

CUBA 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and prohibits discrimination based on religion. The government and the Cuban Communist Party monitored religious groups through the Office of Religious Affairs (ORA) in the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) and continued to control most aspects of religious life. Observers noted that the government harassed some religious leaders and their followers, with reports of threats, detentions, and violence. Evangelical and other Protestant religious leaders reported the government threatened to expropriate some religious properties under zoning laws passed in 2015 but took no action during the year. Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) reported in a January publication that there was an increase in government threats to close churches from 2014 to 2015. The majority was related to government threats to close churches belonging to Assemblies of God congregations, but the Assemblies of God and the government were able to reach an agreement which enabled the churches to stay open. Religious groups reported a continued increase in the ability of their members to conduct charitable and educational projects, such as operating before and after school and community service programs, assisting with care of the elderly, and maintaining small libraries of religious materials. Multiple high-level leaders from Catholic, Protestant, and minority religious groups agreed the religious freedom environment had improved compared to past years.

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

U.S. embassy officials met with officials from the ORA to discuss the registration process for religious organizations and inquire about the rights of nonregistered groups to practice their religion. Embassy officials also met with the head of the Council of Cuban Churches (CCC), an officially recognized organization that has close ties to the government and comprises most Protestant groups, to discuss their operations and programs. The Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom and the Special Representative for Religion and Global Affairs met with leaders of Catholic, Protestant, and minority religious groups to discuss the religious freedom environment in the country. The embassy remained in close contact with religious groups, including facilitating exchanges between visiting religious delegations and religious groups in the country. In public statements, the U.S. government called upon the government to respect the fundamental freedoms of its citizens, including the freedom of religion.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 11.2 million (July 2016 estimate). There is no independent, authoritative source on the overall size or composition of religious groups. The Roman Catholic Church estimates 60 to 70 percent of the population identify as Catholic. Membership in Protestant churches is estimated at 5 percent of the population. Pentecostals and Baptists are likely the largest Protestant denominations. The Assemblies of God reports approximately 110,000 members and the Four Baptist Conventions estimate their combined membership at more than 100,000 members. Jehovah's Witnesses estimate their members at 96,000; Methodists at 36,000; Seventh-day Adventists at 35,000; Anglicans, 22,500; Presbyterians, 15,500; Episcopalians, 6,000; Quakers, 300; and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), 100. The Jewish community estimates it has 1,500 members, of whom 1,200 reside in Havana. According to the Islamic League, there are 2,000 to 3,000 Muslims residing in the country, of whom an estimated 1,500 are Cubans. Other religious groups include Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Buddhists, and Bahais.

Many individuals, particularly in the African Cuban community, practice religions with roots in West Africa and the Congo River Basin, known collectively as Santeria. These religious practices are commonly intermingled with Catholicism, and some require Catholic baptism for full initiation, making it difficult to estimate accurately their total membership.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

According to the constitution, "the state recognizes, respects, and guarantees freedom of religion" and states "different beliefs and religions enjoy the same considerations under the law." The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion. It also declares the country to be secular and provides for the separation of church and state, but says "the Communist Party of Cuba ...is the superior leading force of the society and the State..."

The MOJ, which includes the ORA, regulates religious institutions and the practice of religion.

By law, religious groups are required to apply to the MOJ for official recognition. The application process requires religious groups to identify the location of their

activities, their proposed leadership, and the source of their funding. Once the ministry grants official recognition, the religious group must request permission from the ORA to conduct activities such as holding meetings in approved locations, publishing major decisions from meetings, receiving foreign visitors, importing religious literature, purchasing and operating motor vehicles, and constructing, repairing, or purchasing places of worship. Groups that fail to register may face penalties ranging from fines to closure of their organizations.

Military service is mandatory for all men. For religious groups that actively oppose military participation, there are no legal provisions exempting their members as conscientious objectors; in practice, the authorities allow conscientious objectors to perform alternative service.

The country is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

Religious and human rights groups stated that the government harassed and detained outspoken religious figures, especially those who discussed human rights or collaborated with independent human rights groups. Government security forces took measures, including detentions that were sometimes accompanied by violence, which inhibited the ability of members of the peaceful protest group Ladies in White to attend Catholic Mass. According to a researcher for the charity Open Doors, Christians were harassed and subject to strict surveillance and discrimination, including occasional imprisonment of leaders. The researcher added that “all believers are monitored and all church services are infiltrated by informers.” Some independent evangelical Christian churches said government authorities closely monitored and detained, for unspecified periods of time, their leadership and members of their families. CSW reported that Baptist pastor Reverend Mario Felix Leonart Barroso was arrested on March 20 and his wife was put under house arrest. CSW reported Leonart Barroso was denied food, water, and necessary medical care while in detention and that the phone lines to his house were cut.

CSW published a report in January that stated there was an increase in what it termed violations of freedom of religion and belief from 220 in 2014 to 2,300 in 2015. The report stated that the majority of the incidents involved the government declaring illegal more than 2,000 Assemblies of God churches, the forced closure or dismantling of Assemblies of God churches, and the expropriation of church

properties from various Christian denominations. The report also stated there were numerous detentions, many involving individuals who were forcibly removed from Sunday worship services. The leadership of the Assemblies of God said in September that the Church had reached an oral agreement with the government to keep its churches open and that the forced closure of churches had ceased.

Morning Star News, a Christian news agency, reported the sentencing of Pastor Juan Carlos Nunez to house arrest for one year for “disturbing the peace.” His case was under appeal at year’s end. According to Nunez, his neighbors complained that his speakers were too large and loud during his Sunday sermons. He stated he reduced the size of the speakers, but neighbors and police said the volume was still too loud. Nunez’s church was part of the apostolic movement, an unregistered network of Protestant churches. The authorities dismantled the church structure, which was located on his private property, on January 8 and the 550 members had to meet in the courtyard of the house since that time. The report stated Nunez was sentenced before his attorney had adequate time to defend him.

CSW reported the dismantling of an Apostolic Church in Las Tunas on April 9. The church’s pastor, Reverend Mario Jorge Travieso, stated he was detained by authorities during the dismantling process and threatened with seven years’ imprisonment if he spoke publicly about the incident.

In January the government dismantled at least two other open-air structures that members of the evangelical apostolic movement used as unregistered churches.

Many religious leaders stated they stayed away from overtly political topics. Some said they feared their direct or indirect criticism of the government could result in government reprisals, such as denials of permits from the ORA, dismantling of religious buildings, or other measures that could limit the growth of their religious groups.

The ORA allowed the use of private homes, known as “house churches,” for religious services but required that applicant groups be recognized and seek approval for each proposed location through the formal registration process. Many religious groups used private homes as house churches in response to restrictions on constructing new buildings. Estimates of the total number of house churches for Protestant groups varied significantly, from fewer than 2,000 to as many as 10,000. Religious groups said authorities approved many applications within two to three years from the date of the application, but did not respond to or denied other applications arbitrarily.

According to the Protestant community, some groups were only able to register a small percentage of house churches. In practice, most unregistered house churches reportedly operated with little or no interference from the government. A number of religious groups, including the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons, continued to wait for a decision from the MOJ on pending applications for official recognition, some dating as far back as 1994. These groups reported the authorities permitted them to conduct religious activities, hold meetings, receive foreign visitors, make substantial renovations to their facilities, and send representatives abroad. They also reported that state security monitored their movements, telephone calls, visitors, and religious meetings.

The government reportedly interpreted the law on association as a means for the MOJ to deny the registration of certain religious groups. If it decided that a group was duplicating the activities of another, it denied recognition. In some cases, the MOJ delayed the request for registration or cited changing laws as a reason why a request had not been approved.

Both the Catholic Church and the CCC reported they were able to conduct religious services in prisons and detention centers in some provinces. The Protestant seminary in Matanzas and churches in Pinar del Rio continued to train chaplains and laypersons to provide religious counseling for prison inmates and to provide support for their families. In November the CCC opened a training facility at which they offered courses on chaplain work as well as courses on caring for sacred religious objects, gender and women's issues, and seminars for international students. The CCC stated it had an agreement with the Ministry of Interior that allowed it to operate a nationwide prison chaplain system.

Religious groups reported their leaders continued to travel abroad to participate in two-way exchanges between local faith-based communities and those in other countries. The majority of religious groups continued to report improvement in their ability to attract new members without government interference, and a reduction in interference from the government in conducting their services.

The ORA continued to require a license to import religious literature and other religious materials. The government owned nearly all printing equipment and supplies and regulated printed materials, including religious literature, although some religious leaders said they had received permission to print religious materials on their own presses. The CCC reported it received permission to import

\$300,000 worth of new high-tech printers that it would use to augment its established press capability.

World Watch Monitor, an international web-based Christian news outlet, reported a local Christian pastor saying that Christian literature was only rarely available and that the government considered such literature a threat. Other religious leaders reported few restrictions in their ability to import religious materials and donated goods. Several groups were successful in importing large quantities of Bibles, books, clothing, and other donated goods, although the importation of computers and electronic devices was reportedly much more difficult. The Catholic Church and Protestant religious groups were able to maintain small libraries, print periodicals and other information, and operate their own websites with little or no formal censorship. The Catholic Church continued to publish periodicals and hold regular forums at the Varela Center that sometimes criticized official social and economic policies.

In November the archbishop publicly requested the government to allow the Church to reopen religious schools and have open access to broadcast on television and radio. The Church had been limited to broadcasts of Christmas and Easter messages on state-run radio stations. The ORA authorized the CCC to host a monthly radio broadcast, which allowed the council's messages to be heard throughout the country. No other churches had access to media, all of which were owned by the state. Several religious leaders protested the restriction on broadcasting religious services over the radio or on TV. Church leaders said that a lack of access to media platforms hindered their ability to promote their faiths.

A government decree in 2015 granted government officials the power to expropriate property under new zoning restrictions and to change the status of the churches to rent paying tenants. Some religious leaders reported the government attempted to stop or limit activity by threatening to expropriate property. Members of the Assemblies of God requested the government pass reforms to the law on association that would validate and legalize the property the church owned, as well as allow the church to build new temples. The ORA stated in November that the law was being revised, although it did not provide a timeline for when the revisions would be finalized.

Several religious leaders stated the ORA granted new permits to repair or restore existing buildings, allowing the expansion of some structures and in some cases the construction of essentially new buildings on the foundations of the old. Some leaders stated the government would regularly grant permits to buy properties to be

used as house churches and in some cases would do so even if the titleholder to the property did not plan to live there. Other religious groups stated securing permission for the purchase or construction of new buildings remained difficult, if not impossible.

Several religious leaders, particularly those from smaller, independent house churches or Santeria communities, expressed concern the government was less tolerant of groups that relied on informal locations, including house churches and private meeting spaces, to practice their beliefs. They reported being monitored, and at times being prevented from holding religious meetings in their spaces.

With the exception of established seminaries and interfaith training centers, the government continued to prevent religious groups from establishing accredited schools. Although not specifically allowed or accredited, the government did not interfere with the efforts of some religious groups to operate before- and after-school programs and eldercare programs, weekend retreats, workshops for primary and secondary students, and higher education programs. The Catholic Church offered coursework that led to a bachelor's and master's degree through foreign partners, and several Protestant communities offered bachelor's or master's degrees in theology, the humanities, and related subjects via distance learning.

Leaders of the Jehovah's Witnesses encouraged members to avoid university education in the country, finding the requirements for university admission and the course of study incompatible with the group's beliefs prohibiting political involvement. Jehovah's Witnesses specifically objected, based on incompatibility with their beliefs, to the expectation that students participate in political activities in support of the government and the requirement they be available for assignment to government duties for three years after graduation. By avoiding universities and corresponding political activities, Jehovah's Witnesses were ineligible for some professional careers.

Church leaders reported the government continued an unofficial practice of allowing civilian public service to substitute for mandatory military service for those who objected on religious grounds. Church leaders submitted official letters to a military committee, which then decided whether to grant these exemptions. Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-day Adventist leaders stated their members generally were permitted to perform social service in lieu of military service.

Some religious leaders reported restrictions on their ability to receive donations from overseas. They cited a measure that prohibited churches and religious groups

from using individuals' bank accounts for their organizations, and required existing individual accounts used in this way to be consolidated into one per denomination or organization. According to these religious leaders, the regulations allowed the government to curb the scope and number of activities of individual churches and to single out groups that could be held accountable for withdrawing money intended for purposes not approved by the government.

Religious groups continued to report they were able to engage in community service programs, including assisting the elderly, providing potable water to small towns, growing and selling fruits and vegetables at below-market prices, and establishing health clinics. International faith-based charitable operations, such as Caritas, Sant'Egidio, and the Salvation Army maintained local offices in Havana.

The Director of the ORA stated that the government considered religious communities to be important partners, including in the process of what she said was perfecting the country's economic and social models. She acknowledged some of the challenges that certain religious groups have had in gaining recognition, and said the government is in the process of updating its registration process.

Multiple high-level Catholic, Protestant, and minority religious leaders agreed that the religious freedom environment had improved compared to past years.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officers met with officials in the ORA and the head of the Council of Cuban Churches. U.S. officials raised concerns about the ability of unregistered churches to gain official status, as well as the rights these unregistered churches have to practice their religion. ORA officials met with the U.S. Special Representative for Religion and Global Affairs, the first ever meeting between the U.S. government and the ORA. The ORA officials welcomed increased engagement with U.S. religious groups and U.S. government counterparts.

In a July meeting led by the Special Representative for Religion and Global Affairs, multiple high-level Catholic, Protestant, and minority religious leaders discussed the current state of religious freedom in the country. The Ambassador at

Large for International Religious Freedom met with Baptist and independent church leaders in October.

In public statements, the U.S. government called upon the government to respect fundamental freedoms of its citizens, including the freedom of religion.

Embassy officers met frequently with a wide range of religious groups, including Protestants, Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslims, and Catholics, to discuss the principal issues of religious freedom and tolerance affecting each group. Religious groups noted a wide range of concerns, including those involving free assembly, church expansion, access to state-owned media, and the ability to open private religious schools. Embassy engagement with smaller religious groups under pressure from the government included an assessment of how the recent change in diplomatic relations affected these communities.

Embassy engagement included facilitating exchanges between visiting religious delegations and religious groups, including between visiting representatives of religious organizations from the United States and local institutions. Officials from the U.S. embassy met frequently with U.S. citizens visiting as part of faith-based exchanges and humanitarian aid programs and encouraged these faith-based representatives to engage directly with local faith-based institutions.