

World  
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Research

# Venezuela: Full Country Dossier

March 2024



**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

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# Introduction

## World Watch List 2024

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	12.8	96	98	96	94	94
2	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	10.6	93	92	91	92	92
3	Libya	15.9	16.0	15.9	16.1	16.4	10.2	91	88	91	92	90
4	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.7	12.8	89	89	88	88	87
5	Yemen	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	5.9	89	89	88	87	85
6	Nigeria	13.5	13.9	14.5	14.9	14.4	16.7	88	88	87	85	80
7	Pakistan	13.2	13.9	15.0	15.1	13.1	16.7	87	86	87	88	88
8	Sudan	14.1	14.2	14.9	14.9	15.5	13.3	87	83	79	79	85
9	Iran	15.0	14.6	13.5	15.8	16.5	10.9	86	86	85	86	85
10	Afghanistan	15.7	15.9	15.2	16.3	16.6	4.6	84	84	98	94	93
11	India	12.2	12.6	13.3	14.8	13.2	16.5	83	82	82	83	83
12	Syria	13.4	14.3	13.9	14.3	14.2	11.1	81	80	78	81	82
13	Saudi Arabia	15.2	15.3	14.8	15.7	16.6	3.3	81	80	81	78	79
14	Mali	11.1	10.1	14.7	12.8	15.1	15.6	79	76	70	67	66
15	Algeria	14.4	14.1	11.5	14.0	15.6	9.8	79	73	71	70	73
16	Iraq	14.2	14.4	14.0	14.8	13.9	7.8	79	76	78	82	76
17	Myanmar	12.2	10.6	13.4	13.7	13.0	16.1	79	80	79	74	73
18	Maldives	15.6	15.5	13.6	16.0	16.4	0.9	78	77	77	77	78
19	China	13.0	10.0	12.8	14.6	16.0	11.1	78	77	76	74	70
20	Burkina Faso	11.7	9.7	13.2	11.5	13.8	15.6	75	71	68	67	66
21	Laos	11.6	10.6	13.2	14.3	14.0	11.3	75	68	69	71	72
22	Cuba	13.2	8.7	13.8	13.3	15.1	8.7	73	70	66	62	52
23	Mauritania	14.6	14.2	13.8	14.2	14.2	1.3	72	72	70	71	68
24	Morocco	13.2	13.8	11.7	12.8	14.4	5.4	71	69	69	67	66
25	Uzbekistan	14.6	12.7	13.9	12.6	15.5	1.7	71	71	71	71	73
26	Bangladesh	12.4	10.6	12.5	10.8	10.4	14.1	71	69	68	67	63
27	Niger	9.4	9.6	14.5	7.7	13.1	15.9	70	70	68	62	60
28	CAR	10.3	8.6	13.9	9.6	12.2	15.6	70	70	68	66	68
29	Turkmenistan	14.2	12.3	13.6	13.9	15.5	0.6	70	70	69	70	70
30	Nicaragua	12.1	7.6	13.2	13.2	14.1	9.6	70	65	56	51	41
31	Oman	14.3	14.0	10.6	13.3	14.0	3.1	69	65	66	63	62
32	Ethiopia	9.9	9.7	12.6	10.4	12.1	14.4	69	66	66	65	63
33	Tunisia	12.3	13.2	10.2	12.4	13.8	6.9	69	67	66	67	64
34	Colombia	11.1	8.6	12.9	11.3	10.4	14.1	68	71	68	67	62
35	Vietnam	11.3	9.4	12.4	13.8	14.2	7.2	68	70	71	72	72
36	Bhutan	13.1	12.1	12.4	14.1	14.3	2.2	68	66	67	64	61
37	Mexico	11.5	8.5	12.5	11.1	10.6	14.1	68	67	65	64	60
38	Egypt	12.5	13.7	11.4	11.9	10.9	7.8	68	68	71	75	76
39	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	13.9	8.4	12.5	15.0	68	68	65	63	43
40	Qatar	14.2	14.2	10.5	13.2	14.4	0.6	67	68	74	67	66
41	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	13.0	15.9	67	67	66	64	56
42	Indonesia	10.9	12.3	11.5	10.2	9.7	11.5	66	68	68	63	60
43	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	8.0	13.1	15.9	66	65	65	64	60
44	Brunei	15.0	14.7	10.0	10.8	14.1	1.3	66	65	64	64	63
45	Comoros	12.7	14.0	11.2	12.4	14.2	1.1	66	66	63	62	57
46	Tajikistan	13.8	12.6	12.3	12.9	13.4	0.6	66	66	65	66	65
47	Kazakhstan	13.3	11.8	12.1	12.8	14.3	1.1	65	65	64	64	64
48	Jordan	12.9	14.2	10.5	12.4	12.8	2.2	65	65	66	64	64
49	Malaysia	13.0	14.1	11.5	12.2	11.1	2.4	64	66	63	63	62
50	Turkey	13.0	11.5	11.6	13.2	11.4	3.1	64	66	65	69	63

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020
51	Kenya	10.3	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	12.4	63	64	63	62	61
52	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	14.4	62	63	61	58	55
53	Nepal	12.1	10.4	9.5	13.2	12.3	4.4	62	61	64	66	64
54	Kuwait	13.1	13.6	9.4	12.0	12.2	0.9	61	64	64	63	62
55	Djibouti	12.3	12.6	12.7	10.1	12.3	1.1	61	60	59	56	56
56	Chad	11.6	8.2	10.2	10.2	10.3	10.6	61	58	55	53	56
57	UAE	13.3	13.4	9.5	11.3	12.8	0.7	61	62	62	62	60
58	Sri Lanka	12.9	9.2	10.8	11.5	9.7	5.9	60	57	63	62	65
59	Azerbaijan	13.2	9.9	9.6	11.9	13.6	1.7	60	59	60	56	57
60	Palestinian Territories	13.1	13.3	9.7	10.7	12.1	0.9	60	60	59	58	60
61	Kyrgyzstan	13.2	10.3	11.3	10.5	12.2	1.3	59	59	58	58	57
62	Russian Federation	12.7	7.7	10.6	12.8	12.9	1.7	58	57	56	57	60
63	Rwanda	9.4	7.7	9.0	10.4	11.7	9.4	58	57	50	42	42
64	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.4	9.8	9.7	12.8	57	55	52	48	48
65	Bahrain	12.0	13.2	8.6	11.3	8.5	1.1	55	55	57	56	55
66	Honduras	7.9	4.7	12.2	7.3	9.9	12.6	55	53	48	46	39
67	Venezuela	6.0	4.4	11.1	10.0	10.8	10.7	53	56	51	39	42
68	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	11.0	8.9	52	49	44	43	41
69	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	8.3	10.5	7.2	52	48	43	47	45
70	Uganda	8.1	5.0	7.4	6.7	8.8	15.9	52	51	48	47	48
71	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	11.5	11.4	7.2	52	52	51	46	43
72	Lebanon	11.0	10.2	7.0	6.1	6.6	7.2	48	40	35	34	35
73	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.9	8.8	8.9	3.7	47	44	44	43	43
74	South Sudan	5.7	4.4	7.0	6.3	7.6	15.6	46	46	43	43	44
75	Belarus	9.6	3.8	5.8	9.7	13.3	3.3	46	43	33	30	28
76	Ivory Coast	12.0	6.5	8.7	5.9	8.0	3.3	44	44	42	42	42
77	Ukraine	5.5	4.8	8.0	11.6	11.6	2.8	44	37	37	34	33
78	Israel	9.8	8.6	5.8	6.3	6.9	6.7	44	38	41	40	38

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## Sources and definitions

- This country report is a collation of data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and includes statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD).
- Highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”. In order to reduce the length of these reference sections, a table containing links to regularly used sources can be found at the beginning of the “Keys to Understanding” chapter under the heading “Links for general background information”. Where one of these sources has been quoted in the dossier text, a quote reference is supplied as indicated in the second column of the table.
- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.
- The latest update of WWL Methodology can be found on the research pages of the Open Doors website: <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-documentation/> and on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom): <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>.

# WWL 2024 Situation in brief / Venezuela

## Brief country details

Venezuela: Population (UN estimate for 2023)	Christians	Chr%
30,017,000	27,445,000	91.4

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

## Map of country



Venezuela: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	53	67
WWL 2023	56	64
WWL 2022	51	65
WWL 2021	39	-
WWL 2020	42	69

## Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Venezuela:	
Main persecution engines	Main drivers
Dictatorial paranoia	Government officials, Political parties, Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs
Communist and post-Communist oppression	Government officials, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, Political parties, Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups
Organized corruption and crime	Government officials, Political parties, Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups, Organized crime cartels or networks

*Engines and Drivers are listed in order of strength. Only Very strong / Strong / Medium are shown here.*

### Brief description of the persecution situation

The authorities do not allow government opposition or criticism. This means that church leaders, Christian groups and Christian organizations risk government action against them if:

- their religious activities involve denouncing irregularities and illegalities of the regime (including corruption, lack of democratic practices, and human rights violations);
- they support opposition leaders;
- they carry out humanitarian work.

Government action can include threats, church attacks, defamation, arbitrary arrests, surveillance, censorship, restricted use of public services, and lack of access to goods such as food and medicine. Due to the socio-economic crisis in the country, the government takes advantage of the lack of basic goods and services needed by all citizens in order to manipulate them. Easy access to food, medicine and education is reserved for supporters of the ruling party. Christians have also faced threats and violence carried out by criminal groups (mainly Colombian guerrillas) acting with impunity (often in support of the regime) and hindering the humanitarian assistance provided by churches to the neediest.

### Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

- **April 2023, Zulia:** A local criminal gang has been intimidating a community church by cutting power cables and throwing excrement. Church leaders have been working with children and youth which is viewed as hindering criminal group recruitment in the area. (Source: Open Doors research)
- **March 2023, Miranda:** Evangelical pastor Jondri Cedillo (42) of the United Pentecostal Church of Venezuela, was [killed](#) by two men who were possibly attempting to abduct him (Impacto Venezuela, 30 March 2023).
- **October 2022, Zulia:** The National Telecommunications Commission (CONATEL) ordered the closure of at least four evangelical Christian radio stations in the opposition-held municipality of Cabimas in Zulia State: Renuevo, Celestial, Jerusalen, and Gilgal Estereo (US State Department IRFR 2022 Venezuela).

## Specific examples of positive developments

Looking ahead to the 2024 presidential elections, some signs of apparent openness on the part of the Venezuelan government have become visible. Even though dialogue with the opposition stalled during the WWL 2024 reporting period, it is expected that talks will resume before the opposition primaries.

According to a recent survey, there is a [greater](#) number of population intending to vote for the primary and presidential elections than previously. This could help towards improving the quality of the electoral process in the country. (El Ucabista, 13 October 2023)

With the country in a state of crisis, churches continue to be seen as a source of hope and stability in the eyes of many citizens, particularly where help is brought to those [most in need](#) (Noticia Cristiana, 31 July 2022).

## External Links - Situation in brief

- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: killed - <https://impactovenueza.com/cicpc-investiga-homicidio-de-pastor-evangelico-en-el-este-de-caracas/>
- Specific examples of positive developments: greater - <https://elucabista.com/2023/10/13/mas-de-60-estaria-dispuesta-a-votar-en-las-primarias-segun-estudio-de-delfos-y-cepyg-ucab/>
- Specific examples of positive developments: most in need - <https://www.noticiacristiana.com/latam/2022/07/iglesias-venezuela-ayudan-gente-vertedero-basura.html>

# WWL 2024: Keys to understanding / Venezuela

## Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
Amnesty International 2022/23 country report – covering 156 countries	AI Venezuela 2022	<a href="https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/americas/south-america/venezuela/report-venezuela/">https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/americas/south-america/venezuela/report-venezuela/</a>	5 September 2023
BBC News Venezuela country profile - updated 2 June 2023	BBC Venezuela country profile	<a href="https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-19649648">https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-19649648</a>	5 September 2023
Bertelsmann Transformation Index country report 2022 – covering 137 countries	BTI Venezuela report 2022	<a href="https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/VEN">https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/VEN</a>	5 September 2023
Crisis24 Venezuela report (Garda World)	Crisis24 Venezuela report	<a href="https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/venezuela">https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/venezuela</a>	5 September 2023
Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index 2022 – covering 167 countries	EIU Democracy Index - Latin America pp.40-45	<a href="https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/DI-final-version-report.pdf">https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/DI-final-version-report.pdf</a>	5 September 2023
FFP's Fragile States Index 2023 – covering 179 countries	FSI 2023 Venezuela	<a href="https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/">https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/</a>	5 September 2023
Freedom House's 2023 Democracy index – covering 29 countries, Venezuela not included	Democracy Index 2023	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores">https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores</a>	
Freedom House's 2023 Global Freedom index – covering 210 countries	Global Freedom Index 2023 Venezuela	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/country/venezuela/freedom-world/2023">https://freedomhouse.org/country/venezuela/freedom-world/2023</a>	5 September 2023
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2023 report – covering 70 countries	Freedom on the Net 2023 Venezuela	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/country/venezuela/freedom-net/2023">https://freedomhouse.org/country/venezuela/freedom-net/2023</a>	6 March 2024
Georgetown's Women, Peace and Security Index 2021/2022 – covering 170 countries	GIWPS 2021 Venezuela	<a href="https://giwps.georgetown.edu/country/venezuela/">https://giwps.georgetown.edu/country/venezuela/</a>	5 September 2023
Girls Not Brides Venezuela country report	Girls Not Brides Venezuela	<a href="https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/venezuela/">https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/venezuela/</a>	5 September 2023
Human Rights Watch World Report 2023 - Venezuela country chapter	HRW 2023 Venezuela country chapter	<a href="https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/venezuela">https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/venezuela</a>	5 September 2023
Internet World Stats 2023 Venezuela	IWS 2023 Sri Lanka	<a href="https://www.internetworldstats.com/south.htm#ve">https://www.internetworldstats.com/south.htm#ve</a>	5 September 2023
RSF's 2023 World Press Freedom Index – covering 180 countries	World Press Freedom 2023 Venezuela	<a href="https://rsf.org/en/country/venezuela">https://rsf.org/en/country/venezuela</a>	5 September 2023
Transparency International's 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index – covering 180 countries	CPI 2022 Venezuela	<a href="https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022/index/ven">https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022/index/ven</a>	5 September 2023
UNDP Human Development Report Venezuela - Data updates as of 8 September 2022	UNDP HDR Venezuela	<a href="https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data/#countries/VEN">https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data/#countries/VEN</a>	5 September 2023
US State Department's 2022 International Religious Freedom Report Venezuela	IRFR 2022 Venezuela	<a href="https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/venezuela/">https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/venezuela/</a>	5 September 2023
USCIRF 2022 country reports – covering 17 CPC / 11 SWL, Venezuela not included	USCIRF 2023	<a href="https://www.uscifr.gov/countries">https://www.uscifr.gov/countries</a>	
World Bank Macro Poverty Outlook April 2023 - Venezuela not included	Macro Poverty Outlook 2023	<a href="https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/macro-poverty-outlook/mpo_jac">https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/macro-poverty-outlook/mpo_jac</a>	
World Bank Venezuela data - 2021	World Bank Venezuela data	<a href="https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfileId=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncountry=VEN">https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfileId=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncountry=VEN</a>	5 September 2023
World Bank Venezuela overview	World Bank Venezuela overview	<a href="https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/venezuela/overview">https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/venezuela/overview</a>	5 September 2023
World Factbook Venezuela - updated 29 August 2023	World Factbook Venezuela	<a href="https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/venezuela/">https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/venezuela/</a>	5 September 2023



## Recent history

In 1998, Hugo Chavez was elected president of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. His 'Bolivarian Revolution' brought a new Constitution, along with socialist and populist economic and social policies funded by high oil prices, and an increasingly anti-USA foreign policy. Shortly after taking power, he revised the Constitution to extend his power for “fulfilling” his promise of a radical transformation of the country. He appointed a new Congress, a new National Electoral Council and a new Supreme Court. He ruled for 14 years, from 1999 until his death in 2013. Nicolás Maduro, Chavez's right-hand man and former vice-president, took over the presidency in 2013.

The May 2018 presidential election for the period 2019-2025 was won by Maduro and his United Socialist Party of Venezuela. Due to various irregularities identified by independent observers and the opposition, the legitimacy of the process was [questioned](#) both nationally and internationally (NPR, 21 May 2018). The National Assembly - the only major institution controlled by the opposition (until the end of 2020) declared the re-election invalid and in January 2019, Juan Guaidó, the president of the National Assembly [proclaimed](#) himself to be "president in charge" (Insider, 23 June 2019). His goal was not only to overthrow Nicolás Maduro, but also to install a transitional government and allow free elections. However, despite broad international support, Juan Guaidó did not wield much power in practical terms and he was hampered by apparent involvement in corruption scandals and a general lack of transparency in the handling of Venezuelan assets abroad. In December 2022, the opposition legislature voted to [end](#) the interim government, with which Guaidó ceased to be the face of the opposition in the country (France 24, 31 December 2022).

In December 2020, Maduro [regained](#) control of the National Assembly through legislative elections boycotted by the opposition parties (AA, 7 December 2020). In November 2021, Venezuela's National Electoral Council announced that the ruling Socialist party had [won](#) in twenty of the twenty three governorships (BBC News, 22 November 2021).

Like most countries in the region, the first cases of COVID-19 were identified in the country in March 2020, which led to the declaration of a state of emergency and various restrictions on movement. Collectives and the security forces used “[any means necessary](#)” (including violent abuse and other human rights violations) against those they accused of violating national lockdown measures (Reuters, 7 August 2020).

In June 2023, the president of Iran, Ebrahim Raisi, [visited](#) Venezuela, Nicaragua and Cuba. Some analysts think the purpose was to strengthen ties with other authoritarian governments in order to present a united front against the USA (Voz de América, 20 June 2023).

At the end of the WWL 2024 reporting period, [tensions](#) between Guyana and Venezuela rose concerning the exploitation of oil fields in disputed waters of the Caribbean Sea (El Espectador, 22 September 2023).

## Political and legal landscape

In August 2022, an IPSOS survey on the perception of government management showed that President Maduro only reached a [5%](#) approval rating in the region. Others with very low ratings were Pedro Castillo in Peru and Miguel Díaz-Canel in Cuba (IPSOS, August 2022). According to the World Leaders Ranking prepared by Mitofsky, four American presidents had popularity ratings of [less than 20%](#), among them, Nicolás Maduro (Mitofsky, June 2023). This shows that the average citizen does not feel satisfactorily represented by either Maduro or the opposition.

Observers concur that Nicolás Maduro consolidated power by undermining democracy and the rule of law: His political party, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) took control of the National Assembly, the last independent branch of government, in January 2021. The PSUV and its allies [won](#) 256 out of 277 congressional seats in flawed elections held in December 2020 (BBC News, 5 January 2021). [Regional elections](#) were then held on 21 November 2021. The Venezuelan Episcopal Conference [issued](#) a statement to the population, encouraging everyone to go to the polls and - if they wanted to see change - to consider each candidate carefully before casting their vote (Conferencia Episcopal de Venezuela, 17 November 2021). Nevertheless, the ruling Socialist party won control of twenty of the twenty-three governorships. This means that only three governorships belong to opposition politicians (AS, 22 November 2021). The authorities [denied](#) visa extensions for electoral observers from the European Union and required them to leave the country (Reuters, 3 December 2021).

The next presidential elections are scheduled for 28 July 2024. In 2022, the president hinted that free elections would be [conditional](#) on the lifting of international sanctions (El País, 30 November 2022). Civil society organizations have pointed out various [maneuvers](#) that endanger the legitimacy and transparency of the upcoming electoral process (HRW, 6 July 2023). The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) [condemned](#) the restrictions on the right to political participation and freedom of association of opposition candidates and activists demanding the respect of human rights in Venezuela (IACHR, 14 July 2023). Likewise, it has rejected recent decisions made by the Supreme Court of Justice which [interfere](#) in the running of the Communist Party of Venezuela (PCV), which opposes the government coalition and several legislative initiatives (IACHR, 21 August 2023).

Juan Guaidó had previously appeared in recent years as Maduro's main political rival; however, the opposition deputies of the National Assembly elected in 2015 approved the reform of the so-called Transition to Democracy Statute and this meant an [end](#) to the existence and purpose of the so-called "interim presidency" (El País, 30 December 2022). In 2023, the members of the National Electoral Council (CNE) [resigned](#) and it is now up to the National Assembly, with an official majority, to name the new members (DW, 20 June 2023). Given the lack of technical support of the CNE, the opposition parties created the National Primary Commission, which is in charge of [independently](#) organizing the primary elections of the opposition. On 22 October 2023 Maria Corina Machado won the primary held last year by the opposition faction known as the Unitary Platform, which is backed by the USA (El País, 5 March 2024). She had been [disqualified](#) from holding public office for 15 years, accused of irregularities in her mandate as a deputy (BBC News, 30 June 2023).

The [2022 annual report](#) of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights highlighted that after years of interference, particularly in the justice system, the Executive Power continues to monopolize all the public powers of the state. As a consequence, the institutions of the national public level operate primarily to guarantee the permanence of the government party in power and not to promote and protect human rights (IACHR, April 2023). This situation did not improve during 2023. On the contrary, once again there were measures applied aiming to obstruct a legitimate and transparent electoral process.

Due to the democratic crisis, in 2021 [various rounds of negotiations were begun](#) between the political opposition (Unitary Platform) and the Venezuelan government. During the fifth round of negotiations in Barbados in October 2023 the parties agreed on a joint statement and signed two partial agreements (Government of Norway, last updated 1 December 2023).

To [quash](#) dissent, President Maduro has made use of both the security forces and corrupt courts. His government has rewarded allies, particularly in the security forces, by allowing them to earn income from illegal gold mining, drug trafficking and other illicit activities. As a result, security forces have detained and abused Maduro's opponents, including military officers, politicians, and civic leaders (Congressional Research Service, 7 August 2023). The Center for Justice and Peace documented approximately 36 acts of persecution and criminalization exercised by the government of Nicolás Maduro in its determination to stay in power (CEPAZ, May 2023). Such violations are possible because of the repressive legal system, examples of which are listed below:

- i. *The “Law against Hate for Peaceful Coexistence and Tolerance”*: This law aims to quash dissent by [limiting](#) freedom of speech. Faith-based criticism of the government is also targeted (Albaciudad, November 2017).
- ii. *Administrative Ruling ONCDOFT-001-2021*: This obliges national and foreign non-profit organizations (NGOs) active in Venezuela to enter details in a special registry, [revealing](#) not only all donor organizations and their beneficiaries, but also personal information concerning their members (BDO, 17 May, 2021). Church leaders and confessional organizations have expressed concern since members or activities perceived as opposing the interests of the government may be sanctioned.
- iii. *Law of Transparency and Access to Information of Public Interest*: It is presented as a [law](#) in order to guarantee the exercise of the right of access to information of public interest, however the wording is ambiguous, leaving it to the discretion of local authorities to determine what information does or does not generate a threat to public order or the state.
- iv. *Reform of the Organic Law of the Supreme Court of Justice*: This [reform](#) reduced the number of judges in the Supreme Court from 32 to 20 and failed to prohibit the reelection of magistrates whose terms are about to expire (Gaceta Oficial, 19 January 2022).
- v. *The [draft](#) bill “The International Cooperation Law Project”*: This seeks to redefine international cooperation in the country and criminalize civil society organizations for receiving foreign funds when their activities are not aligned with the interests of the regime (Derechos digitales, 3 June 2022).
- vi. *[Law](#) on supervision, regularization, performance and financing of non-governmental and related organizations*: This law, in addition to limiting the activities that can be carried out by organizations, grants state authorities the power to unilaterally dissolve those that par-

ticipate in activities that could impact national stability in some way (Provea, August 2023).

vii. In the WWL 2024 reporting period, Nicolás Maduro [promulgated](#) the Law for the Protection of Assets, Rights and Interests of the Republic and its Entities Abroad. The objective is to protect the nation's assets and also guarantee the people of Venezuela immediate justice with respect to "the embargo made by the United States" (MPPRE, 22 May 2023).

According to Freedom House's Global Freedom Index 2023 Venezuela (C1): "The Maduro regime has become increasingly dependent on economic, medical, military, and other assistance from foreign allies, particularly the governments of Russia, Cuba, Turkey and Iran." To remain in power, it is therefore interested in strengthening relations with those countries: For instance, MSN news reported on 19 August 2022, that "[soldiers' olympic games](#)" had been staged in Venezuela for army members from Russia and other countries hostile to the USA. In addition, Maduro [signed](#) a 20-year cooperation agreement with Iran in June 2022, in which he ceded one million hectares of farmland ostensibly for Iranian food production, in what has been called a test of "indestructible friendship" between the two countries (Perfil, 26 July 2022).

The bloc referred to as the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA) includes Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua. In May 2022, it issued a [statement](#) rejecting "the exclusions and discriminatory treatment at the so-called 'Summit of the Americas in Los Angeles'" held in Los Angeles after the USA made it clear that it only wanted leaders of governments that respect democracy to attend (Reuters, 27 May 2022). Since September 2022, with Gustavo Petro as president of Colombia, relations with Venezuela began to be restored. Not only has binational trade resumed, but Caracas (the capital of Venezuela) has also [hosted peace talks](#) between the Colombian government and the National Liberation Army (ELN) (BBC News, 22 November 2022).

US sanctions against Venezuela [include](#) (Congressional Research Service, 8 August 2023):

- Visa revocations and sanctions on individuals;
- Financial sanctions restricting Maduro government and state oil company, PdVSA, access to US financial markets, with certain exceptions to minimize the impact on the Venezuelan people and US economic interests;
- Blocking assets and prohibiting unlicensed transactions with PdVSA, Venezuela's central bank, and the state gold mining company, among other entities;
- Blocking assets in the USA and prohibiting transactions with that government unless authorized as part of efforts to aid the Venezuelan people.

Additionally, in 2019, the USA [announced](#) the temporary suspension of operations of the US Embassy in Caracas and the withdrawal of diplomatic personnel, and it subsequently announced the opening of the Venezuela Affairs Unit (VAU), located at the US Embassy in Bogota, Colombia (US State Department IRFR 2022 Venezuela).

On 13 November 2017 the Council of the EU adopted [restrictive measures](#) in view of the continuing deterioration of democracy, the rule of law and human rights in Venezuela (EU Sanctions Map, August 2023). The measures, which are currently due to expire on 13 November 2023, include:

- Prohibition of arms export;

- Asset freeze and prohibition to make funds available;
- Restrictions on admission to EU member states;
- Restrictions on equipment used for internal repression.

The Venezuelan government filed an appeal against these sanctions, however in September 2023, the General Court of the European Union [dismissed](#) the appeal, concluding that the sanctions were fully justified due to the brutal repression carried out by the Maduro administration against dissidents and political opponents (El Tiempo, 13 September 2023).

In November 2021, the International Criminal Court (ICC) [opened](#) an investigation into crimes against humanity in Venezuela (The Guardian, 4 November 2021). The Prosecutor of the ICC signed a [memorandum of understanding](#) with President Maduro - an agreement by both parties to conduct the investigation cooperatively (International Criminal Court, November 2021). According to Human Right Watch, the ICC prosecutor announced he would establish an [in-country office](#) (HRW, 22 April 2022). It is the [first time](#) that crimes committed in the Americas have come under formal ICC investigation (Reliefweb, 12 November 2021). In November 2022, the Prosecutor reported that he had asked the Pre-Trial Chamber I of the institution to allow him to [restart](#) his investigation into alleged crimes against humanity in Venezuela (CNN, 1 November 2022). On 27 June 2023, ICC judges announced that the investigation could go ahead. The decision follows a petition by the ICC prosecutor to [continue](#) his investigation after the Venezuelan government asked the court in April 2022 to defer to the government's own inquiries (HRW, 27 June 2023). On September, the Public Office for the Defense of Victims (OPCV) presented a request to the Appeals Chamber of the ICC requesting the [dismissal](#) of the appeal presented by the Venezuelan regime against the decision that authorized the resumption of investigations into the commission of crimes against humanity in Venezuela (ICC, 13 September 2023).

In a situation where the government allows no dissenting voices, many Christians, especially those critical of the party's authoritarian practices and violations of democratic principles, are under surveillance and considered enemies of the country.

## Religious landscape

Venezuela: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	27,445,000	91.4
Muslim	108,000	0.4
Hindu	700	0.0
Buddhist	40,600	0.1
Ethno-religionist	222,000	0.7

Jewish	7,200	0.0
Bahai	196,000	0.7
Atheist	74,100	0.2
Agnostic	1,575,000	5.2
Other	348,200	1.2
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

According to the World Christian Database (accessed March 2023), although Christians make up 91.4% of the population, it is important to note that there is an upward trend among those who identify as agnostics or atheists, which currently make up 5.4% of the population.

The [Constitution](#) guarantees freedom of religion and worship as long as it does not oppose morality, good customs and public order (CNE, September 2021). Likewise, it guarantees the independence and autonomy of churches and religious confessions, with no limitations other than those derived from the Constitution and the law. Parents have the right to have their sons or daughters receive the religious education that is in accordance with their convictions. Nonetheless, the Constitution also states that no one may invoke religious beliefs or disciplines to evade compliance with the law or to prevent another from exercising their rights.

The Catholic Church is one of the oldest and most established institutions in the country. Since Catholicism has the most historical roots in the country, the Catholic Church is the only denomination with a special agreement between the government and the Holy See in Rome. Protestantism, in contrast, is made up of a variety of church groups, some of which [support](#) the ruling party (El Periódico, 9 February 2023), while others are neutral or stand clearly in opposition.

The government continues to seek rapprochement with factions within Protestantism taking advantage of its fragmentation. In this way, the government seeks to instrumentalize the religiosity of the population, confuse believers with the use of religious references in political messages and thus improve its image and ensure electoral support. As part of the ruling party's strategy for staying in power, it has [created](#) the office of 'Vice Presidency of Religious Affairs' (Alnavío, 1 November 2021), now led by Nicolás Maduro Guerra, son of President Maduro. Some of the [tasks](#) related to the position are to “build and manage the spiritual wealth” in Venezuela so that “it turns over and becomes a Chavista majority” (El Pitazo, 3 April 2023). So far, the office has installed the 'Pastoral Government Councils' throughout the country with the aim of [integrating](#) Christian groups in the running of regional and local authorities along government lines (Alnavío, 1 November 2021).

At the beginning of 2022, President Maduro ordered a [census](#) of all Evangelical churches operating in the country to allegedly support the pastors with special bonuses, but at the same time to see how church programs can best support government policies (Noticias Barquisimeto, 19 March 2022). It is expected that the information obtained will be collated in the digital



'Fatherland Database' (Sistema Patria). Measures have been introduced relating to meetings with leaders of evangelical movements, commemoration of the National Day of the Pastor and the Evangelical Christian Pastor, the launch of the "[My Well-Equipped Church](#)" program, consisting of government support for church renovation, social programs and time-slots on radio and TV. Overall, the relationship between the government and evangelical groups has been visibly strengthened (Protestante Digital, 24 January 2023). However, the Evangelical Council of Venezuela (CEV), an organization made up of independent churches and evangelical entities from all over the country, warned that the Pastoral Government Councils are not representative of all Protestants and that the census should [not be made mandatory](#) for religious communities (Entre cristianos, 21 April 2022). Some churches have been put under pressure to conform and the strengthening of ties between the government and some evangelical churches is clearly part of a political strategy in the run-up to the 2024 elections. Such ties give the regime a certain amount of social legitimacy; the government can thereby promote an image of being close to Christians in the country.

President Maduro regularly refers to evangelical groups as being the "true church of God" and as being "the church for the people", clearly inferring that the Catholic Church is neither (La Nación, 20 January 2023). Tension persists between the government and the Catholic Church, especially when Catholic leaders mention the critical situation of the country as a whole. The Catholic Episcopal Conference is viewed by government officials as an opposition "political party", "demons in cassocks" or as an ecclesiastical elite that has [turned its back](#) on the nation's population (Semana, 20 January 2023).

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2022 Venezuela):

- "Representatives of the conference of Roman Catholic bishops, officially known as the Catholic Episcopal Conference of Venezuela (CEV), and the Evangelical Council of Venezuela (ECV), said regime leaders and loyalists verbally harassed clergy and other members of their religious communities for continuing to call attention to the country's humanitarian crisis and for other criticisms of the regime."
- "Each religious group must register with the DJR [Directorate of Justice and Religion] to acquire legal status as a religious organization. Registration requires the declaration of property belonging to the religious group, identification of any religious authorities working directly for it, and articles of incorporation. Religious groups are required to demonstrate how they will provide social services to their communities and to receive a letter of acceptance from the regime-controlled community council in the neighborhood(s) where the group will work. The ministry reviews applications and may delay approval indefinitely."
- "At times, the regime applied the antihate law that criminalizes political party activities promoting 'fascism, intolerance, or hatred' to religious actors. In other instances, the regime targeted religious leaders with the penal code."
- "According to a Catholic Church representative, the regime paused or completely stopped funding some Catholic schools, which are typically located in impoverished areas."
- "Catholic Church representatives also cited difficulties in securing religious visas for priests. They said many international Catholic Church personnel were unable to obtain religious visas and had to enter the country with tourist visas, which require renewal fees that represented a financial burden for the church."

## Further information

Leaders of both the Catholic Church and the Evangelical Council of Venezuela (CEV) openly discuss the problems that the country is experiencing, including the dismantling of democracy and the violation of human rights (Agenzia Fides, 14 January 2022). For example, the leaders of the CEV urged the state powers to "[promptly form](#)", in accordance with the parameters established in the Constitution, the National Electoral Council (CNE) in order to guarantee, among other things, the exercise of the political and electoral rights of citizens. (Swissinfo, 13 July 2023). However, any church leader or Christian group critical of the government, condemning corruption or denying the legitimacy of the president, is liable to be harassed by the government and regime sympathizers. Humanitarian aid distributed by Christian organizations has sometimes been deliberately blocked to prevent anti-government influence from spreading. Since the distribution of food and medicine is mainly in government hands, this allows the regime to manipulate the population and obtain their support. Particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, many Christians found they had to submit to the ruling party - against their will - in order to survive. Many foreign priests and Christians have had to leave the country because their [residence permits](#) have not been renewed (Aciprensa, 10 May 2023).

Over the years, church members have requested the government to protect Christian buildings and churches from theft and vandalism, but attention to their requests depends largely on the will of the local authorities. Similarly, the registration of churches is easier for denominations showing loyalty to the regime. Most denominations, especially those not allied with the government, have difficulties importing Christian material, obtaining, distributing or printing Bibles or renewing their legal status.

Although discussed in more detail below (in: *Security situation*), violence perpetrated by Colombian guerrillas who have settled in the country is putting the work of pastors at risk. The latter are most vulnerable in the border region with Colombia, but violence is increasingly reaching into other rural and urban areas perpetrated both by foreign and local criminal groups. The presence of guerrillas and the conflict that this generates with local criminal groups, in addition to collusion with some Venezuelan authorities, have caused restrictions on activities of religious communities related to the distribution of humanitarian assistance. In addition, these factors have limited the mobility of church leaders, as well as their freedom of expression, to the extent that they cannot openly show their disagreement with the activities of the guerrillas or the authorities who collude with criminal groups.

Finally, church leaders have shown their faith-based disagreement with issues promoted by the government relating to abortion and sex education. In the WWL 2024 reporting period, Christian leaders and others [rejected](#) some of the content taught to children in schools (Resumen Latinoamericano, 14 September 2023). At times, this has earned insults and accusations of discrimination and intolerance against Christians in the country. In a previous reporting period, the authorities acted against a pastor who had made public statements about gender and abortion, and in retaliation, the church was closed down on grounds of irregular legal documentation. The female pastor was subjected to surveillance and the hotel, which was holding a conference in which she was participating, was closed for arbitrary reasons.



## Economic landscape

According to UNDP HDR Venezuela:

- **Gross National Income (GNI) per capita:** 4,811 (2021)
- **GNI per capita women/men:** 2,866 (women); 6,796 (men) (2021)
- **Income inequality:** 21.0%.
- **Population vulnerable to multidimensional poverty:** Data is not available

According to Global Freedom Index 2023 Venezuela (C3):

- "There is virtually no transparency regarding government spending. The Maduro regime has also consistently failed to publish reliable crime and economic data, including monthly inflation statistics, the balance of payments, and annual gross domestic product."

As reported by the [National Survey on Living Conditions](#) (ENCOVI, November 2022), a slowdown in the level of economic activity has been observed (currently at 7.2%) compared to the second half of 2021 and it is forecast that it will fall further in 2023 (to 4.4%), a level which is insufficient for recovery to pre-crisis levels. A combination of factors accounts for these results, which have to do with the deterioration of infrastructure and basic services (energy, water, security, telecommunications), poor access to bank credit, the lack of human capital, the low level of real income of consumers, the low growth of oil production, as well as the effects of some of the international sanctions.

[Círculo de Estudios Latinoamericanos](#) reported (CESLA, 10 October 2023):

- After 7 consecutive quarters showing signs of recovery, the Venezuelan economy has once again entered into a cooling phase that threatens to become a recession. The quarterly data collected by the Venezuelan Finance Observatory (OVF) indicate that during the first half of 2023, the Monthly Indicator of Economic Activity reflects a drop of 7%, when compared to the first half of 2022.
- The contraction of domestic economic activity occurs in a context where oil production has been growing. But this improvement did not translate into growth for the Venezuelan economy, which would indicate the little influence that the oil sector has on the economy today. In markets that are not growing and, in a context, where tax voracity, legal uncertainty and political/institutional uncertainty prevail, private investment does not perceive incentives to move and is concentrated in certain niche, high-risk markets.
- Public investment, for its part, remains absent due to the visible lack of public plans and resources. Inflation has rebounded since May 2023, reflecting the persistent inflationary inertia, the more accelerated depreciation of the bolivar and the rise in import prices. Between January and July 2023, the accumulated inflation reported by the Central Bank of Venezuela (BCV) rose to 121%, more than double that of the same period in 2022 (48%). According to estimates from Síntesis Financiera, monthly inflation in August reached 13.5%, bringing accumulated inflation in January-August 2023 to 151%, from 61% in January-August 2022 (CESLA, 10 October 2023).

The Central Bank of Venezuela (BCV) reported inflation of [8.7%](#) in September 2023 compared to 7.4% in August. With the September variation, accumulated inflation in nine months reaches 158.3%. (VOA, 07 October 2023).

The OVF August 2023 report ([Observatorio de Finanzas, 5 September 2023](#)) showed how Inflation is seemingly getting out of control: "The monthly inflation rate stood at 13.6%, which has presented the largest price increase so far this year. With these results, the annualized and accumulated inflation rates stood at 422% and 144.6% respectively. In this way, Venezuela is entering a process of very pronounced acceleration of price increases."

According to the organization CENDAS, the [family basket](#) as of September 2023 is equivalent to \$495.54 USD, that is, 17,289.45 bolivars. Currently, the minimum wage corresponds to \$3.72 USD. To acquire the basic monthly basket, around 133 minimum wages would be required (CENDAS, September 2023).

### **International sanctions**

The [international sanctions](#), especially those imposed by the USA, are a further factor to consider. According to a joint statement in August 2023, USA, Canada, UK and EU are seeking sanctions relief to encourage President Maduro to negotiate a path towards free and fair elections in 2024 (Congressional Research Service, August 2023). The UNHCR has called for the [lifting](#) of international sanctions because they are causing a deepening of the current crisis, especially since the COVID-19 restrictions further increased the scarcity of available resources (UNHCR, 28 January 2023). Leaders from Colombia and Brazil have also suggested the necessity of sanctions relief from the USA. The Biden administration has indicated would consider lightening sanctions if the Venezuelan government showed signs of meeting certain commitments.

As a result of this economic situation, millions have fled the country. Many of the country's churches have become centers for food distribution and [refuge](#) (El Tiempo, 4 July 2023). Despite legal, administrative and logistical difficulties - along with the risk of provoking government reprisals -, the food programs and other forms of help carried out by churches have been invaluable, since most other civil society organizations are no longer in a position to provide humanitarian aid.

Nevertheless, the worsening of the crisis and the difficulties in obtaining donations - among other things due to bureaucratic restrictions - have caused the [closure](#) of several aid programs, including homes for children and adolescents (VOA, 13 August 2022). In addition, the economic crisis has also seriously affected churches: The constant power cuts and the transport crisis have made it difficult for Christians to attend church services in many areas and some church leaders (both Catholic and Evangelical) have been forced to leave their positions due to lack of funds.

## Social and cultural landscape

According to the World Factbook Venezuela and UNDP HDR Venezuela:

- **Main ethnic groups:** unspecified Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Arab, German, African, Indigenous
- **Main languages:** Spanish (official), numerous indigenous dialects
- **Urban population:** 88.4% of total population (2023)
- **Literacy rate:** 97.5% (age 15 and over can read and write)

According to World Bank data for Venezuela:

- **Education:** The school enrollment for pre-primary (2017) is 70%; for primary (2017) is 94.0% and for secondary (2017) 84.0%. The duration of compulsory education is 17 years (2021).
- **Unemployment (modeled ILO estimate):** 5.3% (2022).
- **Gender Parity Index:** 1.02 (2017). This refers to the ratio of girls to boys enrolled at primary and secondary levels in public and private schools.
- **IDPs/Refugee population by country or territory of origin:** 234,376 (2022)

According to UNDP HDR Venezuela:

- **Human Development Index (HDI) score and ranking:** Venezuela scored 0.691 in 2021, ranking #118 out of 191 countries and territories.
- **Life expectancy (2019):** 85.8 (female) and 88.5 (male)
- **Gender inequality:** Venezuela has a GII value of 0.492, ranking it 123 out of 191 countries in the 2021 index.

### Protests

Poverty has been widespread, basic needs have not been covered, transport costs have risen, the health sector is failing, and the public sector have one of the [lowest salaries](#) in the region (El País, 6 March 2023). On top of this there are numerous human rights violations occurring. As a result, demonstrations have been widespread. In August 2023 alone, the Venezuelan Observatory of Social Conflict (OVCS) registered [389](#) protests, an average of 13 daily. However, this figure represents a decrease of 43% compared to the same period last year. 277 protests were linked to the demand for Economic, Social, Cultural and Environmental Rights (Desca), which represents 72% of the general total. The states that led the protest index were Anzoátegui (55), Bolívar (43), Portuguesa (28), Sucre (28) and Táchira (24) (OVCS, August 2023).

### Human rights violations

According to the [2022 annual report of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights](#), among the human rights violations taking place, are:

- Extrajudicial executions, arbitrary detentions, torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment;
- Forced disappearances and torture in contexts of deprivation of freedom;
- Arbitrary arrests of people known or perceived as opponents;

- Restrictions on freedom of expression;
- Hostile government action against people and organizations defending human rights.

## Migration

A further phenomenon resulting from the crisis is uncontrolled migration. According to the [UNHCR](#) reporting in August 2023, more than 7 million people have left Venezuela. The majority – more than 6 million people – have been hosted in Latin American and Caribbean countries. Also, almost [one in four](#) Venezuelans are in need of humanitarian assistance, according to Humanitarian Response Plan estimates in September 2023 (UNHCR Venezuela Factsheet, September 2023).

According to the [National Survey on Living Conditions \(ENCOVI 2022\)](#):

- Recent Venezuelan migration statistics continue to show a preeminence of male adults leaving the country mainly to look for work, but also for reasons of family reunification. Migrants from 30 to 49 years of age constitute the majority, while in 2017 the age-group 15 to 29 years of age was more represented.
- Those sending financial aid to their home of origin fell to 49% (59% reported in ENCOVI 2021).
- For the first time since 2014, poverty has reduced in the country. 50% of households are no longer classified as poor and households report higher levels of food security. Poverty has begun to have more to do with social factors and infrastructure (housing, education and services), which increased from 31% in 2019 to 42% in 2022. Nevertheless, economic factors are still dominant despite falling from 69% in 2019 to 58% in 2022.

According to the [Public Expenditure Observatory](#) (CEDICE), as of September 2023:

- 8 out of 10 Venezuelans highlight that the electrical service is unstable. At least 5 times a day shortages are recorded.
- Water supply is variable. In some areas it can arrive every 3 days, in others, every 20 days or more.
- More than 60% of failures in the vehicle fleet are due to the inefficient quality of fuel and its supply.
- 74% of schools have a deficit to cover quality education and food services. The school dropout percentage grows year after year. The main reason is the search for sources of family income.

## Food insecurity and government control

State food programs have been denounced by regime opponents as being mechanisms of social control and political-electoral manipulation. The state authorities are evidently using the vulnerability of the poor to manipulate their support. In the WWL 2024 reporting period, there has been an evident rapprochement between the government and some sectors of the wider Evangelical church community. Financial support and facilities have been [provided](#) for some Protestant churches to carry out humanitarian assistance (Minci, 19 January 2023). However, many regard such collaboration as a way of manipulating the Christian population (the majority

in Venezuela) in view of the upcoming presidential elections. It would seem that it is the intention of the government to have all churches adhering to the guidelines of the ruling party. Instrumentalizing Christian initiatives to cover social needs is one way of achieving this goal.

The government approach to the Catholic Church is very different since the authorities fear that Catholic activities which go against government wishes could influence society and destabilize the regime. In the WWL 2024 reporting period and beyond, the operation of civil society organizations, including faith-based organizations, will run the [risk](#) of being shut down if the preliminary draft Law on International Cooperation is approved, an initiative that is aiming for the prohibition, suspension, restriction or elimination of civil society organizations that "directly, or indirectly, promote or participate with other associations, organizations, governments or international organizations, in the application of unilateral coercive measures against the Republic" (OAS, 8 June 2022).

Due to the severe food insecurity in the country, in April 2021, the government allowed the World Food Program (WFP) to operate in the country; the Venezuelan government agreed to [expand and develop](#) the program in 2023 (WFP, Country brief, accessed 7 March 2024). The WFP provides nutritious meals, particularly in preschool and special education schools, as well as investing in improvements in school canteens. According to WFP, Venezuela continues to face a challenging socioeconomic situation, exacerbated by global supply chain disruptions and food price increases. Despite signs of economic recovery, according to the World Bank, Venezuela ranked as having the third [highest food inflation](#) in the world in early 2022 (WFP, 26 July 2023).

## Technological landscape

According to World Internet Stats (IWS 2023 Venezuela):

- **Internet usage:** 78.7% penetration – survey date: June 2022
- **Facebook usage:** 58.4% penetration – survey date: June 2022

According to the World Bank data for Venezuela:

- **Mobile phone (cellular) subscriptions:** 63 per 100 people (2022)

According to [BuddeComm Research](#) (updated May 2019):

- Mobile penetration in Venezuela is below the average for South America, while growth in the sector has been set back by the ongoing economic recession. The number of mobile subscribers fell 5.6% in the first half of 2018 as subscribers terminated services in a bid to reduce discretionary spending. The phenomenon was also seen in the fixed-line segment, where fixed-line connections dropped by 7.4% in the year. Part of the decline is also related to the large number of people who have fled economic hardship.

According to the [Inclusive Internet Index 2022](#):

- Venezuela ranks at #70 out of 100 countries in the Index and is listed below most countries in Latin America. The country ranks at #98 globally in 'Readiness', a result of weak policies and low trust particularly in online privacy, social media, and non-government websites and apps.

According to Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2023 report:

- Venezuela scored 29 points and is classified as 'not free'.
- Venezuela's economic crisis, marked by multiple years of recession and hyperinflation, has hindered the country's electrical and telecommunications infrastructure and the quality of internet access. The country's decaying infrastructure suffers from failures, theft, and vandalism, resulting in frequent blackouts and poor connection speeds. The economic crisis has also impacted Venezuelans' ability to afford internet services and devices, as many must devote their salaries to cover necessities such as food and health care.
- Although there are private providers, the state dominates the information and communications technologies (ICT) market. Telecommunications companies have struggled to remain financially sustainable during the ongoing economic crisis. The Venezuelan ICT market is difficult and expensive for large operators that have high fixed costs.
- The Maduro government blocked digital media outlets, virtual private networks (VPNs), and online platforms. In the absence of rule of law and without institutions offering avenues for appeal, Venezuelan authorities have restricted digital content with no independent oversight and accountable procedures.
- Detentions, imprisonment, and legal and extralegal restrictions on certain forms of online speech have encouraged increased self-censorship and preemptive censorship within media outlets. Impunity for those who threaten or attack journalists in retaliation for their work have reinforced this climate. This situation does not only affect opponents of the Maduro regime and independent journalists, but also ordinary citizens—particularly as authorities have escalated arrests of everyday internet users for comments made on WhatsApp groups or social media.

According to Reporters Without Borders (World Press Freedom 2023 Venezuela):

- “The state media, along with official spokespersons, disqualifies, prosecutes, and sometimes publicly threatens journalists for their reports. The economic crisis has led to a drastic reduction in the distribution of official advertising, which favors media close to the government. In order to receive financial support, the media must agree to broadcast official government messages for free. It is common for journalists to be beaten or threatened during pre-electoral or political conflict periods when they carry out their journalistic work. Since both the Attorney General's Office and the Ombudsman's Office are controlled by Maduro, neither helps guarantee the safety of journalists in the country, and acts of physical or verbal violence against them are seldom investigated.”

In 2022, the Venezuelan parliament approved a legislative agenda that included a project for the [partial reform](#) of the Law of Social Responsibility in Radio, Television and Electronic Media (El País, 4 March 2021). The list of laws presented also included the [Cyberspace Law](#), first introduced in 2019 (Swiss Info, 21 April 2021). These supplement the controversial "Constitutional Law against Hate, for Peaceful Coexistence and Tolerance" (known as the "Law against Hate") which was approved in November 2017 and which sets out [penalties](#) of 20 year prison sentences, closure of media outlets and substantial fines for media companies considered to be acting as government opponents (Actualidad Jurídica, November 2017).

The constant shortages of electricity have made the use of the Internet and online communication very difficult. According to the [Public Expenditure Observatory](#) reporting in September 2023, at least 4 out of 10 have faults or have their CANTV landline disabled for more than 2 years, without a response. The internet speed is very poor. It is very intermittent and unstable. Although the rate has increased, the service remains inefficient and maintenance days require additional charges (CEDICE, September 2023).

Additionally, there is a constant wave of digital blockades against media that do not adhere to the government line. Radio stations in governorates run by the opposition have been [closed](#) by the National Telecommunications Commission (CONATEL) (NTN24, September 2022). The rapporteurs of the UN and the IACHR reported in a joint statement that restrictive measures have included unjustified Internet outages and the blocking of independent media. The closure of media outlets and/or the seizure of their equipment, as ordered by the government, has increasingly limited citizens' access to reliable information from independent sources, and encouraged a general environment of self-censorship among the media (OAS, 30 August 2022).

Without printed newspapers and with digital media blocked, Venezuelans have very [limited possibilities](#) to access non-state information (France 24, 1 May 2022). During the 2021 elections, the European Union Electoral Observation Mission concluded that all media with national coverage had a strong [bias](#) in favor of the government or the ruling party (MOE, 21 November 2021).

Since state authorities monitor all use of the Internet and social media, Christians who wish to openly discuss political matters and human rights violations, are easily targeted and become victims of possible government retaliation.

## Security situation

Venezuela suffers from endemic corruption and criminal impunity. As reported by Freedom House in Global Freedom Index 2023 Venezuela (C2):

- "Corruption is rampant in Venezuela. The government's economic policies — particularly its currency and price controls — offer significant opportunities for illicit market activity and collusion between public officials and organized crime networks" (see also below: *Persecution Dynamics, Section - Persecution engines*).

Hence, violence it is exercised by law enforcement officers in their task of repressing dissent, by local and foreign criminal groups, and by the authorities in collusion with the latter.

In September 2019, the United Nations Human Rights Council set up an Independent International Fact-Finding Mission, which was extended through to September 2024. The [Mission's September 2023](#) report documented that state institutions have contributed, either by action or omission, to the repression of real or perceived government opposition. According to the Mission's investigations:

- The Ombudsman's Office routinely and deliberately failed to respond effectively to allegations of serious human rights violations.



- The National Electoral Council implemented norms and practices that arbitrarily limited the establishment and autonomous functioning of opposition parties, weakening public trust in the electoral system and curtailing the activities of trade unions.
- The National Commission of Telecommunications used administrative procedures in an arbitrary manner to restrict media platforms that criticized the government.
- The Comptroller General of the Republic applied political disqualifications, selectively, to opposition leaders, in violation of international standards and applicable domestic procedures.
- The General Directorate of Military Counter-intelligence was involved in 40% of the 124 instances of arbitrary deprivations of life, arbitrary detention, short-term enforced disappearance, torture and ill treatment, and sexual and gender violence documented by the mission for the September 2023 report. This was followed by National Bolivarian Police (35%) and the Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (15% of the cases). These three institutions were responsible for 81% of the cases of arbitrary detention and of 93% of the cases of torture. Other security forces involved in the principal human rights violations investigated by the mission included the National Bolivarian Guard, and the Scientific, Criminal and Criminological Investigator Corps, among others.

High crime rates have been made possible by corrupt authorities, a flawed judiciary system and poor gun control. According to the [2023 Annual Report](#) published by the Venezuelan Violence Observatory in December 2023:

- Venezuela ended the year 2023 with an estimated 6,973 violent deaths. This represents a 25% decrease in relation to the years 2021 (9,447 violent deaths) and 2022 (9,367 violent deaths). Although the absolute figures presented a reduction, the internal composition of the causes of violent deaths remained similar to those observed in 2022. Deaths that occurred due to police intervention represented 13.7% of the total, very similar to the 13.2% in 2022. In 2023, two federal entities had a rate of violent deaths greater than 40 deaths per one hundred thousand inhabitants: The Capital District with 50.8 and the state of Miranda with 41 victims per hundred thousand inhabitants. The five most violent entities in the country in 2023 were the Capital District (50.8), Miranda (41), Bolívar (38.5), La Guaira (36.4) and Amazonas (33.4).

Venezuela is considered a 'narco-state', and part of the concern is that criminal networks supply funds to keep the Maduro dictatorship in place, since the current social chaos under President Maduro helps organized crime maintain territorial control. The 2023 Global Organized Crime Index ranks Venezuela at #8 of 35 countries in Americas. Venezuela is the fifth of 12 countries in South America, and the twenty-fourth among the 193 that are part of the index.

The country was rated with a criminality score of [6.72](#). This represents an increase from 2021, when it earned a rating of 6.64. Venezuela has become a safe haven for criminals wanted by INTERPOL, with fugitives hiding in the country. The criminal legal framework in Venezuela has not undergone significant changes, and the lack of judicial independence in the country has fostered criminality and human rights violations. National legislation against organized crime has not been effectively implemented (Ocindex, December 2023).



In this context, the reduction in the annual level of homicides over the last few years is explained by the economy being in crisis, by the tighter control of drug trafficking routes, by the fact that criminal groups act as the local authorities having taken over control in many areas, and by the mass emigration.

There are various armed groups operating in the country. According To Insight Crime, [Venezuela's top five criminal organizations](#) in 2023 were (Insight Crime, 16 February 2023):

- The Bolivarian Liberation Forces (Fuerzas Bolivarianas de Liberación – FBL)
- Las Claritas Sindicato
- Acacio Medina Front
- El Tren de Aragua
- The National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional -ELN), which is present in 40 municipalities in 8 states and thus has the greatest geographical spread than any other criminal structure or armed group in the country.

According to Human Rights Watch (HRW 2023 Venezuela country chapter):

- Armed groups - including the National Liberation Army (ELN), Patriotic Forces of National Liberation (FPLN), and groups that emerged from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) - operate mostly in border states, establishing and brutally enforcing curfews and regulations governing everyday activities. Venezuelan security agents have conducted joint operations with ELN fighters and have been complicit in their abuses.

Additionally, there are further groups with notable influence:

- The group of corrupt officials known as the [Cartel of the Suns](#) (Insight Crime, 2 May 2022);
- '[Mega-gangs](#)' (Borgen Project, 5 November 2021) - a form of organized crime born out of the country's overcrowded, self-governed prison system;
- The [colectivos](#) (BBC News, 6 February 2019) - used by the authorities to monitor and intimidate regime opponents;
- Other smaller criminal groups.

According to Insight Crime, the country's economic crisis has been taken advantage of by criminal groups, who have created [community organizations](#) and foundations that allow them to have popular support through donations, soup kitchens, health days and similar activities (Insight Crime, 11 April 2022). The objective is also community control, with access to food supplies for the obedient, and forced displacement, mutilation and even killing for the disobedient.

There are indications that Islamic militant groups are also operating in the country, especially agents of Hezbollah, the Iranian-backed Lebanese Islamist group. These groups appear to be [involved](#) in arms and drug trafficking, as well as money laundering to finance their operations (Infobae, 26 February 2023). The cartel Los Zetas, in Mexico, El Envigado in Colombia and the Venezuelan cartel Los Soles have been accused of [strategically aligning](#) with Hezbollah to sell more drugs (Iranwire, 25 March 2021). Some observers believe the Hezbollah may be benefitting from the 4,000 square miles of Venezuelan territory which have officially been transferred to

[Iranian control](#) as part of the Iran-Venezuela 20 year cooperation treaty (Mosaic, 4 October 2022).

According to HRW 2023 Venezuela country chapter, the OHCHR continued receiving complaints of torture, ill-treatment, and incommunicado detentions in 2022. Agents of the Special Action Forces (FAES) and other police and military units have killed and tortured with impunity in low-income communities, including during security raids called “Operations To Liberate the People”. The judiciary stopped functioning as an independent branch of government in 2004. There has been no meaningful justice for crimes committed with knowledge or acquiescence of high-level authorities and judicial authorities have been complicit in abuses.

As a consequence of the economic crisis during and following the COVID-19 pandemic, many young people have been leaving school to look for employment; this makes them easy prey for being [recruited](#) by criminal gangs and irregular armed groups for illegal and criminal purposes (Swissinfo, 30 March 2022). The COVID-19 state of emergency was also used as a convenient cover for punishing dissent and intensifying levels of control over the population. The IACHR expressed [concern](#) that the Venezuelan authorities regularly categorize the violent deaths of young men living in poverty as instances where the victims “resisted arrest” (OAS, 29 January 2022).

In areas controlled by criminal groups (especially the border regions), Christians often represent a threat to the activities and authority of these groups and run the risk of being victims of [reprisals](#) (Infobae, 19 June 2022), which can take the form of child recruitment, death threats and killings. In such areas, Christians do not have any state authorities to turn to for help. Churches and other Christian-owned buildings are also exposed to vandalism and [theft](#) (Efecto Cocuyo, 2 April 2023).

## Trends analysis

### 1) The Maduro regime clings to power

The lack of cohesion and leadership among the political opposition groups has weakened the efforts of the international community and local civil society to exert pressure on the ruling regime. Meanwhile, Maduro clings to power trying to show signs of legitimacy to the discontented and desperate population suffering from the economic and humanitarian crisis that the country is experiencing. In this context, the Church - with its pastoral and humanitarian work - is seen as an obstacle to the totalitarian interests of the regime and tries to discredit and divide it so that it is not seen as having a voice of authority.

### 2) Attempts are made to silence any criticism from civil society

Complaints regarding human rights violations, the lack of transparency in electoral processes, authoritarian practices and the monopolization of power in state institutions are seen as manifestations of opposition and lead to government reprisals. Through intimidation and retaliation (sometimes, in collusion with criminal groups), the goal is to silence any type of critical voice. Civil society is thus given no space. The same goes for the Church, when it demands decent living conditions for citizens and opposes abuses of power; it becomes an enemy of state

power.

### 3) Criminal groups are taking advantage of government failures

Amid the worsening crisis affecting the general population, criminal groups have proliferated and strengthened their presence by taking advantage of the state's failed socialist-communist policies. Thus, violence against citizens has increased both due to government practices and the action of local and foreign criminal groups (especially in border areas) that act with impunity in various areas of the country. Levels of fear have been rising and the risks faced by churches is evident when its work among the most vulnerable and its message of peace is interpreted as a challenge to illegal activities and an affront to criminal groups that are fighting for control in some areas of the country.

### External Links - Keys to understanding

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- Social and cultural landscape: National Survey on Living Conditions (ENCOVI 2022): - [https://assets.website-files.com/5d14c6a5c4ad42a4e794d0f7/636d0009b0c59ebfd2f24acd\\_Presentacion%20ENCOVI%202022%20completa.pdf](https://assets.website-files.com/5d14c6a5c4ad42a4e794d0f7/636d0009b0c59ebfd2f24acd_Presentacion%20ENCOVI%202022%20completa.pdf)
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- Social and cultural landscape: highest food inflation - <https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000149726/download/>
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## WWL 2024: Church information / Venezuela

### Christian origins

Attracted by the mining and pearl fishing, the Spanish conquest of Venezuela began in eastern Venezuela with settlements first established on the Venezuelan islands and along the coast. Examples are: Nueva Cádiz and Macuro (Amacuro) founded in 1498; Cubagua (founded in 1500 and 1530), Nueva Toledo (in 1500), Nueva Córdoba (in 1523) and La Asunción (in 1524). All these cities were [founded](#) in the European search for gold, silver and precious gems (Redalyc, May-October 2006).

A group of Franciscan friars introduced Roman Catholicism with the founding of Cumaná in 1515. Despite attempts at peaceful evangelization, the indigenous people in the region opposed Christianity violently. However, in 1531, after the founding of the city of Coro in 1527 (the first capital of the Province of Venezuela), it was possible to set up the first Episcopal Headquarters of South America and the first Catholic diocese of Venezuela. The responsibility of evangelization was shared between diocesan priests and a number of religious orders such as the Capuchins (Aragonese, Catalans, Andalusians and Valencians), Franciscans, Observants, Dominicans, Augustinians and Jesuits. Although most indigenous people in the area embraced Catholic Christianity, those who lived in remote areas continued to practice their ancestral beliefs.

[Protestant missions](#) did not enter the country until the 19th century. The British and Foreign Bible Society started work in Venezuela in 1819. In the following decades, Anglicans, Lutherans, Plymouth Brethren and Methodists were able to establish congregations. In 1919 the first Pentecostal group established itself, with Baptists following in 1924 (Prolades, 15 October 2009).

## Church spectrum today

Venezuela: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	33,800	0.1
Catholic	23,670,000	86.2
Protestant	2,262,000	8.2
Independent	1,648,000	6.0
Unaffiliated	254,000	0.9
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-423,000	-1.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>27,444,800</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	1,439,000	5.2
Renewalist movement	6,566,000	23.9

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

**Orthodox:** Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Renewalist movement:** Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.

The largest Christian denomination in Venezuela is by far the Roman Catholic Church, representing 86.2 % of all Christians (with a reduction of 0.2% in comparison to WCD 2022 estimates). According to the President of the Venezuelan Bishops Conference, less than 80% of the population identify themselves as Catholic and trends show that this figure is decreasing. The number of those attending Sunday services is low ([Agenzia Fides, 9 January 2023](#)). In contrast, Evangelical and Protestant churches are growing fast in the country, both in rural and urban areas. Those not aligned with the regime have often been most respected by local populations.

## Areas where Christians face most difficulties

The operation of the three main Persecution engines (DPA, CPCP and OCC - see below) is blended, causing the dynamics of persecution to spread throughout the country. In the WWL 2024 reporting period, most cases of persecution against Christians occurred in Amazonas, Aragua, Apure, Barinas, Barquisemeto, Bolivar, Carabobo, Distrito Capital (Caracas), Falcon, Guarico, La Guaira, Mérida, Miranda, Sucre, Táchira, Zulia. Unreported cases in other cities are highly likely.



## Christian communities and how they are affected

### Communities of expatriate Christians

Since expatriate Christians are not forced into isolation, they are not treated as a separate category for scoring in WWL analysis.

### Historical Christian communities

The largest denomination in this category is the Roman Catholic Church. However, the small Orthodox and a growing Protestant community made up of the Lutheran, Calvinist, Presbyterian and Anglican churches also belong to this category. It is mainly Christians from this category who suffer intimidation and attacks for expressing Christian views and values which clash with the ideology of the regime and the interests of criminal groups, which sometimes act in collusion with the authorities.

### Converts

In Venezuela, this category mainly consists of Christians moving from one church denomination to another who then face criticism and rejection for abandoning the traditional faith of their families. However, it also consists of people who become Christians after abandoning the Socialist/Communist ideology of the ruling party or after leaving a criminal group. In these last cases, they are monitored and persecuted if they speak out or their humanitarian work is considered an act against the regime or when they represent a threat to the stability of the criminal group (especially in the border areas of the country). In general, Christians belonging to this category also face reprisals and interference related to the main persecution engines present in the country.

### Non-traditional Christian communities

This category is mainly made-up of Pentecostals, Baptists and Evangelical groups. They represent a growing minority but suffer the same repression as the historical Christian communities when they refuse to support the government. However, these church groups are more vulnerable to being put under pressure to show sympathy with the regime (in exchange for administrative and economic benefits and to be able to provide humanitarian assistance to the neediest). If they refuse, they are forced to operate illegally because official registration will be denied or indefinitely delayed. They can also face other kinds of non-administrative reprisals, especially against their church leaders. The churches belonging to this category also tend to be very vulnerable to the hostilities and violence exerted by criminal groups, especially those located in the border areas.

## External Links - Church information

- Christian origins: founded - <https://www.redalyc.org/pdf/543/54311007.pdf>
- Christian origins: Protestant missions - <http://www.prolades.com/encyclopedia/historical/chron-ven.pdf>
- Church spectrum today - additional information: Agenzia Fides, 9 January 2023 - <https://www.fides.org/en/news/73260>

# WWL 2024: Persecution Dynamics / Venezuela

## Reporting period

1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023

## Position on the World Watch List

Venezuela: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	53	67
WWL 2023	56	64
WWL 2022	51	65
WWL 2021	39	-
WWL 2020	42	69

The overall score decreased by 2.5 (rounded to 3) points in WWL 2024. This was due to (very) slight reductions in pressure in 4 *Spheres of life* and a drop in violence score from 11.7 points to 10.7 points. Intimidation and retaliation by both the government and criminal groups have continued although there were fewer killings and arrests in the WWL 2024 reporting period. In the run-up to the in the upcoming 2024 presidential elections, the regime seems to be avoiding major confrontations with the Church in order to drum up support.

## Persecution engines

Venezuela: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Not at all
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Not at all
Clan oppression	CO	Very weak
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	Weak
Communist and post-Communist oppression	CPCO	Strong
Secular intolerance	SI	Very weak
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Strong
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Medium

*The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.*

The main Persecution engines (DPA, CPCP and OCC) are blended.

### **Dictatorial paranoia (Strong)**

According to the World Justice Project ([Rule of Law Index 2023](#)), Venezuela is ranked #142 out of 142 countries. President Maduro is determined to stay in power at all costs with little respect for democracy and the rule of law, even when his government is considered illegitimate by many members of the international community. The entire state machinery has been geared up to support the Socialist/Communist principles of the regime and monitor and punish any kind of opposition. The government introduced an ID card to identify those who support the ruling party for receiving basic services and government benefits, including food and health care.

The violation of citizens' rights also affects Christians, particularly church leaders when speaking publicly asking for the return to (real) democracy and denouncing corruption and the violations of human rights. Churches and Christian organizations who provide basic humanitarian assistance to citizens are seen as competing with the state, which does not want civil society actors endangering its image of being the sole provider. Thus they have become victims of verbal and physical attacks, arbitrary arrests and administrative reprisals etc. Christian property has also been damaged and sometimes, religious activities have been interrupted and/or prevented. President Maduro regularly accuses church leaders of being allied with the political opposition, of interfering in the political sphere, of misleading ordinary Christians and of spreading violence instead of peace.

### **Communist and post-Communist oppression (Strong)**

The government, following the ideal of Bolivarian Revolution, rules according to Socialist/Communist principles and seeks to control all areas of life in society, trying to ensure that all activities are favorable to the regime. When the Church stands firm in its convictions and defends its autonomy and teaching, it faces harassment from the government, for instance, when church leaders oppose policies concerning life, marriage and family which contradict traditional Christian values. The government attempts to fragment the Church by offering economic benefits in exchange for political support, particularly targeting the newer and smaller church denominations. Any dissident voice demanding the abandonment of Marxist ideology is censored and Christians actively engaged in community projects are swiftly labeled as enemies and traitors of the homeland. The repression worsens where church projects have international links, since this is viewed as being an “imperialist” attack on national sovereignty. To make sure society continues to be based on Socialist/Communist principles, the state education system is used to influence children from a young age.

### **Organized corruption and crime (Medium)**

As mentioned above in the section *Security situation*, Venezuela experiences high levels of corruption and the active presence of various criminal groups. Venezuela is considered a '[narco-state](#)' (Miami Herald, 6 November 2023) and criminal networks operate with ease due to corruption at all levels of government; they can act with impunity and often carry out government orders to silence dissenting voices. The state uses paramilitary gangs (“colectivos”) in various cities to monitor and intimidate all opposition, including the social demands highlighted by churches and church leaders. Colombian guerrillas and other criminal groups involved in the business of migrant smuggling in the border region hinder church humanitarian

work; they also try to indoctrinate and recruit minors. These criminal groups represent a risk for Christians, especially where church teaching directly opposes criminal activity.

## Drivers of persecution

Venezuela: Drivers of persecution	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	-	-	-	VERY WEAK	WEAK	STRONG	VERY WEAK	STRONG	MEDIUM
Government officials	-	-	-	-	Weak	Strong	Very weak	Strong	Medium
Ethnic group leaders	-	-	-	Very weak	-	-	-	-	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	-	-	-	Very weak	-	-	-	-	-
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	-	Weak	Weak	-	Weak	-
Violent religious groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	Weak	Very weak	Weak	-
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	-	-	-	-	Very weak	Medium	Very weak	Medium	Very weak
One's own (extended) family	-	-	-	-	-	Very weak	-	Very weak	-
Political parties	-	-	-	-	-	Medium	Very weak	Strong	Medium
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	-	-	-	-	-	Medium	-	Strong	Medium
Organized crime cartels or networks	-	-	-	-	-	Weak	-	Weak	Medium
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.) and embassies	-	-	-	-	-	Very weak	Very weak	Very weak	-

The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. Please note that "-" denotes "not at all". For more information see WWL Methodology.

### Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia

- **Government officials (Strong):** Most government officials – at all levels – are followers of Socialist/Communist ideology, loyal to President Maduro and will do anything to keep him in power. They seek to repress voices that could endanger the stability of the regime, thus Christians who demand that President Maduro should step down are harshly treated; the authorities can limit the exercise of human and/or civil rights and put pressure on Christians that show disagreement with the regime. The main organs of repression are the Bolivarian

National Guard (GNB), the Bolivarian National Police (PNB) and its Special Actions Forces (FAES), the Scientific, Criminal and Criminal Investigations Corps (CICPC), the Bolivarian Intelligence Service National (SEBIN) and the General Directorate of Military Counterintelligence (DGCIM).

- **Political parties (Strong):** The ruling party is the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV). Although there are opposition political parties, these are systematically repressed. The ruling party remains in power thanks to the weakening of the rule of law and the irregular use of the entire state apparatus. The ruling party monitors and silences (at times violently) Christians who seek to weaken regime loyalty. Thus, many Christians face imprisonment, defamation, and physical, psychological and economic harassment.
- **Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups (Strong):** These groups, particularly the Special Action Forces, assist government officials and the ruling party in their efforts to remain in power. They use threats and violence to act against anyone seeking to undermine the government. The main groups are the so-called Integral Defense and Security Committees, 'colectivos'. ELN and ex-FARC members also belong to this category and operate in border regions when supporting the government represents a benefit to their interests.
- **Citizens (Medium):** The current state of crisis has caused many citizens to show their loyalty to the regime, either out of convenience or fear of reprisals. Such loyalty may include participating in acts of hostility against the Church, especially when religious leaders denounce human rights violations perpetrated by the Maduro government.
- **Organized crime cartels or networks (Weak):** Narco cartels (from Mexico and Colombia) and smaller criminal groups are able to act with impunity, especially in rural and border areas, thanks to close alliances with the government and their support to the authorities' political interests. Church efforts to build a culture of peace are obstructed because they interfere with the criminal interests of those groups.

#### **Drivers of Communist and post-Communist oppression**

- **Government officials (Strong):** Most government officials at all levels seek to prevent the spreading of any ideas and beliefs which contradict Socialist/Communist principles, even if this means suppressing fundamental liberties. Those Christians who undertake socio-political projects in their communities are treated with suspicion and if their activities are not aligned with the regime's interests, they could be victims of sanctions and reprisals (mostly in the form of licenses and permits being denied). State school curricula also contain obligatory education in Marxist philosophy.
- **Political parties (Medium):** The ruling party and its government officials seek to establish Socialist/Communist principles firmly in society. Together, they seek to impose on citizens adherence to the ruling party and loyalty to its demands. Christians known for their opposition to the government are targeted and suffer constant harassment and limitations of their human rights.
- **Citizens (Medium):** As explained above (under: *Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia*), for a variety of reasons, many citizens want to show loyalty to the ruling party. Many act as informers monitoring church activities and Christian initiatives in their localities, acting according to the Socialist-Communist principles.

- **Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups (Medium):** Paramilitary groups and regime sympathizers use pressure and violence to force citizens to follow the regime's Socialist-Communist ideals. They block any Christian activity relating to aspects of democracy, human rights and political liberties. The main groups are listed above under *Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia*.

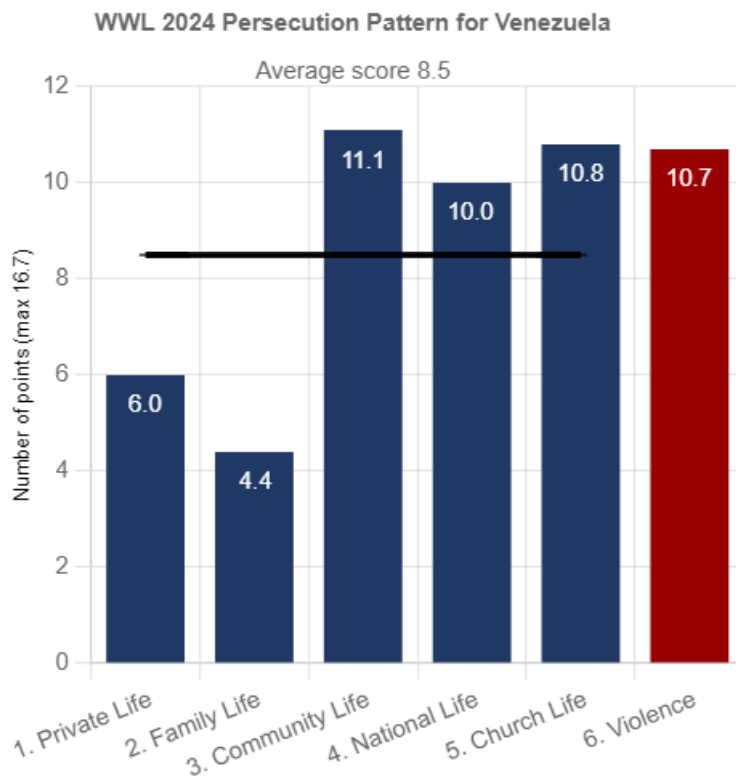
#### Drivers of Organized corruption and crime

- **Government officials (Medium):** The state apparatus has become a platform for organized crime and corruption. Both the authorities and criminal groups intimidate dissident voices (including Christians) and act with impunity due to the widespread collusion between officials and organized crime.
- **Political parties (Medium):** Both the ruling party and opposition groups have been accused of corruption. The former for mishandling public funds and for government institutions being coopted by criminal groups; the latter for their lack of transparency in the use of donations. The lack of trust between opposition groups has indirectly helped the regime to stay in power.
- **Organized crime cartels or networks (Medium):** Criminal groups act in collusion with the power elite. Thanks to rampant corruption, these groups are part of the repressive arm of the government, which allows them total impunity in exchange for intimidating the opposition, including Christians. Drug-trafficking networks - mainly located in border areas with abundant natural resources - are also taking advantage of the current political, social and economic crisis. The various criminal networks want to keep President Maduro's regime in power so that they can continue to carry out their illegal activities unchallenged. Christians are at risk where they denounce such criminal operations and try to protect ordinary citizens from their criminal activities.
- **Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups (Medium):** In addition to the paramilitary groups created by the dictatorial regime, this driver includes guerrilla groups such as ELN and ex-FARC members, both of Colombian origin and predominantly operating along the border with Colombia. Church activities in such areas are permanently risky, especially where Christian teaching openly opposes local criminal interests.

### The Persecution pattern

As can be seen in the diagram below, the WWL 2024 Persecution pattern for Venezuela shows:

- The average pressure on Christians in Venezuela remains at a high level, despite a very slight decrease from 8.8 points in WWL 2023 to 8.5 points in WWL 2024.
- Pressure is highest in the *Community, Church* and *National* spheres of life. The very high pressure in Community life reflects the intense government repression of Christians perceived as regime opponents in the various areas of day-to-day living and the influence of social control by criminal groups in some geographical areas.
- The score for violence is very high at 10.7 points, showing that the ruling party and criminal groups do not shy away from using violent methods where their interests are perceived as being under threat.



## Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

*In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, four questions have been selected from the WWL 2024 questionnaire for brief commentary and explanation. The selection usually (but not always) reflects the highest scoring elements. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. (To see how individual questions are scored on a scale of 0-4 points, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).*

## Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

**Block 1.4: It has been risky for Christians to reveal their faith in written forms of personal expression (including expressions in blogs and Facebook etc.). (2.75 points)**

Due the lack of independent media in the country, the main way for Christians to follow the real church situation is through social media. However, there are occasions when a Christian posting faith-based opinions condemning regime activities, supporting humanitarian work, or showing interest in church leaders considered government opponents, can face harassment, punishment or restricted access to food and other goods and services. The greatest risk is that, under the current legislation, any social media post not aligned with government interests can be considered hate speech or subversive.

**Block 1.9: It has been risky for Christians to meet with other Christians. (2.75 points)**

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions introduced to combat it, Christians who were considered to be activists faced various risks when meeting with others privately. Given the increased surveillance by the government of their private activities, if they did meet up they could be arrested for supposedly inciting violence or planning acts of terrorism. Also, in

the border region close to Colombia and other nearby areas, various guerrilla groups and drug traffickers have assumed control of some zones, sometimes in collusion with the government. In these territories, the presence of such criminal groups often prevents Christians from gathering even for legitimate purposes unrelated to any specific religious activity.

**Block 1.7: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with immediate family members. (2.50 points)**

Due to the high levels of intolerance and polarization in the country caused by the imposition of Socialist/Communist principles, anyone sharing an opinion opposing the regime (even when it is about defending a religious belief) risks being denounced, arrested and prosecuted by regime allies, even by those in one's own family. This fear leads to self-censorship. Additionally, the social control exerted by criminal groups influences the risk that Christians - especially young people and activists - experience when they openly speak about Christian values opposing criminal businesses and the rules imposed by criminal groups. There have also been reports of interdenominational conflicts, which have hindered Christians from speaking about their faith with immediate relatives.

**Block 1.8: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with those other than immediate family (extended family, others). (2.50 points)**

'Colectivos', informers and state agents seek to quell any opposition to the authorities in the communities. Thus, Christians who oppose the government's anti-democratic activities are not free to share their faith-based opinions with their extended family or others for fear that this information will be leaked and lead to interrogation and reprisals. Lately, due to the government's rapprochement with some religious communities, members of extended family have sometimes been acting as government informants if any faith issue is discussed that could be classified as political opposition or criticism of 'Biblical statements' made by some authorities. In addition, in places where armed groups control areas, such as the border with Colombia, Christians speaking about their faith and implying opposition to armed group interests could be risking their lives.

## Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

**Block 2.8: Christian children have been pressured into attending anti-Christian or majority religion teaching at any level of education. (3.50 points)**

Socialist ideology is a compulsory component of the state school curriculum. The children of Christians at these schools are thus forced to learn and promote the guiding principles of Communism and various Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) postulates. Also, in rural and border areas taken over by guerrilla groups, children of Christians are forced to receive information distributed by guerillas for the purposes of recruitment. There are also some internal reports of pressure being exerted on non-Catholic children to attend Catholic classes or to follow Catholic practices in schools.



**Block 2.7: Parents have been hindered in raising their children according to their Christian beliefs. (3.25 points)**

State schools teach Socialist ideology which often contradicts the Christian values that parents wish to instill in their children's minds and hearts. Fearing reprisals, Christian parents hardly dare to express their disagreement with the school compulsory curriculum or when their children are chosen to be part of the so-called “revolutionary youth camps”. In areas where guerrilla groups are active (especially in border regions such as Zulia, Tachira, Apure, Barinas, Bolivar and Amazonas), Christian parents may face serious threats of violence if they try to prevent their children from being indoctrinated by criminal groups.

**Block 2.9: Children of Christians have been harassed or discriminated against because of their parents' faith. (3.00 points)**

When Christian parents are targeted as perceived opponents of the regime, children also suffer the consequences and are criticized, mocked, or used as 'bad examples' at school, for instance. The children of Christian parents sometimes face threats and other kinds of harassment as a way for the regime to put pressure on the parents and force their compliance. This also applies when Christian parents refuse to follow the rules imposed by criminal groups and their children become victims of reprisals as a way of intimidating their parents.

**Block 2.10: Christian spouses and/or children of Christians have been subject to separation for prolonged periods of time by circumstances relating to persecution. (2.25 points)**

Where Christians have been arbitrarily detained or have had to leave the country to stop being targeted, they are forced to live separated from their families for prolonged and indefinite periods. For those who have fled, it is impossible to return to their homes either because they could be imprisoned or because they are prohibited from entering the country. In some cases, Christian activists opt to send their families out of the country to keep them safe. Sometimes forced displacement is generated by criminal groups terrorizing Christians living in the zones under their control. Although forced migration is a recurring reality in the country, it involves many dangers such as encountering mafia groups in control of the roads, especially when passing through the Darién (Panamanian crossing).

## Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

**Block 3.5: Christians have been put under pressure to take part in non-Christian religious ceremonies or community events. (3.25 points)**

Christians working in public offices have frequently been forced to take part in pro-government events (often involving marches and electoral campaigning) against their Christian conscience. Most of them participate out of fear of being dismissed or targeted by the regime. In a few other cases, Christians have been pressured into attending activities involving the adoration of Santeria deities so as not to lose state benefits and services. Also, due to the severity of the economic crisis, the government can force people (often the poorest) to take part in events contrary to their Christian beliefs in order to survive. At workplaces and in educational settings, similar pressure can be applied.

**Block 3.9: Christians have faced disadvantages in their education at any level for faith-related reasons (e.g. restrictions of access to education). (3.00 points)**

Despite the pressure to take on board Socialist/Communist ideology and despite the lack of academic freedom, education at state schools and universities is key for students hoping for a better future (usually abroad). Especially at universities, if students are Christians and politically active, they will likely be targeted for reprisals in the form of suspension or expulsion, or harassed to such a degree that they simply give up their studies. Similarly, it has been reported that Christian students refusing to participate in Santero rites have also at times become victims of reprisal. Additionally, in the border areas, the active presence of armed groups is a factor that influences whether Christian students can continue their school education, or not.

**Block 3.10: Christians have been discriminated against in public or private employment for faith-related reasons. (3.00 points)**

In general, religious affiliation as such is not a determining factor or a cause to be discriminated against in public or private employment; this only happens against those considered to be government opponents - e.g. when a Christian is active in politics or social issues. On repeated occasions, the president has indicated that there cannot be people in managerial or government positions who are against the revolution and against him. Those who are not members of the ruling party or who disagree with the government's anti-democratic measures are likely to be harassed and even dismissed from their positions (ignoring the fact that they are acting on grounds of faith). Alternative employment may well be impossible to find due to the lack of private initiatives in the country.

**Block 3.13: Christians have been interrogated or compelled to report to the local vigilante/police for faith-related reasons. (3.00 points)**

Special groups, such as the 'colectivos' and 'compatriotas cooperantes', are sent to interrogate political dissidents, including Christians who speak openly against the government or are engaged in church-based or civil society initiatives. The aim is to discourage any activity that could endanger the regime's interests, especially if it is related to humanitarian work funded by international donors or involves any kind of contact with those considered opponents. Also, in areas where criminal groups dominate, Christians involved in humanitarian assistance and similar projects are forced to seek permission from those groups before carrying out such projects.

## Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

**Block 4.1: The Constitution (or comparable national or state law) limits freedom of religion as formulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (3.75 points)**

Although, the Constitution establishes that the state shall guarantee the freedom of religion and worship, there are other legal provisions included in the criminal code and administrative regulations (as explained above in: *Political and legal landscape*) which can lead to faith-based opinions being considered hate speech or plans for a coup, where they go against ruling party interests.

**Block 4.8: Christians have been hindered in expressing their views or opinions in public. (3.50 points)**

Anyone who expresses an opinion that "promotes hatred and discrimination" can be made criminally responsible and considered an enemy of the state. However, the regime interprets what is to be understood by that. As a result, churches that would normally demand justice and respect for the Venezuelan people, often remain silent for fear of being prosecuted - as happened to some church leaders during the WWL 2024 reporting period. Christians and Christian leaders who raise their voice against the constant violations of human rights, calling attention to the country's humanitarian situation, or who criticize government policies (including those related to SOGI postulates), face threats, arrests and attacks from the regime or sympathizers of the regime. Since Christians are not free to state their opinions in public, self-censorship is common.

**Block 4.9: Christian civil society organizations or political parties have been hindered in their functioning or forbidden because of their Christian convictions. (3.50 points)**

Political parties that do not align with the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PUSV) are heavily restricted and cannot participate freely in the political life of the country. Hence, Christian political parties cannot function. Christian civil society organizations, especially those providing social projects and humanitarian aid, face harassment, hinderances and constant scrutiny, especially about their funding. Since the provision of food and other services is a way for the government to exert control over the population (through the so-called "national card"), the regime is wary of any competition and will block it. In addition, Christians who support civil society initiatives are also targeted by the government.

**Block 4.14: Those who caused harm to Christians have deliberately been left unpunished. (3.50 points)**

Due to corruption and rampant impunity within the state apparatus, state and non-state agents (e.g. members of criminal groups) who have exerted pressure or committed acts of violence against Christians critical of the regime (or Christian human rights activists), have not been properly prosecuted nor punished. In this context, without an independent justice system, Christians have no effective authority to turn to. Coupled with the rising insecurity, the fact that citizens have lost confidence in state institutions (such as the legislative and judicial powers) has forced thousands of Venezuelans, including Christians, to flee the country.

## Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

**Block 5.2: It has been difficult to get registration or legal status for churches at any level of government. (3.50 points)**

With the exception of the Roman Catholic church, which enjoys full legal recognition, other religious groups must be registered as a 'nonprofit civil association' with the Directorate of Justice and Religion (DJR) in order to receive permits, licenses and some economic benefits. Even though full legal church status is denied by law to non-Catholic denominations, the DJR imposes arbitrary registration requirements and legal taxes on them and the success of the process de-

pende largely on their regime support. Thus, due to deliberate bureaucratic hindrances, the registration process (or the renewal of the legal permit to operate) can last more than a decade for churches considered to be aligned with the opposition. Most of these churches, unless they show a certain level of loyalty to the regime, are thus forced to operate illegally and permanently risk action being taken against them by the authorities .

**Block 5.8: Christian preaching, teaching and/or published materials have been monitored. (3.50 points)**

Through the work of local authorities, criminal groups and sympathizers of the regime, the government is able to constantly monitor churches' teaching and preaching to check if there is any criticism of the regime (including the way it promotes SOGI postulates) or Socialist/Communist ideology. Similarly, in areas coopted by criminal groups, preaching is heavily monitored by the groups to see if the teaching represents a threat to their illegal operations. Some churches have had their activities disrupted and congregations have been intimidated.

**Block 5.20: It has been risky for churches or Christian organizations to speak out against instigators of persecution. (3.50 points)**

Every time the Venezuelan Church raises its voice in protest, it becomes a target not only of the government but also of regime sympathizers and allied criminal groups. Christians who openly reject Socialist/Communist ideology and denounce regime abuses are under constant threat of being arrested or otherwise 'silenced'. Lately, even not showing oneself as sympathetic to the regime is a risk factor, because the difference to other religious leaders who do openly provide their support is clearly evident. Also, when churches publicly denounce or call attention to criminal activities and corruption (especially in the country's border areas), they risk reprisals from local armed groups.

**Block 5.11: Pastors or other Christian leaders (or their family members) have been special targets of harassment for faith-related reasons. (3.25 points)**

Given that the aim of the regime is to remain in power and exert total control, Christian leaders are frequently pressured into appearing publicly as supporters of the regime. Where they refuse and remain critical of the government, vocal about human rights, work in humanitarian aid projects or defend biblical views on marriage and family, they will almost certainly face reprisals. For instance, some pastors have faced smear campaigns and court cases on accusations of terrorism and hate speech. Criminal groups have also actively collaborated in intimidating opposition voices, including church leaders, not only when they do not align themselves with the regime, but also when their church ministry is seen as a threat to their criminal activities.

## Violence

Violence is defined in WWL Methodology as the deprivation of physical freedom or as bodily harm to Christians or damage to their property. It includes severe threats (mental abuse). The table is based on reported cases as much as possible, but since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as being minimum figures. The following points should be considered when using the data provided in the Block 6 table:

**1. Some incidents go unreported because the Christians involved choose not to speak about the hostility being faced.**

Possible reasons for this may be:

- Doing so would expose them to more attacks. For example, if a family member is killed because of his/her faith, the survivors might decide to keep silent about the circumstances of the killing to avoid provoking any further attacks.
- In some circumstances, the reticence to pass on information may be due to the danger of exposure caused by converts returning to their previous faith.
- If persecution is related to sexual violence - due to stigma, survivors often do not tell even their closest relatives.
- In some cultural settings, if your loved one is killed, you might be under the obligation to take revenge. Christians not wishing to do that, may decide to keep quiet about it.

**2. Other incidents go unreported for the following possible reasons**

- Some incidents never reach the public consciousness, because no one really knows about it; or the incident is simply not considered worth reporting; or media coverage is deliberately blocked or distorted; or media coverage is not deliberately blocked, but the information somehow gets lost; or the incidents are deliberately not reported widely for security reasons (e.g. for the protection of local church leaders).
- In situations where Christians have been discriminated against for many years, armed conflict can make them additionally vulnerable. Christians killed in areas where fighting regularly takes place are unlikely to be reported separately. Examples in recent years have been Sudan, Syria and Myanmar.
- Christians who die through the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care (due to long-term discrimination) are unlikely to be reported separately. Christians are not always killed directly; they can be so squeezed by regulations and other oppressive factors that they die – not at once, but in the course of years. This often includes the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care, or exclusion from government assisted socio-economic development projects. These numbers could be immense.

Venezuela: Violence scores per Block 6 question in questionnaire	WWL 2024	WWL 2023
6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	5	7
6.2 How many churches or public Christian properties (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	14	14
6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	0	17
6.4 How many Christians have been sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment, or similar things for faith-related reasons?	0	0

Venezuela: Violence scores per Block 6 question in questionnaire	WWL 2024	WWL 2023
6.5 How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	3	0
6.6 How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	1	0
6.7 How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians?	0	0
6.8 How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	27	15
6.9 How many houses of Christians or other property (excluding shops) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	3	0
6.10 How many shops or businesses of Christians have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	0	2
6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	18	12
6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	4	1

In the WWL 2024 reporting period:

- **Christians killed (5):** The incidents involved local criminal groups murdering Christian religious leaders who openly opposed their illegal activities, mainly in the border areas of the country.
- **Christian buildings attacked (14):** Most of the incidents involved criminal groups threatening and attacking churches. With a similar goal of intimidation, some attacks by regime sympathizers were also reported.
- **Christians attacked (27):** Most of the incidents involved criminal groups threatening and attacking church members (including Christian leaders), mainly with death threats. Some attacks by regime sympathizers were also reported.
- **Christians forced to leave their homes (11):** All the cases involved Christians, particularly church leaders, who had been victims of reprisals for their pastoral work in areas coopted by criminal groups acting with impunity in the country.

## 5 Year trends

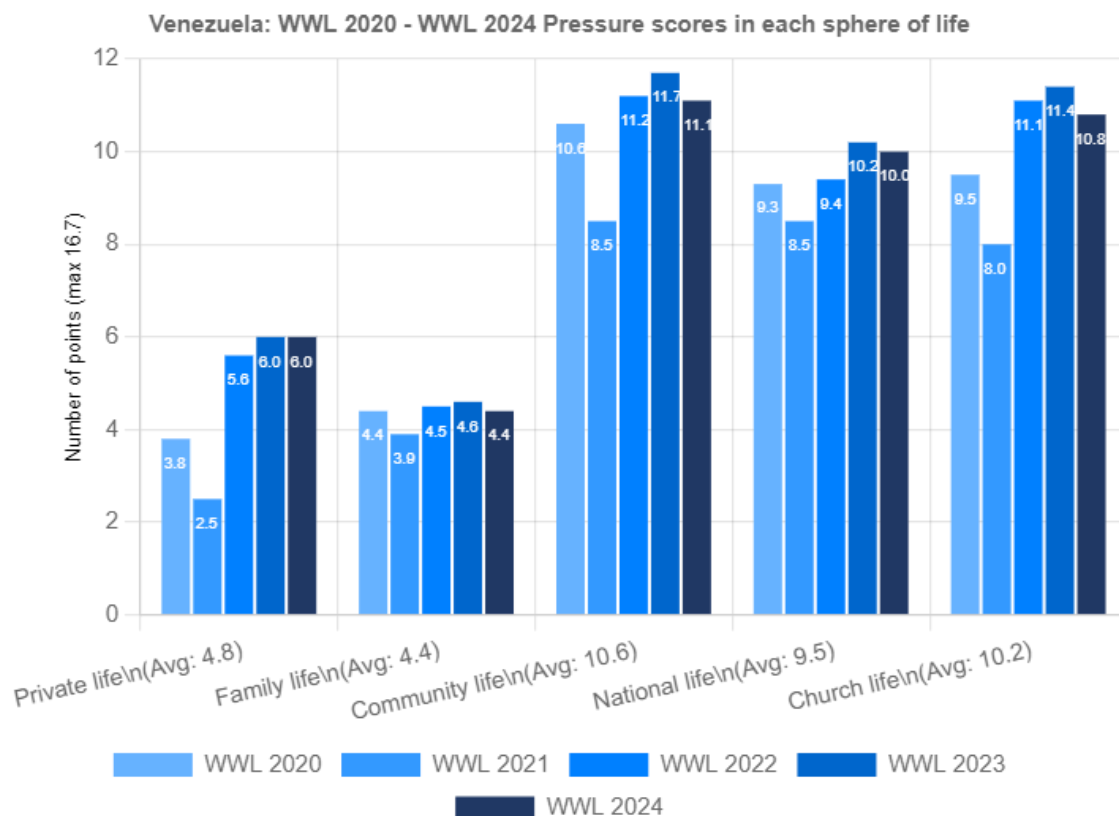
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

## 5 Year trends: Average pressure

Venezuela: WWL 2020 - WWL 2024	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2024	8.5
2023	8.8
2022	8.4
2021	6.3
2020	7.5

The table above shows that the average pressure on Christians has consistently been above 6.3 points over the last five reporting periods, rising to its highest level in WWL 2023 due to increased intimidation and retaliation by both the government and criminal groups.

## 5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life



Throughout the last five reporting periods there was a clear increase in the pressure in most *spheres of life*, in comparison with WWL 2020. Variations occur because the levels of repression against churches and church leaders depend on the current political interests of the regime. For instance, when it is convenient for the government, as happened lately during the preparation of electoral campaign, the humanitarian work carried out by churches was allowed, but when



church leaders make public calls for the respect of democracy and human rights (i.e. during an election period), the pressure increases against them. Additionally, as criminal groups have become more active and bolder, this has also had an impact on the level of pressure experienced by Christians in all *spheres of life*.

## 5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



The chart above shows that the score for violence increased in large steps from WWL 2020 to WWL 2023 (which reached the category 'extremely high'). Violence went down in WWL 2024 but there were still many violent incidents against Christians not just from the government seeking to silence opposition voices, but also from criminal groups intimidating Christians whom they regard as defying their 'authority' over the areas under their control.

## Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	-
Security	Violence – death; Violence – sexual
Social and Cultural	-
Technological	-

Within the context of Venezuela’s ongoing complex humanitarian emergency, Christian women face several vulnerabilities. Young girls are trafficked and can end up trapped in prostitution net-

works, exchanging sex for food or medicine ([USDS, 2023, Trafficking in Persons Report: Venezuela](#)). Christian women were reportedly better paid because their purity is presumed, and desired, but a country expert explained: “In the past it was known that Christian women are better paid..., however there are no recent indications about this. In this difficult context, desperation might cause moral boundaries to be ignored in order to survive.”

Many young women are choosing to escape Venezuela in light of economic and social factors. Within the context of displacement they are exposed to organized trafficking and exploitative criminal groups, where once again, their presumed purity can increase their perceived economic value.

While many women and girls are leaving Venezuela, it is primarily young men that depart to seek economic opportunities, including in Christian families and communities. Left alone, women become more vulnerable and at increased risk of prostitution as a means of survival. State support is not a viable option; given that most government services are offered to those who belong to the party, Christian families who refuse to align with the government do not receive state support and as a result fall into destitution (El Pais, April 20, 2021).

Women in Venezuela, in addition to hunger and economic downturn, face gender-based violence on a daily basis. Women are subject to psychological, physical and sexual violence, most often at the hands of their partners. Data collected in 2022 reported that there was one femicide every 37 hours (Utopix, 2022, accessed 28 February 2024). Regardless of the violence experienced, most women will choose not to report to the authorities (IRC, 2024).

In summary, Christian women and girls are vulnerable to exploitation in all contexts in Venezuela – whether on the move when fleeing the country, upon arrival in new countries, or when left alone and vulnerable by absent male family members. Wives of political prisoners for instance, are subjected to diverse forms of maleficence. A local source explained: “They are subjected to strong pressure that has even led them to pay 'supposed' fines (extortion) so that their husbands do not suffer physical harm. These 'fines' and strong psychological pressure are led by agents of the public force.”

## Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

Group	Male Pressure Points
Economic	Discrimination/harassment via education; Economic harassment via business/job/work access
Political and Legal	Imprisonment by government
Security	Abduction; Forced to flee town/country; Violence – death; Violence – physical
Social and Cultural	Violence – psychological; Violence – Verbal
Technological	-

Within Venezuela's context of extreme violence and instability, Christian men and boys face a breadth of pressure. Most notably, young men are at particular risk of being targeted by criminal gangs and guerrilla groups, especially along the Colombian border. They are more likely to be recruited into the ranks of the Bolivian Guard or Venezuelan army, enticed by the promise of food and medicines. "These criminal groups make tremendous economic proposals to the youth, but the pastors try to dissuade the youth from joining in a very [covert] way because if the criminal leaders find out about their opposition, they will disappear," a country expert explained.

As of 2023, there are more than 270 political prisoners behind bars, and about 19 million people unable to access health care and nutrition. More than 7.7 million Venezuelans have fled the country, generating one of the largest migration crises in the world ([HRW 2024, Venezuela country chapter](#)). In light of these pressures and exacerbated by the economic and political crisis, many men and boys are forced to leave the country in order to find work to support their families. While on the move, they are vulnerable to being captured and exploited by organized crime groups ([International Crisis Group, 9 August 2022](#)). Their families who they leave behind also become vulnerable, as highlighted in the female gender profile above.

Church leaders, who are predominately male, suffer the highest levels of persecution, especially at the hands of the government with Catholic leaders typically most vulnerable. As a country expert explained: "In this context, those who oppose [the government] based on their faith-based points of view are also victims of the regime, religious leaders have been discredited or defamed, attacked verbally and physically, religious activities have been interrupted, religious practices such as burials have [also] been interrupted. In general, there is persecution from the ruling party against Christians whenever they openly denounce the injustices and irregularities of the regime."

Church leaders also face threats and economic exploitation from criminal gangs, particularly if they are involved in outreach efforts to young people, which could threaten gang recruitment levels. Pressure is greatest in areas on the country's border, where criminal groups fight for territorial control. An expert disclosed that "in the territories controlled by criminal groups, especially in the border area of the country, collections of passage, extortion, are a way of controlling the area. Religious leaders must make these payments not only to enter the territories in which they carry out their activities, but they must also have the leader's authorization."

Reflecting the seriousness of threats against church leaders, in the WWL 2024 reporting period several were killed with many more forced to flee their homes.

## Persecution of other religious minorities

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2022 Venezuela):

- "Some members of the Jewish community again stated the regime and those sympathetic to it, including some regime-affiliated media outlets, used anti-Zionist rhetoric to mask antisemitism, saying they avoided accusations of antisemitism by replacing the word 'Jewish' with 'Zionist'. For example, on January 27, during a broadcast of his weekly television show in which he showed 'wanted' posters of various opposition leaders, PSUV vice president Diosdado Cabello called David Smolanky, OAS Commissioner for the Venezuelan Migrants and Refugee Crisis, a 'Zionist' and a 'fascist'. Following backlash for his comments, Cabello denied his statements were related to Smolansky's Jewish roots but instead concerned the "Zionist mafia he represented."
- "In August [2022], the regime's Ministry of Communication and Information released a series of videos calling for the return of an Emtrasur airplane belonging to state-owned airline Conviasa and grounded in Argentina in June by a court order for alleged links to terrorism. In one video, the regime labeled the 1994 terrorist attack in Buenos Aires against the AMIA Jewish Center a 'false positive', suggesting it was not actually a terrorist attack. In response to the video, which was also broadcast on the regime-owned television channel VTV, the Simon Wiesenthal Center issued a statement calling the characterization of the attack an 'unspeakable outrage'."
- "In August [2022], during a podcast interview, Esteban Trapiello, president of regime-linked regional Telearagua television stations and the Aragueña radio station, questioned the 'tale' of the Holocaust and expressed a desire to meet Adolf Hitler and ask him why he did not 'finish everything he started'. CAIV issued a statement on August 22 condemning Trapiello's comments as 'delusional antisemitism'."
- "According to the Simon Wiesenthal Center, in February [2022], the cities of Chacao, Baruta and El Hatillo, all in Miranda State, issued a 'Joint Manifesto against Anti-Semitism', which included approval of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism. The manifesto also urged Holocaust education in primary schools."

## Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

### **Dictatorial paranoia**

The desire to remain in power generated apparent signs of political and economic opening on the part of the Maduro government on the eve of the start of the electoral year. However, there are still no major signs of transparency, respect for democratic rule and abandonment of abusive practices that guarantee fair elections in which the civil and political rights of the population are minimally guaranteed. In this scenario, the work of the Church and religious leaders who remain firm in their defense of the most vulnerable and in the search for the common good continues to be very difficult and challenging.

## Communist and post-Communist oppression

Freedom of speech, religious liberty, and freedom of conscience are likely to continue to be restricted since it opposes the Socialist/Communist ideology of the ruling party. Schools are likely to continue promoting loyalty to the president and rejection of all views opposing him. It is likely that the regime will continue to keep some churches under close control for not showing loyalty or giving in to pressure, thus causing confusion and division among the wider Church. Despite this, most churches will continue to be seen as enemies of the regime and the Christian humanitarian work will most likely continue to be hindered by the authorities when not politically convenient.

## Organized corruption and crime

Criminal groups look set to gain in strength due to the continuing impunity and collusion with the authorities. They are likely to increase their territorial influence, spreading fear as their main tactic. Churches will remain particularly vulnerable to threats and attacks from such groups, especially where Christians work in peace-building initiatives, drug-rehabilitation programs, and offer humanitarian support to migrants.

## External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution engines description: Rule of Law Index 2023 - <https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/downloads/WJPIIndex2023.pdf>
- Persecution engines description: narco-state - <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/article281178108.html>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: (USDS, 2023, Trafficking in Persons Report: Venezuela) - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-trafficking-in-persons-report/venezuela/>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: (HRW 2024, Venezuela country chapter) - <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/venezuela>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: International Crisis Group, 9 August 2022 - <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/andes/colombia-venezuela/hard-times-safe-haven-protecting-venezuelan>

## Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

As in earlier years, these are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Venezuela>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.