

# VENEZUELA

Violations of freedom of religion or belief continue in Venezuela. These violations include the government's failure to investigate and hold accountable perpetrators of attacks on religious leaders and houses of worship and virulent rhetoric from President Hugo Chavez, government officials, state media, and pro-Chavez media directed at Jewish and Catholic communities in Venezuela. Based on these concerns, USCIRF again places Venezuela on its Watch List in 2012. Venezuela has been on USCIRF's Watch List since 2009.

## Background

Since 1998, there has been a steady increase of government rhetoric, and sometimes government actions, against Venezuela's Jewish and Catholic communities, creating an environment in which Jewish and Catholic religious leaders and institutions are vulnerable to attack. These developments occurred against a backdrop of efforts by President Chavez to extend political control over the economy, NGOs, and society, as well as his backtracking on democracy and human rights. The Constitution of Venezuela provides for freedom of religion on the condition that its practice does not violate public morality, decency, or public order. There are no official restrictions on religious practice. Religious groups are required to register with the Directorate of Justice and Religion (DJR) in the Ministry of Interior and Justice. Venezuela granted every group's registration request in the past few years.

National laws passed within the previous few years allow for the creation of ruling-party-dominated "communal councils" to oversee the curriculum, teachers, and school administrators of all public and private schools, including religious schools, as well as the confiscation of Catholic Church property, including churches, schools, and other ecclesiastical buildings. A draft law in the National Assembly would require all NGOs, including religious groups that receive at least 10 percent of funding from foreign sources, to obtain advanced government approval of their activities and funding sources and provide the government with information on their sources of funding, organizational leadership, and activities.

## Religious Freedom Conditions

The government of Venezuela has not brought to justice the perpetrators of egregious attacks against Jews and Christians, continues to promote anti-Semitic conspiracies in state media, and seeks to diminish the influence of the Catholic Church.

**Impunity:** In a positive development, authorities sentenced six individuals to 10 years in prison for the vandalism and desecration of the Tiferet Israel Synagogue in January 2009. The trial for the five other individuals detained for this incident began on July 15, 2011 and is ongoing. However, no investigations or arrests have been initiated in response to tear gas canisters being thrown into the Apostolic Nunciature, also in January 2009, although a pro-government organization, "La Piedrita," publicly took credit for that attack as well as earlier ones against the Nunciature. In addition, no arrests or prosecutions have occurred in response to the following 2009 attacks: the forcible entry and occupation by President Chavez's supporters of the residence of the Archbishop of Caracas, the vandalism of the Beth Shmuel synagogue, or the robbery and vandalism of the Ibrahim al-Ibrahim mosque.

**Anti-Semitism:** Government officials, state media and pro-government media continue to make anti-Semitic statements, especially around important international events regarding Israel and the Middle East. For instance, speaking in support of Palestinian statehood at the UN, President Chavez in September 2011 again called Israel a "genocidal state." In past years, Jewish institutions had been vandalized and individual Jews threatened following such statements. The Jewish community in Venezuela continues to believe that they will be held responsible for actions taken by the Israeli government and statements by the President leave them vulnerable to attack.

As the October 2012 presidential election approaches, some fear an increase in anti-Semitic statements and possible attacks on the Jewish community. While the opposition candidate Henrique Capriles Radonski was raised as a Roman Catholic, he is the grandson of Polish Jews who fled Nazi persecution and his great-grandparents were killed in the Treblinka concentration camp. Within a week of Capriles' selection in February 2012, state-run Radio Nacional de Venezuela posted on its website a column calling him a supporter of "international Zionism" that included a number of traditional anti-Semitic themes and conspiracies. A state-run newspaper also published a cartoon depicting Capriles wearing a swastika and a mob formed in front of a Caracas synagogue until the police broke it up. Capriles also faced

anti-Semitic attacks when he ran for governor in 2008. In the past, the Jewish community center in Caracas has been attacked during important political events.

The Venezuelan Jewish community has expressed concern about the diplomatic, military, financial, and trade ties between Venezuela and Iran, and the growing relationship between President Chavez and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

***Government-Catholic Church Tensions:*** President Chavez views the Catholic Church as a potential threat to his power given that more than 90 percent of Venezuelans are Catholic. During the past year, the government began wiretapping the telephones of some Catholic leaders; expropriated some Catholic schools and community centers; and prohibited church representatives from visiting prisoners for humanitarian or spiritual purposes.

President Chavez and his supporters often try to use the state media to discredit the Catholic Church and its leaders' criticisms of government actions. Such government statements decreased in 2011.

### **Recommendations for U.S. Policy**

U.S.-Venezuelan relations remained poor during the past year, after deteriorating in late 2010 when President Chavez refused to accept the U.S. Ambassador to Venezuela, Larry Palmer. Currently there is no U.S. Ambassador to Venezuela. Issues about President Chavez's health further complicate the relationship. USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government take a number of critical steps to advance religious freedom in Venezuela through key programs and policies and through multilateral efforts. USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government:

- Increase its efforts to promote freedom of religion or belief in Venezuela, stress the importance of holding accountable perpetrators of attacks on religious institutions, and continue to speak out against attacks on religious leaders and institutions when they occur;
- Speak out publicly at the highest levels and continue to draw international attention to state-sponsored anti-Semitism and to recently intensified efforts to pressure and silence the Catholic Church in Venezuela;
- Work with countries such as Brazil and Argentina that have influence with the Venezuelan government to encourage it to stop making anti-Semitic statements, fully investigate attacks on religious communities, institutions and leaders, and hold perpetrators accountable; and
- Work with the Organization of American States (OAS), including the OAS General Assembly and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, to investigate and condemn religious freedom violations in Venezuela, including attacks on religious communities, institutions, and leaders.

**Please see USCIRF's 2012 Annual Report for a more extensive review and recommendations on Venezuela.**