common. Religious groups, like other independent civil society organisations, operate under a constant threat of possible violence, arbitrary detention, or the loss of specific rights. Religious leaders who are perceived by the government to have said the 'wrong' thing are treated as traitors, and in some cases have been attacked by illegal armed groups supported by the regime. As a result, many religious leaders practice a form of self-censorship in public activities such as prayers and sermons, but also in private or informal meetings, out of concern that a government informant might be listening.

Recommendations

To the government of Venezuela:

- Amend the constitution and civil, administrative and criminal codes to include strengthened provisions for FoRB and other human rights in line with international law and norms on FoRB, including Article 18 of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and the American Human Rights Convention.
- Reform the registration process for religious groups to ensure transparency and equitable treatment, including by eliminating the requirements for an endorsement from neighbourhood councils and the provision of intrusive information.
- Guarantee freedom for religious leaders to carry out their work without harassment, threats or government pressure targeting them or their families.
- 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 United States (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 United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) should add Venezuela to the Special Watchlist for religious freedom violations.
- The State Department should add the National Liberation Army (ELN) to the list of Entities of Particular Concern for severe religious freedom violations in both Colombia and Venezuela.
- 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. Once in place, the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom should do the same.

¹ United Nations Human Rights Council, Report of the independent international fact-finding mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, 20 September 2022 <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/51/43>

- 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 Brazil and Colombia.
- 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.

To the government of the United Kingdom:

- Advocate for amendments to Venezuela's constitution and legal frameworks to strengthen FoRB, ensuring compliance with international obligations.
- Urge Venezuela to stop state-backed harassment and surveillance of religious leaders and ensure their freedom to operate independently.
- Advocate for protections for vulnerable religious communities, particularly minority groups including Jews, Protestant Christians, and indigenous and Afro-descendant populations.
- Call for an end to the detention and harassment of religious and human rights defenders, ensuring their freedom to provide humanitarian aid.
- Support international efforts to stop illegal armed groups from controlling religious communities and exerting pressure on religious leaders, especially along the border regions.

To the European Union and Member States:

- Closely monitor the FoRB situation and establish good contact with diverse religious and indigenous groups.
- Consider further expanding sanctions on individuals and entities in Venezuela responsible for human rights violations.
- 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.
- Urge the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (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 appropriate opportunity, to make the reforms highlighted in the recommendation section above 'To the government of Venezuela'

Legal Framework

Article 59 of Venezuela's constitution provides protections for FoRB, as long as those beliefs are not contrary to 'morals, good customs and public order'.² The constitution also enshrines international human rights law, giving it constitutional status and precedence over national legislation.

Venezuela is party to a number of international human rights treaties, and these instruments are constitutionally recognised within its legal system and directly applicable in court. Venezuela has ratified the ICCPR and the ICESCR, both of which entered into force for the country in 1978. It is also a party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Venezuela has ratified the Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT), and, though it has signed the Optional Protocol to CAT, it has not ratified that protocol. Regrettably, the state has yet to ratify the Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance. Venezuela re-ratified the American Convention on Human Rights (San José Pact) in 2019 after renouncing it in 2012.

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, its terminology has been criticised as overly general or vague and open to abuse. In its 2023 Report on International Religious Freedom, the US State Department notes that the Law Against Hatred criminalises acts of inciting hatred or violence without a specific exemption for religious speech, making it possible for the law to be applied against religious leaders whose criticism may be interpreted as opposition to the government.³

² Official Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela <https://www.asambleanacional.gob.ve/storage/documentos/botones/constitucion-nacional-20191205135853.PDF>

³ US Department of State, 2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Venezuela <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/venezuela/>

Religious groups are required to register with the Vice Minister of Religious Affairs and Worship, a position that sits within the Ministry of Interior, Justice and Peace. The registration process requires that the petitioning group declare any property, identify all individuals in leadership positions, provide articles of incorporation, demonstrate in what way they will provide social services to the community, and produce a letter of support from the respective neighbourhood 'community council', which are often aligned with Maduro government.

Articles 210, 211 and 212 of the Venezuelan Criminal Code represent a significant threat to FoRB, establishing the potential criminal sanctions against religious leaders for anything they might express in the exercise of their religious duties. The broad and ambiguous wording allows moral, social or religious statements to be interpreted as contempt, disobedience, or denial of authority, facilitating the sanction of critical religious voices and encouraging self-censorship.

Article 210 *Any minister of religion who, in the exercise of his duties, treats with public contempt or vilification the institutions, the laws of the Republic, or the acts of authority shall be punished with arrest for a period of one to six months.*

Article 211 *Any minister of religion who, taking advantage of his position, incites contempt for or disobedience to the institutions, laws, or provisions of the authorities, or to the duties inherent in a public office, shall be punished with arrest in a fortress or political prison for a period of forty-five days to one year. If the act is committed publicly, the arrest may be imposed for up to two years. The same penalties shall apply to any minister of religion who, taking advantage of his position, coerces, induces, or persuades any person to carry out acts or make statements contrary to the law or detrimental to rights acquired under it.*

Article 212 *Members of the clergy who violate the provisions of the law on ecclesiastical patronage, or who in any other manner—under the guise of ecclesiastical functions, jurisdiction, or duties—usurp civil jurisdiction, disregard the sovereignty of the Nation, or disobey the laws of the Republic and the resolutions and prohibitions issued and established by the Government as a result thereof, shall incur the penalty of expulsion from the geographical territory of the Republic for a period of one to three years.*

The Law on the Oversight, Regularisation, Operation, and Financing of Non-Governmental Organizations and Non-Profit Social Organisations, enacted on 15 November 2024, imposes severe restrictions on civil society organisations, including religious groups, affecting their autonomy, freedom of expression, and ability to operate independently. Non-profit organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), including religious organisations, are prohibited from engaging in political activities or receiving funding from foreign sources without government approval,

affecting their ability to implement programs addressing social and humanitarian issues. This law has encouraged self-censorship among religious organisations, discouraging their leaders from expressing opinions that could be perceived as critical of the government or its actions, and from seeking international financial support.

On 15 October 2025 the Evangelical Council of Venezuela (ECV) filed an appeal for interpretation before the Supreme Tribunal of Justice (TSJ) to 'clarify the application of the Law on Oversight, Regulation, Action and Financing of Non-Governmental Organisations and Non-Profit Social Organisations to non-profit civil associations of a religious nature', given the evidence of discrepancies in the application of this law by different administrative bodies of the state. At the time this report was written, there was no judgment or resolution issued by the TSJ available in official repositories accessible through public searches that specifically addresses the ECV's petition.

In 2024, the 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. Article 7 prohibits 'collaboration' with foreign organisations, a vague term that could potentially criminalise legitimate communication between religious leaders and international human rights groups and would likely discourage many religious figures from reporting FoRB violations out of fear of reprisals, undermining both freedom of expression and religious freedom. Article 21 encourages self-censorship among religious media and faith communities by threatening fines, shutdowns, or the loss of licenses if they publicly express opposition to or criticism related to the administration of justice, human rights, and the country's economic and humanitarian situation. This discourages public discussion of ethical and humanitarian issues and restricts religious groups' freedom of expression, for example teaching biblical concepts linked to justice or publicly praying for the economic situation.

Religious Education

Venezuela and the Vatican maintain a concordat dating to 1964, that provides government funding to Roman Catholic run schools. An agreement between the Roman Catholic Bishops' Conference of Venezuela (BCV) and the state permits the teaching of Roman Catholicism in public schools in preparation for the ritual of First Communion. This is implemented inconsistently. While the government continues to provide some funding to Roman Catholic educational institutions, sources told CSW that the amount has decreased substantially as compared to pre-Chávez years.

Although there is no categorical prohibition of faith-based education in Venezuela, the current legal framework has led to a structural weakening of religious education within state run schools. According to Article 7 of the Organic Law of

Education (LOE),⁴ promulgated in 2009, the state is defined as secular. This has been interpreted by authorities to exclude religion as a subject from the mandatory curriculum in public schools.

Article 7 *The State shall maintain its secular character in educational matters under any circumstances, preserving its independence from all religious currents and organizations. Families have the right and responsibility for the religious education of their sons and daughters in accordance with their convictions and in conformity with the religious freedom and freedom of worship provided for in the Constitution of the Republic.*

While the 1999 Constitution (Art. 59) and the LOE itself formally recognise the right of families to educate their children according to their convictions, in practice, religious teaching has shifted from being a formal subject integrated into the school schedule to becoming a secondary activity external to the state instruction system. This is in contrast with the robust institutionality that existed under the 1992 cooperation agreement between the Ministry of Education and the BCV. That agreement allowed for a national structure of diocesan co-ordinations where teachers paid by the State provided Christian formation under the technical supervision of the Roman Catholic Church. Currently, that alliance has been dismantled, forcing religious institutions to retreat into their own educational pastoral offices or to the management of subsidised centres through the Venezuelan Association of Catholic Education (AVEC).⁵ Consequently, although the right has not been legally prohibited, the end of the state's administrative and financial support has effectively limited access to religious education for the vast majority of students in public campuses.

Political Context

Over the past quarter of a century, Venezuela was governed under two successive authoritarian regimes backed by the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV): those of Presidents Hugo Chávez (1999–2013) and Nicolás Maduro (2013–2026). The most recent and highly disputed elections were held in July 2024. The incumbent president, Maduro, claimed victory despite strong evidence that he had in fact lost by a wide margin.

On 3 January 2026 US forces removed Maduro from power, extracting him and his wife from the country and charging them criminally in the US. Individuals associated with the PSUV 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, Interior Minister Diosdado Cabello, and Defence Minister Vladimir Padrino.

The ruling party and its allies, including the armed forces, maintain effective control over the National Assembly, which has largely functioned as an extension of the executive branch rather than as an independent check on power. This institutional alignment has enabled the passage of laws and policies that reinforce executive control and undermine electoral integrity, contributing to an uneven electoral playing field and the erosion of democratic safeguards. Fundamental human rights—including freedom of assembly, freedom of expression, and freedom of conscience, all of which are closely linked to FoRB—are systematically and, in many cases, severely violated.

The PSUV strategy to entrench its power, in the context of rampant corruption and a collapsing economy, has included steady attacks on independent civil society, including human rights defenders, pro-democracy groups and members of the political opposition, who are routinely targeted for harassment, violence, arbitrary detention, and in some cases enforced disappearance. Indigenous groups have also suffered serious human rights violations, including massacres and forced displacement, at the hands of the government.

The judicial systems are compromised and ineffective. In a sample of 183 cases that could constitute crimes against humanity, the Independent International Expert Panel of the Organization of American States (OAS) found that only 12 trials were conducted between 2014 and August 2021.⁶ In 52.5% of these cases, the state initiated no judicial process at all.

On 12 December 2025, the National Assembly (Parliament) of Venezuela unanimously approved the Law for Palestine and Humanity, the Law repealing the Rome Statute, thereby withdrawing the country from the International Criminal Court (ICC) as a member state and further weakening Venezuela's participation in the international human rights protection system, including mechanisms that address crimes against humanity. The lack of recourse to investigations and a fair trial has strengthened a culture of impunity, contributing to a reluctance to report crimes to justice mechanisms. Individuals, including religious leaders, who have been subjected to threats and acts of intimidation, in most cases prefer to remain silent, and, in extreme cases, emigrate.

Further complicating the situation is the presence and expansion of illegal armed groups, especially the ELN, a Colombian guerrilla group, into Venezuela, and the activities of these groups and attempts to establish territorial control have led to restrictions on FoRB. The government's tolerance of these groups in Venezuelan territory has resulted in their consolidation of power in various regions at the local level,

4 Official Gazette of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, No. 5929, 15 August 2009 <https://www.asambleanacional.gob.ve/storage/documentos/leyes/ley-organi-20220131130620.pdf>

5 <https://www.avec.org.ve/index.php/gerencia-de-convenio/>

6 Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 'Venezuela must combat impunity for grave human rights violations', 20 May 2024 <https://www.oas.org/es/cidh/jsForm/?File=/es/cidh/prensa/comunicados/2024/107.asp>

leaving civil society leaders vulnerable to coercion and threats.

Religious Context

Numbers on religious composition differ depending on the source,⁷ and official data is not updated regularly, but a 2011 census found that the population predominantly identifies as Christian, divided between Roman Catholics at around 71%, and Protestant groups at around 17%. Around 8% identify with no religion. Bahai's, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Muslims and The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints (Mormons) are also present. There is some crossover between ethnicity and religion. Many indigenous groups practice traditional pre-Columbian belief systems or a mix of Christianity and pre-Columbian beliefs. Religious belief systems with roots in West Africa, generally referred to as Santería, are also present. In many cases, Santería practices overlap syncretistically with Roman Catholicism and local folk religions.

The governments of Chávez and Maduro publicly claimed to uphold FoRB but followed the Cuban model of cultivating relationships with some religious groups which publicly support the regime in return for preferential treatment, and discriminating against those that do not. In 2025 USCIRF reported that Maduro pushed for the Law Against Hate to be used to target Roman Catholic priests and other religious leaders for criticising the government.⁸ This illustrates a broader pattern of using vague legal tools to suppress criticism and restrict freedom of conscience and expression.

Some members of the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy, especially, have criticised the government, calling for human rights to be upheld and commenting on the humanitarian situation. In return, Roman Catholic leaders, including lay leaders, have been harassed and subject to intimidation tactics. This includes verbal and physical attacks, threats of arrest, and, in some cases, arbitrary detention.

Protestant denominations are not unified as a wider group, as is typical in much of Latin America, and the government has encouraged those divisions. The Evangelical Christian Movement for Venezuela (MOCEV) and the National Religious Council publicly support the Maduro regime. Protestant groups not allied with the government, including those that belong to the ECV (part of the UN accredited World Evangelical Alliance) have been subject to acts of intimidation, pressure tactics and discrimination.

Independent religious groups are viewed with suspicion by a government that seeks to co-opt or counter their influence on the population. In 2020 the Inter-Religious Social Forum of Venezuela (IRSFV) was established, bringing together the BCV, the ECV and smaller and more vulnerable minorities including the Jewish community, which has been subjected to antisemitic rhetoric, harassment and abuse. In direct response to the creation of the IRSFV, the government created the National Interreligious Council (NIC), comprised of religious groups supportive of President Maduro.

Under Maduro the government strengthened or developed links with some other religious groups, including those with Afro-Venezuelan roots such as the Venezuelan Federation of Ancestral Religions Aganju Sola and Yanza (FVRAASY) and the National Spiritist Council of Venezuela (CNEV). 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.

Government officials 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 emigration of a significant proportion of the Jewish population, which has dropped from 25,000 in the 1990s⁹ to around 6,000 in 2020.¹⁰ Declarations by government officials targeting religious groups or their leaders are also often mirrored in the government allied press. In 2020 and 2021, Maduro allied media published conspiracy theories linking 'Zionists', understood as a dog whistle reference to Jews, to COVID-19 in a supposed plot to bring down the Maduro government. On 17 November 2025, during a nationally broadcast address, Maduro accused the US and 'Zionists' of seeking to hand the country over to demons. These types of declarations in government-allied media are interpreted by religious leaders as singling them and their communities out and labelling them enemies of the Maduro regime, in effect giving a green light to proxies, including criminal groups, to target them.

Religious groups have responded in different ways to the authoritarian regime. The ECV has been outspoken and publicly denounced discriminatory treatment. The council's Executive Director, Reverend José G. Piñero, whose family is partially in the exile due to the pressure on him, stated during a February 2025 meeting at which Protestant leaders and government officials were present, 'that the ECV believes in the separation of Church and State, as well as in Christians'

7 A 2021 study carried out by the National Survey for Life Conditions (ENCOVI) found that 70.7% of the respondents identified as Roman Catholic and 18.7% as Protestant. <https://www.proyectoencovi.com/encovi-2021> In November 2025, a survey by Center Gumilla in Caracas, launched a survey titled Religious Sociography: The Religiosity of Venezuelans which found that 63% of Venezuelans identify as Roman Catholic, while Protestants make up 12.5% of the population, 6% do not identify with any religion, and 4% say they are atheists. Another 2.5% reported having their 'own spirituality' and 1.5% stated that they practice Santería. <https://gumilla.org/sociografia-religiosa/>

8 USCIRF, Issue Update: Repression of Religious Freedom in Latin America's Triad - Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, November 2025 <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2025-11/2025%20Issue%20Update%20Patterns%20of%20Religious%20Repression%20in%20Latin%20America.pdf>

9 The Times of Israel, 'Post-Chavez, Venezuelan Jews plant roots elsewhere', 30 March 2013 <https://www.timesofisrael.com/post-chavez-venezuelan-jews-plant-roots-elsewhere/>

10 World Jewish Congress, Jewish Communities: Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of) <https://www.worldjewishcongress.org/en/about/communities/VE>

civic responsibility'.¹¹ He emphasised that their main mission is to preach the gospel and rejected government-imposed initiatives meant to control or manipulate faith. Reverend Piñero also warned against state bureaucracy, stressing that the government should facilitate rather than oversee religious activity in order to safeguard religious freedom.

It is estimated that between 10 and 15 legislators come from the Protestant sectors,¹² mainly from the Democratic Alliance and PSUV. Although the title of 'pastor' is not included on their ballots, their electoral base and discourse are rooted in Christian principles, solidifying their influence within Venezuela's political power. Several evangelical leaders and pastors have secured seats in the National Assembly of Venezuela by aligning with Chávez and Maduro. Notable figures include Javier Bertucci, pastor of the Maranatha Christian Church, and Osvaldo Zamora, leader of the Pentecostal Church, both elected as deputies under the Great Patriotic Pole.¹³ Others like Alfonso Campos Jessurun and Paucides González also gained positions due to their ties with the government and lack of opposition.

Case Study: Pastor Gricelia Josefina Solórzano Malpica



In June 2024 Pastor Gricelia Josefina Solórzano Malpica, pastor of the Upper Room Evangelical Pentecostal Missionary Church in San Fernando, Apure, was accused of generic embezzlement, misappropriation of public funds, aggravated larceny, misappropriation or diversion of assets, and conspiracy to

commit a crime. Pastor Solórzano's case was sent to the Terrorism Court in Caracas, and she was later detained in the General Directorate of Military Counterintelligence (DGCIM), known for numerous cases of arbitrary detention, torture, and extrajudicial executions. Her arrest was political. Colonel Ramón Alonso Carrizalez Rengifo accused the pastor of being one of those responsible for losing the internal elections of the PSUV when she was the administrator of the Legislative Council of the State of Apure (CLEA), a position she held from 2008 to 2013. The arrest orders came from Interior Minister Diosdado Cabello, the second most powerful person in the Bolivarian Revolution and a close friend of Colonel Carrizalez.

Presidential Elections and Protests

The presidential elections of 2018 and 2024 were characterised by irregularities, accusations of fraud and mass demonstrations. The first wave of protests began in March 2017 after the TSJ assumed the legislative powers of the National Assembly, undermining the separation of powers and disregarding the popular vote. This was perceived as a violation of the constitution and triggered mass protests in defence of democracy and the rule of law.

Priests and members of religious orders who expressed their dissent or offered pastoral assistance during the protests were accused of supporting the opposition. This led to threats against religious figures, including graffiti on churches that read 'death to priests', as well as attacks on and disruptions of homilies, and physical attacks by government supporters on worshippers during the Eucharist inside the Basilica of Saint Theresa in Caracas, leading to complaints by the then Cardinal Archbishop Baltazar Porras Cardozo.¹⁴

During both the 2018 and 2024 elections, religious leaders were aggressively pressured to endorse the PSUV and Maduro. Those who refused to back the government or endorse the electoral process, which many viewed as fraudulent,¹⁵ were subjected to harassment and slander. Religious leaders who spoke out publicly and critically about the elections were labelled traitors and were subjected to threats, intimidation, harassment, and other forms of pressure aimed at preventing them from continuing to speak. A Roman Catholic priest told CSW that many religious leaders held the view that to remain silent in the face of injustice meant siding with the oppressors and affirmed that priests felt a moral obligation to stand in solidarity with those suffering.

A second nationwide wave of protest marches organised by Venezuela's National Assembly began on 11 January 2019. On 23 January, during a march in Caracas, National Assembly president Juan Guaidó was declared interim president under Articles 233, 333, and 350 of the constitution,¹⁶ after the assembly deemed Maduro's presidency illegitimate. Tens of thousands of people demonstrated across the country. Security forces used tear gas and violence against the protesters and human rights groups reported 14 deaths during the demonstrations.

One of those killed on 23 January 2019 was Wilmer Mendoza, a youth leader at the First Baptist Church in Barinas State. He was participating in the peaceful march when the security

11 Evangelical Council of Venezuela, 'Intervention of Reverend José G. Piñero (ECV Executive Director) in meeting with pastors and government officials', 10 February 2025 <https://www.facebook.com/consejoevangelicove/videos/3441068762695071/>

12 The figure of '10 to 15 legislators' comes from the analysis of the composition of the Democratic Alliance (where Bertucci's party contributes several regional and substitute seats) and the share of the Christian Evangelical Movement of Venezuela (MOCEV), which operates within the PSUV.

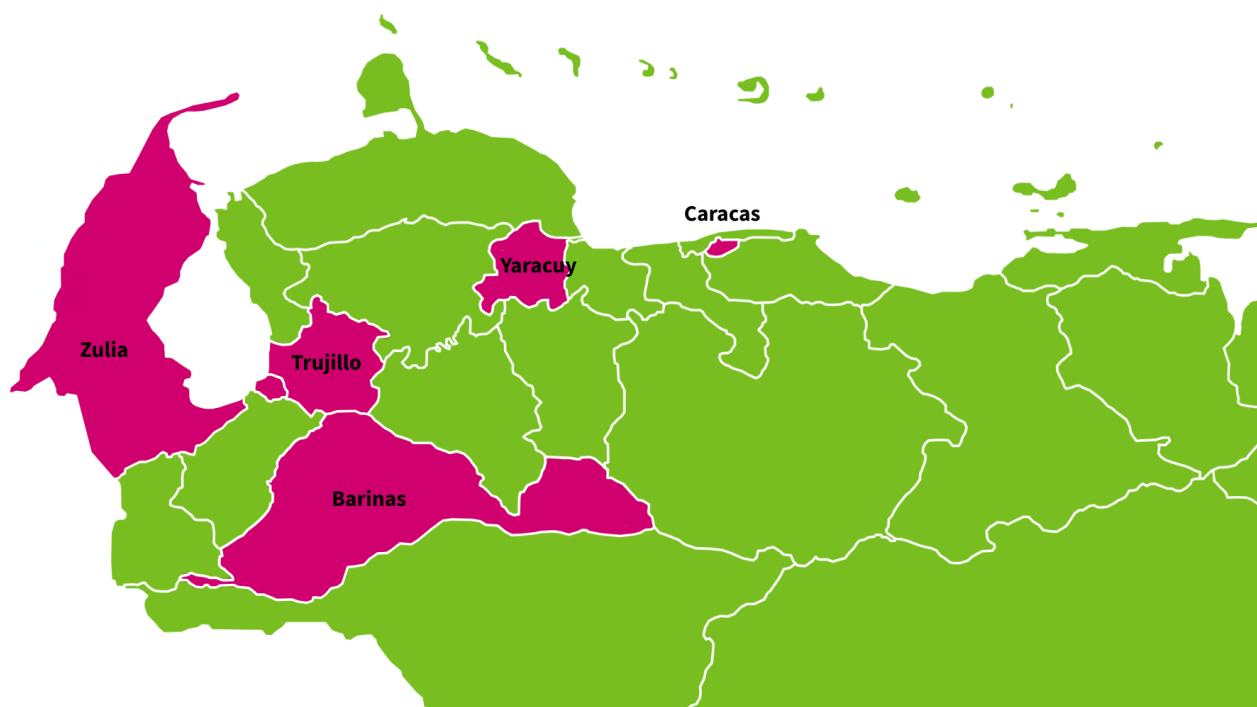
13 The Simón Bolívar Great Patriotic Pole, usually referred to as the Great Patriotic Pole is an alliance created in 2012 of mostly leftist, socialist, and Chavista political parties and which supported the presidential campaigns of Chávez and then Maduro.

14 Comunicación Continua, 'Cardinal Baltazar Porras Cardozo demands justice after colectivo attacks on La Salle school-Mérida', 20 April 2017 <https://comunicacioncontinua.com/cardenal-baltazar-porras-cardozo-exigio-justicia-tras-ataque-de-colectivos-a-colegio-la-salle-merida/>

15 The result of the 2018 presidential election was rejected by the opposition and most Western governments because the leading opposition parties were banned from participating.

16 This declaration invoked the Article 233 of the Constitution, which provides for presidential succession in cases of the president's absolute absence, together with Articles 333 and 350, which call for the restoration of constitutional order and the rejection of illegitimate authority.

Sites of Government Violations During Election-Related Protests



forces opened fire. The same day, Gregory José Pérez, Executive Director of the National Baptist Youth Union of Venezuela until 2023, was arbitrarily detained in Yaracuy State when security forces went house to house looking for members of the opposition. He was released 24 days later with legal restrictions that included periodic reporting to the court every set number of days and a ban on leaving the country.

The 28 July 2024 presidential election was equally contentious. Although the focus was electoral, marches led by the opposition served as a platform to demand an end to political persecution, the release of prisoners, and the restoration of basic services such as healthcare and pensions. The Maduro regime attacked the opposition and warned of a ‘bloodbath’ and ‘civil war’ if Maduro did not win a third six-year term. Religious leaders who did not overtly express support for Maduro and the PSUV were threatened and accused of being part of the opposition. At the same time, the government offered incentives including infrastructure improvements to religious groups that were willing to publicly demonstrate their support for Maduro and his party. According to a July 2024 report by Open Doors, one pastor who declined these incentives found that the church’s electric line had been cut, leaving it without power.¹⁷

In response to these threats, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR) warned that

this type of discourse by the highest authority of the State and the security forces has the effect of intimidating and curtailing the political freedom of the electorate... These actions affect democratic institutions and the freedoms of association, assembly, and expression, as they discourage the political participation of opposition individuals, their electorate, and the general public.¹⁸

Another wave of protests erupted around the announcement on 28 July that Maduro had won another term in office. In the weeks leading up to and following the elections, officers from the Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (SEBIN) were seen carrying out surveillance at Roman Catholic parish houses and the offices of Protestant pastors in Zulia State and Caracas. They were especially visible in working-class neighbourhoods including Petare and El Valle in the capital city. The surveillance also included the deployment of paramilitary members who took photographs of those attending masses and religious services. Governor Gerardo Márquez of Trujillo State verbally attacked religious leaders, including Father Pedro Elías Artigas after the priest called for prayer for the freedom of Venezuela. Governor Márquez used a derogatory epithet to describe the priest and accused him of ‘politicking’, before concluding with the statement that ‘...in Heaven Chávez rules, and in Venezuela, Nicolás

¹⁷ Open Doors, ‘Pastors suffer harassment during elections in Venezuela’, 27 July 2024 <https://puertasabiertasal.org/cristianos-perseguidos-noticias/pastores-sufren-acosos-durante-elecciones-en-venezuela/>

¹⁸ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, ‘IACHR and RELE warn of political persecution in Venezuela in the electoral context’, 19 July 2024 <https://www.oas.org/es/CIDH/jsForm/?File=/es/cidh/prensa/comunicados/2024/166.asp>

[Maduro].¹⁹ Also in August, Father Elvis Cabarcas, from the Machiques Diocese in Zulia, was accused of organising opposition activities, specifically by the praying of the rosary in San Benito Square. He was arbitrarily detained by the Bolivarian National Guard of Venezuela (GNB) and taken away in a military truck to Detachment 114. He was released several hours later.

A 2024 report by the Committee of Relatives of Victims of the Events of February and March 1989 (COFAVIC), a Venezuelan human rights NGO, found that the government used intimidation and threats to prevent any form of public prayer on behalf of teenagers detained during protests and to discourage questioning of the official narrative. COFAVIC referred to this as a form of ‘preventive repression’, where the state no longer only attacks an institution, but descends to the level of the religious grassroots, directly pressuring neighbourhood priests or local pastors to silence messages of comfort to victims.²⁰

Despite some efforts by the government to cultivate support within the Roman Catholic Church, tensions remain. In September 2025 government figures lashed out at the VBC after Maduro repeated his previous year’s decree to move Christmas celebrations to 1 October. The bishops criticised the move, insisting that Christmas is a universal religious celebration that must not be used for political propaganda, while noting that the holiday spirit was ‘tarnished’ by the ongoing political crisis and persecution. In response, Minister of Interior Cabello branded the critical members of the Roman Catholic Church as “criminals” and a ‘band of terrorists’ allegedly linked to destabilisation plans.²¹

Freedom of Expression

SEBIN is used to intimidate and control those perceived to be in opposition to the government or its policies. Religious leaders are specific targets of SEBIN officers, and those who express views perceived as insufficiently supportive of the government are regularly harassed and threatened. According to one religious leader:

Over the past year, I have received anonymous threats over the phone and at my front door. I have faced extensive surveillance, but up until now everything has just been intimidation. There have been a few exceptions, the church’s pick-up truck was stolen, one of the church leader’s homes was burgled, and my assistant was

physically abused. In each of these cases, every time something happened to a member of my team, they sent messages to me claiming responsibility. They have never done anything to me, no one has put me in prison, but they always send messages telling me where I am, where my wife is, and what I am doing... it is clear that there are state security entities, at least at the regional level, involved in this.

On 29 July 2024 the Archbishop of Coro, Falcón State, Víctor Hugo Basabe, was reported to the Attorney General’s Office by National Assembly deputy Doily Hernández of Nueva Esparta State for alleged incitement to violence promoted by the cleric on his X (formerly Twitter) account.²² The leader has been the target of public attacks by the regime since 2016.²³ On 1 December 2024 members of the political opposition in Punto Fijo, Carirubana gathered at the Virgin of Coromoto Cathedral in Falcón State to pray for the liberation of political prisoners and peace in the country. During the event, a prominent trade union leader, Starling Bracho,²⁴ expressed concern at the attempts to intimidate political leaders at a religious service and denounced the presence of security officials who infiltrated the gathering, took photos, and parked vehicles outside the cathedral.

Such tactics strongly discourage many religious leaders from preaching or speaking, even in informal or private meetings, on topics that could be perceived as controversial. Freedom of expression concerns extend to religious 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.

Case Study: Cardinal Baltazar Enrique Porras Cardozo

On 31 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 the 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, who he referred to as ‘El Cuervo’ and other Venezuelan Catholic Church leaders, had attempted to block the canonisation

19 Los Andes, ‘Governor Gerardo Márquez lashes out at the parish priest of San José church and claims that God “is a Chavista”’, 19 July 2024 <https://diariodelosandes.com/gobernador-gerardo-marquez-arremete-contra-parroco-de-la-iglesia-san-jose-y-afirma-que-dios-es-chavista/>

20 COFAVIC, ‘Report on attacks on religious freedom 2001-2023’, 13 May 2024 <https://cofavic.org/12564/>

21 Clarín, “‘Band of terrorists’: Chavismo attacks bishops who criticized Nicolás Maduro’s government”, 5 September 2024 https://www.clarin.com/mundo/banda-terroristas-chavismo-ataca-obispos-criticaron-gobierno-nicolas-maduro_0_PEHtsVKr6l.html

22 Diario VEA, ‘The Archbishop of Coro is accused of inciting hatred, violence, rebellion’, 30 July 2024 <https://diariovea.com.ve/denuncian-al-arzobispo-de-coro-por-incitar-al-odio-violencia-y-rebelion/>

23 Examples include: Diosdado Cabello verbally attacks Basabe for his critical homily (2016) <https://www.radiofeyalegrianoticias.com/cabello-sobre-discurso-de-mons-basabe-fue-mal-intencionado/>; The Legislative Council declares Basabe a ‘persona non grata’ (2016) <https://efectococuyo.com/politica/consejo-legislativo-de-lara-declara-persona-no-grata-al-obispo-victor-hugo-basabe/>; Maduro demands an investigation into the homilies and attacks Basabe, calling him a ‘devil in a cassock’ (2018) <https://elsiglo.com.pa/internacional/america/maduro-tildo-diablo-sotana-sacerdote-hablo-corrupcion-homilia-FHES24043330>

24 Starling Bracho is a Venezuelan union leader, serving as secretary general of the Corpoelec Workers’ Union in Falcón state, and has been harassed by officers of the Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (SEBIN), as reported by labor organizations in January 2023.

of José Gregorio Hernández and that the sainthood process ultimately succeeded thanks to the efforts of the ‘commander-in-chief’ Maduro.²⁵

Credit: Facebook/Baltazar Porras Cardozo



In October the bishop was prevented physically from travelling to Isnotú, in Trujillo State, where he had intended to preside over a mass in honour of Hernández. Regional organizations noted that Cabello and other authorities actively discouraged his participation, alleging that his presence was ‘inconvenient.’²⁶ In December 2025 Cardinal Porras Cardozo 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.’²⁷

Discriminatory Treatment

Several government benefit programs were launched on 19 January 2023 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 with and cultivation of ties with faith communities. In March 2024, the 2023 programs were placed under the new overarching framework of the Hugo Chávez Great Mission for Equality and Social Justice, centralising the distribution of resources.

A priest from Barinas told CSW:

Since Chávez, the state has wanted to present itself as the provider, god and father of all in exchange for loyalty to the regime. Contrary to the God of the Bible, this clay god [Maduro] tortures and murders those who do not follow him.

The Good Pastor Bonus offers financial incentives, distributed through the Homeland System²⁸ to government-allied Protestant pastors. It represents a ‘next-generation’ benefit specifically designed for pastors registered with the Homeland System and affiliated with the MOCEV. In 2024, 20,000 pastors were included in the scheme. In May 2025, Maduro announced that as part of the programme, 20,000 pastors would receive a monthly stipend of 1050 bolivars, equivalent to approximately \$2.60 USD—enough to buy about 1 kilogram of beef—a not insignificant amount in extremely impoverished areas.

The My Well-Equipped Church project, under the Mission Beautiful Venezuela initiative, provides infrastructure support, for example the repairing of roofs, painting, installing air conditioning, and providing chairs. From January 2023 through June 2024 the initiative provided equipment and funds to 3,565 religious buildings, including 2,815 Protestant churches and 750 Roman Catholic churches. In one example in Barinas State, the church of Protestant pastor Wenceslao Méndez received government-provided materials that allowed basic infrastructure improvements to its facilities. The church, a small congregation with limited financial resources, previously met in an unfinished, modest structure.

The project initially focused mainly on Protestant churches but was eventually extended to Roman Catholics as well. A Roman Catholic lay leader in Barinas told CSW that priests who have accepted to the government’s conditional gifts, ‘...see an economic way out to help the congregation, in the midst of a context of misery and need, in exchange for giving credit to Maduro [for the benefits]’. There is no official information to indicate that non-Christian religious communities, including Jews, Muslims, or indigenous religious groups, have had access to the benefits provided under the program.

On 6 March 2024 Maduro reduced fees associated with the registration process for Protestant churches, and in January 2025 the regime established the Vice Ministry of Religious Affairs and Worship, which sits within the Ministry of Interior and Justice, and of which the main objective is

25 Correo del Orinoco, ‘Baltazar Porras placed himself at the service of the opposition to conspire against the government’, 30 October 2025 <https://www.correodelorinoco.gob.ve/baltazar-porras-a-la-orden-de-la-oposicion-para-conspirar-contra-el-gobierno/>

26 infobae, ‘The Maduro regime prevented Cardinal Baltazar Porras from reaching the José Gregorio Hernández shrine to officiate a mass in Venezuela’, 25 October 2025 <https://www.infobae.com/venezuela/2025/10/26/el-regimen-de-maduro-impidio-al-cardenal-baltazar-porras-llegar-al-santuario-de-jose-gregorio-hernandez-para-oficiar-una-misa-en-venezuela/>

27 El País, ‘The Chavista authorities prevent Cardinal Baltazar Porras from leaving Venezuela and cancel his passport’, 10 December 2025 <https://elpais.com/americas/2025-12-10/las-autoridades-chavistas-impiden-al-cardenal-baltazar-porras-salir-de-venezuela-y-anulan-su-pasaporte.html>

28 The Homeland System is a digital platform, created in 2016, through which various government benefits including pension and vaccines are distributed to those who have signed up, providing detailed personal information in the process. It has been viewed by human rights organisations as a method of social control. <https://english.elpais.com/usa/2021-04-24/sistema-patria-a-new-digital-tool-for-social-control-in-venezuela.html>

purportedly to eliminate ‘bureaucracy’ and resolve the delay in procedures including legal registrations and the granting of permits.²⁹ These measures were presented as administrative improvements but had a clear purpose aimed at building support for the government within the religious sector. Their real impact on FoRB remains limited, however, as the government continues to apply a selective regulatory approach: churches aligned with the government receive administrative advantages, while non-aligned groups continue to face bureaucratic obstacles and prolonged delays in legal registration.

The Co-opting of Religious Events and Institutions

Chávez’s leadership and the early years of the Maduro regime were characterised by a combative relationship with the Roman Catholic Church, including the denial of renewed residence permits for religious personnel and the promotion of a prayer ‘Our Chávez’, replacing the ‘Our Father’ of the traditional Christian prayer.

In January 2023 the government issued instructions for churches, primarily Protestant, to take on the functions of a ‘mission base’ operating under the branding of ‘Social Church’. Socialist Mission Bases (SMBs), created in August 2013, were originally modular buildings or repurposed houses built by the state and established to create a direct line of command between the national government and the grassroots. This integration of churches into a state system reflects the strategic use of religion to convert faith-based groups into tools of social control and political dependence. By channelling social assistance and support for religious ministers through the Homeland System, the state intervenes in ways that undermine the independence of religious organisations. Venezuelan lawyers expressed concern to CSW that this weakens the principle of state neutrality and indirectly disadvantages congregations that, for ethical or doctrinal reasons, choose not to align with the government’s narrative of ‘spiritual unity’. In operationally linking churches with SMBs, the state appears less focused on protecting FoRB and more on using religious networks to advance electoral interests and extend territorial oversight.

In January 2025 Maduro signed an agreement with the Ministry for the Penitentiary Service and some Protestant groups, allowing pastors from participating groups to spread the ‘message of Jesus Christ’ in prisons throughout the national territory in order to build the ‘path of redemption’.³⁰ The specific denominations were not publicly disclosed but are assumed to include those that are known to be aligned with the government.³¹ The ECV did not officially participate. In February 2025 the Venezuelan Prison Observatory (OVP)

expressed concern that political prisoners at Tocarón prison in Aragua State were being forced to participate in Protestant religious activities, noting that this qualifies as forced religious indoctrination and violates freedom of thought and conscience. Families of the detainees reported that those who refused to participate were threatened with punishment.

In contrast to the access granted to some Protestant churches, the Roman Catholic Church has faced restrictions on its ability to enter detention facilities in recent years.

In an interview, Father Daniel Ron, stated:

Normally we should visit the prisoners, but we can’t do that. The last visit I was able to make was at the beginning of 2016. And I didn’t do it as a priest because they wouldn’t have let me in. I had to go as a lawyer, which was when I visited the prisoners held at SEBIN and El Helicoide.³²

A priest based in Caracas told CSW that access remains restricted, particularly when clergy seek to visit prisoners regarded as political detainees or dissidents, or when the priest has previously made public statements critical of the government

In addition to its attempts to ‘reschedule Christmas’ for political reasons, 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 endorsing and 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.

Case Study: New Covenant Christian Orientation Centre Church



Credit: Facebook/CEV.

While the government offers handouts to religious groups supportive of the regime, it takes the property of others, as illustrated in the long running case of Reverend Nelson Sevilla, a supporter of the political opposition, and the New Covenant Christian Orientation Centre Church he founded and leads in Caracas. On 12 August 2006 the local government

29 Prensa Latina, ‘Creation of Vice Ministry of Worship Announced’, 30 January 2025 <https://www.prensa-latina.cu/2025/01/30/anuncian-creacion-en-venezuela-de-viceministerio-de-cultos/>

30 El Tiempo, ‘Nicolás Maduro: Churches will spread the message of Jesus Christ in Venezuelan prisons’, 30 January 2025 <https://eltiempove.com/nicolas-maduro-iglesias-difundiran-el-mensaje-de-jesucristo-en-las-carceles-venezolanas/>

31 The Protestant movements aligned with the PSUV are MEV, MOCEV, and Christians for Peace Movement of Venezuela (MCPV): a broader not exclusively Protestant Christian movement.

32 Revista, “‘I visit political prisoners as a lawyer, because if I say I am a priest they won’t let me in.’”, 12 November 2017 <https://revistasic.org/visito-presos-politicos-como-abogado-porque-si-digo-que-soy-sacerdote-no-me-dejan-entrar/>

confiscated land belonging to the church under the pretext that the property would be used to develop projects to support the unhoused population. The projects never materialised. In 2008, after the intervention of new mayor and a legal battle, Pastor Sevilla was able to recover the property for the community. However, on 6 November 2010, then President Chávez issued a decree ordering the confiscation of a theatre in which approximately 400 church members met regularly, 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. The church never 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.

Civil Society Organisations and Humanitarian Work

While false accusations of 'hate crimes' are employed by the government in an attempt to silence criticism, physical surveillance and harassment by irregular groups in working class neighbourhoods and sensitive areas of the country, including those characterised by mining or large indigenous populations, aims to dismantle the humanitarian and spiritual support network that the religious sector provides to vulnerable populations.

The provision of humanitarian aid and social programs by religious groups and civil society organisations (CSOs) has been a growing flashpoint and the government has increasingly attempted to restrict religious groups and CSOs from providing aid, in some cases using violence to prevent them from doing so. Religious leaders reported that members of their congregations involved in social outreach programs 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. One religious leader explained to CSW that:

Those who offer forms of humanitarian aid are seen as a rival to the government in this regard. Religious organisations generally help people by providing food or medicine without discrimination and not in order to promote a political agenda... The government intends to be seen as the only benefactor and as an entity on which the population is dependent, so that they can gain political favour through votes or through support for the government's political acts. When a religious organisation like a church starts something which the government sees as some form of competition, they hinder it. This can involve sending criminal groups or their own organized gangs against religious leaders, the expropriation of certain spaces, the expulsion of the

church or ministry from the place they operate, or any other type of harassment.

A report published in 2024 by the COFAVIC entitled 'Restrictions on Society Organizations Connected to Religious Institutions Between 2001-2023' documents a systematic pattern of harassment and repression against religious organisations and faith-based communities, particularly those engaged in social action in vulnerable communities.³³ Between 2018 and 2023, 2,398 alleged attacks against organisations and human rights defenders were recorded, reflecting a pattern of persecution against organised civil society. In the first quarter of 2024, 18 cases of aggression were reported, with 38.9% allegedly committed by public officials and 33.3% by individuals or groups sympathetic to the ruling party.

In August 2021 Roman Catholic Church groups were blocked by the NB from distributing aid to populations affected by heavy rains and flooding in the state of Mérida, hindering the transport of medicines, food and supplies from Cáritas and other organisations.³⁴ The Presidency of the BCV issued a statement on 30 August 2021 denouncing that the authorities not only blocked access to humanitarian aid but also displayed an 'attitude of indifference and offense' toward members of the Roman Catholic Church, including Cardinal Baltazar Porras, who was Archbishop of Mérida at the time.

Illegal Armed and Criminal Groups

The presence of Colombian illegal armed groups in Venezuela—including right-wing paramilitary and narco-criminal groups as well as left-wing guerrilla organisations, particularly the ELN and dissident factions of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP)—has existed for decades but 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.

These armed groups have established territorial control and operational bases in border states such as Amazonas, Apure, Táchira and Zulia, where they reportedly benefit from safe haven, logistical support, and the tolerance or cooperation of sectors of the Venezuelan security forces. This relationship has fuelled the expansion of drug trafficking and other illicit economies, especially in strategic regions such as Catatumbo, one of Colombia's main cocaine-producing areas and a key corridor for cross-border trafficking. Analysts argue that Maduro tolerated or even protected these groups due to ideological alignment and for geopolitical leverage against Colombia and participation in parallel networks of power and economic benefit linked to organised crime, reinforcing loyalty among certain military

33 COFAVIC, 'Report on attacks on religious freedom 2001-2023'.

34 El Diario, 'Why is the National Guard obstructing the entry of humanitarian aid into Mérida?', 30 August 2021 <https://eldiario.com/2021/08/30/gnb-obstaculiza-ayuda-humanitaria-merida/>

States/Areas with a Prominent Presence of Illegal Armed and Criminal Groups



and political actors. As a result, these groups operate with increased capacity on both sides of the border, exacerbating regional insecurity and undermining the rule of law.

In municipalities along the Colombian border in Apure and Táchira States, the ELN has exercised de facto social and military control, imposing its own rules and so-called ‘commandments’ on local populations, including rural communities, schools and religious institutions. This occurs in a context of partial state absence and official tolerance, allowing the group to operate without effective oversight.

Priests and pastors in these areas have been intimidated and coerced into complying with the armed group’s rules under explicit threats of violence. In one documented case, a priest was surrounded by armed ELN members and presented with a set of rules he was required to follow in order to ‘live in peace’ and for the church to ‘remain there’, with the warning that non-compliance could result in his disappearance. Religious leaders are often required to notify the ELN before conducting pastoral activities, including community outreach or visits involving international organisations.

Religious leaders are also prohibited from addressing certain topics publicly, even during worship services or community activities. Forbidden subjects include extortion, kidnapping, human rights, women’s empowerment and migration. Some have been barred from using social media or giving interviews, limiting their ability to communicate community needs or report abuses. These conditions create a climate of surveillance, intimidation and self-censorship, severely restricting freedom of religion or belief, including preaching, pastoral care and participation in community dialogue.

In areas with a strong presence of illegal armed groups or high levels of organised crime, FoRB violations are both more frequent and more severe. Religious leaders have reported that these groups view religious communities as threats to their authority or influence. Along parts of the Colombia-Venezuela border, Protestant leaders have stated that armed groups ban the construction of churches, prohibit religious gatherings in private homes (such as prayer groups or Bible studies), and demand a share of religious donations. Religious communities are often forbidden from appointing leaders from outside the local area or receiving visits from co-religionists. Leaders who refuse to cooperate or attempt to remain neutral frequently receive threats against themselves or their families, and many have been forcibly displaced.

In February 2021 an attack on Restoration House, a church-run drug rehabilitation centre in Mérida State, illustrated the extreme violence faced by religious institutions. Armed men assaulted the facility, beating and torturing four residents, carving crosses into their backs, and tearing pages from their Bibles and forcing them to eat them. Religious leaders concluded that the attack was motivated by religious hatred and intended to undermine the church’s work, membership, and income. Despite significant national and international attention, no arrests were made. In many similar cases, victims choose not to report attacks publicly due to fear of retaliation, contributing to widespread impunity.

Religious leaders have told CSW that criminal groups engage in similar behaviours to that of the Colombian illegal armed groups. Criminal and illegal armed groups often view

religious groups as threats to their influence or authority. In some areas along the border with Colombia where the ELN and break-away FARC factions continue to operate, Protestant leaders have reported that the groups have placed a ban on the construction of churches and prohibit members of the population from meeting in private homes for religious purposes (e.g. prayer groups or Bible studies).

Armed groups have also taken control of the Orinoco Mining Arc. According to reports from Transparency Venezuela, the International Crisis Group, and Human Rights Watch (2024-2025), the control of the arc is divided among three main types of actors. First, mega-gangs or 'unions' maintain violent control over mines and towns despite military operations, focusing on extortion and social control. The ELN and FARC dissidents operate as de facto authorities in Bolívar State and border areas, controlling gold extraction and trafficking routes after displacing local unions. State and para-state actors, such as Uepamo, the General Directorate of Military Counterintelligence (DGCIM), and the SEBIN, are involved through operations that frequently result in the transfer of mining control to military or allied forces, in addition to surveilling and intimidating social and religious leaders to prevent reports of massacres and extortion.

In the municipalities of El Callao, Sifontes and Roscio in Bolívar State, territorial control is exercised by a complex mix of groups that often operate with the acquiescence or participation of state sectors. Four pastors from these municipalities, consulted by CSW, reported that after the presidential elections in July 2024, the presence of individuals monitoring preachings during services and homilies increased. A pastor from Tumeremo, the municipal seat of Sifontes, said:

It's very common to see people we've never met before, listening carefully, taking some notes, some on their phones, others in small notepad

Another pastor from El Callao told CSW that a 43-year-old stranger asked him about his family and children, mentioning the name of the school where his children study and the schedule of activities his wife attended at church. The religious leader questioned why he was being asked to provide this information. The man replied:

We know everything about you. We're very concerned about the safety of religious leaders in the region, and we want you to stay alive. So, it's good for you to be careful with what you preach and who you support.

A pastor in Guasipati, the municipal seat of Roscio, told CSW that an ELN member emphasised to him the need to ensure that his church was not filled with people who opposed the revolution, as 'definitive measures would have to be taken'. The pastor did not request an explanation, but understood the implication. As a preventive measure, in order to avoid a possible violent attack on church members, he felt he had no choice but to ask individuals who were known to be linked to the political opposition to remain at home and stop attending the church.

Visits from armed groups continued in 2025, said a Catholic lay leader from Bolívar State consulted by CSW:

They [irregular groups or even the SEBIN] do not want us as religious leaders to become social mobilisers.

In these municipalities, the local priest or evangelical pastor is often the only one who dares to denounce disappearances or 'disciplinary murders' committed by these criminal groups and/or provide pastoral support to opponents.

Indigenous Peoples

Illegal mining and the presence of armed groups have led to the destruction of sites considered sacred by indigenous communities. In Amazonas State, Cerro Autana, a geologic 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 geologic formations known as tepuis. The Kamarata River, another site of profound spiritual significance, has also been contaminated, further threatening traditional religious practices.

In addition, the presence of armed 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.

Case Studies: Bishop Johnny Reyes Sequera and Father Josiah Asa K'Okal

Religious leaders working in areas with a large indigenous population, where illegal armed groups are operating, where environmental destruction and human rights violations are high due to mining, for example, or a combination of all three, are at particular risk.

In his efforts documenting the presence of illegal armed groups and associated abuses in Amazonas State as well as referring them to the UN and the IACHR, Bishop Johnny Reyes Sequera, Apostolic Vicar of Puerto Ayacucho, has become a primary defender of freedom of expression in the region, defending the right of both the religious sector and indigenous communities to speak the truth in the face of state harassment. In retaliation for being one of the few voices denouncing illegal mining in Yapacana National Park, Bishop Reyes has received indirect threats from irregular groups operating with state permission. A source told CSW that it is common for the bishop's pastoral visits to riverine communities along the Autana, Cuao and Sipapo rivers to be 'monitored by armed groups, who restrict the

vicariate's access to certain areas in order to prevent the documentation of socio-environmental damage and abuses against indigenous peoples'.

In 2017 Bishop Reyes denounced the deaths of 37 detainees at the Amazonas Judicial Detention Centre, stating that the prisoners had been 'killed in a planned manner by security forces'.³⁵ In June 2024 the bishop stated in a public article that 'practically all guerrilla forces or irregular armed groups have taken refuge in, or have enjoyed government concessions to operate in, these territories'.³⁶

Credit: BCV



On 31 July 2024 Bishop Reyes was verbally attacked by the governor of Amazonas State, Miguel Rodríguez. The incident sparked widespread condemnation from civil society and religious sectors. After he declared that electoral truth belongs to the people, the bishop was publicly disparaged

by Governor Rodríguez who labelled him a 'demon' and a 'politician in a cassock', accusing him of destabilisation and of politicising the Catholic Church.³⁷



On 1 January 2024 Josiah Asa K'Okal, a Roman Catholic priest with the Missionaries of the Consolata since 1997, disappeared after leaving his home in Tucupita where he worked with the Warao indigenous people.³⁸ He had left home by bicycle that morning to carry out visits to individuals in his parish. His

body was recovered the following day, hanging from a tree. While the authorities were quick to label the death of the priest, a well-known indigenous and human rights defender, a suicide, many of those close to him have unsuccessfully called for an independent investigation and autopsy, noting that in speaking out against the mass sterilisation of indigenous women and organised human trafficking

of Warao women and children he had presumably made powerful enemies.

Conclusion

Religious organisations in Venezuela face serious administrative and judicial restrictions, such as revoked permits and heavy fines, limiting their operations. Religious leaders are subjected to persecution, including threats, arbitrary arrests and violence, aiming to control freedom of expression and complicated engagement on social and humanitarian issues. This fosters a culture of self-censorship and reinforces social control, reducing FoRB. Repression intensifies dramatically during elections, although the government's repressive machinery remains a constant threat.

Restrictions on pastoral access, limitations on prison ministry, and administrative obstacles imposed on church-linked humanitarian organisations, including Cáritas, appear to function as reprisals linked to critical public positions taken by religious actors. These measures undermine both FoRB and the delivery of humanitarian assistance. Available evidence indicates a sustained pattern of the authorities relying on broadly framed legislation and informal pressure tactics to deter or silence religious leaders who publicly address social, political or human rights concerns. These practices have had a chilling effect on religious expression.

The expansion of illegal mining and the presence of armed groups in indigenous territories, in a context of insufficient state protection, have resulted in the destruction and contamination of sites of deep spiritual significance. This has had a severely negative impact on indigenous religious practices and cultural continuity.

As Venezuela looks at its post-Maduro future, the international community must pressure the Venezuelan authorities to cease their repressive actions and guarantee protections for religious and humanitarian actors. The international community should actively monitor FoRB in the country, setting benchmarks for measurable improvement meeting standards established in international law, and must urgently press the Venezuelan government to take active measures to protect indigenous territories and their spiritual rights.

³⁵ Fides News Agency, "In Puerto Ayacucho, 37 prisoners were murdered in a planned manner," denounces Monsignor Reyes, 21 August 2017 <https://www.fides.org/es/news/62788>

³⁶ Venezuelan Program for Education and Action in Human Rights, 'Monsignor Jonny Reyes: "Amazonas is a forgotten state, unwanted and unknown by the State"', 8 June 2024 <https://provea.org/actualidad/monsenor-jonny-reyes-amazonas-es-un-estado-olvidado-no-querido-y-desconocido-por-el-estado/>

³⁷ SOS Orinoco, Southern Venezuela Socio-Environmental Observatory: May-August 2024 <https://www.observatorioamazonia.org/client/reports/observatorio-04.pdf>

³⁸ According to the 2001 census, there are 33 distinct indigenous people groups in Venezuela, with a combined population of over 536,000 people, making up 2.3% of the country's total population.

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