

World
Watch
Research

Venezuela: Full Country Dossier

February 2023



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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Introduction

World Watch List 2023

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	14.4	98	96	94	94	94
2	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	8.7	92	91	92	92	91
3	Yemen	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	5.9	89	88	87	85	86
4	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.7	12.2	89	88	88	87	86
5	Libya	15.6	15.5	15.9	16.1	16.3	9.1	88	91	92	90	87
6	Nigeria	13.8	13.8	14.6	14.8	14.4	16.7	88	87	85	80	80
7	Pakistan	13.4	13.8	14.8	14.8	12.9	16.7	86	87	88	88	87
8	Iran	14.5	14.6	13.8	15.8	16.5	10.7	86	85	86	85	85
9	Afghanistan	15.4	15.7	15.4	16.1	16.6	4.6	84	98	94	93	94
10	Sudan	14.1	14.2	14.9	14.9	15.5	9.4	83	79	79	85	87
11	India	12.3	13.1	13.0	14.8	13.3	15.7	82	82	83	83	83
12	Syria	13.2	14.1	13.6	14.1	14.1	11.3	80	78	81	82	82
13	Saudi Arabia	15.2	15.3	14.9	15.8	16.7	2.4	80	81	78	79	77
14	Myanmar	12.5	11.6	13.9	13.9	12.9	15.4	80	79	74	73	71
15	Maldives	15.4	15.3	13.8	16.0	16.4	0.2	77	77	77	78	78
16	China	12.9	10.0	12.7	14.5	15.6	11.1	77	76	74	70	65
17	Mali	11.1	10.1	14.7	10.3	15.1	15.0	76	70	67	66	68
18	Iraq	14.1	14.6	14.0	14.8	13.9	4.6	76	78	82	76	79
19	Algeria	14.1	14.1	11.5	13.7	15.1	4.8	73	71	70	73	70
20	Mauritania	14.5	14.2	13.3	14.1	14.2	1.3	72	70	71	68	67
21	Uzbekistan	14.9	12.7	13.9	12.7	15.6	1.5	71	71	71	73	74
22	Colombia	11.8	8.9	13.1	11.3	10.4	15.4	71	68	67	62	58
23	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	12.5	9.6	13.8	15.6	71	68	67	66	48
24	CAR	10.3	8.6	13.9	9.6	12.2	15.6	70	68	66	68	70
25	Vietnam	11.8	9.6	12.8	14.6	14.4	6.9	70	71	72	72	70
26	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.3	13.6	14.1	15.7	0.6	70	69	70	70	69
27	Cuba	13.1	8.3	13.1	13.2	14.9	7.0	70	66	62	52	49
28	Niger	9.4	9.5	14.5	7.7	13.1	15.4	70	68	62	60	52
29	Morocco	13.2	13.8	10.9	12.2	14.5	4.8	69	69	67	66	63
30	Bangladesh	12.6	10.7	12.8	11.3	10.6	10.7	69	68	67	63	58
31	Laos	11.7	10.2	13.3	14.2	14.0	5.0	68	69	71	72	71
32	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	13.9	8.4	12.5	15.6	68	65	63	43	43
33	Indonesia	11.3	12.0	11.6	11.1	9.2	12.8	68	68	63	60	65
34	Qatar	14.2	14.1	10.5	13.2	14.4	1.5	68	74	67	66	62
35	Egypt	12.7	13.5	11.6	12.1	10.8	7.0	68	71	75	76	76
36	Tunisia	12.0	12.8	10.4	12.0	13.5	6.5	67	66	67	64	63
37	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	13.0	15.6	67	66	64	56	55
38	Mexico	10.3	8.3	12.5	11.0	10.5	13.9	67	65	64	60	61
39	Ethiopia	9.9	10.3	13.1	10.4	12.1	10.6	66	66	65	63	65
40	Bhutan	13.2	12.3	11.6	13.9	14.2	1.1	66	67	64	61	64
41	Turkey	12.8	11.5	11.8	13.0	11.5	5.7	66	65	69	63	66
42	Comoros	12.7	14.0	11.2	12.4	14.2	1.5	66	63	62	57	56
43	Malaysia	12.8	14.3	11.4	12.2	11.1	3.9	66	63	63	62	60
44	Tajikistan	13.8	12.2	12.3	12.8	13.4	1.1	66	65	66	65	65
45	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	7.2	13.1	15.9	65	65	64	60	54
46	Brunei	14.8	14.6	10.1	10.9	14.4	0.4	65	64	64	63	63
47	Oman	14.0	14.1	10.3	13.3	12.9	0.6	65	66	63	62	59
48	Kazakhstan	13.2	11.6	11.9	12.7	14.2	1.1	65	64	64	64	63
49	Jordan	13.0	14.0	10.5	12.3	12.7	2.0	65	66	64	64	65
50	Nicaragua	10.8	5.9	11.9	12.8	13.6	9.4	65	56	51	41	41

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019
51	Kenya	10.3	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	13.3	64	63	62	61	61
52	Kuwait	13.5	13.7	9.8	12.3	13.1	1.1	64	64	63	62	60
53	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	15.6	63	61	58	55	52
54	UAE	13.4	13.4	9.9	11.2	12.8	1.1	62	62	62	60	58
55	Nepal	12.0	9.8	9.4	13.0	12.6	4.4	61	64	66	64	64
56	Djibouti	12.3	12.6	12.7	10.1	12.3	0.6	60	59	56	56	56
57	Palestinian Territories	13.0	13.3	9.7	10.3	12.0	2.0	60	59	58	60	57
58	Azerbaijan	13.2	10.0	9.5	12.0	13.6	0.6	59	60	56	57	57
59	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.2	11.0	10.4	12.0	2.0	59	58	58	57	56
60	Chad	11.6	8.2	10.2	10.2	10.3	7.6	58	55	53	56	48
61	Russian Federation	12.3	7.9	10.3	11.8	12.8	2.0	57	56	57	60	60
62	Sri Lanka	12.8	9.1	10.6	11.3	9.5	3.9	57	63	62	65	58
63	Rwanda	9.4	7.7	9.0	10.4	11.7	8.9	57	50	42	42	41
64	Venezuela	6.0	4.6	11.7	10.2	11.4	11.7	56	51	39	42	41
65	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.4	9.8	9.7	11.1	55	52	48	48	43
66	Bahrain	12.7	13.3	8.7	10.7	8.8	0.9	55	57	56	55	55
67	Honduras	7.1	5.0	11.9	7.6	9.8	11.9	53	48	46	39	38
68	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	11.5	11.4	7.2	52	51	46	43	42
69	Uganda	8.1	5.0	7.4	6.7	9.2	14.8	51	48	47	48	47
70	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	11.0	5.4	49	44	43	41	42
71	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	8.3	10.5	3.0	48	43	47	45	46
72	South Sudan	5.7	4.4	7.0	6.3	7.6	15.0	46	43	43	44	44
73	El Salvador	7.7	4.2	10.6	7.4	9.1	6.7	46	45	42	38	30
74	Ivory Coast	12.0	6.5	8.7	5.9	8.0	3.3	44	42	42	42	43
75	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.9	8.8	8.9	1.1	44	44	43	43	43
76	Belarus	9.5	3.8	4.8	9.4	12.1	3.3	43	33	30	28	35

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Sources and definitions

- This country report is a collation of data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and includes statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD).
- Highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”. In order to reduce the length of these reference sections, a table containing links to regularly used sources can be found at the beginning of the “Keys to Understanding” chapter under the heading “Links for general background information”. Where one of these sources has been quoted in the dossier text, a quote reference is supplied as indicated in the second column of the table.
- The WWL 2023 reporting period was 01 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.
- The latest update of WWL Methodology including appendices can be found on the [World Watch List Documentation](#) page of the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).

WWL 2023 Situation in brief / Venezuela

Brief country details

Venezuela: Population (UN estimate for 2022)	Christians	Chr%
29,267,000	26,884,000	91.9

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

Map of country



Venezuela: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2023	56	64
WWL 2022	51	65
WWL 2021	39	-
WWL 2020	42	69
WWL 2019	41	71

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2019-2023 reporting periods

Dominant persecution engines and drivers

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

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

Brief description of the persecution situation

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

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

Such government action can lead to threats, church attacks, defamation, arbitrary arrests, surveillance, censorship, restricted use of public services, and lack of access to goods such as food and medicines. Due to the socio-economic crisis in the country, the government takes advantage of the lack of basic goods and services needed by all citizens in order to manipulate them. Easy access to food, medicine and education is reserved for supporters of the ruling party.

Children face continual indoctrination in the ruling party's Socialist/Communist ideology in state schools thus violating:

- i) the right of parents to educate their children according to their Christian convictions;
- ii) the right of the Church in school education.

Christians have also faced threats and violence carried out by criminal groups (mainly Colombian guerrillas) acting with impunity (often in support of the regime) and hindering the social assistance provided by churches to the neediest.

Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

- **August 2022, Maracaibo:** Evangelical Pastor Ronald Luis Soto [died](#) from wounds after being shot by gunmen several times on his way to Estrella de Belén church in the Casa Blanca sector, Baralt municipality in Zulia state (bordering with Colombia). The pastor was also a councilor for the Un Nuevo Tiempo party and major of the La Cañada de Urdaneta municipality. The pastor was assassinated in front of the members of the church. (Tal Cual, 11 August 2022).
- **May 2022, Aragua:** A Christian family was [attacked](#) by a group of armed men when they were leaving their local church after an evening prayer meeting (El Siglo, 24 May 2022). The father died of gunshot wounds and the mother and child were seriously wounded. The police think the attack was possibly some sort of retaliation.
- **December 2021, Valencia:** According to in-country sources, 16 pastors were arrested by the national police for the crime of religious proselytism after holding an evangelization service. Since it was an arbitrary action, 8 of them were released one week later, but others continued to be detained for a few more days without any explanation.
- **November 2021, Barinas:** After an opposition candidate was mistakenly announced as the winner of the local elections by a Christian radio station, the officially re-elected mayor decided to [attack](#) the Christian station with a mob of 70 protesters, cut off the electricity supply and threaten Pastor Luis Becerra, responsible for the broadcasting (Ipys Venezuela, 3 December 2021).

Specific examples of positive developments

With the country in a state of crisis, the Church continues to be seen as a source of hope and stability in the eyes of many citizens. Indeed, the crisis has brought [many closer](#) to the life and work of local churches (Aleteia, 27 October 2021) which are particularly valued for their help among those [most in need](#) (Noticia Cristiana, 31 July 2022).

External Links - Situation in brief

- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: died - <https://talcualdigital.com/concejal-de-unt-fue-asesinado-de-varios-disparos-cerca-de-una-iglesia-en-el-zulia/>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: attacked - <https://elsiglo.com.ve/2022/05/24/asesinaron-evangelico-regresaba-iglesia/>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: attack - <https://ipysvenezuela.org/alerta/alerta-ipysve-censurados-programas-informativos-y-emisoras-en-barinas-y-merida-posterior-a-elecciones-regionales/>
- Specific examples of positive developments: many closer - <https://es.aleteia.org/2021/10/27/venezuela-la-crisis-ha-logrado-que-muchos-se-acercaran-a-la-iglesia/>
- Specific examples of positive developments: most in need - <https://www.noticiacristiana.com/latam/2022/07/iglesias-venezuela-ayudan-gente-vertedero-basura.html>

WWL 2023: Keys to understanding / Venezuela

Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
Amnesty International 2021/22 country report – covering 154 countries	AI country report 2021/22 (pp. 398-403)	https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/POL1048702022ENGLISH.pdf	1 July 2022
BBC News country profile	BBC country profile	https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-19649648	1 July 2022
Bertelsmann Transformation Index country report 2022 – covering 137 countries	BTI report 2022	https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-dashboard/VEN	1 July 2022
CIA World Factbook	CIA Factbook	https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/venezuela/	1 July 2022
Crisis24 country report (Garda World) – covering 193 countries	Crisis24 country report	https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/venezuela	1 July 2022
Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index 2021 – covering 167 countries	EIU 2021 (p.49)	https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/eiu-democracy-index-2021.pdf	1 July 2022
FFP's Fragile States Index 2022 – covering 179 countries	FSI 2022	https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/	2 September 2022
Freedom House's 2022 Democracy index – covering 29 countries, Venezuela not included	Democracy Index 2022	https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores	
Freedom House's 2022 Global Freedom index – covering 210 countries	Global Freedom Index 2022	https://freedomhouse.org/country/venezuela/freedom-world/2022	1 July 2022
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2022 report – covering 70 countries	Freedom on the Net 2022	https://freedomhouse.org/country/venezuela/freedom-net/2022	14 February 2023
Human Rights Watch World Report 2022 (country chapter) – covering 100+ countries	HRW 2022 country chapter	https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/venezuela	1 July 2022
Internet World Stats 2022	IWS 2022	https://www.internetworldstats.com/south.htm#ve	1 July 2022
RSF's 2022 World Press Freedom Index – covering 180 countries	World Press Freedom 2022	https://rsf.org/en/country/venezuela	1 July 2022
Transparency International's 2021 Corruption Perceptions Index – covering 180 countries	CPI 2021	https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021/index/ven	1 July 2022
UNDP's Global Human Development Indicators (country profile) – covering 189 countries	HDI profile	https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data/#/countries/VEN	1 July 2022
US State Department's 2021 International Religious Freedom (country profile)	IRFR 2021	https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/venezuela/	1 July 2022
USCIRF 2022 country reports – covering 15 CPC / 12 SWL, Venezuela not included	USCIRF 2022	https://www.uscifr.gov/countries	
World Bank country overview – covering 178 countries	World Bank overview 2022	https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/venezuela/overview	1 July 2022
World Bank country profile data – covering 222 countries	World Bank profile (2020 data)	https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfileId=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncountry=VEN	1 July 2022
World Bank Macro Poverty Outlook 2022 – covering 147 countries (divided per region) - Venezuela not included	Macro Poverty Outlook 2022	https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/macro-poverty-outlook/mpo_lac	

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 2020, Maduro [regained](#) control of the National Assembly through legislative elections boycotted by the opposition parties (AA, 7 December 2020). In November 2021, the

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 coronavirus 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).

The economy has continued to deteriorate, causing shortages of virtually everything from electricity and water to fuel and household supplies. Despite the COVID-19 restrictions, the difficult socio-economic context has led to widespread [demonstrations](#) (OVCS, September 2021) and [large-scale emigration](#) (R4V, November 2021).

Political and legal landscape

According to a [poll](#) carried out by Datincorp in August 2021, 63% of respondents declared themselves dissatisfied with Nicolás Maduro in his performance as a politician, and 77% declared themselves dissatisfied with Juan Guaidó (El Nacional, 9 August 2021). Towards the end of the WWL 2023 reporting period, an IPSOS survey on the perception of government management showed that President Maduro only reached a [5%](#) approval rating in the region. Others with very low ratings were Pedro Castillo in Peru and Miguel Díaz-Canel in Cuba (IPSOS, August 2022). This shows that the average citizen does not feel satisfactorily represented by either Maduro or the opposition.

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

The next presidential elections are scheduled for the year 2024, however, in statements made in October 2022, President Nicolás Maduro left open the possibility that the elections could be held [earlier](#). However, according to the Constitution, it is the National Electoral Council (CNE) who has the responsibility of setting election dates (Acceso a la justicia, 18 October 2022). In addition, the president has hinted that free elections would be [conditional](#) on the lifting of international sanctions (El País, 30 November 2022).

Juan Guaidó appeared in recent years as Maduro's main political rival, however, the opposition deputies of the National Assembly elected in 2015 have since approved the reform of the so-

called Transition to Democracy Statute. This decision has meant an [end](#) to the existence and purpose of the so-called "interim presidency". The opposition is now looking for a new strategy for the upcoming elections (El País, 30 December 2022).

In the midst of the democratic crisis, attempts were made by the political opposition (Unitary Platform) and the Venezuelan government to [resume](#) dialogue, this time in Mexico City, facilitated by Norway and accompanied by Russia and the Netherlands (DW, 14 August 2021). The talks aimed at defusing the economic crisis and humanitarian emergency gripping the country. A first round of negotiations was held on 13-15 August 2021 and the second round, held on 3-6 September, achieved "a partial agreement for the social protection of the Venezuelan people" (AA, 7 September 2021). A third round was held at the end of September 2021 but a fourth round, scheduled for October, was [suspended](#) because Alex Saab, a Colombian-born businessman and close ally of President Maduro had been accused of money-laundering and was extradited to the USA from Cape Verde (Venezuela Weekly, 22 October 2021). The proximity to the local and regional elections in November 2021 increased the political tension between the - fragmented - opposition and the president. However, in March 2022 the head of the Venezuelan delegation indicated that political dialogue could now [resume](#) under certain conditions (El País, 15 March 2022). Finally, a [new round](#) of negotiations was announced in November 2022, in Mexico City. The chief negotiator of the Venezuelan government, Jorge Rodríguez, reiterated to the press that one of the objectives of this round was to "sign a broad social agreement with a sector of the Venezuelan opposition" in order to cover the social needs of Venezuelans (DW, 11 November 2022).

The [2021 annual report](#) of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights highlighted how the crisis in the country's democratic institutions has continued to deepen, causing the rule of law to be totally lacking. According to the report, institutions such as the Supreme Court of Justice, the National Constituent Assembly and the Public Ministry have all been coopted by the Executive powers (IACHR, 2021). This situation did not improve during 2022.

In general, the government and its supporters regard all forms of opposition as state treason and use state security forces to [quash dissent](#) among politicians, army officers, civil leaders and others (Congressional Research Service, 8 December 2021). For example, from January to September 2022, the Center for Justice and Peace documented approximately [421 rights violations](#) carried out by the government against journalists, political activists and civil society organizations (CEPAZ, September 2022). Such violations are possible because of the repressive legal system, examples of which are listed below:

- i. The "Law against Hate for Peaceful Coexistence and Tolerance": This law aims to quash dissent by [limiting](#) freedom of speech. Faith-based criticism of the government is also targeted (Albaciudad, November 2017).
- ii. Administrative Ruling ONCDOFT-001-2021: This obliges national and foreign non-profit organizations (NGOs) active in Venezuela to enter details in a special registry, [revealing](#) not only all donor organizations and their beneficiaries, but also personal information concerning their members (BDO, 17 May, 2021). Church leaders and confessional organizations have expressed concern since members or activities perceived as opposing the interests of the government may be sanctioned.

- iii. Law of Transparency and Access to Information of Public Interest: It is presented as a [law](#) in order to guarantee the exercise of the right of access to information of public interest, however the wording is ambiguous, leaving it to the discretion of local authorities to determine what information does or does not generate a threat to public order or the state.
- iv. Reform of the Organic Law of the Supreme Court of Justice: This [reform](#) reduced the number of judges in the Supreme Court from 32 to 20 and failed to prohibit the reelection of magistrates whose terms are about to expire (Gaceta Oficial, 19 January 2022).
- v. The [draft](#) bill “The International Cooperation Law Project”: This seeks to redefine international cooperation in the country and criminalize civil society organizations for receiving foreign funds when their activities are not aligned with the interests of the regime (Derechos digitales, 3 June 2022).

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

The so-called Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (usually referred to as the ALBA bloc and includes Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua) issued a [statement](#) rejecting "the exclusions and discriminatory treatment at the so-called 'Summit of the Americas in Los Angeles'" held in May 2022 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 will also host peace talks between the Colombian government and the National Liberation Army (ELN) (Reliefweb, 1 December 2022).

US sanctions against Venezuela [include](#) (Congressional Research Service, 6 December 2022):

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

A total of 55 Venezuelan state officials have had EU sanctions imposed after action was taken against a further [19 officials](#) accused of undermining democracy or carrying out rights abuses (US News, 22 February 2021).

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).

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	26,884,000	91.9
Muslim	102,000	0.3
Hindu	650	0.0
Buddhist	38,500	0.1
Ethno-religionist	217,000	0.7
Jewish	7,300	0.0
Bahai	185,000	0.6
Atheist	69,000	0.2
Agnostic	1,432,000	4.9
Other	330,900	1.1
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

According to the World Christian Database in April 2022, although Christians make up almost 92% of the population, it is important to note that over 5% of the population identify themselves as agnostic/atheist.

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, as well as being the only church denomination with legal status. 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 Evangelical churches, some of which [support](#) the ruling party (MPV, 30 April 2022), while others are neutral or stand clearly in opposition.

The government continues to seek rapprochement with factions within Protestantism taking advantage of its fragmentation. In this way, the government seeks to instrumentalize the religiosity of the population, confuse believers with the use of religious references in political messages and thus improve its image and ensure electoral support. As part of the ruling party's strategy for staying in power, it has [created](#) the office of 'Vice Presidency of Religious Affairs', now [led](#) by Nicolás Maduro Guerra, son of President Maduro (VTV, 23 July 2022), and has set up 'Pastoral Government Councils' throughout the country with the aim of [integrating](#) Christian groups in the running of regional and local governments (Alnavio, 1 November 2021). These regional councils support government policies dealing with religious affairs and are made up of [delegates](#) from some of the Protestant churches (Miranda, 17 May 2022).

At the beginning of the year 2022, Nicolás Maduro ordered a [census](#) of all Evangelical churches operating in the country to allegedly support the pastors with special bonuses, but at the same time to see how church programs can best support government policies (Noticias Barquisimeto, 19 March 2022). It is expected that the information obtained will be collated in the digital 'Fatherland Database' (Sistema Patria). The Evangelical Council of Venezuela (CEV) has 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). It has already emerged that some churches are being put under pressure in the form of government threats if they do not conform.

According to the The US State Department IRFR 2021:

- "Religious leaders reported that the Venezuelan Interreligious Forum, founded in 2020 and consisting of Catholic, evangelical Protestant, and Jewish representatives, coordinated throughout the year on dialogue and building consensus around human rights, democratic institutions, and the rule of law." These are all religious groups not associated with President Maduro's regime.
- "The Maduro regime promoted the National Religious Council that it created in 2020. As part of this effort, members of the regime helped organize meetings throughout the year with the Evangelical Christian Movement for Venezuela (MOCEV), a pro-Maduro organization. Evangelical Protestant leaders said members of MOCEV did not speak for their religious communities and lacked credibility among their followers due to MOCEV's tendency to focus on politics rather than religion and spirituality."

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the government banned church services for approximately seven and a half months in 2020. As in many other countries, several churches [found alternative ways](#) to carry out activities despite the ban (France 24, 14 September 2020). Catholic churches, for instance, [highlighted](#) the importance of visiting prisons, developing online resources and keeping the youthwork going (Vatican News, 2 July 2021). However, much depended on permits being granted by local or national authorities.

Leaders of both the Catholic Church and the Evangelical Council of Venezuela (CEV) openly [discuss](#) the problems that the country is experiencing, including the dismantling of democracy and the violation of human rights (Agenzia Fides, 14 January 2022). In this context, any Christian religious leader, church 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 antigovernment influence from spreading (VOA, 30 August 2021). Since the distribution of food or medicine is in government hands, this allows the regime to manipulate the population and obtain their support. Particularly during the pandemic, many Christians found they had to submit to the ruling party - against their will - in order to survive.

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 authorities. Similarly, the registration of churches is easier for denominations showing loyalty to the regime. Most denominations, especially those not allied with the government have difficulties importing Christian material, obtaining, distributing or printing Bibles or renewing their legal status.

Although discussed in more detail below (in: *Security situation*), violence perpetrated by Colombian guerrillas who have settled in the country is putting the work of pastors at risk. The latter are most vulnerable in the border region with Colombia, but the violence is increasingly reaching into other rural and urban areas. The presence of the guerrillas and the conflict that this generates with local groups, in addition to collusion with some Venezuelan authorities, have caused restrictions on activities of religious communities related to 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, it is important to point out that in the WWL 2023 reporting period, religious leaders who have shown their disagreement with issues promoted by the government, relating to abortion and LGBTQ+ postulates have been the target of retaliation. According to internal sources, there was the case of a pastor who made public statements against gender identity 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 where a conference in which she participated was held, was closed for arbitrary reasons.

Economic landscape

According to UNDP's HDI profile:

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

There is neither recent official information on the fiscal situation of the country, nor is there transparency in terms of public spending (Global Freedom Index 2022). According to the [National Survey on Living Conditions \(November 2022\)](#), a slowdown in the level of economic activity has been observed (currently at 7.2%) compared to the second half of 2021 and it is forecast that it will fall further in 2023 (to 4.4%), a level which is insufficient for recovery to pre-crisis levels. A combination of factors accounts for these results, which have to do with the deterioration of infrastructure and basic services (energy, water, security, telecommunications), poor access to bank credit, the lack of human capital, the low level of real income of consumers, the low growth of oil production, as well as the effects of some of the international sanctions.

Círculo de Estudios Latinoamericanos (CESLA), citing the International Monetary Fund, pointed out that the Venezuelan economy registered a [drop](#) in GDP of 1.5% (CESLA, June 2022). Besides the worldwide COVID crisis, other main factors influencing the economic situation were reported to be:

- The collapse of crude oil production (exacerbated by the effects of US trade and oil sanctions);
- The dramatic loss of the purchasing power of the bolivar;
- The absence of public and private investment;
- The collapse of the credit market.

At the same time, there has been a notable increase in the 'dollarization' of the economy, including wages and salaries. This, together with the greater stability seen in the foreign exchange market, as well as the already advanced currency substitution process, has created a climate of greater income stability, contributing to the end of hyperinflation.

According to the Venezuelan Finance Observatory, [inflation](#) in Venezuela exceeded 300 percent. The main price increases were registered in the food sector, with increases of up to 332.43%. Monthly inflation in 2022 up to December was 37.2%, accumulated inflation and interannual inflation corresponded to 305.7% (OVF, December 2022). Beyond the figures, there continues to be a problem of structural poverty, in which the minimum wage is often not enough to support the basic food basket. The Public Expenditure Observatory, reported as of November 2022 that a family made up of 3 people needs on average around 466 USD monthly to [cover the costs](#) of various goods and services (CEDICE, November 2022). To date, the [minimum wage](#) established by the State is around 6 USD (BBC, 16 January 2023).

The [international sanctions](#), especially those imposed by the USA, are a further factor to consider. According to a joint statement, the USA, Canada, the UK and the European Union seek to leverage sanctions relief to encourage President Maduro to negotiate a path toward free and fair elections in 2024 (Congressional Research Service, November 2022). 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, September 2021).

As a result of this economic situation, millions have fled the country. Many of the country's churches have become centers for food and refuge. 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 groups are no longer in a position to provide humanitarian aid (Aleteia, 27 October 2021). Nonetheless, the worsening of the crisis and the difficulties in obtaining donations - among other things due to bureaucratic restrictions - have caused the [closure](#) of aid programs, including homes for children and adolescents (VOA, 13 August 2022). In addition, the economic crisis has also seriously affected churches: The constant power cuts and the transport crisis have made it difficult for Christians to attend church services in many areas and some church leaders have been forced to leave.

Social and cultural landscape

According to the CIA Factbook and UNDP's HDI profile:

- **The main ethnic groups:** unspecified Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Arab, German, African, Indigenous
- **The main languages:** Spanish (official), numerous indigenous dialects
- **The urban population is:** 88.4% of total population (2023)
- **The literacy rate is:** 97.1% (age 15 and over can read and write)

According to the World Bank country profile:

- **Education:** The school enrollment for pre-primary (2017) is 70%; for primary (2017) is 97.0% and for secondary (2017) 88.0%. The duration of compulsory education is 17 years (2021).
- **Unemployment (modeled ILO estimate):** 6.4% (2021).
- **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:** 199,202 (2021)

In addition, the [UNHCR](#) reports that more than 7 in 10 of all refugees under UNHCR's mandate and other people in need of international protection come from just five countries. One of them is Venezuela (5.6 million) (UNHCR, 27 October 2022).

According to the UN Global Human Development Indicators (HDI profile):

- **Human Development Index (HDI) score and ranking:** Venezuela scored 0.691 in 2021, ranking #118 out of 191 countries and territories.
- **Life expectancy (2021):** 70.6

- **Gender inequality:** Venezuela has a GII value of 0.492, ranking it 123 out of 191 countries in the 2021 index.

According to the [National Survey on Living Conditions 2021 \(November 2022\)](#):

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

State food programs have been denounced by regime opponents as being mechanisms of social control and political-electoral manipulation.

According to the Public Expenditure Observatory (CEDICE), as of November 2022:

- Drinking water was in [short supply](#) for more than a week in 43 % of the country;
- Interruptions in the electricity supply for more than 1 hour a day occurred in 60.3% of the country;
- Queues for fuel lasting between 2 and 12 hours took place in 78% of the country.

Due to severe food insecurity in the country, in April 2021, the government allowed the World Food Program (WFP) to operate in the country. The WFP provides nutritious meals, particularly in preschool and special education schools, as well as investing in improvements in school canteens. In April 2022, the program completed a [year of operations](#) through school meal programs, focusing on children between 6 months and 6 years of age and the staff of educational institutions (WFP, 3 June 2022). In November 2022, WFP and the Venezuelan government [agreed](#) to expand and develop the program in 2023 (WFP, 22 November 2022).

Although there have been slight improvements in the economic situation, there is still a major social crisis in the country: Poverty is widespread, basic needs are not being covered, transport costs have risen, the health sector is failing, salaries in the public sector have [decreased](#) (BBC News, 23 August 2022), and there are numerous human rights violations occurring. As a result, the Venezuelan Observatory of Social Conflict (OVCS) recorded [3,892 protests](#) during the first half of 2022; this figure represents an increase of 15% compared to the same period in 2021 (OVCS, 26 July 2022). 572 protests were [registered](#) in September 2022 alone: Bolívar state experienced the highest number (88), followed by Lara (67), Sucre (36), Falcón (35) and Anzoátegui (34) (OVCS, 21 October 2022).

Among the [human rights violations](#) taking place, are (IACHR, 2021):

- Extrajudicial executions of young people living in poverty;
- Forced disappearances and torture in contexts of deprivation of freedom;
- Arbitrary arrests of people known or perceived as opponents;
- Restrictions on freedom of expression;
- Hostile government action against people and organizations defending human rights.

A further phenomenon resulting from the crisis is uncontrolled migration. According to the UNHCR, the first quarter of 2022 registered the movement of 3.2 million people across the [border](#) between Colombia and Venezuela through the three international bridges linking the state of Tachira to the department of Norte de Santander, along with a rising trend of many migrants returning to Venezuela (UNHCR, 20 July 2022).

Because the state authorities use the vulnerability of the poor to manipulate their support, any assistance provided by churches or others is seen as a threat, and is therefore closely monitored and sometimes prohibited. The state regards such church programs as a form of political intervention and competition, fearing that such activities could influence society and destabilize the government. In the WWL 2023 reporting period and beyond, the operation of civil society 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).

Technological landscape

According to World Internet Stats (IWS 2022):

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

According to the World Bank (country profile):

- **Mobile phone (cellular) subscriptions:** 59 per 100 people (2021)

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

- **Mobile phones:** 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 2021](#):

- 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 2022 report, Venezuela scored 30 points and is classified as 'not free'.

- “During Venezuela’s November 2021 regional elections, in which opposition parties sought to challenge the authoritarian rule of Nicolás Maduro, service providers blocked VPNs and the anonymous web browser Tor, presumably on government orders, in addition to widespread blocking of international and independent Venezuelan media sites. Venezuelan internet users were cut off from critical information, particularly the reports of foreign media and election-monitoring groups.”

According to Reporters Without Borders (World Press Freedom 2022):

- “Journalism in Venezuela is practiced in a restrictive environment. It is common for journalists to be beaten or threatened during pre-electoral or political conflict periods when they carry out their journalistic work. Since both the Attorney General’s Office and the Ombudsman’s Office are controlled by Maduro, neither helps guarantee the safety of journalists in the country and acts of physical or verbal violence against them are seldom investigated.”

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

The constant shortages of electricity have made the use of the Internet and online communication very difficult. According to the Public Expenditure Observatory (CEDICE), as of November 2022, there have been [recurrent failures](#) in the electricity supply during the day among 60.3% of the population (CEDICE, November 2022). Additionally, there is a constant wave of digital blockades against media that do not adhere to the government line. Radio stations in governorates run by the opposition have been [closed](#) by the National Telecommunications Commission (CONATEL) (NTN24, September 2022).The rapporteurs of the UN and the IACHR indicated in a joint statement that restrictive measures have been reported in Venezuela, particularly through unjustified Internet outages and the blocking of independent media. The closure of media outlets and/or the seizure of their equipment, as ordered by the government, has increasingly limited citizens' access to reliable information from independent sources, and

encouraged a general environment of self-censorship among the media (OAS, 30 August 2022). Without printed newspapers and with digital media blocked, Venezuelans have very [limited possibilities](#) to access non-state information (France 24, 1 May 2022). During the 2021 elections, the European Union Electoral Observation Mission concluded that all media with national coverage had a strong [bias](#) in favor of the government or the ruling party (MOE, 21 November 2021).

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

Security situation

Venezuela suffers from endemic corruption and criminal impunity. Corruption networks make it possible for criminals to co-opt various government authorities (see below: *Chapter on Persecution Dynamics, Section - Persecution engines*). Hence, violence is exercised both by law enforcement officers in their task of repressing dissent, local and foreign criminal groups, as well as by the authorities in collusion with them.

On 27 September 2019, the United Nations Human Rights Council set up an Independent International [Fact-Finding Mission](#) for a period of one year, to assess alleged human rights violations committed in Venezuela since 2014. The mandate was [extended](#) by the Council on 6 October 2020 for an additional two years, until September 2022 (OHCHR, October 2020); through Resolution 45/20 and Resolution 51/29, it was extended until September 2024 (OHCHR, 2022). The mission's September 2022 [report](#) identified as perpetrator structures in the commission of human rights violations and crimes falling within the Mission's mandate, Venezuela's State military and civilian intelligence services, the Directorate General of Military Counter-Intelligence (DGCIM) and the Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (SEBIN), respectively. According to the Mission's analysis and information received, real and perceived dissidents and government opponents were targeted for detention based on criteria which included their alleged participation in plots against the government, their leadership roles or leadership potential, their roles within the political opposition, their public criticism of the government and, in some cases, their potential to be subjected to acts of extortion. In certain cases, President Nicolás Maduro and other persons of his inner circle, as well as other high level authorities were involved in selecting targets. The Mission has documented numerous irregularities during arrests carried out by DGCIM. These include a failure to present warrants, or carrying out arrests based on false evidence. The Mission has documented several cases where DGCIM used excessive force during arrests, including the shooting of arrestees. Another frequent tactic of DGCIM was to arrest or orchestrate kidnappings of family members to pressure targets into turning themselves in (Reliefweb, September 2022).

High crime rates have been made possible by corrupt authorities, a flawed judiciary system and poor gun control. According to the Venezuelan Violence Observatory, Venezuela closed the year 2022 with an estimated 9,367 people [killed](#) by violent causes. In the year 2022, six federal entities had a rate of violent deaths greater than 41 per hundred thousand inhabitants: the Capital District (67); La Guaira (50) Miranda (48); Bolivar (43); Guarico (41) and Carabobo (41). And seven states had a rate of violent deaths above 30 victims per hundred thousand inhabi-

tants: Aragua (35), Amazonas, Monagas and Anzoátegui with 34; and Trujillo, Delta Amacuro and Zulia with 33 (OVV, December 2022).

The 2021 Global Organized Crime Index ranks Venezuela at #18 out of 193 countries, 3rd of 12 countries in South America, with a 6.64 [criminality score](#). 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. Violent deaths included homicides, resistance to authority and disappearances. 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. The National Liberation Army (ELN) from Colombia, for instance, is mostly active in border states like Apure, Táchira and Zulia (Insight Crime, 2022). The UN Fact-Finding Mission has also received information that the ELN has had an [intermittent](#) presence in various mining areas in Bolívar state since at least 2018 (Reliefweb, 20 September 2022). According to Human Rights Watch, the ELN and a coalition of FARC dissident groups are fighting for territorial control of Arauca and Apure. They have threatened and intimidated the spokespersons of the communal councils and have filled territories with fear because of murders, forced recruitment and forced displacement. All this under the acquiescence and sometimes in [collaboration](#) with the Venezuelan security forces. Other homegrown organizations like guerrilla group the Bolivarian Liberation Forces (FBL) and the Bolivarian National Guard have been accused of participating in joint operations with ELN guerrillas (HRW, 28 March 2022).

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.

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 October 2021). 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).

As a consequence of the economic crisis surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, many young people have left school to look for employment; this makes them easy prey for being [recruited](#) by criminal gangs and irregular armed groups for illegal and criminal purposes (Swissinfo, 30 March 2022). According to Human Rights Watch (HRW 2021 country chapter), the government and its security forces have been responsible for extrajudicial executions and short-term forced disappearances and have jailed opponents, prosecuted civilians in military courts, tortured detainees, and cracked down on protesters. 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 have 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](#) (El Impulso, 6 June 2022).

Trends analysis

1) The Maduro regime is moving ever further away from a democratic solution

Despite international pressure, Maduro persists in maintaining an authoritarian style of government. His resistance towards serious negotiations with the weak and divided political opposition makes it difficult to ever return to democratic practices, especially since he has strengthened alliances with other authoritarian Communist countries. Christians who call for a return to the rule of law are considered enemies of the government and become victims of repression.

2) The repression of opposition voices continues

The persistent and unpunished violation of human rights of government critics has not ceased and has at times intensified. The regime has taken advantage of its total control over state power and resources to intimidate opponents and spread fear among the population, including through alliances with criminal groups. Again, Christians who stand up for the defense of the most vulnerable are soon considered enemies of the government and become victims of repression.

3) Criminal groups are growing stronger

The lack of presence of state authorities in many areas has been the ideal breeding ground for the emergence of criminal groups (guerrillas, paramilitaries, drug traffickers and others). They are able to operate with near total impunity, at times in complicity with the state authorities. The Colombian-Venezuelan border region is an area of particular concern, since the distribution of humanitarian aid there is very limited due to the high levels of violence. The Church is vulnerable when it is seen as challenging the interests of criminal groups in those areas.

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WWL 2023: Church information / Venezuela

Christian origins

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

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

gustinians 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	23,248,000	86.5
Protestant	2,191,000	8.1
Independent	1,582,000	5.9
Unaffiliated	251,000	0.9
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-422,000	-1.6
Total	26,883,200	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	5.3
Renewalist movement	6,476,000	24.1

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

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

The largest Christian denomination in Venezuela is by far the Roman Catholic Church, representing 86.5 % of all Christians (with a reduction of 1.4% in comparison to WCD 2021 estimates). Evangelical and Protestant churches are growing fastest in the country, especially in rural areas. Those not aligned with the regime have often been most respected by local populations.

Areas where Christians face most difficulties

As indicated above, the operation of the three main Persecution engines (DPA, CPCP and OCC) is blended, causing the dynamics of persecution to spread throughout the country. In the WWL 2023 reporting period, most cases of persecution against Christians occurred in Amazonas, Anzoátegui, Aragua, Apure, Barinas, Barquisemeto, Bolivar, Carabobo, Distrito Capital (Caracas),

Falcon, Guarico, La Guaira, Mérida, Miranda, Sucre, Táchira, Zulia. Unreported cases in other cities are highly likely.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians

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

Historical Christian communities

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

Converts

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

Non-traditional Christian communities

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

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WWL 2023: Persecution Dynamics / Venezuela

Reporting period

1 October 2021 - 30 September 2022

Position on the World Watch List

Venezuela: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2023	56	64
WWL 2022	51	65
WWL 2021	39	-
WWL 2020	42	69
WWL 2019	41	71

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2019-2023 reporting periods

Venezuela's increase in overall score was largely due to higher levels of violence in several of the Block 6 categories compared to WWL 2022 (especially Christian killing, attacked, arrested and Christian businesses closed). *Dictatorial paranoia* (Strong) and *Communist and post-Communist oppression* (Medium): The dictatorial government of President Maduro was strengthened by the 2021 local elections and increased its threatening stance against churches not aligning with its views and policies. Churches that continue to call for a return to democracy and offer humanitarian assistance to those most affected by the national crisis, face government hostility. *Organized corruption and crime* (Medium): Criminal groups of both national and foreign origin are gaining a greater presence in the country (particularly in the border areas) and are terrorizing Christians who do not give in to their threats and extortion demands. This sometimes occurs in collusion with local authorities.

Persecution engines

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

Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Strong
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Medium

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

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

Dictatorial paranoia (Strong)

According to the World Justice Project ([Rule of Law Index 2022](#)), Venezuela is ranked 140th out of 140 countries. President Maduro is determined to stay in power at all costs with little respect for democracy and the Rule of Law, even when his government is considered illegitimate by many members of the international community. The entire state machinery has been geared up to support the Socialist/Communist principles of the regime and monitor and punish any kind of opposition. The government introduced an ID card to identify those who support the ruling party for receiving basic services and government benefits, including food and health care. The violation of citizens' rights also affects Christians, particularly church leaders when speaking publicly asking for the return to (real) democracy and denouncing corruption and the violations of human rights. Churches and Christian organizations who provide basic humanitarian assistance to citizens are seen as competing with the state, which does not want civil society actors endangering its image of being the sole provider. Thus they have become victims of verbal and physical attacks, arbitrary arrests and administrative reprisals etc. Christian property has also been damaged and various religious activities have been interrupted and/or prevented. President Maduro regularly accuses church leaders of being allied with the political opposition, of interfering in the political sphere, of misleading ordinary Christians and of spreading violence instead of peace.

Communist and post-Communist oppression (Medium)

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

Organized corruption and crime (Medium)

As mentioned above in the section *Security situation*, due to the high levels of corruption in the

country and the active presence of various kinds of criminal groups, Venezuela is considered a '[narco-state](#) (El American, 24 September 2022)'. Criminal networks operate with ease due to corruption at all levels of government; they can act with impunity and often carry out government orders to silence dissenting voices. The state uses paramilitary gangs (“colectivos”) in various cities to monitor and intimidate all opposition, including the social demands highlighted by churches and church leaders. Colombian guerrillas and other criminal groups involved in the business of migrant smuggling in the border region hinder church humanitarian work; they also try to indoctrinate and recruit minors. These criminal groups represent a risk for the Church, especially where church teaching directly opposes criminal activity.

Drivers of persecution

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

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

Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia

- **Government officials (Strong):** Most government officials – at all levels - are followers of Socialist/Communist ideology, loyal to President Maduro and will do anything to keep him in power. They seek to repress voices that could endanger the stability of the regime, thus Christians who demand that President Maduro should step down are harshly treated; the authorities can limit the exercise of human and/or civil rights and put pressure on Christians that show disagreement with the regime. The main organs of repression are the Bolivarian National Guard (GNB), the Bolivarian National Police (PNB) and its Special Actions Forces (FAES), the Scientific, Criminal and Criminal Investigations Corps (CICPC), the Bolivarian Intelligence Service National (SEBIN) and the General Directorate of Military Counterintelligence (DGCIM).
- **Political parties (Strong):** The ruling party is the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV). Although there are opposition political parties, these are systematically repressed. The ruling party remains in power thanks to the weakening of the rule of law and the irregular use of the entire state apparatus. The ruling party monitors and silences (at times violently) Christians who seek to weaken regime loyalty. Thus, many Christians face imprisonment, defamation, and physical, psychological and economic harassment.
- **Citizens (Medium):** The current state of crisis has caused many citizens to show their loyalty to the regime, either out of convenience or fear of reprisals. Such loyalty may include participating in acts of hostility against the Church, especially when religious leaders denounce human rights violations perpetrated by the Maduro government.
- **Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups (Medium):** These groups, particularly the Special Action Forces, assist government officials and the ruling party in their efforts to remain in power. They will use threats and violence to act against anyone seeking to undermine the government. The main groups are the so-called Integral Defense and Security Committees, 'colectivos'. ELN and ex-FARC members also belong to this category and operate in border regions when supporting the government represents a benefit to their interests.
- **Organized crime cartels or networks (Medium):** Narco cartels (from Mexico and Colombia) and smaller criminal groups are able to act with impunity, especially in rural and border areas, thanks to close alliances with the government and their support to the authorities' political interests. Church efforts to build a culture of peace are obstructed because they interfere with the criminal interests of those groups.

Drivers of Communist and post-Communist oppression

- **Government officials (Strong):** Most government officials at all levels seek to prevent the spreading of any ideas and beliefs which contradict Socialist/Communist principles, even if this means suppressing fundamental liberties. Those Christians who develop socio-political initiatives in their communities are treated with suspicion and if their activities are not aligned with the regime's interests, they could be victims of sanctions and reprisals (mostly in the form of licenses and permits being denied). State school curricula also contain obligatory education in Marxist philosophy.

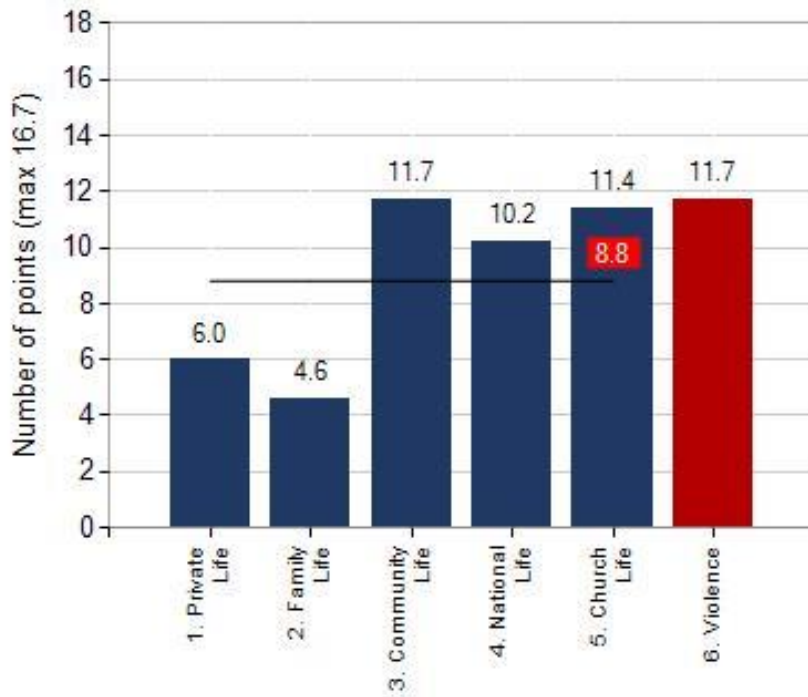
- **Political parties (Medium):** The ruling party and its government officials seek to establish Socialist/Communist principles firmly in society. Together, they seek to impose on citizens adherence to the ruling party and loyalty to its demands. Christians known for their opposition to the government are targeted and suffer constant harassment and limitations of their human rights.
- **Citizens (Medium):** As explained above (under: *Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia*), for a variety of reasons, many citizens want to show loyalty to the ruling party. Many act as informers monitoring church activities and Christian initiatives in their localities, acting according to the Socialist-Communist principles.
- **Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups (Medium):** Paramilitary groups and regime sympathizers use pressure and violence to force citizens to follow the regime's Socialist-Communist ideals. They will block any Christian activity relating to aspects of democracy, human rights and political liberties. The main groups are listed above under *Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia*.

Drivers of Organized corruption and crime

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

The Persecution pattern

WWL 2023 Persecution Pattern for Venezuela



The WWL 2023 Persecution pattern for Venezuela shows:

- The average pressure on Christians in Venezuela is at a high level, rising from 8.4 points in WWL 2022 to 8.8 points in WWL 2023.
- Pressure is highest in the *Community, Church and National spheres of life*. The very high pressure in *Community life* reflects the intense government repression of Christians perceived as regime opponents in the various areas of day-to-day living.
- The score for violence is extremely high at 11.7 points, showing that the ruling party and criminal groups do not shy away from using violent methods where their interests are perceived as being under threat.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, four questions have been selected from the WWL 2023 questionnaire for brief commentary and explanation. The selection usually (but not always) reflects the highest scoring elements. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. (To see how individual questions are scored on a scale of 0-4 points, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).

Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

Block 1.8: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with those other than immediate family (extended family, others). (3.25 points)

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

Block 1.4: It has been risky for Christians to reveal their faith in written forms of personal expression (including expressions in blogs and Facebook etc.). (3.00 points)

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

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

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions introduced to combat it, Christians who were considered to be activists faced various risks when meeting with others privately. Given the increased surveillance by the government on their private life, when they meet they could be arrested for supposedly inciting violence or planning acts of terrorism. Also, in the border region close to Colombia, various guerrilla groups and drug traffickers have assumed control of some areas, sometimes in collusion with the government. In these areas, the presence of such criminal groups often prevents Christians from gathering even for legitimate purposes unrelated to any specific religious activity.

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

Due to the high levels of intolerance and polarization in the country caused by the imposition of Socialist/Communist principles, anyone sharing an opinion opposing the regime (even when it is about defending a religious belief) risks being denounced, arrested and prosecuted by regime allies, even by those in one's own family. This fear leads to self-censorship. Additionally, there are sporadic reports from internal sources about cases where interdenominational conflicts inside indigenous communities have created obstacles hindering Christians from speaking about

their faith with immediate relatives.

Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

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

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

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

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

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

When Christian parents are targeted as perceived opponents of the regime, children also suffer the consequences and are criticized, mocked, or used as 'bad examples' at school, for instance. The children of Christian parents sometimes face threats and other kinds of harassment as a way for the regime to put pressure on the parents and force their compliance. This also applies when Christian parents refuse to follow the rules imposed by criminal groups and their children become victims of reprisals as a way of intimidating their parents. In addition, there are sporadic internal reports about the children of non-Catholics being victims of social rejection in private Catholic schools because their families do not follow the majority religion.

Block 2.10: Christian spouses and/or children of Christians have been subject to separation for prolonged periods of time by circumstances relating to persecution. (3.00 points)

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

many dangers such as encountering mafia groups in control of the roads, especially when passing through the Darién (Panamanian crossing).

Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Special groups, such as the 'colectivos' and 'compatriotas cooperantes', are sent to interrogate political dissidents, including Christians who speak openly against the government or are engaged in church-based or civil society initiatives. The aim is to discourage any activity that could endanger the regime's interests, especially if it is related to humanitarian work funded by

international donors. Also, in areas where criminal groups dominate, Christians involved in humanitarian assistance and similar projects are forced to seek permission from those groups before carrying out such projects.

Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

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

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

Block 4.14: Those who caused harm to Christians have deliberately been left unpunished. (3.75 points)

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

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

Anyone who expresses an opinion that "promotes hatred and discrimination" can be made criminally responsible and considered an enemy of the state. However, the regime interprets what is to be understood by that. As a result, churches that would normally demand justice and respect for the Venezuelan people, often remain silent for fear of being prosecuted - as happened to some church leaders during the WWL 2023 reporting period. Christians and Christian leaders who raise their voice against the constant violations of human rights, calling attention to the country's humanitarian situation, or who criticize government policies (including those related to SOGI postulates), face threats, arrests and attacks from the regime or sympathizers of the regime. Since Christians are not free to state their opinions in public, self-censorship is common.

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

Political parties that do not align with the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PUSV) are heavily restricted and cannot participate freely in the political life of the country. Hence, Christian political parties cannot function. Christian civil society organizations, especially those providing social projects and humanitarian aid, face harassment, hinderances and constant scrutiny, especially about their funding. Since the provision of food and other services is a way

for the government to exert control over the population (through the so-called "national card"), the regime is wary of any competition and will block it. In addition, Christians who support civil society initiatives are also targeted by the government.

Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

Block 5.20: It has been risky for churches or Christian organizations to speak out against instigators of persecution. (3.75 points)

Every time the Venezuelan Church raises its voice in protest, it becomes a target not only of the government but also of regime sympathizers and allied criminal groups. Christians who openly reject Socialist/Communist ideology and denounce regime abuses are under constant threat of being arrested or otherwise 'silenced'. Also, when churches publicly denounce or call attention to criminal activities and corruption links (especially in the country's border areas), they risk reprisals from local armed groups.

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

With the exception of the Roman Catholic church, which enjoys full legal recognition, other religious groups must be registered as a 'nonprofit civil association' with the Directorate of Justice and Religion (DJR) in order to receive permits, licenses and some economic benefits. Even though full legal church status is denied by law to non-Catholic denominations, the DJR imposes arbitrary registration requirements and legal taxes on them and the success of the process depends largely on their regime support. Thus, due to deliberate bureaucratic hindrances, the registration process (or the renewal of the legal permit to operate) can last more than a decade for churches considered to be aligned with the opposition. Most of these churches are thus forced to operate illegally and permanently risk action being taken against them by the authorities.

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

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

Block 5.11: Pastors or other Christian leaders (or their family members) have been special targets of harassment for faith-related reasons. (3.50 points)

Given that the aim of the regime is to remain in power and exert total control, Christian leaders have faced reprisals where they have been critical of the government, vocal about human rights, working in humanitarian aid projects or defending biblical views on marriage and family. Pastors have faced smear campaigns and court cases on accusations of terrorism and hate speech. Crimi-

nal groups have actively collaborated in intimidating opposition voices, including church leaders not only when they do not align themselves with the regime, but also when their church ministry is seen as a threat to their criminal activities.

Violence

Violence is defined in WWL Methodology as the deprivation of physical freedom or as bodily harm to Christians or damage to their property. It includes severe threats (mental abuse). The table is based on reported cases as much as possible, but since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as being minimum figures. The following 5 points should be considered when using the data provided in the Block 6 table:

1. Some incidents go unreported because the Christians involved choose not to speak about the hostility being faced. Possible reasons for this may be:

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

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

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

3. For further discussion (with a focus on the complexity of assessing the numbers of Christians killed for their faith) please see World Watch Monitor's article dated 13 November 2013 available at:

<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2013/11/number-of-christian-martyrs-continues-to-cause-debate/>.

4. The use of symbolic numbers: *In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10*, 100* etc.) is given and indicated with an asterisk. A symbolic number of 10* could in reality even be 100 or more but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 100* could go well over 1000 but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 1,000* could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000*, 100,000* and 1,000,000*: Each could indicate much higher numbers, but WWR chooses to be cautious because the real number is uncertain.*

Venezuela: Violence Block question	WWL 2023	WWL 2022
6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	7	4
6.2 How many churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	14	24
6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	17	6
6.4 How many Christians have been sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment, or similar things for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.5 How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	0	2
6.6 How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.7 How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians?	0	0
6.8 How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	15	9
6.9 How many houses of Christians or other property (excluding shops) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	0	3
6.10 How many shops or businesses of Christians have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	2	0
6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	12	0
6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	1	6

In the WWL 2023 reporting period:

- **Christians killed (7):** The incidents involved local criminal groups murdering Christian religious leaders who openly opposed their illegal activities, mainly in the border areas of the country.
- **Christians detained (17):** All incidents included Christians suffering arbitrary arrest, most often accused of calling attention to the human rights abuses perpetrated by the government, or of carrying out humanitarian or pastoral work deemed unacceptable by the authorities.

- **Christians attacked (15):** Most of the incidents involved criminal groups threatening and attacking church congregations. With a similar purpose, some attacks by regime sympathizers were also reported.
- **Christians forced to leave their homes (12):** All the cases involved Christians, particularly church leaders, who had been victims of reprisals for their pastoral work in areas coopted by criminal groups acting with impunity in the country.

5 Year trends

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

5 Year trends: Average pressure

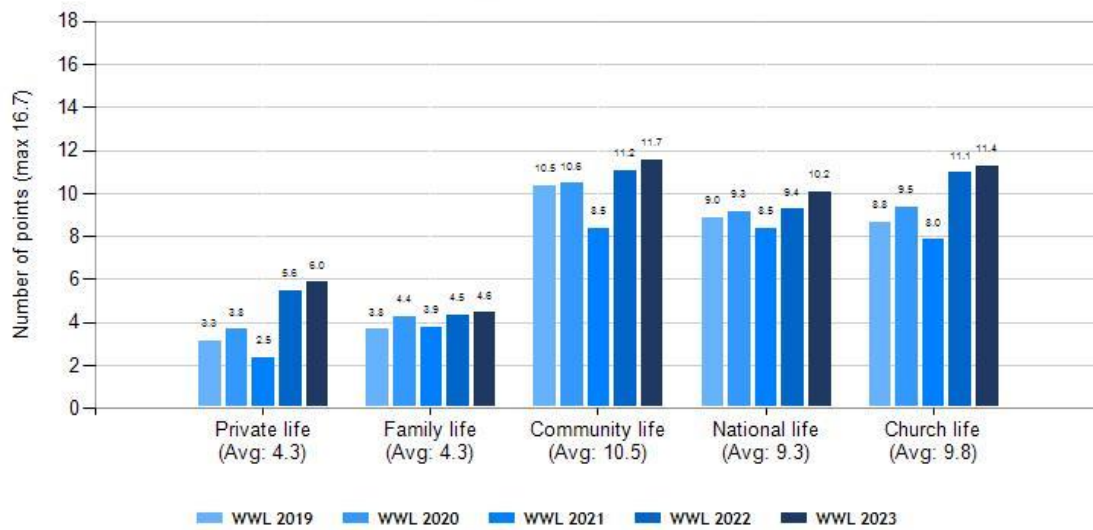
Venezuela: WWL 2019 - WWL 2023	
Persecution Pattern history	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2023	8.8
2022	8.4
2021	6.3
2020	7.5
2019	7.1

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

5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life

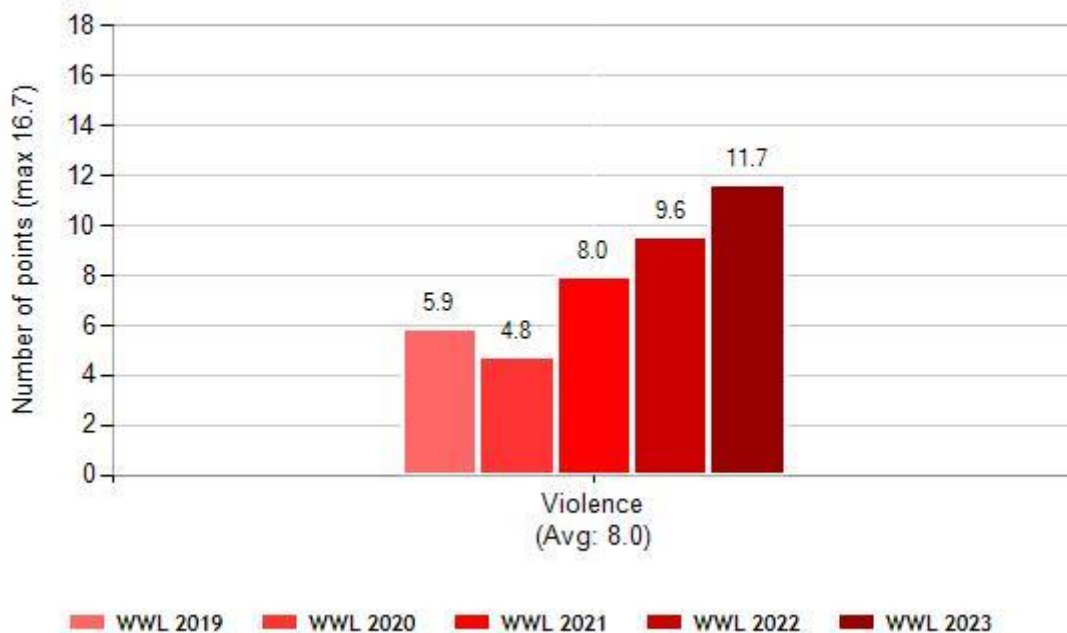
As can be seen in the chart below, throughout the last five reporting periods there was a clear increase in the pressure in all *spheres of life* (except for a slight dip in WWL 2021). Variations occur because the levels of repression against churches and church leaders depend on the current political interests of the regime. For instance, when it is convenient for the government, the humanitarian work carried out by churches was allowed, but when church leaders make public calls for the respect of democracy and human rights (i.e. during an election period), the pressure increases against them. Additionally, as criminal groups have recently become more active, this has also impacted on the level of pressure experienced by Christians in all *spheres of life*.

WWL 2019 - WWL 2023 Persecution Pattern for Venezuela
(Spheres of life)



5 Year trends: Violence against Christians

WWL 2019 - WWL 2023 Persecution Pattern for Venezuela
(Violence)



The chart above shows that the score for violence has increased sharply in the last three reporting periods with the highest peak in WWL 2023 (which reached the category 'extremely high'). There have been a greater number of violent incidents against Christians not just from the government seeking to silence opposition voices, but also from criminal groups intimidating Christians whom they regard as defying their 'authority' over the areas under their control.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	-
Security	-
Social and Cultural	Violence – psychological
Technological	-

Within the context of Venezuela’s ongoing complex humanitarian emergency, Christian women face several vulnerabilities. Young girls are trafficked and can end up trapped in prostitution networks, exchanging sex for food or medicine ([USDS, 2022 Trafficking in Persons Report: Venezuela](#)). Christian women are reportedly better paid because their purity is presumed, and desired. As a country expert explained: “In the past it was known that Christian women are better paid because their purity is presumed, however there are no recent indications about this. In this difficult context, desperation might cause moral boundaries to be ignored in order to survive.”

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

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

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

Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

Group	Male Pressure Points
Economic	Discrimination/harassment via education; Economic harassment via business/job/work access; Economic harassment via fines
Political and Legal	False charges; Imprisonment by government; Travel bans/restrictions on movement
Security	Abduction; Forced to flee town/country; Military/militia conscription/service against conscience; Violence – death; Violence – physical
Social and Cultural	Denied/restricted healthcare; Violence – psychological; Violence – Verbal
Technological	-

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

In light of such pressure and exacerbated by the economic and political crisis, many men and boys are forced to leave the country in order to find work to support their families. While on the move, they are vulnerable to being captured and exploited by organized crime groups ([International Crisis Group, 9 August 2022](#)). Their families who they leave behind also become vulnerable, as highlighted in the female gender profile above.

Church leaders, who are predominately male, suffer the highest levels of persecution, especially at the hands of the government with Catholic leaders typically most vulnerable. A country expert explained: “In this context, those who oppose based on their faith-based points of view are also victims of the regime, religious leaders have been discredited or defamed, attacked verbally and physically, religious activities have been disrupted, religious practices such as burials have [also] been interrupted. In general, there is persecution from the ruling party against Christians whenever they openly denounce the injustices and irregularities of the regime.” The Bolivarian National Intelligence Service officials continued to intimidate church leaders who criticized Maduro in their sermons (US State Department, IRFR 2021).

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

stories in which they carry out their activities, but they must also have the leader's authorization.”

Reflecting the seriousness of threats against church leaders, in the WWL 2023 reporting period several were killed and many more were forced to flee their homes.

Persecution of other religious minorities

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2021):

- “Some members of the Jewish community stated the regime and those sympathetic to it, including some regime-affiliated media outlets, used anti-Zionism to mask antisemitism, saying they avoided accusations of antisemitism by replacing the word “Jewish” with “Zionist.” CAIV [Confederation of Jewish Associations of Venezuela] members reported that on May 25 [2021], regime “shadow governor [protectorate]” of Tachira State Freddy Bernal called for the downfall of the “murderous Zionist State of Israel” during a speech at a rally that followed fighting between Israel and Hamas that month”.
- “Articles published in the online newspaper Aporrea carried messages calling for the destruction of Israel”.

Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

Dictatorial paranoia

The slight improvement in the country's economic situation should not distract from the severity of the humanitarian crisis in the country and the abuses committed by the government, especially against all opposition voices. In its effort to highlight the real situation in the country and to encourage a restoration of democratic practices, the Church continues to be a fundamental actor in society, trusted by large swathes of the general populace. For this, many church leaders are likely to continue facing harsh government hostility.

Communist and post-Communist oppression

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

Organized corruption and crime

Criminal groups look set to gain in strength due to the continuing impunity and links of corruption with the authorities. They are likely to increase their territorial influence, spreading fear as their main tactic. The Church will remain particularly vulnerable to threats and attacks from such groups, especially where Christians work in peace-building initiatives, drug-rehabilita-

tion programs, and humanitarian support to migrants.

External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution engines description: Rule of Law Index 2022 - <https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/>
- Persecution engines description: narco-state - <https://elamerican.com/venezuelan-state-controls-25-of-global-trafficking/>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: USDS, 2022 Trafficking in Persons Report: Venezuela - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-trafficking-in-persons-report/venezuela/#:~:text=According%20to%20civil%20society%20organizations,with%205.6%20per%201%2C000%20people.>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: El Pais, 20 April, 2021 - <https://elpais.com/internacional/2021-04-20/el-sistema-patria-un-nuevo-sistema-de-control-social-en-venezuela.html>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: International Crisis Group, 9 August 2022 - <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/andes/colombia-venezuela/hard-times-safe-haven-protecting-venezuelan>

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the new Research & Reports page of the website od.org. As in earlier years, they are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom) using the following links:

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