



1.5. Judicial system

The judiciary is organised into four tiers (courts of appeal, high tribunals, courts of first instance, and parish courts), which collectively handle civil and criminal matters.[206](#) In addition, specialised jurisdictions oversee civil, criminal, labour, tax and customs, administrative, juvenile, military, and agrarian cases.[207](#) The system is further complemented by justices of the peace, as well as the Prosecutor General's Office, the Ministry of Justice, and the Executive Office of the Magistracy, which supervises the lower courts.[208](#)

The judicial system is heavily influenced by the executive branch.[209](#) The Supreme Justice Tribunal (Tribunal Supremo de Justicia, TSJ) has been effectively captured and turned into an extension of executive power; most TSJ magistrates are members of the PSUV or former government officials.[210](#) In 2024, the TSJ appointed a new board of directors that included three judges who had previously run for elected office under the ruling PSUV before joining the judiciary.[211](#) Many government contracts are awarded through 'emergency procurement', a mechanism that allows officials to bypass open bidding.[212](#) Because the judiciary is described as 'heavily politicized', it often steps in to "'legalize"' unlawful or irregular practices.[213](#)

The Citizen's Corruption Observatory (OCC, Observatorio Ciudadano de Corrupción) reported that Venezuela's witness-protection law, revised in 2021, lacks clear definitions and procedures for safeguarding whistleblowers in corruption cases.[214](#) This leaves decisions to the discretion of the Public Prosecutor's Office, discouraging the reporting of corruption and often resulting in reprisals.[215](#) According to the OCC, the agencies responsible for implementing the witness-protection law are understaffed and provide only minimal and sporadic protection.[216](#) The Public Ministry has not published statistics since 2017 and has not provided additional information to supplement the few institutional reports it has released.[217](#)

Sources indicated that access to justice for victims of civil-rights violations is effectively non-existent.[218](#) The judicial system applies the law selectively, targeting opposition figures and dissidents while shielding government officials from accountability.[219](#) The government also uses the courts to criminalise dissent, employing fabricated charges against opposition leaders to neutralise political rivals rather than uphold justice.[220](#) A number of foreign nationals have been detained and accused of engaging in 'mercenary', 'terrorist', or 'destabilising' activities.[221](#) The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) of the Organization of American States (OAS) reported that the Venezuelan government intensified these detentions in 2025 and that they are carried out in order to later 'us[e] them as bargaining chips for Venezuelan citizens deprived of liberty abroad'.[222](#) Consular visits are routinely denied.[223](#)

Sources indicated that violations of due process are systematic.[224](#) Detentions were frequently carried out by unidentified individuals who provided neither arrest warrants nor reasons for the arrest, often using excessive force.[225](#) Those detained then faced legal proceedings and detention conditions marked by widespread abuses.[226](#) Hearings were held privately and conducted through digital platforms; detainees were unable to see, hear, or question the officers involved and were denied communication with public defenders before or during the proceedings.[227](#) Authorities routinely withheld information about detainees' whereabouts, and the criteria and timelines for their release remained unclear.[228](#)

The UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Venezuela (UNIFFMV) reported that investigations and judicial proceedings remain 'virtually paralyzed for years, with hearings repeatedly suspended due to the absence of defendants, frequent changes of judges, or delays in basic procedures'; most cases stall at the preliminary stage, leaving victims without an effective judicial response.[229](#) The UNIFFMV also found long gaps between procedural actions and cases dismissed by prosecutors without proper higher-level review, hindering evidence collection, essential procedures, and efforts to secure the appearance of alleged perpetrators.[230](#) Several detainees were photographed with incriminating items they did not possess at the time of arrest.[231](#) Following the 2024 elections, in the context of what observers described as 'indiscriminate' detentions of dissidents and protestors, detainees were sent to provisional detention centres where prosecutors opened cases based on real or fabricated criticism of the government using social-media posts or reports from 'cooperating patriots',[232](#) regime-affiliated groups, as evidence.[233](#) Authorities organised collective hearings involving up to 103 individuals and brought charges such as 'terrorism', 'incitement to hatred', and 'instigation to commit a crime'.[234](#)

Sources indicated that habeas corpus[235](#) is no longer an effective safeguard against violations, and that deliberate obstruction by justice officials has enabled these abuses.[236](#) Acceso a la Justicia reported that between 2021 and 2023, Venezuelan courts issued 207 rulings on habeas corpus applications: only one was granted, 118 were rejected, and the remaining 88 consisted of procedural actions that neither approved nor denied the request (such as declaring an application incomplete or requesting additional information).[237](#) The same source also noted that the Constitutional Chamber of the TSJ took more than six years to rule on the single granted application (filed in July 2017 and approved in December 2023) which concerned an individual arrested for homicide in 2010 and held in preventive detention ever since.[238](#)

Sources indicated that impunity remained a problem in Venezuela.[239](#) About 24.6 % of Venezuelans trust the justice system,[240](#) and adherence to the law is described as the exception rather than the rule.[241](#) The World Justice Project's (WJP) 2025 Rule of Law Index ranked Venezuela last out of 143 countries in overall adherence to the rule of law, and in the categories of 'constraints on government powers', 'regulatory enforcement', 'civil justice', and 'criminal justice'.[242](#)

Factors contributing to impunity include the absence of international-standard judicial procedures, deficiencies in evidence collection, reluctance to investigate serious human rights violations,[243](#) and a pattern in which investigations focus on the victims' prior political or personal activities rather than the perpetrators' intent.[244](#) The International Commission of

Jurists (ICJ) indicated that additional obstacles include lack of information on case status, insufficient resources, and high turnover among prosecutors.^{[245](#)} The US Department of State (USDOS) Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for Venezuela cited a 'general lack of transparency and technical criteria in the assignments of district attorneys to criminal investigations'.^{[246](#)}

Transparencia Venezuela reported that, since 2000, judicial dismissals have been highly discretionary, and the Supreme Court has ruled that provisional judges may be removed through a simple administrative order.^{[247](#)} According to the ICJ, cooperation between state security forces and investigators or prosecutors is 'problematic', as security agencies implicated in human rights violations often interfere with Public Ministry investigations.^{[248](#)} Corruption is also prevalent in the justice system to obtain favourable rulings or procedural benefits.^{[249](#)}

Transparencia Venezuela documented cases including the arrest of a prosecutor and two Public Defender's Office representatives for receiving 360 000 USD from a member of criminal organisation Tren de Aragua in exchange for procedural advantages, as well as the detention of judicial employees, including a judge, who allegedly attempted to collect 100 000 USD from a woman to expedite her case.^{[250](#)} Illegal charges at registry offices and notaries are also reported as common.^{[251](#)} For additional information on Tren de Aragua, see section [2.1.2 Megabandas](#).

International Crisis Group indicated that judicial reform aimed at ensuring independence and dismantling the repressive structures that sustained *chavismo* has seen no meaningful progress since Maduro's fall.^{[252](#)} On 19 February 2026, interim president Rodríguez reactivated a long-dormant 'reform commission', but it remains under the control of Interior Minister Diosdado Cabello, who has overseen it since its creation by Maduro in 2021.^{[253](#)}

In March 2026, the UNFFMV indicated that state institutions previously identified as central to repression remain unchanged and unreformed, including the judiciary, the Office of the Ombudsperson, the Office of the Public Prosecutor, and the Office of the Comptroller General.^{[254](#)} In a telephone interview, Víctor Amaya, Editor-in-Chief of Venezuelan news source Tal Cual, stated that justice-system reforms are frequently announced but do not result in substantive change, noting that 'everything is changed so that nothing changes'.^{[255](#)}

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