

World Watch Research

Venezuela: Background Information

September 2024



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Contents

Copyright and sources	1
Map of country	2
Recent history	2
Political and legal landscape	4
Religious landscape.....	8
Economic landscape.....	11
Social and cultural landscape.....	13
Technological landscape	15
Security situation	17
Christian origins	21
Church spectrum today.....	22
Further useful reports.....	22
External Links	23

Copyright and sources

World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

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Map of country



Venezuela: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
29,395,000	27,137,000	92.3

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

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). In January 2023, Gustavo Petro and Nicolás Maduro issued a joint [declaration](#) announcing, among other things, that Venezuela will be a guarantor country for Colombia in the process of maintaining bilateral peace. This declaration concluded negotiations on the Agreement regarding the Promotion and Reciprocal Protection of Investments and promised the opening of all border crossings (Presidencia de la República, 7 January 2023). 24 September 2023 marked [one year](#) since the full re-establishment of diplomatic, political and commercial relations between the two countries (Presidencia, 24 September 2023).

In September 2023, tensions between Guyana and Venezuela rose concerning the exploitation of oil fields in disputed waters of the Caribbean Sea (The Guardian, 22 September 2023). In December 2023, the presidents of both countries pledged to not threaten or use force against one another. However, in April 2024, the Venezuelan government promulgated the Organic Law for the Defense of Guayana Esequiba, which declares Esquibo a Venezuelan state. After Maduro announced the annexation, the US army carried out joint training with the Guyanese army in a clear sign to deter Venezuela. The conflict is expected to return to diplomatic paths ([The Guardian, 21 July 2024](#)).

Due to the economic crisis and the increase in violence, the wave of Venezuelan migration increased from 2014 onwards and continues to this day. According to July 2024 figures from UNHCR, "more than [7.7 million](#) people have left Venezuela, the largest percentage having been welcomed in countries in Latin America and the Caribbean". The United Nations has described it as the [largest exodus](#) in the history of the Western hemisphere, "equaling Ukraine in the number of displaced people and surpassing Syria" (CNN, 1 September 2022).

Political and legal landscape

The official results of the presidential election on 28 July 2024 have been widely criticized as undemocratic, opaque and aimed at maintaining President Nicolás Maduro in power ([APNews 17 September 2024](#)).

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 Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) had pointed out in advance the [impossibility](#) of holding free, fair and competitive presidential elections due to obstacles to the participation of opposition candidates (IACHR, 5 April 2024). Previously, the IACHR had already rejected the 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). Another relevant measure was Venezuela's [withdrawal](#) of the invitation to the European Union (EU) to act as electoral observer, after the EU ratified sanctions against 50 Venezuelan officials in mid-May (APNews, 29 May 2024) following the [expulsion](#) from the country of the staff of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (BBC News, 23 February 2024).

The [2023 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. Therefore, 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, July 2024). This situation did not improve during 2024. 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). The talks included a [Partial Agreement on the Promotion of Political Rights and Electoral Guarantees for All](#) (Government of Norway, last updated 1 December 2023). As part of the negotiation, the USA agreed to lift some sanctions that prevent the sale of Venezuelan oil abroad (The Economist, 19 October 2023). However, the US government later reimposed sanctions on Venezuela's oil and gas sector due to the Venezuelan government's repressive measures against the opposition (CNN, 17 April 2024).

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 around [55 acts](#) of persecution and criminalization exercised by the government of Nicolás Maduro in its determination to stay in power (CEPAZ, May 2024). Such violations are possible because of the repressive legal system, examples of which are listed below:

- 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).
- 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.
- 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
- 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).
- 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). In March 2023, the Permanent Commission on Foreign Policy, Sovereignty and Integration [approved](#) the text (Asamblea Nacional, 1 March 2023).
- The [draft](#) bill 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 participate, in its criterion, of political activities or that attempt against national stability and the institutions of the Republic (Provea, August 2023). In January 2024, the General Assembly [resumed](#) discussion of this project, which was approved in first discussion of the law (IACHR, 26 January 2024).
- In May 2023, Nicolás Maduro [signed](#) the Law for the Protection of Assets, Rights and Interests of the Republic and its Entities Abroad. The objective was to prevent Venezuelan assets abroad from being affected by US sanctions (America economia, 32 May 2023).
- The draft bill against Fascism, Neo Fascism and Similar Expressions, which [prohibits](#) the promotion of violence as a method of political action (VOA, 2 April 2024). In April 2024, the National Assembly approved the Bill in its first discussion.

According to Freedom House's [Freedom in the World Index 2024 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, relations with those countries are being strengthened. Examples of this are: 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 for Iranian food production, in what has been called a test of "indestructible friendship" between the two countries (Perfil, 26 July 2022). In the celebration of the 2024 Independence Day, [Russian soldiers](#) were also included in the national parade (Infobae, 7 July 2024).

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). Although in the run-up to the July 2024 elections Gustavo Petro described the disqualification of various political opponents in Venezuela as an anti-democratic measure, the relationship between both countries remained intact as evidenced in the April [meeting](#) between Gustavo Petro and Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela, in which they discussed various topics such as migration, energy transition and climate control (France 24, 9 April 2024).

International sanctions against Venezuela (see also below: Economic landscape)

US sanctions against Venezuela [include](#) (Congressional Research Service, 24 April 2024):

- Visa revocations related to corruption or human rights abuses;
- Terrorism related sanctions; including the prohibition of all U.S. commercial arms sales and retransfers to Venezuela
- Drug trafficking related sanctions; including the imposition of asset blocking sanctions on 11 individuals and 25 companies with connections to Venezuela by designating them as Specially Designated Narcotics Traffickers.
- Sanctions on those the President identified as responsible for significant acts of violence, serious human rights abuses, or antidemocratic actions.
- Financial sanctions, including the prohibition of access to U.S. financial markets by the Venezuelan government, including state energy company Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A. (PdVSA)
- The blocking of assets of, and prohibiting certain transactions with, any person determined by the Secretary of the Treasury to operate in designated sectors of the Venezuelan economy or to engage in corrupt transactions with the Maduro government.

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 reviewed annually (or every six months) since then, 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.
- Restrictions on equipment, technology or software intended primarily for use in the monitoring or interception by the Venezuelan regime of the Internet and of telephone communications on mobile or fixed networks in Venezuela.

Formal ICC investigation

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. In March 2024, the ICC Appeals Chamber [denied](#) the Venezuelan government's appeal against the Pre-Trial Chamber's decision to authorize resuming the investigation in Venezuela (Reliefweb, 1 March 2024).

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	27,137,000	92.3
Muslim	97,200	0.3
Hindu	590	0.0
Buddhist	36,100	0.1
Ethnic religionist	219,000	0.7
Jewish	7,200	0.0
Bahai	174,000	0.6
Atheist	63,900	0.2
Agnostic	1,341,000	4.6
Other	318,500	1.1
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

According to the World Christian Database (accessed May 2024), there is a downward trend among those who identify as agnostics or atheists, who together make up 4.8% of the population. There was an upward trend in the number of Christians, who make up 92.3% of the population - a 0.9% rise in comparison to the previous year..

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 has continued to seek rapprochement with factions within Protestantism (taking advantage of its fragmentation) especially in the run up to elections. 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). The Religious Affairs Commission of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) also held [meetings](#) to promote voting in favor of Nicolás Maduro in the July presidential elections (El Siglo, 23 June 2024). In meetings of the religious sector held with the government, the supervision of international religious observers was [proposed](#) to help guarantee free and fair elections (Ciudad CCS, 09 February 2024).

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 could best support government policies (Noticias Barquisimeto, 19 March 2022). The information obtained was probably 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 (Protestante Digital, 24 January 2024).

Overall, the relationship between the government and evangelical groups has been visibly strengthened. 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). The CEV also expressed [concern](#) about the participation of people who "identify as pastors adhering to the evangelical faith" in public events, raising questions regarding whether the motive behind such participation was a "search for benefits", economic or otherwise. The government's friendliness towards certain Protestant groups 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 2023](#) Venezuela):

- “Representatives of the conference of Roman Catholic bishops (the Catholic Episcopal Conference of Venezuela (CEV)), and the Evangelical Council of Venezuela (ECV) said Maduro

supporters continued to verbally harass clergy and other members of their religious communities for calling attention to the country's humanitarian crisis and other criticisms of Maduro."

- "Each religious group must register with the DJR [Direction 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 obtain a letter of acceptance from the Maduro-aligned community council in the neighborhood(s) where the group will work. The ministry reviews applications, with no time limit for approval. Religious groups must register any new statutes with the DJR"
- "Many religious groups practiced self-censorship out of fear that Maduro's representatives would apply the penal code or the anti hate law that criminalizes political party activities promoting "fascism, intolerance, or hatred" to religious actors who criticized them."
- " According to a Catholic Church leader, Maduro representatives paused or completely stopped funding some Catholic schools, which are typically located in impoverished areas. The leader described this as part of Maduro representatives' attempt to limit the actions and influence of the Church."
- " Catholic Church representatives continued to cite difficulties in securing religious visas for priests. They said many international Catholic Church personnel could not 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) have openly discussed the problems that the country is experiencing, including the dismantling of democracy and the violation of human rights. 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. In March 2024, President Maduro [exempted](#) evangelical churches from paying for the protocolization of the Constitutive Acts of non-profit Civil Associations of a religious nature (El Universal, 11 March 2024). 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 2023, 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 the past, 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 Human Development Report Venezuela](#) (updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **Gross National Income (GNI) per capita:** 6,184 (2022)
- **GNI per capita women/men:** 4,285 (women); 8,126 (men) (2022)
- **Income inequality:** 21.1% (2021).
- **Population vulnerable to multidimensional poverty:** 12.1

According to the [Freedom in the World Index 2024](#) 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, March 2024), the economic factors that aggravate the vulnerability of people are the lack of access to bank credit, lack of housing insurance policy, lack of affiliation to a medical insurance policy, situation of structural poverty, lack of housing, lack of formal employment.

Círculo de Estudios Latinoamericanos reported that during the first part of 2024 the [economic pace of growth](#) appeared to have slowed down. Estimates based on data collected by the Venezuelan Finance Observatory (OVF) indicated that, at the end of the first quarter, economic activity expanded only 2% in interannual terms. This was decisively influenced by an increase in oil production. In contrast, non-oil activity, according to the OVF, registered a moderate growth of 1% in the first quarter of the year. The first quarter of 2024 closed with a significant slowdown in inflation reported by the Central Bank of Venezuela (BCV). The accumulated inflation until April was 6.3%, in contrast to the 87% registered in the same period of 2023. Monthly inflation remained in single digits throughout the four-month

period: 1.7% in January, 1.2% in February, 1.2% in March and 2.0% in April. The annual inflation rate in April fell to 65% from 190% in December 2023. Interannual inflation in Venezuela stood at 64.9% in April, maintaining its slowing trend of recent months even though it remains one of the highest in the world.

According to the OVF June 2024 report ([Observatorio de Finanzas, 5 June 2024](#)):

- “The inflation rate in May 2024 was 3.9%, an increase compared to the previous month when it registered 2.9%. The accumulated rate reaches 15.3% and year-on-year inflation reaches 78%. The items most affected by inflation were services (7.2%), communication services (6.8%) and education (4.4%). All services increased in the month of May: 18.2% in electricity service; 16.7% of the Water service; cleaning and gas services on average increased by 7%; cable TV service 5%; cell phone 14.4% and internet 4%. Regarding the education sector, there are increases in monthly payments for transportation (6%), universities (4%) and schools (24%)”.

According to the organization CENDAS, the [family basket](#) as of May 2024 was equivalent to \$547.13 USD, that is, 21,786.87 bolivars and the minimum wage corresponded to \$3.26 USD. To acquire the basic monthly basket, around 167.59 minimum wages would be required (CENDAS, May 2024).

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 US Biden administration [reinstated](#) sanctions on Venezuela's oil and gas sector since President Nicolás Maduro failed to commit to free and fair elections (NPR, 18 April 2024).

As a result of this economic situation, millions have fled the country. Many of the country's churches have become key actors in [helping](#) the most vulnerable (Vatican News, 29 January 2024). 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 (Aciprensa, 18 April 2024). 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 ([Aciprensa, 10 May 2023](#)).

Social and cultural landscape

According to the [World Factbook Venezuela](#) (accessed 19 September 2024) and [UNDP Human Development Report Venezuela](#) (updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **Main ethnic groups:** unspecified Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Arab, German, African, Indigenous
- **Main languages:** Spanish (official) 98.2%, indigenous 1.3%, Portuguese 0.1%, other 0.4% (2023 est.)
- **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 (2018) is 101% and for secondary (2017) 84.0%. The duration of compulsory education is 17 years (2023).
- **Unemployment (modeled ILO estimate):** 5.5% (2023).
- **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:** 347,695 (2023)

According to [UNDP Human Development Report Venezuela](#) (updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **Human Development Index (HDI) score and ranking:** Venezuela scored 0.695 in 2022, ranking #119 out of 193 countries and territories.
- **Life expectancy (2022):** 75.7 (female) and 66.9 (male)
- **Gender inequality:** Venezuela has a GII value of 0521, ranking it 134 out of 193 countries in the 2022 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 the first quarter of 2024, the Venezuelan Observatory of Social Conflict (OVCS) highlighted the increase in peaceful demonstrations to demand the right to political participation. Protests linked to basic services ranked first in the index, displacing labor protests. During the first ninety days of 2024, 914 protests were [documented](#) demanding economic, social, cultural and environmental rights (Desca), 74% of the general total. The states with the most demonstrations are Bolívar (151), Anzoátegui (124), Sucre (114), Táchira (96) and Lara (71) (OVCS, 1 April 2024).

Human rights violations

According to the [2023 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 and association of people and organizations defending human rights; restrictions on academic freedom;
- Criminalization of speeches of public interest through the “Law against hate”;
- Hostile government action against people and organizations defending human rights. Disproportionate use of public force to disperse protests.

Migration and its causes

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. According to The UN Refugee Agency, only in the first half of 2023, 71,100 Venezuelans were recognized as [refugees](#) worldwide, 57% in the Americas. In the same period, 163,700 Venezuelans filled new asylum applications worldwide, 76 % in the Americas. In 2023, Venezuelans represented 63% of those crossing the Darien jungle; nearly half of them traveled directly from Venezuela according to Protection Monitoring reports. As of 30 April 2024, over 139,267 people entered Panama through Darien irregularly in 2024, a 26% increase compared to the same period in 2023. Venezuelans remained the primary group crossing (88,660) followed by Ecuadorians (10,640 people) and Haitians (8,997 people) (UNHCR Venezuela Factsheet, May 2024).

According to the [National Survey on Living Conditions \(ENCOVI 2023\)](#):

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.

- The flow of remittances has been suffering a drop. In 2021 it was considered 64% while in 2023, 56%.
- In 2023, 78% of moderate or severe vulnerability is concentrated in the poorest 30%. 80% of low-vulnerable households are located between deciles 6 and 10 of the poverty indices.
- 89% of households suffer from food insecurity. Half of the households do not receive sufficient income to cover the food basket, categorizing them in extreme poverty.

According to the [Public Expenditure Observatory](#) (CEDICE), as of April 2024:

- The top 5 entities with the highest number of electrical failures include: Zulia, Mérida, Anzoátegui, Bolívar and Carabobo. The average number of hours without electricity supply is 12.9 hours.
- Water supply is variable. 14% of those surveyed say they must wait between 20 and 40 days for water. There is growing concern about payments for water tankers in the interior of the country, especially in Nueva Esparta and Miranda.
- The frequency of public transportation is closely affected by the frequency of fuel distribution.
- 66% of those surveyed consider that the educational quality in public schools is lower than in private institutions. 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. Since 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 current 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 the WFP, "Venezuela has shown significant economic growth because of international political negotiations and other internal measures to promote economic stability. Despite such economic improvements, the country continues to face challenges related to global supply chain disruptions, food price increases and other external factors. In January, Venezuela registered a [173% food inflation](#), according to the World Bank" (WFP, January 2024).

Technological landscape

According to [DataReportal Digital 2024: Venezuela](#) (23 February 2024) / survey date - January 2024:

- **Internet usage:** 61.6% penetration
- **Social media usage:** 48.2% of the total population. As of January 2024, 53.4% of Venezuela's social media users were female and 46.6% male.
- **Active cellular mobile connections:** 73.4% of the total population

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 Venezuela](#) 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 2024 Venezuela](#)):

- "The government's monopoly on the importation of newsprint and printing supplies resulted in the disappearance of the print editions of about a hundred newspapers. An opaque policy for granting and revoking radio broadcast frequencies resulted in the closure of 200 radio stations."
- "The economic crisis has caused a drastic cut in state advertising, which is allocated in an opaque and arbitrary manner that favors pro-government media. To receive this form of financial support, the media must agree to broadcast government messages for free".
- "Reporters are often beaten or threatened in the course of their work during elections or political conflicts. As President Maduro controls both the attorney general's office and the ombudsman's office, neither helps to guarantee the safety of journalists, with the result that physical or verbal violence against them is 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 a representative of the Espacio Público organization, The National Commission of Communications (CONATEL) generates [censorship](#) mechanisms that it applies daily. Most often this is a request for media not to talk about a specific topic or not to draw attention to a person who has criticized government policy (Correo del Caroni, 23 June 2024). The National Union of Press Workers denounced the [closure](#) of radio stations in six states of the country between January and April 2024, namely the states of Zulia, Portuguesa, Bolívar, Lara, Carabobo and Trujillo. In these cases, CONATEL did not respond to the stations' requests to renew their operating licenses (Efecto Cocuyo, 3 May 2024).

In 2022, the rapporteurs of the UN and the IACHR reported in a joint statement that restrictive measures by the government included unjustified Internet outages and the blocking of independent media. They also reported that the closure of media outlets and/or the seizure of their equipment, as ordered by the government, has increasingly restricted 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). A similar bias was observed in the run-up to the presidential election of July 2024.

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. In 2023, CONATEL ordered the [closure of Catholic-associated radio station](#) Radio Fe y Alegría, citing a lack of permission to operate. Observers said CONATEL issued the order after the station interviewed a politician who opposed Maduro (US State Department, IRFR 2023 Venezuela).

Security situation

Venezuela suffers from endemic corruption and criminal impunity. As reported by Freedom House in the [Freedom in the World 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".

As a result, violence 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. In February 2024, the mission expressed concern over the fate of human rights activists and urged the government to end a wave of repression against opponents. In September 2023, the [Mission's report](#) documented that state institutions have contributed, either by action or omission, to the repression of real or perceived government opposition (HRC; 18 September 2023). 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.

Further, the government announced in 2024 its “[Bolivarian Fury Plan](#)”, a measure that allows the deployment of military and police troops to “thwart any terrorist and coup attempt” and for the “defense of peace” (Infobae, 19 January 2024.) Through this plan, the opposition has been [criminalized](#) and arbitrary arrests and forced disappearances have been frequent (Voa, 17 June 2024). The main party affected by these measures is Vente Venezuela, the group led by María Corina Machado. Citizens who supported María Corina during her tour of Venezuela also faced [reprisals](#) (Cocuyo Effect, June 18, 2024).

The first [report on political-electoral violence](#) carried out by the Peace & Reconciliation Foundation indicates that in the period 5 March - 25 May 2024, 25 violent incidents were recorded with 38 victims. “92% of the victimizing acts (captures, arrest warrants, disqualification orders, tax sanctions, raids, threats) were carried out by the armed and security forces of the Venezuelan State; highlighting the extensive work that the Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (SEBIN) and the intelligence directorate of the Bolivarian National Police (PNB) have had in the capture and retention of some of the registered victims (12). Most of them disappeared for several days after their detention, until they were presented in court or are waiting to receive charges, a task carried out by the National Prosecutor's Office of Venezuela” (PARES, 14 June 2024).

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).

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).

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.

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. In this context, organizations like Insight Crime indicated in advance that criminal alliances with state forces played a [crucial role](#) in the survival of the Chavista regime ahead of the July 2024 elections (Insight Crime, 31 January 2024). According to the organization “non-state armed groups provide senior Chavistas with access to criminal rents and repress activity in their areas of influence. In return, the state tolerates, and in some cases actively protects, their

activities.” And in that sense, all the security policies adopted by the government of Nicolas Maduro have been a political façade and not a real fight against organized crime. Already in 2020, prosecutors from the USA, with the announcement of the indictment against Maduro under narco-terrorism, drug trafficking, and weapons charges, had already [warned](#) about Maduro's active role in drug exports and other illegal businesses with cartels and Colombian guerrillas, mainly with the FARC (Justice Gob, 26 March 2020). It is highly probable that the ELN and other criminal groups that depend on networks of corruption and impunity will condition the next elections in the country, in order to continue their presence and carry out their criminal activities with complete freedom.

According to Human Rights Watch ([HRW 2024 Venezuela country chapter](#)):

- Armed groups—including the National Liberation Army (ELN), the Patriotic Forces of National Liberation (FPLN), and groups that emerged from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)—operate mostly in border states, brutally enforcing curfews and regulations governing everyday activities. Fundaredes reported in 2023 that armed groups and criminal gangs are expanding extortion in the border area with Colombia, threatening civilians’ lives and properties.

Additionally, there are:

- 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.

The 2024 report "[Situation of human rights in Venezuela](#)" (Reliefweb, 28 June 2024) states:

- “OHCHR documented the arbitrary detention of 28 persons, including five women, that were subjected to enforced disappearances for periods ranging from two to 41 days. In at least nine cases, habeas corpus or other constitutional remedies regarding the enforced disappearances were presented before tribunals, but they were either not responded to, or found inadmissible. Of the 28 cases, 23 detentions were allegedly perpetrated by agents of the Bolivarian National Intelligence Services and Military Counterintelligence Directorate, and 10 detainees were reportedly tortured or ill-treated. OHCHR echoes the views expressed by UN human rights mechanisms such as the Working Group on Involuntary or Enforced Disappearances that there is no time limit for an enforced disappearance to occur, and that the duration does not have any repercussion on the gravity of the crime, or the harm caused.”

As a consequence of the economic crisis during and following the COVID-19 pandemic, many young people have been leaving school in recent years 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).

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).

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	33,200	0.1
Catholic	23,109,000	85.2
Protestant	2,492,000	9.2
Independent	1,634,000	6.0
Unaffiliated	247,000	0.9
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-378,000	-1.4
Total	27,137,200	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	1,419,000	5.2
Pentecostal-Charismatic	6,477,000	23.9

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

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. **Pentecostal-Charismatic:** Church members involved in renewal in the Holy Spirit, sometimes known collectively as "Renewalists".

The largest Christian denomination in Venezuela is by far the Roman Catholic Church, representing 85.2 % of all Christians (with a reduction of 1% in comparison to WCD 2023 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 Masses 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, especially due to their humanitarian work. In general, church leaders (both Catholics and Protestants/Evangelicals) who stand up to the regime are most respected by the local population.

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/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

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

External Links

- Recent history: questioned - <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/05/21/612918548/venezuelas-maduro-wins-boycotted-elections-amid-charges-of-fraud>
- Recent history: proclaimed - <https://www.businessinsider.com/juan-guaido-venezuela-opposition-leader-sworn-in-as-interim-president-nicolas-maduro-protests-2019-1>
- Recent history: end - <https://www.france24.com/es/am%C3%A9rica-latina/20221231-en-venezuela-la-oposici%C3%B3n-aprob%C3%B3-el-fin-de-la-presidencia-interina-de-juan-guaid%C3%B3>
- Recent history: regained - <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/americas/venezuela-maduro-regains-control-of-national-assembly/2067928>
- Recent history: won - <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-59370013>
- Recent history: any means necessary - <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-venezuela-punishme/venezuelans-breaking-coronavirus-rules-punished-under-the-sun-idUSKCN2532UW>
- Recent history: visited - <https://www.vozdeamerica.com/a/gira-presidente-iran-venezuela-nicaragua-cuba-politica-economia-analisis/7143945.html>
- Recent history: declaration - <https://petro.presidencia.gov.co/prensa/Paginas/Declaracion-conjunta-del-Presidente-de-la-Republica-de-Colombia-Gustavo-Pet-230107.aspx>
- Recent history: one year - <https://petro.presidencia.gov.co/prensa/Paginas/A-un-ano-de-restablecer-relaciones-con-Venezuela-Colombia-ha-exportado-USD-600-millones-al-vecino-pais-230924.aspx#>
- Recent history: The Guardian, 21 July 2024 - <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/article/2024/jul/21/venezuela-guyana-latin-america-tensions-rise-maduro-essequibo-border-dispute-support-elections-oil-indigenous>
- Recent history: 7.7 million - <https://www.acnur.org/emergencias/situacion-de-venezuela>
- Recent history: largest exodus - <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2022/09/01/desplazados-venezolanos-ucranianos-sirios-onu-trax/>
- Political and legal landscape: APNews 17 September 2024 - <https://apnews.com/article/venezuela-election-supreme-court-certifies-maduro-39d9f3b9beb0fe96fa052e4d2a3c106b>
- Political and legal landscape: won - <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-55545352>
- Political and legal landscape: Regional elections - https://as.com/diarioas/2021/11/22/actualidad/1637596198_688229.html
- Political and legal landscape: issued - <https://conferenciaepiscopalvenezolana.com/comision-permanente-de-la-cev-dirige-comunicado-mas-alla-de-las-elecciones-regionales>
- Political and legal landscape: denied - <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/venezuela-denies-visa-extension-electoral-observers-source-2021-12-03/>
- Political and legal landscape: impossibility - <https://www.oas.org/es/CIDH/jsForm/?File=/es/cidh/prensa/comunicados/2024/067.asp>
- Political and legal landscape: interfere - <https://www.oas.org/es/CIDH/jsForm/?File=/es/cidh/prensa/comunicados/2023/189.asp>
- Political and legal landscape: withdrawal - <https://apnews.com/article/venezuela-election-european-union-electoral-observers-maduro-5e05e255f0b67bf9f476aa7a1b889016>
- Political and legal landscape: expulsion - <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articles/c89nng7q1eo>
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