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RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN VENEZUELA

An Unprecedented Risk



VICTIMS OF COMMUNISM
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Religious Freedom in Venezuela: An Unprecedented Risk

Executive Summary

Over the past two years, religious freedom in Venezuela has entered an unprecedented risk zone. Authorities have deployed simultaneous strategies such as co-optation, legal harassment, stigmatization, and censorship, all with a common objective: to discipline faith communities that maintain their autonomy and prophetic voice.

- 1. Co-optation.** Through the *Government's Pastoral Councils and the "Buen Pastor" Plan*, the Executive offers economic assistance only to pastors and congregations that register on *Patria*, the official government platform used to administer social benefits. In practice, this creates a registry of "loyal" churches while marginalizing independent ones (OLIRE, 2023).
- 2. Legal Harassment.** *The Anti-Hate Law*—drafted in vague terms—applies to critical priests and pastors. The paradigmatic case was the defamation lawsuit against Jesuit priest Alfredo Infante after he denounced extrajudicial executions (U.S. Department of State, 2023).
- 3. Closure of Civic Space.** The proposed *NGO Oversight Law* (first reading, 2023) subjects the Church's social initiatives to annual registration procedures under the threat of suspension or dissolution (COFAVIC, 2024).
- 4. Pastoral Obstacles.** Chaplains have been prohibited from entering several prisons since 2018 (Revista SIC, 2023), and 85 religious radio stations were shut down in 2022–2023 by order of CONATEL (Espacio Público, 2024).
- 5. Public Stigmatization.** Government spokespersons have labeled bishops as "enemies of the nation"; the president himself has referred to priests who criticize him as "devils in cassocks" (VTV, 2024). These campaigns normalize verbal attacks and foster a climate of fear.

Institutional Context and Legal Framework

Venezuela is a secular state, as established by the Organic Law on Education, and the separation between Church and State is intended to guarantee equal treatment for all religions. The domestic legal framework explicitly recognizes religious freedom in several legal instruments beyond the Constitution. For instance, the Organic Law on Indigenous Peoples and Communities protects the right of Indigenous groups to

maintain their beliefs and places of worship, prohibiting the imposition of other religions. Similarly, the Law for the Protection of Children and Adolescents enshrines minors' right to practice their own religion under the guidance of their parents.

At the international level, Venezuela has ratified treaties that uphold religious freedom, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 18) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Article 18). The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) has issued jurisprudence clarifying the permissible limits of this right: **any restriction must be established by law, pursue a legitimate aim (such as security, public order, public morals, or the rights of others), and be strictly proportional**. This means that religious expression may only be limited in exceptional circumstances, avoiding any form of discrimination. The IACHR has also warned that **the political persecution of religious leaders constitutes a compounded rights violation**: beyond infringing civil rights, it undermines religious freedom by punishing individuals for their spiritual or social work. In cases from Central America and Mexico, for example, the IACHR found state responsibility when priests, pastors, or church-affiliated organizations faced reprisals for mediating conflicts or denouncing human rights abuses. These standards serve as a benchmark for assessing the Venezuelan situation.

Recent Laws and Regulations

In recent years, the Venezuelan government has promoted regulations that, although not exclusively targeting the religious sphere, **have had a significant impact on faith-based organizations**. One example is the **Draft Law on NGO Oversight**, approved in its first reading by the National Assembly in January 2023. Various job servers warned that this law—aimed at regulating and registering non-governmental organizations—represents “a direct threat to the essential principles of democracy,” as it could be used **to restrict the social activities of churches and religious groups** operating as civil associations (such as the work of Caritas and other church-affiliated charitable organizations).

In fact, **COFAVIC (Committee of Relatives of Victims, a human rights NGO)** stated in 2024 that the legal and administrative environment has become increasingly hostile. After monitoring attacks and restrictions against religious organizations from 2001 to 2023, it concluded that there is “an aggravated context of restrictions and aggressions” that **creates risk and censorship** for the social and spiritual work of religious institutions. The organization noted that 2023 saw a spike in adverse incidents against faith communities, matching the peak observed in 2017—a year marked by widespread protests.

Additionally, fiscal policies have affected the autonomy of churches. A 2014 tax reform eliminated the tax exemptions previously granted to religious institutions, limiting them solely to organizations with charitable purposes.

More recently, in 2021, the Ministry of Education unilaterally modified the funding

mechanism for parochial schools affiliated with the Venezuelan Association of Catholic Education (AVEC), redirecting personnel payments through a state entity instead of AVEC itself. **The Venezuela Conference of Catholic Bishops** protested this move, calling it a “violation of the Church-State agreement” and warning that it undermined the **educational autonomy** of Catholic schools. According to a 2023 report, the government **even withdrew financial support entirely from certain Catholic educational institutions** in retaliation for the Church’s criticism of the national situation—an action that would violate existing laws protecting such agreements.

This context reveals a troubling trend: unilateral decisions by the State that **erode the historical collaboration with churches in areas such as education and healthcare** and limit the freedom of religious organizations to manage their social missions.

Political Instrumentalization of Religion

In parallel with the restrictions, the government has promoted the **co-optation of aligned religious sectors**. A notable example is the creation of so-called “Governmental Pastoral Councils,” official bodies with a local presence in the regions announced starting in 2021–2022. These Councils—driven by the Executive—present themselves as representatives of the evangelical community but have been denounced by independent Protestant leaders as a mechanism to “declare themselves the only authorized voice” of evangelicals, **silencing churches that do not recognize them** and labeling them as opponents of the regime.

Through this parallel structure, the government began the mass registration of evangelical churches under the **“Buen Pastor Plan,”** offering **financial subsidies to pastors who register**. The Observatory for Religious Freedom in Latin America openly criticized this attempt at control, emphasizing that *“state aid must be granted equally and without political or partisan strings attached.”*

Indeed, since January 2022 it was officially announced that pastors registered on the government’s *“Carnet de la Patria”* platform would receive special financial bonuses, confirming the use of material incentives to align religious sectors.

The **Evangelical Council of Venezuela**—the main federation of historic Protestant churches in the country—has distanced itself from these governmental initiatives. After an official event in January 2023 called the “National Day of the Evangelical Pastor,” during which President Nicolás Maduro announced exclusive social programs for the Christian Evangelical Movement of Venezuela (an evangelical group close to the ruling party), **the Council issued a public rejection. It clarified that it was not represented at the event and that its churches “do not feel represented by a single politically imposed spokesperson.”** The Council described the establishment of this official religious commemoration as **“a political-partisan action”** and stressed that *“public funds must not be used to advance particular religious or ideological creeds.”* It also criticized the proselytizing presence of

high-ranking officials at worship services.

This firm stance by the highest independent evangelical body highlights the concern **over the instrumentalization of religion for electoral purposes**. Even evangelical leaders, traditionally closer to the government in the past, have begun to draw the line against the political use of faith: José Piñero, Executive Director of the Evangelical Council, reiterated in 2024 his Church's commitment to "*truth, justice, and religious freedom*," warning against those seeking to mix religious messaging with partisan propaganda.

It should be noted that this co-optation aims not only for political support, but also **to control religious discourse**. In a January 2023 event, Maduro publicly insinuated that "*evil dresses in a cassock*"—a clear reference to critical Catholic priests— while simultaneously calling to "build bridges with the Catholic people" to jointly defend the revolution. This dual discourse is nothing new: the regime stigmatizes outspoken clerics by accusing them of being "devils in cassocks" while still attempting to appear close to them. In fact, **officials from the ruling party** have repeatedly accused the Catholic Church of being the "enemy of the homeland" when it denounces authoritarian measures. All of this creates a pattern in which the State **rewards and promotes friendly religious groups** while marginalizing or attacking those that defend their institutional autonomy.

Harassment and Criminalization of Religious Leaders

Local and international organizations have documented an **increase in verbal and legal attacks** against religious representatives who adopt a towards the regime. In May 2023, the U.S. Department of State released a report on religious freedom in Venezuela warning how the Maduro regime has applied the **Constitutional Law Against Hate to criminalize expressions by oppositional religious actors**. This law—approved in 2017 by the Constituent Assembly—vaguely defines hate-incitement offenses with penalties of up to 20 years' imprisonment and has become a tool to persecute dissenting voices, including those of priests and pastors.

The U.S. report notes that "*on some occasions, the regime applied the anti-hate law ... to religious actors*" and that **in other cases the Penal Code was invoked to attack religious leaders for their pronouncements**. A concrete example was the **defamation criminal complaint** filed in 2022 by a pro-Maduro governor (Rafael Lacava, of Carabobo) against Father **Alfredo Infante**, a Jesuit priest and human rights defender who, alongside the NGO Provea, had published a report denouncing extrajudicial executions in the region. Although the accusation was eventually withdrawn after widespread backlash, the threatening message was clear: any religious actor documenting state abuses could face legal retaliation.

Simultaneously, the **official rhetoric** against certain denominations has escalated. Members of the Venezuelan Jewish community reported that in 2022 there was an **increase in antisemitic rhetoric** from pro-government media and state voices. While no direct physical assaults were reported, this hostile environment instills fear

and constitutes a violation of these minorities' right not to be defamed based on their faith.

The **Venezuela Conference of Catholic Bishops** has also been targeted by defamation campaigns in official media: in television programs and government-affiliated social networks, the Bishop's Conference has been accused of acting like "*an extreme-right political party*" for its calls to restore democracy. In an episode cited by COFAVIC, a pro-government deputy shared videos in 2017 stating that "*those who lead the Bishop's Conference have a political and partisan position,*" adding that bishops should not "use their religious office while disregarding the peace of the country." These stigmatizing narratives—backed by prominent state figures such as **Diosdado Cabello**, who has labeled as bishops "ridiculous" and the Church as conspiring against the government—seek to undermine the credibility of religious institutions and **justify punitive measures against them**.

The Catholic hierarchy has also not escaped direct insults from the president himself. Publicly denigrating and threatening statements from the highest level not only violate the dignity of religious leaders, but they also encourage an atmosphere of intolerance that can translate into harassment by government sympathizers. Indeed, following homilies criticizing the national situation, episodes of harassment against clerics and parishioners have been reported. For example, in 2018 pro-government groups gathered outside a Caracas parish to intimidate Father Miguel Acevedo and his congregation, verbally abusing and even attacking mass attendees.

Restrictions on Pastoral and Social Ministry

Beyond rhetoric, concrete obstacles have been **imposed on religious ministry and faith-based activities**. A corresponding right to religious freedom is the ability of churches to provide spiritual care to those in need, including vulnerable populations such as prisoners, the sick, or the poor. Yet for several years, Venezuelan **authorities have prohibited or complicated access for priests' and pastors' access to detention centers**—even for basic spiritual assistance.

As early as 2017, Monsignor Roberto Lückert (Archbishop Emeritus and then-President of the Justice and Peace Commission of the Venezuela Conferences of Catholic Bishops) denounced the "senior orders" **preventing prelates from entering prisons**. The situation continues to worsen, chaplains aren't allowed entry even on religious holidays; at times, special meals for inmates are permitted, but **the accompanying priest is not**. These restrictions violate the Venezuelan Constitution itself, which guarantees all citizens—including detainees—the right to receive religious assistance and practice their faith (Art. 59).

Church spokespeople have warned that these prohibitions stem from a deliberate policy by the Ministry of Penitentiary Affairs, especially under Iris Varela (now a pro-government deputy), whose tenure was marked by the marginalization of the Church's influence/role in prisons. The **Holy See** even conducted diplomatic efforts to

reverse this measure, without success. In practice, this denies both prisoners' religious freedom (to receive sacraments, guidance, or spiritual comfort) and the pastoral mission of churches, particularly affecting political prisoners who wish to see a priest.

Another affected domain is **religious communication and censorship**. Amid the broad closure of independent media, some faith-based radio stations were shut down by administrative orders. For instance, in October 2022, *Radio Paz 103.1 FM*—a community Catholic station in Portuguesa—was closed, and in December, the *Sonora 107.7 FM* station was also taken off air. These closures were part of a broader wave in 2022, during which more than 80 radio outlets were shut down—according to freedom-of-expression groups—under technical pretexts but which clearly targeted voices not aligned with the government.

The Church condemned these actions, as they hinder the Church's ability to communicate spiritual and civic messages to the faithful. Notably, in **January 2023** the **Venezuela Conference of Catholic Bishops** held its 119th Plenary Assembly, warning against the deepening of **information censorship** in Venezuela and **demanding respect for freedom of expression and worship**. Bishops emphasized that the persecution of media outlets is part of a broader pattern of repression that also affects the Church when it raises its voice.

Finally, **the security of worship sites and religious personnel** has been compromised both by de facto actions and by the State's omissions. Although many attacks on churches—such as vandalism, theft of sacred objects, and profanations—are not always directly attributable to government policy, the prevailing impunity exacerbates the situation. For example, in 2022, a series of thefts occurred in temples (such as the María Auxiliadora church in Maracay) and an evangelical pastor was murdered in Zulia in what appeared to be an extortion case.

The weakness of the rule of law and the lack of effective protection for churches, especially in the interior regions, **also constitute an indirect violation of religious freedom**, as the State fails to guarantee safe conditions for worship. Additionally, unequal provision of public services has affected religious activities: during the COVID-19 pandemic, bishops denounced discrimination in vaccination campaigns, where initially only holders of the government political ID were vaccinated, excluding many elderly persons and ecclesiastical staff serving communities. This unequal treatment based on political affiliations contravenes the principle of state neutrality in religious matters.

Responses from Independent Religious Organizations

Faced with this situation, traditional religious organizations **have intensified their defense of religious freedom and human rights in Venezuela**. The Catholic Church, through the Venezuela Conference of Catholic Bishops, maintains a firm posture of denunciation and exhortation. In January 2023, at the conclusion of their Ordinary Assembly, they issued a pastoral message urging the reconstruction of hope in the country through **sincere political dialogue**, emphasizing that such dialogue is only possible in a climate **where religious plurality and freedom of expression are**

respected. The bishops highlighted that one of the greatest aspirations of the Venezuelan people is “*to live in peace and freedom*,” which requires resolving the political crisis and **fully restoring democratic guarantees.**

In 2024, the Church’s concern heightened as they saw similarities with Nicaragua where Daniel Ortega’s government unleashed an open persecution of the Church. “*We pray and work to avoid reaching serious situations like those in other countries*,” said Monsignor Jesús González de Zárate, President of the Venezuela Conference of Catholic Bishops, in February 2025. In the pastoral exhortation “*Constructores de Esperanza*” (February 2025), Venezuelan bishops warn that they will not cease their prophetic mission of denouncing injustices and advocating for the oppressed, reaffirming that “*we aspire to conditions of freedom, work, and religious pluralism*” in Venezuela.

This determined defense of religious freedom by the Catholic Church has been accompanied by tangible measures, such as public prayers for political prisoners and calls for their release. The Bishop’s Conference has repeatedly urged the government **to grant amnesty or pardons to those detained for reasons of conscience**, reminding them that national reconciliation depends on respect for fundamental rights for all, including dissenters.

Likewise, the **independent evangelical community** has raised its voice. We have already noted the statement by the Evangelical Council of Venezuela rejecting political manipulation of faith. In 2024, the Council organized national forums and meetings to educate its churches on the importance of maintaining separation **between Church and State** and resisting partisan pressures. In an April 2022 statement (still in effect), the Evangelical Council warned that “*the Venezuelan evangelical Christians are not represented by the ‘Governmental Pastoral Councils’*” created by the Executive and **expressed concern about the inspection and mandatory census actions these councils intended to carry out on congregations.** Invoking both the Bible and the Constitution, **this body explained to its followers that no church should submit to extra-legal registration or control** and recommended documenting any coercion attempts for legal denunciation.

This proactive response by evangelicals demonstrates growing coordination among denominations to protect their freedom of worship against interference. Similarly, leaders of other religious minorities—Jews, Jehovah’s Witnesses, grassroots Christian communities—have collaborated with NGOs to document violations. For example, the Jewish community has participated in regional studies on antisemitism, and Christian congregations of various churches **contributed to independent monitoring of aggression conducted by COFAVIC between 2022 and 2023.**

International organizations dedicated to religious freedom back up these local complaints. **Aid to the Church in Need**, in its 2023 global report, classified Venezuela as a country in a **state of aggravated “discrimination” in religious matters**, attributing it primarily to the presence of “*an authoritarian government*.” ACN highlights that the government only provides aid and social benefits to those registered in its Patria system or to certain religious groups close to power, excluding others. *This*

results in unequal treatment and indirect punishment of non-aligned religious communities. The report also recognizes “*attacks on places of worship and harassment of religious leaders*” as **clear violations of religious freedom in Venezuela**, concluding that “prospects for the future remain negative” without change.

Other observatories, like the **Observatory for Religious Freedom in Latin America (OLIRE)**, have given international visibility to Venezuelan cases, publicizing, for example, the Evangelical Council’s response against the official pastoral councils. All this indicates that the Venezuelan situation has become a regional concern regarding freedom of worship.

Conclusions

Religious freedom in Venezuela, protected by the Constitution and international standards, **faces serious challenges in the current socio-political context**. While there is no declared policy of widespread religious persecution (various faiths can still hold regular rites and services), a **restrictive and hostile environment** has taken shape for faith expressions not aligned with the government. The main conclusions of this analysis are:

- **Co-optation vs. autonomy:** The government has tried to co-opt religious organizations through parallel structures (Pastoral Councils) and selective benefit programs (“Plan Buen Pastor”). This violates the principle of separation of Church and State and seeks to undermine church autonomy. Historic religious organizations—both Catholic and evangelical—have rejected these initiatives, defending their independence and denouncing the political-partisan use of religion.
- **Legal and discursive harassment:** A systematic pattern of harassment against critical religious leaders and entities is evident. This includes defamation campaigns in official media (labeling them political enemies), legal threats using ambiguous instruments like the Law Against Hate and even targeted judicial actions against priests who defend human rights. These tactics aim to **intimidate and self-censor** dissenting voices in faith communities.
- **Restriction of connected rights:** Denial of spiritual care in prisons, shutting down faith-based media outlets, and suspension of educational agreements with Catholic institutions show how related rights such as religious assistance, free expression, and social action are curtailed. These actions conflict with state obligations to enable the free exercise of religious missions for the benefit of the population.
- **Continuity of pastoral work:** Despite adversity, Venezuela’s main religious organizations have not abandoned their moral and social roles. The Catholic Church continues its prophetic denunciation of abuses and its humanitarian work with vulnerable groups—which ironically makes it a target. Similarly, evangelical,

Jewish, and other faith communities continue offering spiritual and material support, even while navigating official obstacles.

In summary, Venezuela's religious freedom is at a precarious moment: **individuals are not persecuted for their faith per se, but religious actors are targeted or discriminated against due to their independent or critical stance**. As COFAVIC noted in its 2024 report, aggression against religious institutions has **intensified in both volume and sophistication**, becoming part of a broader pattern of democratic restrictions. Fully guaranteeing religious freedom in Venezuela requires the restoration of the rule of law, **respect for civil society**, and political tolerance.

Finally, this analysis recommends that the Venezuelan State fulfill its constitutional and international obligations: **cease stigmatizing discourse against religious leaders**, repeal or reform legislation (like the Law Against Hate) used to criminalize legitimate opinions, and **respect religious organizations' autonomy** in spiritual, educational, and social activities. Likewise, international bodies and ecumenical organizations are urged to remain vigilant regarding the situation in Venezuela, supporting churches and faith communities working for peace, justice, and national reconciliation from an independent standpoint. Only through genuine commitment to freedom of conscience and religion can Venezuela move toward authentic coexistence, where each person's faith—whether majority or minority—can be expressed without fear and contribute to the common good of the country.

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