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2009 Report on International Religious Freedom - Cuba

[Covers the period from July 1, 2008, to June 30, 2009]

The Constitution recognizes the right of citizens to profess and practice any religious belief within the framework of respect for the law; however, in law and in practice, the Government places restrictions on freedom of religion.

The Government continued to exert control over all aspects of social life, including religious expression. The Government harassed some members of religious organizations that were not officially recognized. Although government harassment of religious organizations continued during the reporting period, reports of harassment declined slightly. Various religious groups reported fewer restrictions on politically sensitive expression, the ability to hold religious activities even for organizations without official recognition, increased capacity to conduct charitable and community service projects, fewer import and travel restrictions, permission to repair buildings, and significant increases in membership. The Government continued to maintain strict controls on the construction of new buildings for religious purposes, and permission was difficult to obtain. Religious groups complained about widespread surveillance and infiltration of their membership by state security agents.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. Government urged international pressure on the Government to promote religious freedom and other human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 68,888 square miles and a population of 11.4 million. There was no independent authoritative source on the size or composition of religious institutions and their membership. The Roman Catholic Church estimates that 60 percent of the population is Catholic. Actual membership in Protestant churches is estimated at 5 percent and includes Baptists, Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists, Presbyterians, Anglicans, Episcopalians, Methodists, Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), and Lutherans. Other groups include Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Baha'is, and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons).

Some sources estimate that as much as 80 percent of the population consults with

practitioners of religions with West African roots, such as the form of Santeria derived from ethnic Yorubas (Regla de Ocha) and the form of Santeria with origins in the Congo River basin (Regla de Palo), for assistance with specific immediate problems such as bearing children, curing illness, or ensuring safe passage.

The Cuban Council of Churches (CCC) is an officially sanctioned umbrella organization that works closely with the Government and includes 25 religious organizations as full members, eight associate members, two with observer status, and 10 interfaith movements. The CCC is structured into five "zones" across the island, and according to its leadership, represents approximately 100,000 Christians. Most CCC members are officially recognized by the State, although several, including the Evangelical Lutheran Church, lack legal status and are recognized through their membership in the CCC. Other officially recognized groups, including the Catholic Church, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the small Jewish and Muslim communities, do not belong to the CCC.

Catholic Church officials estimate that 10 percent of baptized Catholics regularly attend Mass. Membership in Protestant churches was estimated at 550,000 persons. The Baptists, represented in four different conventions, are possibly the largest Protestant denomination, followed closely by the Pentecostal churches, particularly the Assemblies of God. The number of Pentecostals is believed to be rising sharply. Jehovah's Witnesses reported more than 90,000 members, the Seventh-day Adventists 30,000, Anglicans 22,000, Methodists 21,000, Presbyterians 15,000, Quakers 300, and Mormons 50. The Mormons meet in Havana in space rented from another church. The Jewish community has 1,500 members, 1,200 of whom reside in Havana.

The Muslim population consists of 6,000 temporary residents, mainly businessmen, students, and diplomats, and 300 native-born Sunni Muslims. There are approximately 50 Shi'a Muslims. The Shi'a community directs the Al-Ma'sumin Islamic Center. In the fall of 2008 a hurricane extensively damaged the building, and the Center now operates out of an apartment. The Government is working with the Government of Iran to provide a replacement for the leader of the Shi'a community when the current leader, Miguel Aquila Cardenas "Hassan Felix," a native Cuban, travels to Iran to complete the studies necessary to obtain the title of Mufti.

Several embassies, led by the Iranian and Saudi Arabian missions, offered to build a mosque in Havana; however, the Government has not identified land for this project nor officially accepted the offer. The Government and the Muslim community disagree on construction of the mosque; the Government intends to present a completed structure to the officially recognized groups, and the Muslim community would like Muslims to build it.

Foreign missionary groups operate through registered churches. Visits by religious figures are handled by the Office of Religious Affairs of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution recognizes the right of citizens to profess and practice any religious belief within the framework of respect for the law; however, in law and in practice, the Government places restrictions on freedom of religion.

Changes to the constitution in 1992 declared the country to be a secular state, retained a provision for the separation of church and state, and eliminated references to scientific materialism and atheism.

The Government does not officially favor any particular religion or church. The Government's main interaction with religious groups is through the Office of Religious Affairs of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party. The Office's stated

purpose is to encourage dialogue between religious groups and the Government, but many religious figures believe its real role is to assert the Government's power.

In 2008 the Government signed the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights with reservations. Article 18 of the ICCPR guarantees freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. The Government has not ratified the treaties.

The Government requires religious groups to register with the provincial Registry of Associations within the Ministry of Justice to obtain official recognition. Registration procedures require groups to identify where they will conduct their activities, identify their funding for these activities, and obtain certification from the Registry of Associations that they are not duplicating the activities of a previously registered organization. Registration allows church officials to obtain official permission to travel abroad, receive foreign visitors, and meet in officially recognized places of worship. Conversely, members of unregistered religious groups must request individual exit permits and risk closure of their technically illegal meeting places. The Government has not registered The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints but maintains a written agreement that allows members to hold weekly meetings and baptize new members.

The law allows for the construction of new houses of worship once the required permits are obtained; however, the Government rarely authorizes the permits. A Russian Orthodox Church, completed in 2008 in the historic center of Havana, was the most recent church built. Several religious leaders noted that during the reporting period the Government more readily gave permission to repair or restore existing churches; however, the process of obtaining a permit for an expansion or repair project and purchasing construction materials from government outlets remained lengthy and expensive. During the reporting period construction continued on a Catholic seminary, and many churches were expanded or repaired.

House churches are subject to numerous regulations, many of which address location and hours of worship. Directive 43 and resolution 46 require house churches to register with the Government. The majority of house churches were unregistered and thus technically illegal; however, most registered religious groups were able to hold services in private homes. The Government officially registered 1,640 house churches, but the status of up to 3,000 remained pending at the end of the reporting period.

The Government observes December 25, commonly associated with Christmas Day, as a national holiday. Government declarations and calendars do not assign any religious significance to the day; it is simply designated a holiday.

Religious literature and other religious materials generally are imported through a registered religious group. The Office of Religious Affairs of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party supervises the importation of religious materials and literature and requires that religious groups submit activity reports.

Religious groups are required to submit a request to the local principal official of the Communist Party before being allowed to hold processions or other events outside of religious buildings.

Churches provide religious education classes to their members, as well as seminars to wider audiences. Some postgraduate courses in the history of religion are offered at the state-run University of Havana. The Government allows some religious groups, such as the Catholic Church and the Havana Jewish community center, to administer some charities and offer religious education classes and adult education courses on subjects such as computers and foreign languages. The larger churches are increasingly involved in offering community service, such as assistance to the elderly and the suicide hotline operated by the First Presbyterian Church of Havana. International faith-based charitable operations, such as the Catholic charity Caritas and the Salvation Army, have offices but tend to keep a low profile. Some churches, such as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, expressed frustration that in the fall of 2008 it was not

allowed to offer relief after a series of devastating hurricanes because the Government restricted the use of donations originating in the United States. However, other faith-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including several based in the United States, stated that the Government allowed them to import food and medicine and allowed their affiliated religious organizations to distribute the donations directly.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government continued to exert control over all aspects of societal life including religious expression. The Ministry of the Interior continued to engage in efforts to control and monitor religious activities and to use surveillance, infiltration, and harassment against religious groups, religious professionals, and laypersons. Government officials continued to harass, threaten, and fine unregistered religious groups; state security forces continued to subject officially sanctioned and unregistered house churches to surveillance. Several religious groups, including Pentecostals, viewed the regulations governing house churches as overly restrictive. Although no group reported an official denial of its application to the Office of Religious Affairs, many organizations reported that the Government did not reply to their requests nor answer their correspondence.

The Government does not permit religious education in public schools nor the operation of private primary and secondary schools of any kind, including religious schools, although several international schools in Havana are given considerable leeway in setting their curriculums.

The Government impedes access to printing by making equipment and supplies costly; nevertheless, the Catholic Church and some other churches published periodicals during the reporting period.

There were reports that prison authorities did not inform inmates of their right to religious assistance, delayed months before responding to such requests, and limited visits to a maximum of two or three times a year.

Officials of various groups reported that local officials discriminated against religious persons because of ignorance or personal prejudice. Religious persons encountered employment problems in certain professions, such as education.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

In June 2009 in Camaguey, state security reportedly detained several evangelical pastors for holding an unauthorized meeting.

In April 2009 the state prosecutor recommended a seven-year prison sentence for Pastor Omar Gude Perez. Gude is a leader of the "Apostolic Reformation," an association of independent nondenominational churches. In May 2008 authorities originally imprisoned Gude and charged him with "human trafficking." In March 2009 a court dismissed the human trafficking charges, but Gude remained in prison, and in April 2009 state prosecutors charged him with illicit economic activity and falsification of documents. Gude maintained his innocence and stated he was being persecuted for his religious activities. After Gude's arrest, government officials conducted a full inventory of his house and threatened the family with eviction and confiscation of their belongings.

In October 2008 state security arrested Reverend Roberto Rodriguez Rodriguez and his two sons, charging them with threatening a neighbor. The family maintained that the charges were unfounded and that the basis for the charges was Rodriguez's withdrawal in September 2008 of his organization, the Interdenominational Fellowship of Evangelical Pastors and Ministers in Cuba (CIMPEC), from the CCC, citing state interference in religious matters. The government Registrar of Organizations stripped Rodriguez of his presidency of CIMPEC, which the registrar stated was unconstitutional. The Government sentenced Reverend Eric Gabriel Rodriguez de Toro, the son of

Rodriguez, to house arrest for a period from three months to one year. Roberto Rodriguez remained in prison awaiting a court date, which after several postponements had not been set at the end of the reporting period.

In 2007 police entered the grounds of the Santa Teresita Catholic Church in Santiago de Cuba, beat several persons gathered for Mass who had participated in a political protest earlier that day, and detained 18 persons. The Government apologized to the local bishop but not to the parish priest.

In April 2009 authorities threatened to evict evangelical minister Julio Ibanez of the city of Mariel in Havana Province, citing irregularities in the title to his property. Ibanez stated that the charges were false, and that the real motivation for the eviction was to stop the religious activities held in his house.

In 2007 police in Santiago de Cuba evicted Pentecostal preacher Alain Tolerano Valiente and his family from their home and demolished the church his congregation had erected without permission in a rural area. Police temporarily detained a member of the congregation who was taking photographs and confiscated his camera.

Although there were no reports of persons imprisoned or detained for specifically religious reasons, there were cases of prosecutions of religious workers for other crimes in which evidence suggests the Government targeted the individuals for their religious activities.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States or who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

In general, the majority of religious groups saw a slight improvement in the ability to obtain religious material, receive donations from abroad, and receive exit permits for their members to attend regional and international conferences.

Officially and unofficially sanctioned religious groups, as well as practitioners of religions with origins in Africa, reported no problems conducting their services as long as they informed the police beforehand, and neighbors did not complain.

The leadership of the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Seventh-day Adventists stated that mistreatment and job discrimination that were particularly harsh in the past were now confined to isolated cases. The leaders stated that their membership was usually offered the option of alternative civic service in lieu of mandatory military service, and that their members were usually exempted from patriotic activities at school. The leaders of the Seventh-day Adventists stated that their members were usually excused from work or school activities on Saturdays. Both groups stated that discrimination and harassment decreased.

The Government permitted the Catholic Church to conduct Christmas and Easter Masses inside some prisons. On December 25, 2008, five Catholic bishops, including Cardinal Jaime Ortega, celebrated Christmas Mass in the large prison of Combinado del Este in Havana Province. This was the first time in 50 years that Christmas services were held in a prison.

Some religious groups reported fewer restrictions on politically sensitive expression; for example, some Catholic parishes offered prayers for political prisoners. While religious leaders normally avoided explicitly political commentary, congregations reported increasing boldness in discussions of social issues in sermons without encountering direct severe repercussions as in the past. Nevertheless, when in February 2009 Father José

Conrado Rodriguez of the parish of Santa Teresita de Jesus in Santiago de Cuba published a strongly worded open letter to President Raúl Castro, not only condemning social problems in the country but also lamenting the lack of freedom, state security increased interrogations and threats directed at his parishioners, especially younger persons. The organization Damas de Blanco (Ladies in White), composed of relatives and supporters of political prisoners, gathered without government interference on Sundays at the Church of Santa Rita de Casias in Havana.

Various religious groups found it somewhat easier to import religious materials; bring in foreign religious workers; travel abroad to attend conferences and religious events; use limited Internet access; and restore houses of worship. In March 2009 the Government gave permission for the renovation of four Catholic churches in Havana using funds from the Catholic international charitable organization Aid to the Church in Need. Outside Havana, construction continued on the first new Catholic seminary in 50 years, while instruction took place in classrooms in the seminary's current quarters in central Havana.

Many religious organizations reported a significant rise in membership as well as a revival in interest in religion, especially among the young. Most churches reported increased participation in religious instruction for children because government schools no longer scheduled competing activities on Saturdays or Sundays.

On November 29, 2008, the Catholic Church celebrated the first beatification in the country, which declared Friar José Olallo Valdés blessed. President Raúl Castro and other government officials attended the ceremony.

In 2008 the Catholic Church received 10 hours of television broadcast time, eight of which covered the November beatification ceremony. The Government granted the CCC time for periodic radio broadcasts early on Sunday mornings. In 2008 the Catholic Church received 19 hours of radio broadcast time.

All the Catholic dioceses except one held authorized processions for the celebration of Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre. For the first time, the Government authorized a public procession in Santiago de Cuba in conjunction with this celebration.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. However, the growth of small unregistered Pentecostal and charismatic congregations created divisions among Protestant groups.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. government policy toward the country is to promote increased respect for human rights, including religious freedom, and to support the desire of its citizens to freely determine their country's future. The U.S. Government encourages the development of civil society, which includes strengthening religious institutions. Officials from the U.S. Interests Section met frequently with representatives of religious groups.

As in the past, the U.S. Government worked with its partners in the international community to press the Government to cease repressive practices, including religious discrimination, harassment, and surveillance.
