

CUBA 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The country's constitution contains written provisions for religious freedom and prohibitions against discrimination based on religious grounds. According to the religious freedom advocacy organization Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) and religious leaders, the Cuban Communist Party (CCP), through its Office of Religious Affairs (ORA) and the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), continued to control most aspects of religious life. CSW's annual report concluded the government "violated freedom of religion or belief routinely and systematically" through arbitrary detentions, false charges, threats, and harassment of religious leaders and religious freedom defenders. The report also noted that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the government confiscated food that some religious groups intended to provide to those in need, blocked overseas humanitarian aid, and threatened and charged religious leaders for "spreading disease." There were reports that authorities continued to subject leaders of Free Yorubas of Cuba to arbitrary detentions, threats, and verbal harassment. Media and religious freedom defenders reported the government continued to restrict the right of prisoners to practice religion freely, limit or block international and domestic travel, and harass and detain members of religious groups advocating for greater religious and political freedom, including Ladies in White leader Berta Soler Fernandez and Apostolic Church Pastor Alain Toledano. CSW reported 203 documented cases of freedom of religion violations, compared with 260 in 2019, attributing the decrease to the decision of the Ladies in White to halt their weekly attendance at Catholic Mass for seven months during the pandemic. On October 30, state security officers surrounded a church affiliated with Toledano in Santiago de Cuba and destroyed it; authorities arrested Toledano while he live streamed the destruction on Facebook. According to media, authorities temporarily detained Apostolic leader Yilber Durand Dominguez and Christian artist Jose Acebo Hidalgo when they resisted letting government officials into their homes during the COVID-19 quarantine. In March, authorities released homeschooling advocate Ayda Exposito after she served a sentence for "other acts against the normal development of a minor." Her husband, Reverend Ramon Rigal, was released in July. Media reported authorities threatened to deny the couple custody of their children if they resumed homeschooling. According to religious groups, the ORA and MOJ continued to deny official registration to certain groups, including to several Apostolic churches, or did not respond to long-pending applications, such as those for the Jehovah's Witnesses and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ). In April, a female convert to Islam told media she stopped

wearing a hijab after her government-run workplace forbade her from wearing it. In January, a member of the Jewish community in Nuevitas, Camaguey Municipality, said a local state prosecutor forced him to sign a document acknowledging that if his children came to school wearing kippahs, he and his wife would be arrested and charged with “acts against the normal development of a minor,” with a potential one-year prison sentence. According to CSW, many religious leaders continued to practice self-censorship because of government surveillance and infiltration of religious groups. A coalition of evangelical Protestant churches, Apostolic churches, and the Roman Catholic Church continued to press for legal changes, including easing registration of religious groups, ownership of church property, and new church construction.

Unlike in previous years, the Community of Sant’Egidio, recognized by the Catholic Church as a “Church public lay association,” was unable to hold an interfaith meeting due to COVID-19 restrictions. Some religious groups and organizations, such as the Catholic charity Caritas, however, continued to gather and distribute relief items, providing humanitarian assistance to individuals regardless of religious belief.

Due to lack of government responsiveness, U.S. embassy officials did not meet with or otherwise engage the ORA during the year. Embassy officials met regularly, both in person and virtually, with a range of religious groups, including Protestants, Jews, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Muslims, and Catholics, concerning the state of religious freedom and political activities related to religious groups’ beliefs. In public statements and on social media, U.S. government officials, including the Secretary of State, continued to call upon the government to respect the fundamental freedoms of its citizens, including the freedom of religion. On October 5, the Secretary stated, “Vast swathes of humanity live in countries where religious freedom is restricted, from places like...Cuba, and beyond.” Embassy officials remained in close contact with religious groups, including facilitating meetings between visiting civil society delegations and religious groups in the country.

On December 2, 2020, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State again placed Cuba on the Special Watch List for having engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 11.1 million (midyear 2020 estimate). There is no independent, authoritative source on the overall size or composition of religious groups. The Catholic Church estimates 60 percent of the population identifies as Catholic. Membership in Protestant churches is estimated at 5 percent. According to some observers, Pentecostals and Baptists are likely the largest Protestant denominations. The Assemblies of God reports approximately 150,000 members; the four Baptist conventions estimate their combined membership at more than 100,000.

Jehovah's Witnesses estimate their members at 96,000; Methodists 50,000; Seventh-day Adventists 36,000; Presbyterians 25,000; Anglicans 22,500; Episcopalians 10,000; Anabaptists 4,387 (mostly Iglesia de Los Hermanos en Cristo, the Brethren of Christ), Quakers 1,000; Moravians 750; and the Church of Jesus Christ 357 members. There are approximately 4,000 followers of 50 Apostolic churches (an unregistered loosely affiliated network of Protestant churches, also known as the Apostolic Movement) and a separate New Apostolic Church associated with the New Apostolic Church International. According to some Christian leaders, evangelical Protestant groups continue to grow in the country. The Jewish community estimates it has 1,200 members, of whom 1,000 reside in Havana. According to the local Islamic League, there are 2,000 to 3,000 Muslims, of whom an estimated 1,500 are native born. Immigrants and native born citizens practice several different Buddhist traditions, with estimates of 6,200 followers. The largest group of Buddhists is the Japanese Soka Gakkai; its estimated membership is 1,000. Other religious groups with small numbers of adherents include Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, and Baha'is.

Many individuals, particularly Afro-Cubans, practice religions with roots in the Congo River Basin and West Africa, including Yoruba groups often referred to by outsiders as Santeria, but by adherents as the order of Lucumi or Orisha worship, or Bantu influenced groups referred to as Palo Monte. These religious practices are commonly intermingled with Catholicism and other forms of Christianity and some require Catholic baptism for full initiation, making it difficult to estimate accurately their total membership. Rastafarian adherents also have a presence on the island, although the size of the community is unknown.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

According to the constitution, “the state recognizes, respects, and guarantees religious liberty” and “distinct beliefs and religions enjoy equal consideration.” The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religious beliefs. It declares the country is a secular state and provides for the separation of religious institutions and the state.

The constitution also “recognizes, respects, and guarantees people’s freedom of thought, conscience, and expression.” It states, “Conscientious objection may not be invoked with the intention of evading compliance with the law or impeding another from the exercise of their rights.” It also provides for the “right to profess or not profess their religious beliefs, to change them, and to practice the religion of their choice...,” but only “with the required respect for other beliefs and in accordance with the law.”

The government is subordinate to the Communist Party; the party’s organ, the ORA, enlists the entire government, especially the MOJ and the security services, to control religious practice in the country. The ORA regulates religious institutions and the practice of religion. The Law of Associations requires all religious groups to apply to the MOJ for official registration. The MOJ registers religious denominations as associations on a basis similar to how it officially registers civil society organizations. The application process requires religious groups to identify the location of their activities, their proposed leadership, and their funding sources, among other requirements. Even if the MOJ grants official registration, the religious group must request permission from the ORA each time it wants to conduct activities other than regular services, 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 failing to register face penalties ranging from fines to closure of their organizations and confiscation of their property.

The penal code states membership in or association with an unregistered group is a crime; penalties range from fines to three months’ imprisonment, and leaders of such groups may be sentenced to up to one year in prison.

The law regulates the registration of “house churches” (private residences used as places of worship). Two house churches of the same denomination may not exist within two kilometers (1.2 miles) of one another and detailed information – including the number of worshippers, dates and times of services, and the names and ages of all inhabitants of the house in which services are held – must be

provided to authorities. The law states if authorization is granted, authorities will supervise the operation of meetings; they may suspend meetings in the house for a year or more if they find the requirements are not fulfilled. If an individual registers a complaint against a church, the house church may be closed permanently and members subject to imprisonment. Foreigners must obtain permission before attending services in a house church; foreigners may not attend house churches in some regions. Any violation will result in fines and closure of the house church.

The constitution states, “The rights of assembly, demonstration and association are exercised by workers, both manual and intellectual; peasants; women; students; and other sectors of the working people,” but it does not explicitly address religious association. The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion.

A law in force since July 2019 curtails freedom of expression on the internet to protect against “disseminating information contrary to the common good, morals, decency, and integrity through public data transmission networks.” The penalty for violating the law is 3,000 Cuban pesos (\$120) or two to four years in prison. Military service is mandatory for all men, and there are no legal provisions exempting conscientious objectors from service.

Religious education is highly regulated, and homeschooling is illegal, with parents who homeschool their children subject to arrest.

The country signed the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 2008 but did not ratify it. The government notes, “With respect to the scope and implementation of some of the provisions of this international instrument, Cuba will make such reservations or interpretative declarations as it may deem appropriate.”

Government Practices

CSW’s annual report concluded that the government “violated freedom of religion or belief... routinely and systematically” through arbitrary detentions, false charges, threats, and harassment of religious leaders and religious freedom defenders. It reported 203 documented cases of freedom of religion violations compared with 260 in 2019, attributing the decrease in numbers to the decision of the Ladies in White to halt their weekly attendance at Catholic Mass for seven months during the pandemic. CSW said approximately half of the cases involved threats and harassment, including arbitrary summons of religious leaders and

pressure on congregation members to not worship at unregistered churches or else face losing their employment. The report also noted that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the government confiscated food some religious groups intended to provide to those in need, blocked overseas humanitarian aid, and threatened and charged religious leaders for “spreading disease.”

Many religious groups said notwithstanding the constitutional provisions providing for freedom of conscience and religion and prohibiting discrimination based on religion, the government continued to use threats, detentions, violence, and other coercive tactics to restrict the activities of some religious groups, leaders, and followers, including the right of prisoners to practice religion freely. Religious groups also said the government applied the law in an arbitrary and capricious manner. Some religious groups continued to state their concern that the new constitution, in effect since February 2019, significantly weakened protections for freedom of religion or belief, as well as diluting references to freedom of conscience and separating it from freedom of religion.

According to media, prison authorities continued to abuse Christian rights activist Mitzael Diaz Paseiro for his refusal to participate in ideological re-education programs while incarcerated. Diaz Paseiro, imprisoned since November 2017 and recognized by Amnesty International as a prisoner of conscience, was beaten, prohibited from receiving visits or phone calls, denied medical and religious care, confined to a “punishment” cell, and transferred from prison to prison. Diaz Paseiro was serving a three-year and five-month sentence for “pre-criminal dangerousness” for protesting municipal elections in 2017. He remained in prison through year’s end. Media reported police also used violence against individuals protesting Diaz Paseiro’s treatment. On September 30, police detained two Free Yorubas of Cuba leaders who were protesting Diaz Paseiro’s mistreatment, holding them overnight, beating them, and breaking the arm of one of them, Jennifer Castaneda.

In August, the U.S.-based Patmos Institute blogged a statement calling on the Cuban government to recognize religious minority groups, including the Free Yorubas of Cuba. According to the U.S.-based Global Liberty Alliance, authorities continued to subject Free Yorubas of Cuba leaders to arbitrary detentions, threats, and verbal harassment, in addition to the September detentions and beatings of the two Yoruba leaders protesting the mistreatment of Paseiro. In February, police detained a Free Yorubas couple, telling the couple, “There is only one god, Fidel Castro.” According to observers, although Yoruba and other African syncretic religious groups were given latitude to practice their beliefs as

individuals, the government selectively recognized groups and leaders based on their favorable view of the government.

Media reported police continued their repeated physical assaults on and brief arrests of members of the Ladies in White; more than 20 women were arrested across the country on March 8, International Women's Day. Reports indicated the group's members typically attempted to attend Mass and gather afterwards to protest the government's human rights abuses. Throughout the year, Ladies in White leader Berta Soler Fernandez reported repeated arrests and short detentions for Ladies in White members when they attempted to meet on Sundays. According to media, because of the government's intensified pressure on the movement, it lost significant momentum. According to media and NGOs, Soler Fernandez and other Ladies in White members were frequently physically abused while in police custody, as shown in videos of their arrests. After being taken into custody, they were typically fined and released within 24 hours.

According to media, authorities detained Apostolic leader Yilber Durand Dominguez and Christian artist Jose Acebo Hidalgo when they resisted allowing government officials into their homes during the COVID-19 quarantine. Acebo and Durand were released shortly thereafter.

According to media, authorities harassed and threatened journalists reporting specifically on abuses of religious freedom. In September, authorities released journalist and lawyer Roberto Quinones, imprisoned in April 2019 while reporting on a trial involving religious expression. Reportedly, he left prison having lost a significant amount of weight due to insufficient food.

According to media, in March, authorities released homeschooling advocate Ayda Exposito after having served 11 months of an 18-month sentence for "other acts against the normal development of a minor." Her husband, Reverend Ramon Rigal, was released in July. After the couple was released from prison, authorities threatened to deny them custody of their children if they resumed their prior activities (homeschooling their children). Patmos reported that on August 9, journalist Yoel Suarez Fernandez was detained and threatened for reporting on the Quinones and Rigal cases, and authorities confiscated his phone. In February, he had been prohibited from leaving the country.

According to media sources, Oscar Kendri Fial Echavarría was scheduled for trial in late December for refusing compulsory military service after declaring himself a conscientious objector because of his Christian faith. His trial was subsequently

suspended. Echavarría had previously been detained by state security in October and early December.

According to CSW, many religious groups continued to state their lack of legal registration impeded their ability to practice their religion. Several religious groups, including the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Church of Jesus Christ, continued to await a decision from the MOJ on pending applications for official registration, some dating as far back as 1994. Despite a 2019 letter from Cuban Ambassador to the United States Jose Cabanas to the First Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ in Salt Lake City stating that the denomination was "welcome" in Cuba, the MOJ had not approved the Church's registration by year's end.

Representatives of several religious organizations that had unsuccessfully sought registration said the government continued to interpret the law on associations as a means for the ORA and the MOJ to deny registration of certain groups. They also said ineligibilities for registration sometimes included determinations by the MOJ that another group had identical or similar objectives, using this argument as a pretext to favor certain factions of a religious denomination or one religious group's activities over others.

Due to COVID-19 shutdowns, the MOJ delayed requests for registration. EchoCuba, a U.S.-based international religious freedom advocacy group associated with Outreach Aid to the Americas, again reported that some Apostolic churches repeatedly had their attempts to register denied, forcing them to operate without legal status.

Members of Protestant denominations said some groups were still able to register only a small percentage of house churches in private homes, although some unregistered house churches could operate with little or no government interference. According to EchoCuba, however, several religious leaders, particularly those from smaller, independent house churches or Santeria communities, said the government was less tolerant of groups that relied on informal locations, including private residences and other private meeting spaces, to practice their beliefs. They said the government monitored them, and at times, prevented them from holding religious meetings in their spaces. CSW reported authorities continued to rely on two 2005 government resolutions to impose complicated and repressive restrictions on house churches.

According to EchoCuba, the ORA approved some registration applications, but it took up to two to three years from the date of the application to complete the process. At year's end, Soka Gakkai remained the only Buddhist group registered with the government.

According to religious leaders and former inmates, authorities continued to deny prisoners, including political prisoners, pastoral visits and the ability to meet with other prisoners for worship, prayer, and study. Many prisoners also said authorities repeatedly confiscated Bibles, crucifixes, rosary beads, and other religious items, sometimes as punishment and other times for no apparent reason. According to recently released prisoner Roberto de Jesus Quinones, during his time in prison, officials repeatedly "lost" copies of his request for pastoral care and punished him for fasting on holy days by placing him in solitary confinement or suspending other privileges.

According to CSW, the government, through the Ministry of Interior, continued to systematically plant informants in all religious organizations, sometimes by persuading or intimidating members and leaders to act as informants, or by sending informants to infiltrate a church. The objective was to monitor and intimidate religious leaders and report on the content of sermons and on church attendees. As a result, CSW assessed, many leaders continued to practice self-censorship, avoiding stating anything that might possibly be construed as anti-Castro or counterrevolutionary in their sermons and teaching. Catholic and Protestant Church leaders, both in and outside the government-recognized Council of Cuban Churches (CCC), continued to report frequent visits from state security agents and CCP officials for the purpose of intimidating them and reminding them they were under close surveillance, as well as to influence internal decisions and structures within the groups.

Many house church leaders continued to report frequent visits from state security agents or CCP officials. Some reported warnings from the agents and officials that the education of their children, or their own employment, could be threatened if the house church leaders continued their activities.

CSW reported that on May 4, state security officers appeared at the home of a member of an unregistered Islamic group, who was studying the Quran with others. Members were summoned to appear the next day at the National Revolutionary Police, where authorities told them if they continued to hold unpermitted religious activities, they would be "punished for the crime of association to conspire and commit crimes."

Authorities continued to harass Pastor Alain Toledano Valiente, a member of the Apostolic Movement and leader of the Emanuel Church in Santiago de Cuba. According to Toledano's Facebook page, state security officials organized several "actos de repudio" (state-sanctioned crowds) to intimidate and socially isolate him. On May 1, local members of the Communist Party surrounded his home, as shown in a video posted to the pastor's Facebook page. According to his Facebook page, several individuals also interrupted church services on July 26, National Revolutionary Day and a civic holiday. According to observers, in the eyes of the Communist party, church services held on a civic holiday were an affront to the spirit of the revolution.

On October 30, state security officers surrounded a church affiliated with Toledano in Santiago de Cuba and destroyed it with bulldozers and other heavy equipment while parishioners watched and sang hymns. Toledano was arrested while live streaming the destruction on Facebook. Authorities said they were destroying the church to construct a new railroad line to a local cement factory, but no other buildings or structures were razed. According to CSW, the church's pastor, Palomo Cabrera, and Assemblies of God Regional Superintendent Jose Martinez were taken by state security officials and pressured to sign a document stating the demolition of the church was legal. Local sources also reported authorities attempted to bill Cabrera for usage of the machinery employed in the demolition. Toledano said authorities opposed the construction of a new church – authorities had demolished the previous Emanuel Church and detained hundreds of church members in 2016 – although he had the permits to build the new church. Following one summons, Toledano stated, "In Cuba, pastors are more at risk than criminals and bandits....I cannot carry out any religious activity; that is to say they want me to stop being a pastor."

According to Pastor Andy Nelson Martinez Barrero, on March 17, authorities demolished the III Eden Baptist Church, allegedly for its being an illegal structure. When parishioners approached the site, police said they could not be in the area because they were considered to be a danger to a former member of the congregation who had been expelled for bad behavior. Members of the church said they believed the person was sent to join their church as an informant, a common government practice.

According to media, on September 8, authorities impeded celebrations of the country's patron saint, the Virgen de la Caridad de Cobre, an unofficial but important holiday also known as Feast Day, and security officials arrested scores

of activists. According to many observers, senior government leaders attempted to appropriate the religious holiday with political messaging. The Catholic Church received permission to televise a special Mass and published a statement describing the “opportunistic politicization” of the Feast Day by “the heirs [the current government] of those who once said they [Fidel and Raul Castro] wanted to erase every vestige of religion.” The statement also said, “Neither side has the right to politicize a celebration that precisely calls for harmony, peace, unity, and not hatred.”

According to CSW, although the majority of cases of what CSW defined as religious persecution were directed toward Christians, the country’s religious minorities were also likely to be victims of religious persecution. Patmos again stated that Rastafarians, whose spiritual leader remained imprisoned since 2012, were among the most stigmatized and repressed religious groups. The Patmos report said reggae music, the primary form of Rastafarian expression, was marginalized and its bands censored. According to Sandor Perez Pita, known in the Rastafarian world as Rassandino, reggae was not allowed on most state radio stations and concert venues, and Rastafarians were consistently targeted in government crackdowns on drugs, with the government incarcerating them for their supposed association with drugs without presenting evidence of actual possession or trafficking. Authorities also subjected Rastafarians to discrimination for their clothing and hairstyles, including through segregation of Rastafarian schoolchildren and employment discrimination against Rastafarian adults.

According to its representatives, the country’s small Muslim community was subject to discrimination. Samira Salas Quiala wrote on a Facebook group page for Cuban Muslim Women about her experience of discrimination while working at CIMEX, a company owned by the Cuban Armed Forces. She said that after three years working at a CIMEX store in Havana, her supervisor summoned her and the head of Human Resources and told her she could no longer wear a hijab. Salas Quiala said she stopped wearing a headscarf to avoid being fired.

According CSW, Christian leaders from all denominations said a scarcity of Bibles and other religious literature continued, primarily in rural areas. Some religious leaders continued to report government obstacles prevented them from importing religious materials and donated goods, including bureaucratic obstruction and arbitrary restrictions such as inconsistent rules on computers and electronic devices. In some cases, the government held up religious materials or blocked them altogether. According to Patmos, the Cuban Association for the Divuligation of Islam was unable to obtain a container of religious literature embargoed since

2014. Several other groups, however, said they continued to import large quantities of Bibles, books, clothing, and other donated goods.

The Catholic Church and several Protestant representatives said they continued to maintain small libraries, print periodicals and other information, and to 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.

By year's end, the government again did not grant the Conference of Catholic Bishops' (CCB) requests to allow the Catholic Church to reopen religious schools and have open access to broadcasting on television and radio. According to Church representatives, the ORA expanded the CCB's access to state-controlled media and allowed some members to deliver sermons on public networks as a concession to COVID-19 restrictions. Not all religious groups that also petitioned for media access were given similar access, although for the first time, state-selected evangelical Protestant pastors associated with the government-recognized CCC were given the opportunity to prerecord 15-minute broadcasts during Holy Week. No other churches had access to mass media, which remained entirely state-owned. Several religious leaders continued to express concern about the government's restriction on broadcasting religious services over the radio or on television.

According to media, the government continued to prohibit the construction of new church buildings. All requests, including for minor building repairs, needed to be approved by the ORA, which awarded permits according to the inviting association's perceived level of support for or cooperation with the government. The Berean Baptist Church, whose request for registration has been pending since 1997, continued to be prevented from repairing existing church buildings because as an unregistered group, it could not request necessary permits.

According to CSW, the government continued to use endless requirements for permits that could be arbitrarily cancelled at any time, plus other bureaucratic practices, to control and restrict freedom of religion or belief. Reportedly, the ORA's processes meant many communities had no legal place to meet for church services, particularly in rural areas. Some denominations, especially Protestant denominations, reported similar problems, with the government prohibiting them from expanding their places of worship by threatening to dismantle or expropriate churches because they were holding "illegal" services.

According to CSW, several cases of authorities' arbitrary confiscation of church property remained unresolved or under review, including a church in Artemisa that belonged to a registered religious group and that the government confiscated in March 2019, and the Nazarene Church of Manzanillo. The government had started a process to confiscate the Nazarene Church in April 2019 but took no further action during 2020.

According to media, between June and July, evangelical Protestant pastors Uberney Aguilar and Yalina Proenza received at least six visits and official summons from various government agents aimed at shutting down their congregation, Jehovah Shalom Church, in Holguin. The pastors said that starting in 2017, they met in a property owned by a member of their congregation. On July 9, Holguin Minister of Justice Nelson Flavio Plutin Santos and Ormani Rodriguez Tamayo, the head of the provincial Department of Associations, denied their request for government recognition, which they had submitted in 2019. Due to government public health restrictions, they continued to hold outdoor services.

Other land ownership issues remained unresolved, including that of the land owned by the Western Baptist Convention, which the government confiscated extralegally in 2012 and later transferred to two government companies. According to observers, the confiscation was in retaliation for the refusal of the Western Baptist Convention to agree to various ORA demands to restructure its internal governance and expel some pastors. The Methodist Church of Cuba said it continued its efforts to reclaim properties confiscated by the government more than 60 years ago, including a theater adjacent to the Methodist church in Marianao, Havana. The Methodist Church reportedly submitted all necessary ownership documentation, but government officials again took no action on the case during the year.

According to the Catholic News Agency, on August 29, the Bishop of Santiago de Cuba consecrated the San Benito Abad Church, located in San Bendito Crucero, Santiago de Cuba. Another small Catholic church was under construction in Havana at year's end.

According to media, religious discrimination against students was a common practice in state schools, with multiple reports of teachers and Communist Party officials encouraging and participating in bullying. According to Olaine Tejada, a member of the Jewish community in Nuevitas, Camaguey Municipality, local state prosecutor Mary Vidal forced him on January 6 to sign a legal document acknowledging that if his sons came to school wearing kippahs, he and his wife

Yeliney Lescaille would be arrested and charged with “acts against the normal development of a minor,” with a potential one-year jail sentence. In December 2019, local officials ruled against the Jewish family’s right to wear religious headgear to school. Tejada said the family would appeal to higher authorities to reinstate their rights.

In another incident, Yordanis Diaz Arteaga, President of the Christian Reformed Church of Cuba, told online magazine *Evangelico Digital* in January that his eight-year-old son had been harassed by his teacher in Havana because of his faith. On one occasion, the teacher humiliated his son in front of his peers for saying that he believed in God. On another day, the same teacher confiscated a bracelet the boy was wearing because it had Jesus’ name on it. Diaz said he reported the incident to the school but was not informed if the teacher was disciplined.

According to religious leaders, the government continued to selectively prevent some religious groups from establishing accredited schools but appeared to tolerate the efforts of other religious groups to operate seminaries, interfaith training centers, before- and after-school programs, eldercare programs, weekend retreats, workshops for primary and secondary students, and higher education programs. The Catholic Church continued to offer coursework, including entrepreneurial training leading to a bachelor’s and master’s degree through foreign partners. Several Protestant communities continued to offer university-level degrees in theology, the humanities, and related subjects via distance learning; however, the government did not recognize these degrees.

Jehovah’s Witnesses leaders continued to state they found the requirements for university admission and the courses of study incompatible with the group’s beliefs because their religion prohibited them from political involvement.

CSW continued to report the government used social media to harass and defame religious leaders, including Facebook posts of public figures targeting religious leaders or groups. In most instances, accounts posting attacks targeting religious leaders seemed to be linked to state security. According to CSW, during the year, the government increased pressure on leaders of the Cuban Evangelical Alliance, including through a state television broadcast of a purported investigation of the growth of “dangerous fundamentalism” on the island. The program included an interview with a religious leader considered close to the government who spoke of “extremist Christian fundamentalists” who received support and funding from the United States. The backdrop of the interview included footage of worshippers at religious services in churches affiliated with the Cuban Evangelical Alliance.

Although movement to, from, and within the country was highly restricted for most of the year due to the COVID-19 pandemic, religious travelers said they faced higher levels of scrutiny than others and were often denied freedom of movement, including traveling to religious gatherings outside the country.

According to Patmos, immigration officers continued to target religious travelers and their goods and informed airport-based intelligence services of incoming and outgoing travel. On March 31, authorities in Las Tunas refused to renew Pastor Mario Jorge Traviezo's passport, informing him he was under a travel ban and could not leave the country. According to several news accounts, on February 17, state security agents arrested journalist Ricardo Fernandez Izaguirre, a reporter on religious freedom issues, as he tried to leave his hometown of Camaguey to attend a religious celebration at the invitation of Pastor Alain Toledano. Authorities told him if he tried to leave his town again, he would be imprisoned for "disrespect." Reportedly, Fernandez Izaguirre did not leave town during the year, partly due to the government order and because of COVID-19 restrictions.

According to CSW, unlike in previous years, there were no reported cases of the ORA and immigration officials targeting foreign visitors by denying them religious visas. CSW attributed the change to the government's overall closure of borders to tourists as part of its efforts to limit the spread of COVID-19.

Reportedly because of restrictions on internal movement, government agencies continued to refuse to recognize a change in residence for pastors and other church leaders assigned to a new church or parish. These restrictions made it difficult or impossible for relocating pastors to obtain government services, including housing. Legal restrictions on travel within the country also limited itinerant ministry, a central component of some religious groups. According to EchoCuba, the application of the decree to religious groups was likely part of the general pattern of government efforts to control their activities. Some religious leaders said the decree was also used to block church leaders from traveling within the country to attend special events or meetings. Leaders associated with the Apostolic churches regularly reported they were prevented, sometimes through short-term detention, from traveling to attend church events or carry out ministry work.

According to EchoCuba, the government continued to give preference to some religious groups and to discriminate against others. EchoCuba continued to report the government applied its system of rewarding churches that were obedient and sympathetic to "revolutionary values and ideals" and penalized those that were not. Similarly, the government continued to reward cooperative religious leaders and

threatened to revoke the rights of leaders deemed as noncooperative. According to EchoCuba, in exchange for their cooperation with the government, CCC members continued to receive benefits that other nonmember churches did not always receive, including building permits and international donations of clothing and medicine.

According to media reports, President Miguel Diaz-Canel met with visiting international religious leaders, such as Archbishop of New York Timothy Dolan, but he did not hold public meetings with any national religious leaders.

According to international media, in the face of increasing shortages of food and other essential items, authorities increased restrictions on many religious organizations' ability to receive and distribute humanitarian assistance. While the government allowed Caritas to continue providing food and other goods to the needy, it did not allow many smaller religious groups and charities that were not part of the government-recognized CCC to provide aid. According to *The Havana Times* in August, Customs refused to hand over to non-CCC-affiliated church groups a shipment of five containers of food and other donations from Florida for needy families in Cuba, organized by dissident Rosa Paya of the human rights project Cuba Decide. A CCC religious leader said, "Cuba doesn't need aid from those who serve a government which has wanted to create humanitarian crises with a political and economic agenda for 60 years." Other religious leaders also said the government continued to restrict their ability to receive donations from overseas.

Some religious groups continued to report the government allowed them to engage in community service programs and to share their religious beliefs. Other religious groups reported government restrictions varied and were largely based on the government's perceptions of the "political pliancy" of each religious group. Religious leaders continued to report government opposition to and interference in religious groups' providing pastoral services.

According to media, government officials frequently instigated or did not investigate harassment of religious figures and institutions. For example, Pastor Daniel Gonzalez told online magazine *evangelicodigital.com* that for several years, police in his town of Florida, Camagüey Province, failed to investigate individuals throwing rocks at his church during services. The large rocks severely damaged the roof of the building. Members of the Missionary Church of Cuba in Victoria, Las Tunas, were pelted with stones on their way to worship several times a week, according to Pastor Yoel Demetrio, who said state security officials knew about the attacks and encouraged residents in their neighborhood to carry them out. Prior to

the attacks, Demetrio received two summonses from the National Revolutionary Police, accusing him of “disturbing public order” because of his “illegal” use of audio equipment at his also “illegal” church.

During the year, the government increasingly used an internet law restricting freedom of expression against independent journalists, including those promoting freedom of religion or belief and other human rights. Authorities threatened to use the law to sanction Pastor Jose Yvan Rodríguez Yanez of the Apostolic Movement for making “subversive posts on social media.”

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Unlike in previous years, the Community of Sant’Egidio, recognized by the Catholic Church as a “Church public lay association,” was unable to hold an interfaith meeting due to COVID-19 restrictions.

International faith-based charitable operations such as Caritas, Sant’Egidio, both Catholic, and the Salvation Army maintained local offices in Havana. Caritas continued to gather and distribute relief items, providing humanitarian assistance to all individuals regardless of religious belief.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials did not meet with or otherwise engage with the ORA during the year due to lack of responsiveness from the government. In public statements and through social media postings, U.S. government officials, including the Secretary of State, continued to call upon the government to respect its citizens’ fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of religion and expression. On October 5, the Secretary stated, “Vast swathes of humanity live in countries where religious freedom is restricted, from places like...Cuba, and beyond.”

Embassy officials met with the head of the CCC and discussed obstacles unregistered churches faced to gain official status.

Embassy officials met in person and virtually with leaders of a range of registered and unregistered religious groups, including Protestants, Jews, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Muslims, and Catholics. They discussed the principal issues of religious freedom and tolerance affecting each group, including freedom of assembly, church expansion, access to state-owned media, and their inability to open private religious schools.

On December 2, 2020, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State again placed the country on the Special Watch List for having engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom.