

Venezuelan Churches Feel Subtle Persecution

Venezuela has formed a major alliance and a significant trade relationship with Cuba since the election of President Hugo Chavez in 1999.

Chavez has described Cuba's dictator, Fidel Castro, as his mentor. As the warm relationship continues to intensify, it's bringing along with it a growing sense of concern for religious freedom.

Castro's attitude toward the church has been decidedly unfriendly. However, according to Voice of the Martyrs Canada, over the last year the government shifted away from higher profile forms of oppression to putting pressure on pastors and other Christian leaders.

The concern, says VOMC spokesman Greg Mussleman, is that because of the Chavez admiration for Cuba, Venezuela may be adopting a similar mindset and ideology. Mussleman spoke with Colonel Nelson Castro (unrelated to Fidel Castro), a Venezuelan church leader, about his concerns. Castro's first comment was, "The church in Venezuela in the past has been very active and has done a lot of evangelical campaigns."

Then, says Mussleman, came agreement. "We don't see the more demonstrative persecution—church buildings set on fire, or people thrown into prison—but more subtle kinds of persecution that causes people to compromise."

Many church leaders have gone along with the radical socialist government or kept a low profile to avoid problems, but it backfired. Mussleman goes on to say that the current scenario is proof of that. "What you're seeing is a situation where pastors have compromised, and Col. Castro is saying that this kind of persecution is intensifying for those who stand up and

preach the Gospel.”

Subtle persecution keeps governments under the radar of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. Rather than a direct hit, it’s a campaign of discouragement. “Where a lot of the pastors now are starting to stand up and speak the truth, they’re running into problems. Again, it’s subtle, where people are losing their jobs, their churches, or some buildings have been shut down. They won’t allow them to meet.”

Mussleman notes that on the face of the issue, it looks like there is freedom. “You can have Christian radio stations in Venezuela **if** you agree to some very strict regulations. One of those regulations is that you cannot speak out in any way against the government.”

However, that regulation can put a preacher afoul of the law. “Some of the teachings of Scripture, in our allegiance to Jesus Christ, would be seen as an affront to the government. So if you’re not close to the government and going along with what they’re saying, you won’t be granted a license to operate a radio station.”

The same is true for those trying to keep their churches above ground. However, says Mussleman, “If you’re not close to the government, or if you’re in any way seen as outside of their control, they won’t grant a license or permits to build new structures or renovate the existing structures.” As a result, many churches are going underground.

That’s good and bad news. Castro warns: “I firmly believe that there is going to be a law passed that will modify the way churches gather, and there will be a price to pay. I think that is what is ahead.”

Mussleman responds: “Pray that the church in Venezuela will mature. With persecution and the difficulty the church is facing, pray that the church will be strong, the leaders will

be strong, and they will be preparing their people in what the Bible says about persecution and difficulty."

The time for compromise is over. Castro says, "Preaching the gospel will always bring consequences, but we have to continue to preach Christ as Jesus as our King, no matter what that brings."