

# VENEZUELA 2013 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom. While the government respected religious freedom in many aspects, it intimidated religious groups that criticized the government. There were also instances of anti-Semitism in the government-owned and affiliated media. The government tried to limit the influence of religious groups in certain geographic, societal, and political areas.

There were reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, including anti-Semitic graffiti.

Despite efforts at dialogue, the U.S. government was not able to hold a discussion with the government on religious freedom issues because of an overall chill in the bilateral relationship. Nevertheless, the U.S. embassy maintained close contact with most religious communities.

## Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 28.5 million (July 2013 estimate). According to U.S. government estimates, 96 percent of the population is at least nominally Roman Catholic. The remaining 4 percent includes evangelical Protestants, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and Jehovah's Witnesses. The Venezuelan Evangelical Council estimates evangelical Protestants constitute approximately 17 percent of the population.

There are small but influential Muslim and Jewish communities. The Muslim community of more than 100,000 consists primarily of persons of Lebanese and Syrian descent living in Nueva Esparta state and the Caracas area. The Jewish community numbers approximately 9,000 and is centered in Caracas.

## Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

### Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion on the condition that the practice of a religion does not violate public morality, decency, or public order. Other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom.

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A 1964 concordat governs relations between the government and the Vatican and provides the basis for government subsidies to the Roman Catholic Church.

The Directorate of Justice and Religion (DJR) in the Ministry of Interior, Justice, and Peace is charged with maintaining a registry of religious groups, disbursing funds to religious organizations, and promoting awareness and understanding among religious communities. Each group must register with the DJR in order to have legal status as a religious organization. Requirements for registration are largely administrative, although religious groups are required to serve their community's social interests. Some religious groups receive funding from the government.

### Government Practices

There were instances of anti-Semitism in government-owned and government-affiliated media, and Jewish community leaders publicly expressed concern. On January 27, the government-affiliated newspaper *Diario Vea* reported that “Zionist representatives say they have been in ‘solidarity’ with President Chavez, but the day of the ‘holy innocents’ is over. Is it a political coincidence that the Zionist lobby visited Miraflores [the presidential palace] at this political moment marked by the illness of President Chavez? What are the aims of the Zionist lobby?” On March 22, an article that appeared on the government-affiliated website, *Aporrea*, entitled, “The CIA and the Mossad killed Chavez,” alleging that Zionists had infected Chavez with a cancer-causing agent.

Prior to the April 14 presidential election, there were reports of anti-Semitic expressions with regard to opposition presidential candidate Henrique Capriles Radonski, a Catholic of Jewish ancestry. An article on *Aporrea* accused Israel of working to destabilize Venezuela and accused Capriles of supporting Israel's efforts. The article asked if Capriles was a “Jew disguised as a Catholic.”

During a May 5 program on a government-owned television station, *Venezolana de Television (VTV)*, National Assembly Deputy Jesus Cepeda commented on the “great Jewish tentacles that drive international economics.” Cepeda characterized Zionism as a political vision for “world domination and control of world commerce.” On May 20, *VTV* host Mario Silva blamed Zionists for the public release of an audio recording on which Silva was heard criticizing ruling party officials.

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Several non-Catholic religious groups expressed concern over government inquiries into the use of their property. They stated they perceived this government interest as a potential precursor to expropriation of their lands or facilities.

Persons displaced by 2011 flooding continued to occupy Mormon chapels in Ocumare del Tuy and La Grita with government support. They continued to use the chapel in Ocumare del Tuy as a school after their relocation, and church members did not have access to the property. In October the displaced persons vacated the property in La Grita, giving church members access to their chapel.

All registered religious groups were eligible for funding to support religious social services, but most funding went to Catholic groups. The government continued to provide annual subsidies to Catholic schools and social programs that helped the poor. The government approved funding for the Catholic Church's governing organization, the Venezuelan Episcopal Conference, at levels reduced from previous years, but did not disburse funds during the year. Other religious groups were free to establish their own schools but did not receive government subsidies.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

There were reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

In April vandals painted anti-Semitic graffiti on the outer wall of the Beit Shmuel synagogue in Caracas. The graffiti included swastikas and "SS." Pre-election graffiti in Caracas described opposition presidential candidate Capriles as "Jewish pig Capriles," and other graffiti spelled Capriles' name with the "s" depicted as a swastika.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

It was not possible to conduct a dialogue with the government on religious freedom issues because of an overall chill in the bilateral relationship. DJR officials did not respond to the U.S. embassy's request for a meeting. The embassy maintained close contact with most religious communities and regularly met with religious leaders.