



CIVICUS MONITOR WATCHLIST

VENEZUELA

OVERVIEW OF RECENT RESTRICTIONS TO CIVIC FREEDOMS



INTRODUCTION

In December 2023, the CIVICUS Monitor [downgraded](#) Venezuela's civic space rating from repressed to closed, its worst rating, following a sustained assault on civic freedoms. Over the past few months, authorities have intensified the repression restrictions targeting civil society ahead of the presidential elections [due](#) in 2024. Arbitrary detentions of human rights defenders (HRDs), new restrictive civil society organisations (CSOs) laws proposed, and public vilification of CSOs have been documented. This ramping up of attacks in 2024, among other violations, sees Venezuela added to the CIVICUS Monitor Watchlist.

In the context of a socio-political and economic crisis exacerbated by a humanitarian emergency, the country is expected to host elections. On 17th October 2023, the government of President Nicolás Maduro and the Unitary Platform, a group of opposition parties, committed to some guarantees to ensure a fair election. Despite this, on 26th January 2024, the Supreme Court of Justice of Venezuela [upheld](#) the ban on the opposition presidential candidate Maria Corina Machado, who [won](#) a 2023 primary vote, from standing in the 2024 election. The court [maintained](#) a 15-year ban on Machado holding public office and also confirmed the ineligibility of a possible opposition stand-in, two-time presidential candidate Henrique Capriles.

In this challenging setting, restrictions on fundamental freedoms have intensified as part of a strategy to persecute activists and limit speech criticising the government. In September 2023, the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (FFM) [noted](#) that attacks on civic space have been intensifying through state policies aimed at silencing opposition and criticism of President Nicolás Maduro's Government.

ABOUT THE CIVICUS MONITOR

The [CIVICUS Monitor](#), an online platform that tracks threats to civil society in countries across the globe, rates civic space – the space for civil society – in [Venezuela](#) as “**Closed**”.

The data provides the basis for civic space ratings, which are based on up-to-date information and indicators on the state of freedom of association, peaceful assembly and expression. Countries can be rated as:

CLOSED**REPRESSED****OBSTRUCTED****NARROWED****OPEN**

FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION

Criminalisation, harassment, intimidation and vilification were the most common threats faced in 2023 by HRDs and CSOs. The Centre for Defenders and Justice (Centro para los Defensores y la Justicia, CDJ), a Venezuelan human rights organisation, [recorded](#) 524 attacks against HRDs in 2023, a 32 per cent increase from 2022, when 396 incidents were documented. This alarming trend is part of a broader pattern of systematic attacks on HRDs and dissenting voices, fostering an environment of fear and self-censorship.

ARBITRARY DETENTIONS AND SHORT-TERM ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCES AS TACTICS OF INTIMIDATION

On 22nd January 2024, the Attorney General's Office [issued](#) arrest warrants against journalist Sebastiana Barráez; human rights lawyer and defender Tamara Suju; president of Venezuelans Persecuted in Exile (Veppex) José Antonio Colina; You-Tubers Wender Villalobos and Norbey Marín; and another twenty activists. They were accused of allegedly being involved in a plot to kill the President of Venezuela, among other high-ranking authorities.

Following this, on 9th February 2024, Rocío San Miguel and five family members were arbitrarily [detained](#) by the General Directorate of Military Counterintelligence (Dirección General de Contrainteligencia Militar, DGCIM) at the Simón Bolívar International Airport. San Miguel is a renowned HRD from Venezuela and president of [Control Ciudadano](#), an NGO reporting on public security and the work of the armed forces. She [has been](#) a beneficiary of precautionary measures (PM 349/11) by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights since January 2012, due to being a victim of harassment and threats, including death threats she received at her home.

According to the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), San Miguel was initially [approached](#) by officials from the Administrative Service of Identification, Migration and Foreigners (SAIME) at the airport who requested to verify her migratory status, and she was subsequently taken to their offices for further questioning. Thereafter, she was transferred to an undisclosed location by counterintelligence [agents](#). A day later, five family members, including her daughter, [were](#) also detained.

On 13th February, four of the five family members—Miranda Díaz San Miguel, Víctor Díaz Paruta, Miguel San Miguel and Alberto San Miguel—were conditionally [released](#) subject to periodic reporting, travel restrictions and a prohibition on speaking to the media. Meanwhile, San Miguel's whereabouts [remained](#) unknown until 15th February 2024, raising serious concerns about her safety. The only public information about San Miguel came from the Attorney General's Office, Tarek William Saab, who [stated](#) on social media that she had been detained and linked in the above-mentioned plot.

On 15th February, Venezuelan authorities [declared](#) that she was in the custody of the Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (Servicio Bolivariano de Inteligencia Nacional, SEBIN) at 'El Helicoide' detention centre in Caracas, where detainees have a [well-documented](#) high risk of torture. A day earlier, the Attorney General's Office [announced](#) that San Miguel had been charged with treason, conspiracy, terrorism and association by the Second Court Against Terrorism.

Despite the information, she has been [subjected](#) to a period of incommunicado detention. This has been demonstrated by the fact that neither family members nor legal representatives have been granted access to confirm her wellbeing. However, on 18th February, her daughter was [authorised](#) to visit San Miguel and reported that she appeared to be in good health, despite the ongoing detention. As at the time of writing this report, she is still [being held](#) in detention.

The [UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Office](#) (OHCHR) and the [FFM](#) expressed concerns about San Miguel's detention and called on the authorities to immediately release her and respect her right to legal defence of her choice.

The arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance of San Miguel and her family is a tactic commonly used by Venezuelan authorities to silence critics. This is not an isolated incident but, as [informed](#) by the FFM, a selective pattern of repression targeting human rights defenders, NGO members, journalists and others who express criticism or complaints against the government. Similarly, Amnesty International has [documented](#) nine cases of victims of politically motivated arbitrary detentions between 2018 and 2022.

Foro Penal, a network of pro-bono lawyers in Venezuela, [reported](#) that as of October 2023, there are 271 people deprived of their liberty for political reasons. Of these, 255 were men and 16 were women.

VILIFICATION OF HRDS AND CSOS AND EXPULSION OF UN OFFICE

On 14th February 2024, the Attorney General, Tarek William Saab, [made](#) public statements stigmatising HRDs and CSOs. Saab declared that those who denounce San Miguel's enforced disappearance were committing a crime, and that HRDs and CSOs are actively working against the government. He also [claimed](#) that a new type of NGO has emerged that is nothing more than a front for funding opposition to the Venezuelan government, with some of them involved in insurrectionary actions.

Added to this, on 15th February 2024, the Venezuelan government [announced](#) it was suspending the activities of the UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (OHCHR) in the country and giving its staff 72 hours to leave after [accusing](#) the office of promoting opposition. This decision [came soon](#) after the OHCHR expressed concern regarding the detention of San Miguel, as documented above. Also, the suspension took place a day after the publication of the report by UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food's on his recent visit to Venezuela.

TARGETING OF CSOS AND RESTRICTIVE LEGISLATION

The legal situation for CSOs in Venezuela is already precarious. In 2010 the government [implemented](#) the Law of National Sovereignty and Self-Determination to restrict access to funding by CSOs, citing alleged external threats against the Venezuelan government. Under the current legal framework, some reports [estimate](#) that 28.3 per cent of CSOs operating in Venezuela have been unable to obtain legal status. Meanwhile, almost 55 per cent of registered organisations have reported facing obstacles when changing their boards of directors or undergoing similar administrative changes.

In addition, there are serious [concerns](#) about two bills that could potentially close CSOs working in the country. In January 2023, the National Assembly [approved](#) on first reading a draft bill on 'Law on Control, Regulation, Performance and Financing of Non-Governmental and Related Organisations (draft NGO law)'. A year later, on 12th January 2024, the national assembly resumed its debate with the opening of a public consultation process.

Since its [presentation](#) before the National Assembly, the debate on the bill has been [stigmatising](#) in nature, [depicting](#) civil society organisations that carry out social, humanitarian and human rights work as "enemies of the country", accusing them of using "illicit funds" to "finance terrorism". This bill would grant the executive branch faculties to supervise, inspect, control and penalise organisations and their affiliates via legislative and oversight powers. These powers subject CSOs to the discretionary interests of the ruling government, violating their independence and autonomy.

In March 2023, the National Assembly [adopted](#) the International Cooperation bill on its first reading. Similar to the draft NGO Law, this bill, initially introduced in May 2022, raised concerns due to the imposition of arbitrary limitations on the operation of civil society organisations. These bills are highly restrictive and could potentially lead to the arbitrary suspension and dissolution of CSOs.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

The World Press Freedom Index 2023, published by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), [ranked](#) Venezuela 159th out of 180 countries and territories, reflecting one of the lowest rankings in the region.

INTIMIDATION, SURVEILLANCE AND CENSORSHIP OF JOURNALISTS PERSIST

On 6th January 2024, journalist and activist Carlos Julio Rojas [received](#) online threats by supporters aligned with the ruling party Venezuelan United Socialist Party (Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela, PSUV). According to Espacio Público, a Venezuelan media freedom organisation, Rojas has [denounced](#) continuous acts of stalking and threats against him, including the posting of videos in the platforms X (former Twitter) and TikTok featuring his family, friends and partner. He also declared that the intention behind these incidents is to intimidate and prevent him from leading community-based citizen complaints and reporting on the human rights situation, such as his coverage of the six trade unionists' [case](#).

On 11th January 2024, Diosdado Cabello, the Vice President of the PSUV and a member of the National Assembly, threatened and vilified journalists who were part of a WhatsApp group associated with the previous 2015 AN's press team. The 2015 AN was predominantly opposition-led. According to [media organisation reports](#), the private messages read by the PSUV's Vice President in his programme 'Con El Mazo Dando,' produced by and aired on the state television channel, were obtained unlawfully.

On 24th January 2024, Luis López, a journalist from the regional newspaper 'La Verdad de Vargas' [reported](#) that police officials and members of the SEBIN passed by his house, taking photos from a motorcycle and a van. This incident occurred after López reported on the detention of Juan Freites, the coordinator of the Vente Venezuela political party in Vargas. López has a history of experiencing intimidation, persecution and arbitrary detention, with incidents dating back to 2016. Espacio Público [documented](#) at least 15 press freedom violations in the context of the opposition's [primary election](#) in October 2023. On 22nd October 2023, during the primary election, board members of the private media outlet 'Televisión Regional del Táchira' [banned](#) television reporters from interviewing political figures. The channel instructed its reporters to limit their coverage to less than one minute of footage outside the polling stations.

Some journalists were subjected to surveillance and intimidation while covering this election. In Amazonas, in the southern region of the country, government supporters took photos and videos of voters and journalists covering the election. In Cumaná, northeast, four people on two motorcycles passed by the voting centre 'Colegio Andrés Eloy Blanco' and photographed reporters, including those from the media outlet 'Atarraya Oficial.'

Similarly, at least seven press freedom violations were [documented](#) during the December 2023 Essequibo [consultative referendum](#), most linked to restrictions on public information.

ONGOING ARBITRARY CLOSURE OF RADIO STATION

Lack of transparency or arbitrariness in the National Telecommunications Commission's (CONATEL) administration of licence approvals and renewals, particularly for radio broadcasters, has [led](#) to the [closure](#) of 81 radio stations in 2022, at least [eight](#) in 2023, and at least [four](#) in 2024.

For instance, on 5th January 2024, officials of the Bolivarian National Guard (Guardia Nacional Bolivariana, GNB)—a branch of the armed forces, with specific duties in the areas of security and public order and others—and CONATEL [closed](#) 'Anaru 99.5 FM' in Guasdalito, southwestern Venezuela, seizing its transmitter and console. Certain employees were informed during an internal briefing that the station had administrative problems and had interviewed members of the opposition political party. Five days later, CONATEL [ordered](#) the closure of 'Órbita 99.7 FM' and 'Galáctica 100.7 FM' in Portuguesa, western Venezuela, revoking their concession after 30 years.

On 2nd February 2024, officials from CONATEL [ordered](#) the closure of 'Onda 100.9 FM,' a radio station operating in Valencia, the third-largest city in Venezuela. This closure is the third in less than two years involving radio stations in the Union Radio circuit in the Carabobo state. In October 2023, a resolution issued by CONATEL led to the shutdown of 'Unión Radio Valencia 105.3 FM,' and two weeks later it ordered transmissions of 'Éxitos 99.1 FM' to cease.

RECOMMENDATIONS

TO THE VENEZUELAN GOVERNMENT:

- Ensure the immediate and unconditional release of woman human rights defender Rocío San Miguel and guarantee her physical and psychological security and integrity, as well as that of her family.
- Unconditionally release all people who have been arbitrarily detained for political reasons.
- Ensure that the freedoms of expression, association and peaceful assembly, as well as the right to participate in public affairs of the entire population are respected and protected, in accordance with international human rights standards. In particular, guarantee that human rights defenders, humanitarian workers, journalists, political opponents, as well as trade unionists can carry out their activities in conditions of safety and freedom without suffering harassment, threats, intimidation, surveillance or reprisals.
- Repeal laws that are used to criminalise civil society, such as the Law against Hatred for Peaceful Coexistence and Tolerance.
- Refrain from adopting any measure or law that may limit the exercise of the right to freedom of association or result in undue control over CSOs or interference in their activities, including the draft bill on Control, Regularisation, Action and Financing of Non-Governmental and Related Organisations.
- Take immediate steps to ensure that everyone can exercise the right to freedom of expression without interference and that any restrictions on the exercise of freedom of expression conform with the strict requirements of article 19.3 of the ICCPR.
- Strengthen guarantees for the impartial and independent operation of the National Telecommunications Commission and ensure transparency in the approval and renewal of licences, particularly for radio broadcasters.
- Conduct prompt, effective and impartial investigations into allegations of threats or violence against journalists, media workers and human rights defenders, bring the perpetrators to justice and provide victims with effective remedies, including reparations.
- Take immediate measures to ensure and protect the full autonomy, independence and impartiality of the judiciary and the Public Prosecution Office and guarantee that they are free to operate without undue pressure or interference from the executive or legislative branches.

TO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY:

- Call for urgent and immediate action to address human rights violations, including the freedoms of association, expression and peaceful assembly, particularly ahead of the 2024 presidential elections.
- Recognise the urgency in relation to the deterioration of civic space in Venezuela and take all available measures to respond.
- Take action to support human rights defenders in Venezuela and ensure their protection from harassment, intimidation and violence.
- Provide long-term and emergency funding support to CSOs.
- Urge the government of Venezuela to ensure that any legislative proposals comply with international human rights standards.
- Call on the Venezuelan government for the effective re-establishment of the UN Human Rights Office presence in the country.
- Support multilateral initiatives that ensure international scrutiny on Venezuela, particularly ahead of elections, and further accountability and justice under international law.