



OBSERVATORY OF
RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
IN LATIN AMERICA

Religious Regulation and Discrimination in Venezuela

Country Case Study Analysis

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1. Introduction

The Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America (OLIRE) is a research, training and political advocacy program with the mission of promoting religious freedom in the continent.

This research work was carried out as part of one of our areas of action: *Monitoring*. In this report, we seek to document and analyze the state of religious freedom and its possible limitations in Venezuela, especially because there is little or almost no information on violations of the right to religious freedom in the country that really takes into account the various dimensions of this right. Internal polarization and the lack of available data requires a first-hand qualitative approach to the reality of the various religious communities in the country.

Specifically, the three-fold goal of the case study was to (1) “identify more recent country trends, as well as identify overlooked dimensions of religious regulation and discrimination than existing global datasets”, (2) “provide a summary of international and community-level interfaith peacebuilding and faith based development activities that have attempted to contribute to the advancement of freedom of religion or belief” and (3) “shed light on the causal processes that link freedom of religion or belief, political stability, and socioeconomic development in particular contexts.” To meet this goal, this research combined three data collection instruments: interviews, OLIRE data and desk research.

1.1 Data collection methods

A total of 17 key informant interviews were conducted (a couple more submitted short comments through email or instant messaging). Following a purposive sampling method (combined with snowball sampling), interviewees were selected from the network of OLIRE and its partner organizations. The interviewees represent governmental and nongovernmental organizations (including representatives of religious groups) located in and around Caracas (and some other major cities) and a few along the Venezuelan-Colombian border. Information gaps (about specific geographical areas or events in recent history) were mended by interviews with academics (political analysts and religious studies scholars) and a member of the Venezuelan diaspora living in Costa Rica, as well as through desk research.

To complement the findings from the interviews, this study draws on primary sources developed by OLIRE which come from public reports published in digital media and form part of the Violent Incidents Database and other data collection instruments which capture FoRB violations against a broader set of actors than cross-national datasets and provide novel qualitative information. Desk research was conducted to map and systematize international and community-level interfaith peacebuilding and faith-based development activities that have attempted to contribute to the advancement of freedom of religion or belief in Venezuela. In addition, secondary literature on religious freedom in Venezuela (including religious freedom datasets) was consulted and contrasted with the empirical findings of the (remote) fieldwork.

2. Venezuela: Characteristics of religious landscape

Venezuela is a predominantly Christian country, with Catholicism being the most predominant religious group. The Catholic Church is one of the oldest and most structured institutions in the country, as well as the only one with legal status. Another group with broad representation is the Protestant community, although with a rather heterogeneous composition. A majority Evangelical sector makes up the Evangelical Council of Venezuela. Other Protestant groups include the Unión Evangélica Pentecostal Venezolana, the Network of Christian Churches of Venezuela, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Protestant churches have on many occasions requested the same recognition granted to the Catholic Church, above all, the possibility of registering as a Church and not as civil associations. Other minority religious groups present in the country include Jews, Bahamians, Muslims, Buddhists, and indigenous religions.

Generally speaking, Venezuelan society has been characterized by a large degree of religious tolerance and the virtual absence of interreligious conflict, even though there was – until very recently - no formal interreligious dialogue platform. The enmity between Catholic and non-Catholic Christian groups (and between Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews) that is characteristic of most Latin American countries, does not apply to Venezuela, or to a limited degree. Established religious groups in the country have been welcoming to new religious movements, as well as to Muslim migrants, and indigenous religious expressions command broad respect in Venezuelan society.

Nonetheless, there is still great internal diversity within religious groups in Venezuela, in terms of their participation in development initiatives (ranging from inexistent to high), level of organization and institutionalization, ideological orientation (progressive-conservative) and political stance in the country (pro-government/neutral/anti-government). These dividing lines cut through denominational groups. This diversity may in part be the consequence of a deliberate divide-and-rule strategy by the Venezuelan regime.

In April 2020, the Interreligious Social Council of Venezuela was established, a non-governmental body with representatives of various Christian denominations, the Jewish community and other social organizations. In response to this effort, the government created the government-controlled National Interreligious Council, made up of Evangelical groups that are aligned to the regime and various indigenous religions. Because these bodies are recent, it is difficult to assess their impact. It has been reported that they have not been able to meet very frequently due to the pandemic. Some interviewees mentioned that they have attempted to obtain humanitarian aid from international donors through these networks, but others have complained that a lot of time is wasted on formal meetings with no output.

While some religious groups have shown support to the regime, others are clearly opposed and have been subjected to reprisals. This has caused division among Protestant churches and confusion among Christian citizens. President Maduro has accused the Catholic Church and some Protestant denominations of being allied with opposition forces and of spreading violence instead of peace. Some interviewees mention that internal differences between religious groups are beginning to constitute an obstacle to interreligious collaboration. The main points of disagreement are related to their stance toward the government (which cuts through different denominations),

the strategy to defend human rights and democracy (some recommend caution, others are more outspoken and uncompromising). The issue of rights of sexual minorities, which the Venezuelan government has recently decided to support, possibly following Cuba's example, is potentially divisive. Observers suspect that this issue is not only about differences between progressive and conservative religious doctrines, but rather something that is used by the Venezuelan government to further widen internal divisions within religious denominations.

3. Contemporary FoRB Issues

3.1 Perceptions on the Current State of FoRB

In the following, we summarize the perceptions shared by our interviewees:

3.1.1 Government regulation

- The State and Religion coexist but not always harmoniously. On paper, the government is tolerant toward religion. Religious affiliation in itself is not a source of discrimination, however active engagement of religious groups, leaders and individuals in societal and/or political initiatives is complicated.
- The smaller religious groups are easily controlled by the State. By contrast the Catholic Church, due to its size and its affiliation with the Vatican has more political weight. This being said, the Catholic Church continues to receive some financial support from the government, but there is no transparency about the nature of this support, in particular the amounts of money involved and the strings that are attached to this support. (Other interviewees deny the Catholic Church receives any financial support from the government.) It is known that the State funds the public Catholic universities, which reduces their autonomy and academic freedom.
- Faith based media critical to the government or perceived as critical run the risk of being shut down or expropriated. Only through social media can faith based groups communicate without censorship, but critical journalists face the risk of their passports being confiscated to prevent them from travelling.
- Elements of the Catholic Church have been very vocal about the human rights situation in the country. At times, the leadership of the Catholic Church chooses to be very cautious not to upset the government to avoid losing its privileges, as one of our sources reported. In rural communities, Catholic priests have had no choice but to side with the government to avoid any hindrance from local authorities.
- Religious groups that are not seen as a threat by the regime are largely left alone.

3.1.2 Societal discrimination

- Venezuelan society is largely tolerant toward religion.

- Some interviewees report that *colectivos*, which are criminal groups, are being paid by the regime to intimidate religious leaders that are too critical. Their cellphones will get stolen or stones will be thrown at their houses in the middle of the night. This is a relatively frequently heard accusation among our interviewees and confirms that to some extent organized crime is at the service of the government which uses them to intimidate religious groups and journalists.
- Some of the interviewees, mainly in the border area with Colombia and in the interior of the country express that the freedom of religious groups is severely restricted by guerrillas who threaten any religious leader that they view as a threat to their operations. According to our sources, priests sometimes face serious risks by guerrillas if they denounce human rights violations where they operate, and local criminal groups have affected religious communities.

3.1.3 *Differences between Protestants and Catholics*

- Some Evangelical groups are perceived as collaborators of the regime by Catholics, Jews and by other Protestants. They are believed to have received financial benefits in exchange for their political loyalty. Evangelical leaders have also been awarded government positions. The creation of an Evangelical University, proposed by the government, is pending implementation. Some believe this is part of an attempt of the regime not only to coopt Evangelicals but also to guarantee a reservoir of votes, considering the important numerical growth of this denomination in recent years.
- Most religious groups, however, deliberately steer clear from making any political comments, focusing on “spiritual matters.”
- Proximity to the regime (either political affinity or personal friendship with civil servants) makes it easier for religious groups to obtain registration and other permits from the State. Religious groups that are viewed as opposition to the regime face much bureaucratic discouragement in their dealings with the State. Some interviewed representatives of Evangelical religious groups mentioned delays of up to 15 years to register a particular religious denomination.

3.1.4 *Antisemitism*

- On one hand, the Venezuelan Jewish community suffered from serious anti-Semitism during the first years of the Chávez presidency, but the severity of the situation has diminished and was never supported by Venezuelan population. On the other hand, key people in the government hold anti-Semitic views and government radio shows include anti-Semitic messages. Many Venezuelan Jews have since left the country and the Jewish population has dwindled (70% of Venezuelan Jews left the country since the Chávez-Maduro regime started).

3.2 Regulatory framework and government action

3.2.1 Regulatory framework

- The Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela guarantees freedom of religion and worship as long as it does not oppose morality, good customs and public order. It guarantees the independence of churches and religious confessions. Similarly, it recognizes the right of parents to choose, in accordance with their convictions, the religious education of their children. It also specifically prohibits promoting religious intolerance.
- The Venezuelan Criminal Code establishes that the minister of any cult who, in the exercise of his functions, treats with public contempt or vilification the institutions, the laws of the republic, or the acts of authority, or that promotes the contempt and disobedience of the institutions, laws or provisions of the authority will be punished with jail. . Additionally, regulations such as the “Law against Hate for Peaceful Coexistence and Tolerance” are used to establish fines, sanctions, and penalties of up to 20 years in prison for those who promote or commit “hate crimes” with their messages on radio, television, or social networks and is applied arbitrarily to censor any message that criticizes the ruling party. These laws limit freedom of speech, including faith-based manifestations. Although in 2020 there have been few arrests against religious leaders who openly oppose the regime, it is a risk to which they are permanently exposed, especially when they express their rejection of the party, or the measures adopted by the government since such actions can be considered “hate messages” or “contempt for institutions.”
- The recent Administrative Ruling ONCDOFT-001-2021, by which the Regulations for the Unified Registry of Obligated Subjects before the National Office Against Organized Crime and Terrorism Financing (RUSO-ONCDOFT) obliges national and foreign non-profit civil organizations domiciled in Venezuela to register with the ONCDOFT registry. This would imply making public not only the donor organizations for the development of their activities but also the beneficiaries of said activities, in addition to requiring the provision of personal information about the members, under the presumption of committing crimes such as terrorism. Civil society organizations dedicated to the defense of human rights, including faith-based organizations, have expressed concern that to the extent that their members or their activities are related to some type of activism that the government considers contrary to its interests, or considers terrorist, are exposed to sanctions or other suppositions of repression and stigmatization by the government.

3.2.2 Government action

- The Venezuelan government follows elements from what can be referred to as the “communist handbook” to regulate religion, such as the governments of Cuba, Bolivia and Nicaragua. The government seeks the imposition of communist ideology in the country. In this process, all state and social institutions are forced to follow the party’s guidelines.
- The government provides greater benefits to those churches allied to the regime, not only in matters of registration, but also in the issue of permits, authorizations, and use of basic services. The Directorate of Justice and Religion (DJR) has imposed arbitrary registration requirements on religious groups. The only denomination with full legal status is the

Roman Catholic Church. Other denominations often experience yearlong delays when registering churches with the authorities.

- There is a close relationship between the President and some factions of the Evangelical churches. Provisions in favor of the Evangelical Christian Movement, such as the approval of the proposal to create the First Evangelical Theological University of Venezuela, and the approval of a decree that declares January 15 as the National Pastor Day, among others, can be translated as a form of acceptance towards said denominations, but also of control and manipulation to satisfy political interests.
- Among the latest measures taken, it is important to highlight the recent creation of the Vice Presidency of Religious Affairs of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), an office created to strengthen control mainly over non-Catholic groups. The expansion of the “Government Pastoral Councils throughout the national territory” has also been promoted to “integrate” religious groups with local and regional governments.
- Based on our literature review, Fox wrote in 2016 that the military chaplain core is entirely Catholic. This is not the case anymore, as an Evangelical chaplain of the Presidential Guard has been appointed.
- There is a violent record against religious leaders described as “opponents.” There have been situations involving Christian leaders (Catholic and non-Catholic), in which they have been pressured with arbitrary registration or permit requirements, have been threatened, arbitrarily detained, verbally and physically attacked, and whose property has been vandalized. Religious services have been monitored or violently interrupted for their stance in favor of democracy and respect for human rights.
- In addition to the cooptation of the various branches of government, the regime also exercises social control over the population. Faced with poverty and food insecurity resulting from the economic crisis, the crisis in the health sector, education, etc., the state applies social policies as forms of blackmail.
- The preaching, teaching, and demands made by religious leaders or groups that contradict the core of the socialist system, or the ideology of the Bolivarian revolution, are considered a betrayal that deserves to be sanctioned. In addition, the right of parents to educate their children under their own convictions is also diminished as the government seeks to indoctrinate children and young people in accordance with communist principles.
- Until recently, this has been most evident in the case of the Catholic Church, as it constantly questions the ideology of the party. The church has experienced some restrictions by the government and its supporters, either through physical and verbal attacks against Catholic leaders and/or churches. During 2020, only a few attacks against Christian temples by the regime involved the Bolivarian National Guard and Chavista groups.
- In the case of the Evangelical churches, the situation varies, those who advocate the return of the rule of law can be the object of smear campaigns, however religious groups related to or subjected to the party and its ideology are not classified as terrorists or enemies of the nation.
- Religion is used as a political instrument. Referring to the Christian doctrine, Chávez is classified as the “Christ of the poor”, elections are called “Resurrection Day”, among others. An attempt is made to deify the authorities and present them as those who will provide happiness on earth, trying to disrupt to a certain extent, the image of God presented by traditional religious groups. In addition to branding Jesus Christ himself as the greatest

socialist in history, Chávez and his revolutionary ideology are presented as religious symbols that must unite the militants.

3.2.3 *Antisemitism*

- Ongoing cases of anti-Semitism have also been identified. The official and government-controlled media have become a tool for spreading anti-Semitic propaganda.

3.2.4 *Indigenous communities*

- Within the framework of this study, it was not possible to research the situation of FoRB in indigenous communities. What we do know, is that “In 2005, Venezuela’s government banned proselytizing among indigenous tribes, resulting in the withdrawal of more than 100 missionaries.” (Fox 2015). According to our interviewees, Catholic missionaries are still present in indigenous communities but focus on providing humanitarian support. Evangelical sources state that, in practice, the government does not restrict the work of missionaries, but guerilla groups sometimes do when they represent a threat to the continuity of their criminal operations.

3.3 *Non-state actors: the role of organized crime*

The role played by non-state actors – organized crime in particular – in restricting FoRB in Venezuela (and in Latin America in general) is relatively unknown and generally ignored in most religious freedom instruments. This may be the result of conceptual challenges (organized crime is not considered to be a factor of religious freedom violations) but also of the difficulty of obtaining reliable information. Based on the fieldwork conducted in the framework of this study and prior research by OLIRE, the following can be said:

- Four types of organized crime groups can be distinguished: *colectivos* (criminal groups acting on their own or in collusion with the government, allegedly to intimidate political opponents including religious leaders), drug trafficking networks (most of which are allegedly run by high ranking government and military officials), groups linked to Hezbollah and other Iranian-backed Islamist groups (we have no information about the implications of their presence in the country for religious freedom) and Colombian leftwing guerrillas (which the Venezuelan government explicitly welcomed into the country).
- Venezuela is considered a narco-state since the regime subsists on the income from organized crime. Rampant corruption in the government elite allows these groups to operate throughout the territory with total impunity. Terror is instilled by State security agents, gangs, paramilitary groups present in Venezuela, and other collectives such as the so-called Integral Defense and Security Committees, etc.; the presence of Colombian guerrillas, such as Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC) rebels and National

Liberation Army (ELN) members in territories near the border with Colombia must also be included.

- These groups have become the arm of repression against dissidents to a greater and lesser extent. The government uses them to intimidate and subdue the opposition, and there are indications that they also pose a threat to religious leaders known or related to dissidents or government critics, without anywhere for them to turn to for protection.
- A phenomenon related to the presence of Colombian guerrillas in the country, especially the ELN, is the indoctrination of children by these criminal groups, especially in rural areas and on the country's border. Teachers and authorities of various educational institutions are forced to distribute brochures to students with content related to the political motivation, philosophy, and ideology of these groups. Many of them act against their convictions, in order not to become victims of retaliation.
- Members of these guerrillas also tried to force a Christian educational institution to become a refuge for migrants at the borders during the COVID-19 pandemic. During 2020, churches and religious leaders were also targeted by violent robberies. In some cases, these robberies have resulted in the death of the victims.
- As one interviewee explained, the border area is control by guerrillas. In the Orinoco, part of the jungle, the priests take care of themselves when carrying out their activities. They enjoy the permission of those who control the area, whether these groups act in conjunction with the Bolivarian National Guard or not. Another interviewee shared about a priest who, due to a comment he made at mass, had to clarify some things with the criminal groups.

3.4 Gaps in religious freedom data

Based on the presentation of some of the most noteworthy perceptions that came forward through our interviewees as well as our own analysis of the FoRB situation in Venezuela, the following gaps in existing religious freedom data can be identified:

- A number of important elements of government restrictions of religion in Venezuela are not detected by religious freedom datasets. These are related to issues such as:
 - the consequences of the behavior of religious people rather than their religious identity or affiliation,
 - the intricacies of the internal diversity within religious groups,
 - the subtleties of religious freedom violations such as bureaucratic discouragement or harassment of religious individuals in fields that are not directly related to their religious activity.
- The role of non-state actors (organized crime) in restricting FoRB in Venezuela is not included in any of the religious freedom datasets.

As most religious freedom dataset are macro level aggregates that focus on the national level, they are not suited to detect many subnational dynamics related to FoRB. These include the situation in the Venezuelan-Colombian border area (where guerrillas have a strong presence) and the interior of the country (which includes indigenous communities).
- Because of their often restrictive data collection instruments, religious freedom datasets are insufficiently suited to detect restrictions on FoRB that result not from the direct action of state or non-state actors, but from contextual factors. There are several analytical challenges related to FoRB research in Venezuela.

- The first is that isolating the religious dimension from the overall anti-democratic actions of the Venezuelan state is difficult. Trying to determine whether a particular incident affecting a religious person should be qualified as political persecution or religious persecution would be counterproductive and ignores that many religious victims of government persecution are motivated by their religious convictions. These actions could be classified or understood as politically motivated religious freedom violations.
- The second challenge is similar: the generalized economic hardship the country is going through affects society in general but also the exercise of the right to freedom of religion, including the funding of the operations of religious organizations, humanitarian work by faithbased groups, etc. Again, trying to distinguish what is religious discrimination from the overall economic hardships is nearly impossible and even counterproductive.
- The third challenge is that, due to the rising insecurity, churches and other religious buildings are now more exposed to theft and vandalism, directly affecting the right to free association and worship. Again, this is should not only be viewed as a crime issue; it directly affects freedom of worship, especially in its collective dimension

4. FoRB and Peace

4.1 Local level mediation by religious leaders

There is not much empirical information available about this, but several political analysts pointed to the role priests have historically played and continue to play at the local level in urban and rural settings as mediators between the government and social groups. Their role is highly significant to solve issues related to things such as access to basic social services.

4.2 Pro-democracy and human rights activism by faith-based organizations

Two complementary findings came forward through our interviews. The first is that the freedom of expression on matters related to government policy, democracy or human rights of religious leaders is restricted indirectly. Religious groups that are critical of the regime face harassment or will receive slow or less administrative support. This trend is not understood by most interviewees as being part of FoRB but we include this because of our broad understanding of this right. There is no direct censorship, but all media are controlled by the state. Critical voices rarely face legal consequences, but they can expect to face seemingly unrelated hindrances in other fields or will be accused of a made-up crime. In practice, this leads to self-censorship. The fear of reprisals is further strengthened by the hate speech legislation that was recently adopted.

The second finding is that most Venezuelans, including faith-based organizations are mainly struggling to survive in the context of severe economic hardships. For this reason, pro-democracy and human rights activism is not as visible as it could be. In addition, human rights organizations face many material challenges, related to basic things such as access to the internet, stable

electricity or access to information. This being said, one interviewee pointed to the fact that faithbased NGOs sometimes manage to get the government to address specific complaints. Complaints that are voiced by NGOs tend to have more impact than religious institutions.

4.3 Vatican mediation

An interesting aspect of the Vatican is that it is an institution that is viewed by all parties as an impartial interlocutor, including by the government which has been subject of severe criticism by the hierarchy of the Venezuelan Catholic Church. In past crises, the Catholic Church has actually been a mediator, but in many ways it became a political actor.

In 2016, protests, demonstrations, and clashes in the streets between the authorities of the government of Nicolás Maduro and his opponents led to a mediation process led by the Vatican. The Vatican mediated the dialogues between Chavismo and the opposition, represented by three of the four opposition parties and Pietro Parolin serving as the Vatican's representative and Secretary of State. The Vatican and especially Pope Francis represented a certain cultural affinity between the parties, being of Latin American origin, a factor that contributed to the suitability of his role. Thus, in October of that year, representatives of both parties flew to the Vatican and agreed to initiate a mediation.

During the process, Diosdado Cabello complained that the Holy See was exceeding its role as mediator, arguing that the arguments of the opposition were the same as those of the Vatican. On the other hand, the opposition refused to attend a dialogue table alleging that the government had not kept its word, specifically the release of political prisoners. At the end of the year, Pope Francis invited Nicolás Maduro to the Vatican to continue with the negotiations, which did not materialize and ended the dialogue.

The high levels of polarization, the partiality of the information disseminated and its censorship by the government, and the low legitimacy of the parties hindered this process, which did not produce concrete results. It should be noted that this was not the first mediation effort in the country, but the fourth in the 21st century, nor will it probably be the last.

In 2019, in the face of the constitutional crisis created from the self-proclamation of Juan Guaidó as president and the successive international backing he received, Nicolás Maduro again asked the Pope to get involved in the dialogue as mediator. In the Pope's leaked response, he neither accepts nor denies to mediate, but he does remember that what was agreed in previous processes was not implemented, referring to the processes in the Dominican Republic and those of the Holy See itself. The Pope expressed the Vatican's willingness to mediate if both parties requested it, an element that, as we have seen, is essential for a negotiation. It is worth noting that the letter was addressed to "Your Excellency" and not "President", Nicolás Maduro, an act that demonstrates the importance that factors such as form can have in a negotiation.

Nicolás Maduro's perspective:

- The government has an advantageous position being in power, with resources and means at its disposal. During the government of Nicolás Maduro, the various social outbursts,

however long and popular, have sooner or later ended. This means that the government knows that dragging out the negotiation process as long as possible plays to its advantage, allowing the opposition, the international community and the nationwide protests to lose their momentum.

The opposition's perspective:

- The opposition to the Maduro regime in some ways legitimizes itself by participating in the mediation and negotiation processes. However, historically the opposition in Venezuela has suffered from a lack of cohesion and leadership in its structures, which makes it difficult to compromise by having to consult with different groups within the opposition. Undoubtedly, a negotiation with the Vatican results in attention from the press and international community, which have been among its greatest allies.

Additional interpretations:

- Negotiation can be used to gain time and decompress the social and political tension of a given moment, reasons that may have prompted the parties to participate in the negotiation even though there did not appear to be a sincere interest in reaching an agreement.
- A mediation process can be an incentive for the parties to the conflict, especially when they have been delegitimized and are unable to impose their interests in the conflict. Accepting a negotiation demonstrates the good will and intentions of the parties, who may secretly know that an agreement will not be reached, either because they cannot or because they do not want to.
- One of the most important aspects in the negotiation process is the documentation of the situation prior to the beginning of the process. The socio-political situation in Venezuela does not allow for a correct contextualization of the situation due to the lack of information and its partiality, making it difficult to establish agreements.

5. FoRB and Development

5.1 Faith-based education

In Venezuela there is a large network of, mainly Catholic, faith-based schools. Two general types of faith-based schools can be distinguished: the private Catholic schools, located in larger cities, which can be unaffordable for many families and the schools that are run by the Jesuit foundation *Fe y Alegría* [Faith and Joy] which attends to the poorest neighborhoods, often in collaboration with the government. The *Fe y Alegría* schools have a long history in the country and are recognized to provide education of better quality than public schools to low-income groups.

In 2010 the government proposed a law to eliminate private faith-based education, which directly targeted Catholic schools. This proposal was unsuccessful due to opposition from the parents and representatives of Catholic schools, which receive broad support from society. It was pointed out frequently that most government members send their own children to private Catholic schools because of the superior quality of education when compared to public education.

Today, faith-based education is tolerated by the government, as it could not withstand the broad opposition to its dismantling. According to our interviewees, the government has now adopted an alternative strategy, which is to impose changes to the curricula of both public and private (faith-based) schools in order to promote “socialist indoctrination.” In addition, conservative-leaning interviewees expressed concerns about “gender ideology” being imposed in schools, against the will of parents.

The situation of faith-based universities deserves a separate mention. The most noteworthy ones are private institutions that are run by Jesuits, which are generally considered to provide high quality education but are also among the most critical opposition to the regime. The government has attempted to restrict the access to funding of these universities through different means, which is why international cooperation programs are run clandestinely by small groups of professors. In public universities the government has imposed a leadership that is favorable to the regime and conditions the availability of public funds to their political loyalty.

5.2 Humanitarian work by faith-based organizations

5.2.1 General

- It was difficult to obtain detailed information about the nature and scope of the work that is done by humanitarian faith-based organizations because information does not get shared for security purposes, and also because of government censorship which does not want humanitarian efforts to become known as the regime wants to be considered as the only provider and source of legitimacy. It even happens that beneficiaries of humanitarian supplies are given the impression that they were provided by the state, when in fact they were provided by an NGO run by a religious organization.
- Notwithstanding the former point, the humanitarian involvement of faith-based organizations, in particular of Catholic but recently also Protestant groups, is widely recognized. In the field of education, *Fe y Alegría* plays a significant role, and so does Caritas which is involved in large scale food, clothing and medicine distribution projects. *Hogares Crea*, that attends to drug addicts is also an important program. The Evangelical Heavenly Manna program also distributes food. In general, most humanitarian initiatives are connected to faith-based groups.
- The structural economic hardships make it very difficult to operate religious organizations. Supplies such as toilet paper or spare tires get stolen and religious temples cannot display valuable items. This also severely limits the capacity of religious groups to get involved in humanitarian work. Because of the former, at the moment, most humanitarian work by faith-based groups has come to a halt. In addition, many qualified staff of charities have left the country to seek better economic opportunities abroad. Some groups are happy to cooperate with the government if that allows them to meet humanitarian needs.
- Beyond the structural economic hardships, faithbased organizations face serious hindrances in the operation of their programs. A number of interviewees stated that the import of humanitarian and medical supplies by faithbased organizations is often stalled and hindered (some even stated that no humanitarian aid has been allowed into the country during the past two years; others state that importing goods is possible, but can only be

done in small quantities to avoid attracting attention), and religious workers are denied visas. We also received reports of staff of faith-based organizations being accused of illegally importing and distributing medicines and other humanitarian supplies, some apparently even facing prison sentences for these charges. Illegality appears often to be the only possible way to conduct humanitarian work. Again, because of the untransparent and restrictive approach to information by the government, it is not easy to identify the challenges that faith-based organizations face.

- Representatives of faith-based charities also reported that they need to be cautious when criticizing the government, otherwise cannot continue working. Most charitable organizations deliberately chose to stay away from making polemical statements, because this could hinder their operations.
- The government provides basic services to the population as long as the citizens validate or legitimize the authorities, either by voting for the party in electoral processes or by not criticizing or protesting against them. The affiliation or affinity of citizens with the party plays a very important role in being considered as beneficiaries of the services offered by the government.
- Activities of independent institutions or religious organizations are usually restricted so as not to lose such social control. In this sense, religious associations dedicated to humanitarian aid or assistance, are seen as a threat to the stability of the party and are sometimes punished and prevented from continuing with their work.
- The communal councils, which are state bodies at the local level, often hinder humanitarian work by faith-based groups, or have attempted to control it, as some of our interviewees have pointed out. Faith-based groups are also under much more scrutiny than other groups. Most administrative processes, require the support of the communal councils with whom it is thus important to maintain good personal relationships.
- In areas that are controlled by organized crime, the managers of humanitarian initiatives allegedly need to report about their activities and are sometimes ordered to stop their work.

5.2.2 *The Covid19 pandemic*

- The COVID-19 pandemic has seriously aggravated the overall humanitarian situation in the country. At present, religious organizations actively collaborate with the government to deal with the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. This seems to give have given them some leeway; it also involves a real risk of more state control.
- The pandemic also has important political implications as well as for religious worship. Because of the pandemic, freedom of assembly has been restricted and many people are too afraid to meet. Processions were not possible, for example. The pandemic has also created division between religious groups who before were working collaboratively because of the scarcity of supplies and the growing humanitarian needs.
- Some opposition actors suspect the government is deliberately slowing down vaccination in order to stifle any social protests. Catholic activists are now once again seeking the involvement of the Vatican to facilitate a vaccination program in the country.

6. Recommendations and Conclusions

6.1 *Recommendations by interviewees*

- International donors are often viewed as being donor-driven instead of field-driven. Some of our interviewees are under the impression that the agenda of the donors is being imposed on them. In particular the more conservative interviewees feel the international community drives them to focus on “gender projects” which go against their views.
- The international community should be more sensitive to both the internal diversity within religious groups in Venezuela as well as to the broader political dynamics in the country. A key aspect that was mentioned is that in particular North American agencies prefer to cooperate with the parallel Guaidó government, but do not realize that this body is “just as corrupt and untransparent” as the regular government.
- It is important for foreign organizations working in Venezuela to keep a low profile. If they become too visible, the government can be expected to respond by imposing restrictions on these organizations.
- There is some frustration with international religious leaders who speak out insufficiently about the hardships of Venezuela. More generally, our interviewees sense a lack of international awareness about the attacks on religious freedom in Venezuela.
- At the same time, more than humanitarian aid is need, because it does not address the structural problems the country faces. Comprehensive political reform and economic development plans are needed to get the country back on the right track, but this is difficult with a government that is at the same time “ideologically driven”, “in bed with organized crime” and “incompetent”, according to our reports.
- In order to be able to do their work properly, religious communities need access to stable internet connections and smartphones to be able to communicate. A number of training needs were also identified in the following fields: personal and digital security courses, encouragement to remain actively involved in humanitarian work and training to help religious communities identify the full scope of religious freedom so they identify the more subtle discriminatory acts they face.

6.2 *Conclusions*

- The scope of the role of the various organized crime groups (colectivos, drug trafficking networks, Islamist groups and guerrillas) in the country and their relation with the government deserves further research both in terms of its political role as well as its implications for religious freedom.
- The protection of FoRB in indigenous communities is a controversial issue in most Latin American countries. Under the influence of a political and social movement called indigenismo, Latin American governments have made important steps in the ‘1990s to protect the cultural preservation of indigenous communities. This has led to far-reaching self-government provisions for indigenous communities, but also to bans on proselytism by foreign missionaries. In addition, the human rights situation within indigenous communities, including in the field of religious freedom, has received little to no attention,

in spite of empirical evidence suggesting the prevalence of serious human rights abuses. This matter deserves further research, including in Venezuela.

- Because of the many restrictions that are faced for the conduct of humanitarian aid, the international community must put pressure on the Venezuelan government to allow humanitarian initiatives to be carried out without obstacles. Allowing the import of supplies is of the utmost importance, as well as the delivery of visas for (religious) humanitarian workers and broader possibilities to move funds through the country.
- The international community should take a broad view of FoRB: key dimensions of FoRB violations, some of which were identified in this report, are ignored by existing religious freedom datasets as well as by Venezuelans themselves and are therefore not on the radar of international development agencies. Similarly, international development agencies should acknowledge the internal diversity of religious denominations.
- In advocacy projects, international development agencies should avoid being donor-driven. At the same time, they must raise awareness about the importance of human rights as a complex of interrelated rights (including sexual rights) that should be integrally promoted.
- There are a number of lessons of this research for development planning that could be applied beyond Venezuela. In similar contexts of unstable and authoritarian government, where there is widespread censorship and compartmentalization of information (misinformation), a key dimension of successful democracy assistance projects is information distribution as well as providing training to evaluate the quality of sources.
- Religious groups would do well to recognize the benefits of humanitarian work as a source of resilience. Engaging in humanitarian work, provided it is done carefully, could be a valid strategy to generate goodwill with the authorities and with local communities, which in turn could provide some protection for vulnerable religious communities based on the recognition of their altruistic work. I observed this mechanism at work in Caracas, Venezuela, in 2013. When the government wanted to clamp down on private Catholic schools for ideological reasons, in a particular neighborhood, the community stood up for it and managed to reverse the government's decision because the Catholic Church was doing so much good in terms of social work.

7. Sources

7.1 Interview sample

Note: under-represented groups in this sample were covered through desk research.

Sex

Female: 5

Male: 14

Religious affiliation

Catholic: 9

Protestant: 8

Jewish: 1

Messianic Jew: 1

Afro-Venezuelan: 0
Indigenous: 0
Muslim: 0

Geographic location

Caracas (and some other major cities): 12
Venezuelan-Colombian border area: 5
Interior of the country: 0

Role

Leadership roles in religious groups: 11
Staff of faith-based civil society organizations engaged in religious freedom, peacebuilding, and/or development efforts: 11
Academics (political analysts and religious studies scholars): 7
Members of the Venezuelan diaspora in Central and South America: 1
Government officials: 1

“Political” views (loosely defined)

Pro-government: 1
Opposition: 6
Neutral: 10

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Annex: Violent Incidents Database

The Violent Incident Database (VID) is a service by the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America, designed to collect, record, and analyze violent incidents related to violations of religious freedom. In many cases, the limitations on religious freedom have led to violent incidents in the country, both against religious leaders or religious groups, and even against places of worship, among others.

The following cases reported on the platform, illustrate the state of religious freedom in the country:

Count of violent incidents reported in Venezuela (2018-2021)

Incidents	2018	2019	2020	2021
Killings	2	1	2	2
(Attempts) to destroy, vandalize or desecrate places of worship or religious buildings	7	6	18	16
Closed places of worship or religious buildings	2	0	1	1
Arrests/detentions	2	2	1	5
Sentences	0	1	0	0
Abductions	0	1	0	1
Sexual Assaults/harrasment	0	0	0	0
Forced Marriage	0	0	0	0
Other forms of attack (physical or mental abuse)	4	6	4	6
Attacked houses/property of faith adherents	1	2	6	0
Attacked shops, businesses or institutions of faith adherents	0	1	0	0
Forced to leave Home	0	0	0	0
Forced to leave Country	3	3	0	6

Source: Violent Incidents Database (Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America).

Note: The Violent Incidents Database is continuously updated. The total number of incidents may vary as new cases are identified. To access the up-to-date data visit www.violentincidents.com.