

## 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 the Venezuelan Jewish and Catholic communities. 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 in some cases government actions, against the Venezuelan 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 Hugo Chavez to extend political control over the economy, nongovernmental organizations, and society, as well as his backtracking on democracy and respect for 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, and no groups were refused registration in the past few years.

National laws passed within the past 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 non-governmental organizations, 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 sponsor anti-Semitism, and seeks to diminish the influence of the Catholic Church.

**Impunity:** In a positive development, six persons were sentenced to 10 years in prison for the vandalism and desecration of the Tiferet Israel Synagogue in January 2009. The trial for the five other persons detained for this incident began on July 15, 2011. 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 attacks in 2009: the forcible entry and occupation of the residence of the Archbishop of Caracas by President Chavez's

supporters, the vandalism of the Beth Shmuel synagogue, or the robbery and vandalism of the Ibrahim al-Ibrahim mosque.

***Anti-Semitism:*** 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, in September, in support of Palestine seeking statehood at the United Nations, President Chavez again called Israel a “genocidal state.” In past years, Jewish institutions were 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 such statements by the President leave them vulnerable to attack.

As the October 2012 presidential election approaches, some fear an increase of anti-Semitic statements and possible attacks on the Jewish community. Henrique Capriles Radonski, the opposition candidate, was raised as a Roman Catholic but 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” and including a number of traditional anti-Semitic themes and conspiracies; a state-run newspaper published a cartoon depicting Capriles wearing a swastika; and a mob formed in front of a Caracas synagogue until it was broken up by the police. There also were anti-Semitic attacks on Capriles 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 also 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:*** Given that more than 90 percent of Venezuelans are Catholic, the Catholic Church is a large and influential entity in Venezuela, and therefore is viewed as a potential threat to President Chavez. In this reporting period, 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 missions.

President Chavez and his supporters often try to discredit the Catholic Church and its leaders in the state media to counter the church’s 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. Issues about President Chavez’s health 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;
- Work with countries such as Brazil and Argentina that have influence with the Venezuelan government to encourage it to stop making anti-Semitic statements, investigate attacks on religious communities, institutions and leaders fully, and hold perpetrators accountable;
- 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; and
- Work with the Organization of American States, 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.