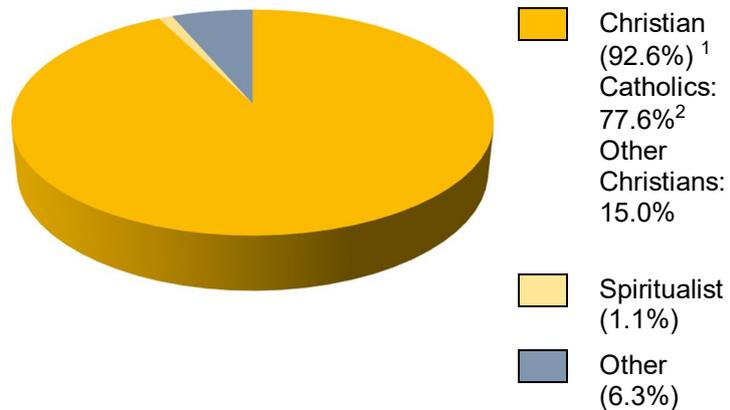


VENEZUELA



Area: 881,050 km ²	Population: 30 million	Political system: Democracy ³	Major Language(s): Spanish ⁴
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Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

In its preamble, the constitution of Venezuela invokes God's protection with the supreme goal of remaking the Republic in order to establish a democratic society and, inter alia, to ensure the right to equality without discrimination or subordination.⁵

The constitution also states that everyone is equal before the law. Consequently, no discrimination is allowed on the basis of race, sex, creed, social status or other factors, or for the purpose of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment, and equal exercise of the rights and freedoms of people. It further states that everyone has the right to express their thoughts or opinions freely, openly and uncensored. Anonymity is not allowed, nor war propaganda or discriminatory messages or those promoting religious intolerance.

The constitution guarantees the independence and autonomy of Churches and religious groups. Parents have the right for their children to receive religious education in accordance with their convictions. Individuals may not avoid complying with the law by invoking his or her religious beliefs nor prevent anyone else from exercising their rights.

Everyone has the right to freedom of conscience and the right to express it. No-one can invoke conscientious objection to avoid complying with law or prevent others from complying with it or exercising their rights.

With respect to labour protection, all forms of discrimination based on politics, age, race, sex, creed or any other condition are prohibited.

As for the rights of indigenous peoples, the State recognises their right to their own social, political and economic organisations, and to their own culture, customs, languages and religions. Similarly, they have the right to maintain and foster their ethnic and cultural identities, worldviews, values and sacred places of worship.⁶

Incidents

In September 2014, during a workshop on designing a “Socialist educational system”, the Archdiocese of Caracas spoke out against the prayer “Chávez nuestro” (Our Chavez), as a new so-called version of the Lord’s Prayer.⁷

In October 2014, the former residents of the village of Carmen de Uria protested with banners and slogans when the regional government announced that their church, which was one of the few buildings left standing after the 1999 Vargas tragedy, would be turned into a homeless shelter and drug rehabilitation facility.⁸

In February 2015, the Venezuela Evangelical Council rejected espionage charges made by President Nicolás Maduro against four U.S. missionaries. The Council maintained that all they were doing was humanitarian work inspired by the highest Christian values.⁹

In June 2015, the Justice and Peace Commission of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Venezuela issued a statement expressing concern at the sudden transfer of Daniel Ceballos, former mayor of San Cristóbel, to another detention centre without informing his relatives and lawyers. Former mayor Ceballos and opposition leader Leopoldo Lopez went on a hunger strike in late May. The commission called on Venezuelan authorities to ensure that all detainees held for political reasons have access to a doctor of their choice as well as to their relatives, legal teams and humanitarian agencies like the Red Cross.¹⁰

In June 2015, on Father's Day, Cardinal Jorge Urosa Savino, Archbishop of Caracas, sent a letter to opposition leader Leopoldo Lopez asking him to stop his hunger strike for the sake of his health and continue his struggle for freedom and democracy.¹¹

In July 2015, the President of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference, Monsignor Diego Padron, called on citizens to participate in parliamentary elections, noting that elections provide an important opportunity to reshape the country’s economic and social life.¹²

Similarly the following November, the Catholic Bishops’ Conference issued a statement regarding the elections to the Venezuelan National Assembly, saying that people had to be aware of the great responsibility that comes with voting.¹³

In August 2015, the Justice and Peace Commission of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference issued a statement expressing deep concern over various allegations of serious violations of human rights under the Decree of Suspension of Constitutional Guarantees in place in several municipalities along the Colombian-Venezuelan border. The commission had received reports that Colombian nationals were being deported en masse without prior notice, forced to leave suddenly without food or personal effects, that families were being separated, and that excessive and disproportionate force was being used. Their statement concluded with a reminder to the authorities that they had an obligation to guarantee everyone’s human rights, including those of foreigners under their jurisdiction.¹⁴

In September 2015, the bishops of Colombia and Venezuela issued a joint statement of fraternity, calling for peace between the two nations, and unity and solidarity in relation to their countries’ border dispute.¹⁵

In October 2015, the United States expressed strong concern over the widespread persecution of religious groups in the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. The State Department, in its International Religious Freedom Report, noted that religious intolerance and hostility combined with other political, economic or social demands often led to violence. It mentioned Venezuela as one of the Latin American countries where leaders and activists have remained strong despite various restrictions, harassment and imprisonment.¹⁶

Prospects for freedom of religion

Venezuela is going through a deep political and social crisis. Its human rights record is constantly being reassessed. In this context, the Catholic Church is an active participant through public statements on relevant issues, appeals for respect of human rights and in its encouragement to citizens to exercise their civic duties.

Compared with the previous period, the years 2014-16 saw some developments that suggest an undercurrent of intolerance or religious discrimination. The country's political, economic and social problems have monopolised attention. The Catholic Church has worked for peace and reconciliation. To some extent, prospects for freedom of religion appear to have improved.

¹ http://www.thearda.com/internationalData/countries/Country_238_2.asp accessed on 9 May 2016.

² <http://www.pewforum.org/interactives/global-christianity/#/Venezuela,Catholic> accessed on 9 May 2016.

³ The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela is a decentralised federal state with a presidential, democratic and participatory government.

http://www.cne.gob.ve/web/normativa_electoral/constitucion/titulo1.php accessed on 9 May 2016.

⁴ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-19649648> accessed on 9 May 2016.

⁵ http://www.cne.gob.ve/web/normativa_electoral/constitucion/preambulo.php accessed on 12 April 2016.

⁶ http://www.cne.gob.ve/web/normativa_electoral/constitucion/titulo3.php accessed on 12 April 2016.

⁷ <http://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2014/09/03/arzobispado-de-caracas-rechaza-el-chavez-nuestro-y-sugiere-que-es-pecado-de-idolatria/#0> accessed on 12 April 2016, cf. <http://derechoyreligion.uc.cl/es/docman/boletin-juridico/2014/34-bj-sept-2014/file> accessed on 13 April 2016.

⁸ http://www.eluniversal.com/noticias/caracas/carmen-uria-luchan-por-preservar-iglesia_102394 accessed on 13 April 2016.

⁹ <http://consejoevangeliico.org.ve/?p=2102> accessed on 12 April 2016.

¹⁰ <http://www.cev.org.ve/index.php/noticias/121-comunicado-violacion-de-los-ddhh-de-ceballos-y-presos-politicos> accessed on 14 April 2016.

¹¹ http://www.arquidiocesisdecaracas.com/iglesia_comu/popup_noticias/noticias_210615.html accessed on 12 April 2016.

¹² http://www.eluniversal.com/noticias/opinion/iglesia-politica_28861 accessed on 13 April 2016.

¹³ <http://www.celam.org/noticelam/detalle.php?id=MTcwNQ> accessed on 13 April 2016.

¹⁴ <http://www.cev.org.ve/index.php/noticias/134-comunicado-de-la-comision-de-justicia-y-paz-de-la-cev-sobre-la-actual-situacion-en-la-zona-fronteriza-colombo-venezolana> accessed on 13 April 2016.

¹⁵ <http://redamazonica.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Mensaje-Obispos-Colombia-y-Venezuela.pdf> accessed on 13 April 2016.

¹⁶ <http://elvenezolanonews.com/old/?p=253172> accessed on 13 April 2016.