

OTHER COUNTRIES AND REGIONS MONITORED: VENEZUELA

USCIRF placed Venezuela on its Watch List in 2009 due to concerns about increasing anti-Semitism and government actions targeting the Catholic Church because of its political statements. While conditions for both the Jewish community and Catholic leadership have improved, concerns remain and the gains are reversible. With the passing of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez on March 5, 2013 and a new president, Venezuela has an opportunity to continue to improve the religious freedom climate and to combat anti-Semitism and intolerance. USCIRF will continue to follow religious freedom conditions in Venezuela in the upcoming year and closely monitor whether anti-Semitic statements are made by government officials or in state media, as well as whether relations between the government and Catholic Church backslide.

ANTI-SEMITISM

Between 1998 and 2009, thousands of Jews fled the country due to increased anti-Semitism, the negative political and economic results of the president's socialist agenda, or some combination of both. The State Department reports that the Jewish population today is estimated to be 12,000, down from an estimated 22,000 in 1998. Prior to President Chavez's rule, Venezuela was not known to have problems with anti-Semitism; rather it enjoyed a reputation of welcoming Jews during and after the Holocaust.

For many years, President Chavez, government officials, government-controlled media, and President Chavez's supporters frequently espoused anti-Semitic statements and Jewish conspiracy theories. The American Jewish Committee (AJC) and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) noted a pattern of this anti-Semitism between 2006 and 2010 where the actions of the state of Israel were conflated with Venezuelan Jews, who were then blamed for Israel's policies. During this period, President Chavez and other senior government officials harshly criticized the actions of Israel, often crossing the line into anti-Semitism. For instance, at different times between 2006 and 2010, the President compared the actions of Israel to the Nazis. President Chavez and other government officials also blamed Israel and Jews for the world's problems and promoted stereotypes of Jewish financial influence and control. Government media and pro-Chavez private media echoed these anti-Semitic sentiments in cartoons and opinion pieces, on state radio programs, and in rallies. Furthermore, anti-Semitic cartoons and graffiti equating the Star of David with a swastika were graffitied on synagogues during these time periods.

La Confederación de Asociaciones Israelitas de Venezuela (CAIV), the Venezuelan Jewish community's umbrella organization, reports that beginning in 2011 anti-Semitic statements made by government officials and in state media have dramatically declined, although they have not entirely ceased. Much of the decline followed a September 2010 meeting between President Chavez and Jewish community representatives, during which these representatives presented him with a dossier of anti-Semitic statements in state media. The improvement, noted the AJC, also followed statements by Cuba leader Fidel Castro, President Chavez's mentor, against Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's denials of the Holocaust, saying, "I don't think anyone has been slandered more than the Jews."

There was, however, an increase in political rhetoric and cartoons that was considered anti-Semitic in 2012, according to CAIV and the ADL. The statements were directed against Henrique Capriles Radonski, the opposition candidate in the October 2012 presidential elections. Capriles 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 pro-Chavez mob formed in front of a Caracas synagogue until it was broken up by the police. These incidents were the most serious of the entire campaign, and unlike when Capriles successfully ran for governor in 2008,

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there were no attacks on his home. Capriles again is running for president in elections to replace President Chavez following his death in March 2013.

The last attack on the Venezuelan Jewish community occurred on January 30, 2009, when 15 masked men overran security guards, broke into, and vandalized the Tiferet Israel synagogue in Caracas. President Chavez publicly condemned the synagogue attack the next day, and the foreign minister and communications minister met with Jewish leaders. Following an international outcry, 11 individuals, including the bodyguard to a rabbi at the synagogue and eight intelligence officers, were arrested on suspected involvement in the attacks. U.S. Embassy Caracas reports that by mid-2012, 7 of the 11 men had been sentenced to 10 years in prison. There have been no further reported synagogue attacks, and the government has provided synagogues and the La Hebraica community center with security during the high holidays and during important Middle Eastern events.

GOVERNMENT AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH RELATIONSHIP

For many years, there were strong tensions and exchanges of heated rhetoric between President Chavez and Catholic Church leaders in response to the Church's vocal criticism of the President's undemocratic record.

2012 saw an ease of tension between the President Chavez and the Venezuelan Catholic Church and some rapprochement. President Chavez expressed more religious belief in response to his battle with cancer and sought increased spiritual guidance from Catholic religious leaders. Additionally, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) reports that the new leadership of the Venezuelan Episcopal Conference has decided to be less publicly critical, as it has found it more productive to quietly work with the government for reforms. Rhetoric between the two already started decreasing in 2011.

While no arrests have been made in response to the 2008 and 2009 "La Piedrita" attacks on the Apostolic Nunciature, President Chavez in January 2009 did condemn the attack and no further incidents have reportedly occurred. Similarly, the USCCB does not report any instances in 2012 of pro-Chavez groups or individuals interrupting Catholic masses with pro-Chavez and anti-Catholic statements.