

VENEZUELA

Indigenous Peoples

Activity: 1972-2020

General notes

- Venezuela's Indigenous Peoples refers to around 51 groups mainly living in the southern state of Amazonas and in the western state of Zulia. According to the 2011 census, there are 725,128 indigenous people living in Venezuela. This means that about 2.7 per cent of the population belongs to indigenous groups which, among others, include the Wayuú, Yekuana, Anu, Yanomami, Warao, Karina, Pemon, Bari and Yukpa (Minority Rights Group International). Only four of these groups have more than 10,000 members (Minorities at Risk).

Movement start and end dates

- In the early 1970s indigenous groups started to mobilize. In 1972 meetings and conferences took place and they started the process of setting up indigenous organizations in different parts of the country (Laboratorio de Paz, 2014: 4). The first indigenous organization was the Indigenous Federation of Bolivar (FIB), founded in 1973 (Van Cott, 2011b: 5; Laboratorio de Paz, 2014: 5). These organizations made a number of claims, ranging from the socio-economic over the cultural to the political, including "self-determination" and local control of natural resources (Laboratorio de Paz, 2014: 5). We thus code 1972 as the start date.
- Initially, mobilization was confined to the regional level. In 1989 the first national indigenous organization (Consejo Nacional Indio de Venezuela, CONIVE) was founded. Apart from political participation (proportional representation, ethnic quotas), land rights and protection of indigenous culture, CONIVE also claims "politico-territorial autonomy" (Van Cott, 2001a) and has "focused on greater implementation of their constitutional rights of self-determination by strengthening economic and political autonomy" (Minorities at Risk). The claim for autonomy is confirmed by the Minorities at Risk Project, which codes the indigenous peoples in Venezuela with SEPX=3, indicating an active self-determination movement. In 1992, the Amazonian region – formerly a Federal Territory – became an "independent" state with a 43% indigenous population – the largest proportion of any state (Van Cott, 2001b: 6).
- The movement is ongoing. Minorities at Risk, for instance, notes that "[I]and disputes still exist" despite a generally more accommodative stance of the Venezuelan government since the 1990s. MAR furthermore notes that "[i]n recent years, indigenous groups have focused on greater implementation of their constitutional rights of self-determination by strengthening economic and political autonomy." CONIVE has remained active in its defense of indigenous rights as a political party, and has won seats in the national parliamentary elections of 2010 and 2018 (Gutiérrez, 2018). [start date: 1972; end date: ongoing]

Dominant claim

- The Indigenous Federation of Bolivar (FIB), the first indigenous organization in Venezuela, made a number of claims, ranging from the socio-economic over the cultural to the political, including "self-determination" and local control of natural resources (Laboratorio de Paz, 2014: 5). The Consejo Nacional Indio de Venezuela (CONIVE), which was formed in 1989 as the first national indigenous organization, also demanded "greater implementation of their constitutional rights of self-determination by strengthening economic and political autonomy" (Minorities at Risk Project). Furthermore, CONIVE advocates more political participation (proportional representation, ethnic quotas), land rights and protection of indigenous culture (Van Cott, 2001a).

Additional evidence for a claim for autonomy is provided by Minorities at Risk Project, which notes that “[i]n recent years, indigenous groups have focused on greater implementation of their constitutional rights of self-determination by strengthening economic and political autonomy.” There is no evidence of claim that goes beyond autonomy, which is why we code it as the dominant claim throughout. [1972-2020: autonomy claim]

Independence claims

NA

Irredentist claims

NA

Claimed territory

- We were unable to find a specific definition of the territory to which the movement’s demands are tied. We therefore flag this territorial claim as ambiguous and code it based on the group’s ethnic settlement area as indicated by the GeoEPR dataset, which offers the best available approximation in this case.

Sovereignty declarations

NA

Separatist armed conflict

- We found no evidence for separatist violence above the LVIOLSD threshold, thus the entire movement is coded as NVIOLSD. Note: Laboratorio de Paz (2014: 6) reports two Guaranis being killed by army troops in 1993. Furthermore, Minority Rights Group International claims that conflicts over land between indigenous communities and ranchers and miners often lead to outbreaks of violence, sometimes involving the military. These outbreaks are however unlikely to meet the threshold for LVIOLSD. Finally, seven people were killed during a violent encounter between indigenous groups and security forces in February 2019 (U.S. State Department, 2019), but this episode again fails to meet our threshold for LVIOLSD. [NVIOLSD]

Historical context

- Prior to the Spanish conquest in 1498, the indigenous peoples of Venezuela were divided into a diverse array of settled, nomadic and semi-nomadic groups. Traditionally warlike, they fiercely resisted the Conquistadors and were forced into the Venezuelan interior where they were largely left alone except for some missionary efforts. The system of communally held reserved land (resguardos) during the Spanish colonial regime was largely destroyed after Venezuela gained independence in 1811 (Minorities at Risk Project; Minority Rights Group International).
- Although there has been increasing contact with Venezuelan mestizos and some whites in the last half a century, several groups (especially the Yanomami) have limited contact with mestizo/white Venezuelans up to this day (Minorities at Risk Project).
- According to Van Cott (2001b), the 1947 constitution enshrined indigenous cultural and property rights. However, these rights were omitted in the 1961 constitution and indigenous rights were only referred to in Article 77, where it stated that “the state will promote the improved living

conditions of the peasant population” and that “the law will establish a regime of exception that requires the protection of the indigenous communities and their progressive incorporation in the life of the Nation” (Van Cott, 2001b: 4).

- We found no concessions or restrictions in the 10 years before the first year we cover.

Concessions and restrictions

- In 1992, the Amazonian region – formerly a Federal Territory – formally became a Venezuelan state. The Amazonian state has a 43% indigenous population – the largest proportion of any state in the country (Van Cott, 2005). According to Laboratorio de Paz (2014: 6), the high concentration of indigenous peoples did not immediately result in increased participation in the regional political process, as “mechanisms were established to avoid the participation of them in the discussion, which resulted in a territorial division that did not correspond with the geographical and cultural distribution of the communities themselves.” Indeed, only until the regional elections of 2000 was an indigenous representative elected Governor (the candidate won the elections in 2006 and 2012, thus the new state has remained in indigenous hands ever since). Nonetheless, the creation of an indigenous state appears to have given the local indigenous people increased stakes in regional affairs: the Regional Organization of Indigenous Peoples of Amazonas (ORPIA), who was opposed to a new Constitution for the Amazonas state, managed to “successfully insert unprecedented recognition and rights in the 1993 Amazonas constitution, including recognition of the state as multiethnic and pluricultural” (Van Cott, 2005: 184). Since there is no evidence of a substantive improvement in the exercise of indigenous peoples’ rights as a result of this recognition, we do not code this episode as an autonomy concession.
- After being elected in 1998, Hugo Chávez initiated a process of reform for the Constitution of Venezuela. The 1961 Constitution had omitted indigenous cultural and property rights and only referred to indigenous rights in Article 77, where it stated that “the state will promote the improved living conditions of the peasant population” and that “the law will establish a regime of exception that requires the protection of the indigenous communities and their progressive incorporation in the life of the Nation” (Van Cott, 2001b: 4). The new constitution, adopted in 1999, included eight different articles on the topic of indigenous peoples’ rights. It gave indigenous populations a series of rights such as a quota system for local, regional and national parliaments, collective land rights, three seats in the National Congress, access to basic public services, and the co-management of natural resources in indigenous territories (Minority Rights Group International). Furthermore, indigenous languages were recognized in the Constitution as official languages within their respective territories. According to Van Cott (2001a: 44), the new constitution formally recognized a federal system and indigenous autonomy as indigenous authorities were granted the right “to exercise public administrative functions and manage state resources in a manner comparable to other subnational, autonomous units of government”. This view is confirmed by Bello (2011, cited in Laboratorio de Paz 2014: 8), who sees the new constitution as “one of the most broad and extensive [with regard to] indigenous rights in Latin America”. [1999: cultural rights & autonomy concession]
- In 2007, the Ministry of Popular Power for Indigenous Peoples was established to represent the interests of indigenous populations within the Venezuelan government. However, Minority Rights Group International reports that the Ministry has done little to advance the rights and improve the lives of indigenous people, and as such we do not code the Ministry’s creation as a concession.
- Since 2015, the Venezuelan government has stepped up the exploitation of natural resources in territories claimed and inhabited by indigenous people. This has been possible because of the slow and uneven implementation of indigenous land demarcations, making indigenous homelands vulnerable to encroachment by state-controlled coal and oil companies, as well as ranchers and loggers (U.S. State Department, 2019; Minority Rights Group International; IWGIA, 2022). Despite official recognition of the indigenous right to be consulted on development projects on their land, these consultations are rarely held in practice (Minority Rights Group International). In a highly mediatic episode in 2015, President Nicolás Maduro authorized the army to begin coal and mineral exploitation in Wayuu territory in Zulia, though he was later forced to reduce the

amount of land affected following mass indigenous protests against the project (Minority Rights Group International). Similar events occurred in subsequent years. In particular, the implementation of the *Arco Minero Orinoco* mining project since 2017 has significantly eroded the land rights of indigenous people in the Bolívar department (IWGIA, 2022). We code a restriction in 2015, when the further erosion of land rights appears to have begun. [2015: autonomy restriction]

- The government created the Institute of Indigenous Languages in 2015 to promote the use of native languages throughout Venezuela and multilingual education. We code a concession, though it should be noted that Minority Rights Group International reports that the Institute has been largely unsuccessful as only one in ten indigenous Venezuelans today speak a second language other than Spanish. [2015: cultural rights concession]
- In 2016, President Maduro granted land titles to the Chaima, Pumé and Carinha groups, recognizing their claims over 700,000 hectares of land in the largest recognition of indigenous land to date (Telesur, 2016). [2016: autonomy concession]
- In May 2017, the indigenous governor of Amazonas state was banned from office for opposing Maduro's government. In the subsequent regional elections, he was replaced by a non-indigenous member of Maduro's party (López 2017). As only 43% of Amazonas state's population is indigenous, the installation of a non-indigenous governor is hard to see as a revocation of autonomy.

Regional autonomy

- The 1999 constitution granted the indigenous peoples regional autonomy (see above). EPR codes autonomy from 2000 as a result. In agreement with this, Colmenares Olívar (2006) suggests that the 1999 constitution gave indigenous peoples a meaningful level of autonomy, though he also notes problems in the implementation of indigenous autonomy such as the uneven and slow process of land demarcation. Following the first of January rule, we code the indigenous peoples as regionally autonomous as of 2000.
- Another reason to code autonomy is the creation of Amazonas state in 1992. 43% of Amazonas state's population is indigenous. The state was led by an indigenous governor between 2000 and 2017. EPR stops coding the indigenous peoples as autonomous from 2017 due to the above-mentioned removal from office of the indigenous governor of Amazonas state and his replacement with a non-indigenous member of the regime's party (see above). However, indigenous peoples continued to have autonomy below the state level ("indigenous autonomy"). [2000-2020: regional autonomy]

De facto independence

NA

Major territorial changes

- [1999: establishment of regional autonomy]

EPR2SDM

<i>Movement</i>	Indigenous Peoples
<i>Scenario</i>	No match/1:1
<i>EPR group(s)</i>	Indigenous peoples
<i>Gwgroupid(s)</i>	10103000

Power access

- We adopt data from EPR. Venezuela's indigenous peoples are coded as irrelevant in 1972 (though not in all subsequent years). We apply the 1973 codes as there were no major differences. [1972-2020: powerless]

Group size

- We adopt data from EPR. [1972-2020: 0.027]

Regional concentration

- Venezuela's Indigenous Peoples mainly live in the southern state of Amazonas and in the western state of Zulia. However, there are also settlements on the coast bordering Guyana. Minority Rights Group International also describes the settlement of the various indigenous groups as dispersed. MAR does not code a regional base. In sum, this suggests that the threshold for territorial concentration is not met. [not concentrated]

Kin

- EPR notes the following kin groups: Indigenous peoples in Brazil, Guyana, and Colombia. Further evidence comes from the Minorities at Risk data which codes "close kindred across a border" listing the Wayuu and the Guahibo in Colombia. [kin in neighboring country]

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Zulians

Activity: 2000-2018

General notes

- Zulia is one of Venezuela's states, located in Venezuela's north-west. Zulia has considerable oil wealth and is one of the areas where opposition against Chavez's leftist regime was strongest.

Movement start and end dates

- Zulia was incorporated into colonial Venezuela in 1777 (Minahan, 2002: 2110). Zulian leaders advocated a separate Zulian entity already under colonial rule. According to Minahan (2002: 2110), "[a] Zulian leader, José Domingo de Rus, attempted to persuade the Spanish authorities to form a separate captaincy-general of Maracaibo [the capital of Zulia], which would include parts of modern Venezuela and Colombia." Furthermore, "[t]he first attempt to form an independent Zulian republic began with a revolt against the Spanish authorities during the Venezuelan war of independence. On 28 January 1821, Zulian leaders in Maracaibo declared the region free and independent of the Spanish government and created a democratic, sovereign republic." The self-declared Zulian republic opted for inclusion in the new Venezuelan state in 1830. Other parts of the Zulian homeland were merged with Colombia.
- Minahan (2002: 2111) reports two more secessionist attempts in the context of the Federal War (1858-1863) and another in 1916 after the discovery of oil in 1912-1913. According to Minahan (2002: 2111) separatist sentiment continued throughout the 1920s and 1930s. He notes that the threat of secession was often used to elicit concessions from Caracas.
- In the 1940s and 1950s, Zulia's autonomy was eroded by two centralizing governments (Minahan 2002: 2112). Minahan (2002: 2112) reports that Zulian identity was rediscovered in the 1970s and that nationalist feelings rose in the 1990s, but does not offer evidence of any organized separatist activity for any of these claims.
- The 1999 Venezuelan Constitution pushed for by Hugo Chavez eroded provincial autonomy. Furthermore Chavez proposed to include Zulia in a new, expanded Falcón (another Venezuelan state), but this proposal was not implemented. Under Chavez, a Zulian autonomy movement evolved. Petras (2009: 122), for instance, reports that "[t]he success of the secessionist regional ruling class in Bolivia has encouraged similar "autonomy movements" in Ecuador and Venezuela, led by the mayor of Guayaquil (Ecuador) and Governor of Zulia (Venezuela)." El Universal (2006) reports an autonomy proposal by the Zulian state. Suggett (2008) reports that Zulia's state legislature proposed an autonomy regime in 2008, inspired by the unilateral autonomy referendums in Bolivia's media luna, another oil-rich region opposed to a left-wing regime. The autonomy movement met the strong opposition of the Chavez regime, which depicted it as an attempt to destabilize the country (US Cable, 2006). Suggett mentions a number of "autonomy advocacy groups", including *Rumbo Propio para Zulia* (Own Path for Zulia) and also notes that Zulia's governor, Manuel Rosales, is a strong advocate of regional autonomy.
- We could not establish Rumbo Propio's date of formation. A 2006 US cable reports about Rumbo Propio and mentions it promoted a campaign for a referendum on autonomy, but notes that the group "seems to have come out of nowhere" and goes as far as suggesting that it is an invention by the Chavez regime to win political support. However, it does not appear that Rumbo Propio was an invention by Chavez, and we found evidence of other Zulian autonomist organizations, including *Pais Zuliano* (Zulian Country). Pais Zuliano's date of formation is also unclear, but they formed a Yahoo group in 2000. Writing in 2002, Minahan (2002: 2113) notes a small but growing nationalist movement that wants increased autonomy and in particular greater control over Zulia's oil. Based on this, we code the start date in 2000, the earliest evidence we found, which appears to make sense as well because as noted above a primary motive for the autonomist aspirations was opposition against Chavez, who had become president in 1999.

- The activities of Rumbo Propio and País Zuliano appear to have ceased after 2008. The last evidence of a separatist claim we found was in May 2008 (Suggett, 2008). Manuel Rosales, an advocate of autonomy and former governor of Zulia state, went into Peruvian exile in 2009. In a 2022 blog post, a former member of Rumbo Propio claims that “our call [for self-determination] unfortunately fell through” (Chacón, 2022). As we did not find clear evidence as to when the movement ended, we apply the “ten years of inactivity rule” and code the movement’s end date in 2018. [start date: 2000; end date: 2018]

Dominant claim

- After Hugo Chavez promoted the 1999 constitution, which eroded provincial autonomy, the Zulians demanded more autonomy for the Zulia state. Manuel Rosales, who was elected governor of Zulia in 2000, supported this demand as well as the groups *Rumbo Propio Para Zulia* (Own Path for Zulia) and Pais Zuliano. [2000-2018: autonomy claim]

Independence claims

NA

Irredentist claims

NA

Claimed territory

- The territory claimed by the Zulians consists of the current state Zulia in northwest Venezuela. We code this claim based on the Global Administrative Areas database.

Sovereignty declarations

NA

Separatist armed conflict

- We found no evidence of separatist violence, thus the entire movement is coded as NVIOLSD. [NVIOLSD]

Historical context

- Zulians have a long history of autonomy and self-sufficiency. According to Minahan (2002: 2110), “[t]he first attempt to form an independent Zulian republic began with a revolt against the Spanish authorities during the Venezuelan war of independence. On 28 January 1821, Zulian leaders in Maracaibo declared the region free and independent of the Spanish government and created a democratic, sovereign republic.” The self-declared Zulian republic survived until 1830, when Zulians opted for inclusion into the new Venezuelan state (Minahan, 2016: 478). Minahan (2016: 478) also notes an attempt at Zulian secession in the context of the Federal War (1858-1863), which led to the unfulfilled promise of an independent Zulia in 1863 and again in 1869.

- During the 20th century, Zulia's autonomy was gradually undermined. In the 1940s and 1950s, two highly centralized governments stripped Zulians from their historic rights, including much of their administrative autonomy (Minahan, 2016: 478; Salas, 2015).
- The 1999 Constitution, pushed by the newly-elected President Hugo Chávez, recognized the autonomous nature of all Venezuelan states and highlighted that Venezuela was a decentralized state. In practice, however, provincial autonomy was further eroded, given that many administrative competencies, including financial and democratic, were transferred to the central government (Matheus Inciarte et al., 2005). [1999: autonomy restriction]

Concessions and restrictions

- In 2006, President Chavez accused Rumbo Propio of working hand in hand with the governor of Zulia Manuel Rosales and the US to hold a referendum on Zulia's secession from Venezuela. Chavez himself threatened Rosales – a strong advocate of regional autonomy – with jail time while the office of the attorney general opened an investigation into Rumbo Propio, both on the suspicion of treason (US cable, 2006). Note that in 2008, Rosales was charged with corruption and granted political asylum in Peru (Carroll, 2009). This is not a restriction as defined in the codebook, though.
- In 2008, too, state legislators from Zulia put forward a project to increase Zulian autonomy, inspired by the unilateral autonomy referendums in Bolivia's Media Luna region. The proposal received significant backlash from the Chavez regime, which claimed that it was a US-led attempt to divide the country and take control of the region's oil reserves (Suggett, 2008). Again, this is not a restriction as defined in the codebook.

Regional autonomy

- While Venezuela is officially a federal state, the extent of regional autonomy is too limited for us to code regional autonomy (see above).

De facto independence

NA

Major territorial changes

NA

EPR2SDM

<i>Movement</i>	Zulians
<i>Scenario</i>	n:1
<i>EPR group(s)</i>	Whites/mestizos
<i>Gwgroupid(s)</i>	10101000

Power access

- Zulia is a state in Venezuela, so the Zulian movement is best seen as regionalist. According to Minahan (2002: 2109), the Zulians are "a Latin people, a mixture of early indigenous peoples, later Spanish colonists, African slaves, and other European migrants of the twentieth century." In

EPR2SDM terms, this movement is best seen as a regionalist movement of the EPR group "Whites/mestizos" (the indigenous peoples are separately coded and according to EPR there are few Blacks in Zulia).

- Whites/mestizos are coded as “dominant” by EPR throughout 2000-2018; however, the Zulians make up only a minority of that group.
- Opposition against Chávez has been particularly strong in the state of Zulia. Therefore, it is unsurprising that we found no evidence of Zulians reaching a prominent position of power within the Venezuelan executive during the Chávez regime. [2000-2018: powerless]

Group size

- According to Minahan (2002: 2108), there are around 4.4 mio Zulians. Minahan says that a significant number of Zulians are located in Colombia’s province of Norte de Santander in addition to the Zulia region in Venezuela. Unfortunately, Minahan does not provide a break-up by countries; however Minahan suggests that the number of Zulians in Colombia is smaller than that of Zulians in Venezuela. Based on the total population of these regions, we estimate that Zulians in Colombia make up ca. 25% of all Zulians and accordingly estimate that the Zulian population in Venezuela in 2002 was 3-3.3 milo. According to the WB, Venezuela's population was 25.33 mio in 2002. [0.1244]

Regional concentration

- Minahan (2002: 2108) suggests that Zulians made up approx 85% of Zulia’s population in 2002 and that well above 50% of all Zulians live in the region. [regionally concentrated]

Kin

- The above account (see group size) suggests that there are ca. 1 million Zulians in Colombia. [kin in adjacent country]

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