



# 2013 Report on International Religious Freedom - Cuba

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## Executive Summary

The constitution protects religious freedom, although government policies and practice restrict religious freedom. The government monitored religious groups, and the Cuban Communist Party, through its Office of Religious Affairs (ORA), continued to control most aspects of religious life. The government harassed outspoken religious leaders, prevented human rights activists from attending religious services, and in some cases employed violence to prevent activists from engaging in public political protests when exiting religious services. Most established religious groups, however, reported an increased ability of their members to meet, worship, travel abroad, recruit new members, and conduct charitable, educational and community service projects. They also reported fewer restrictions on religious expression and the importation of religious materials.

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

The U.S. government encouraged the strengthening of religious institutions. Exchange visits continued to be an important way for members of U.S. religious institutions to engage their Cuban counterparts, and to support their right to practice their faith freely. The U.S. interests section remained in close contact with religious groups, as well as with U.S. religious groups traveling to the country. In public statements, the U.S. Department of State called upon the government to respect the fundamental freedoms of its citizens, including freedom of religion.

## Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 11.0 million (July 2013 estimate). There is no independent authoritative source on the size or composition of religious groups. The Roman Catholic Church estimates that 60 to 70 percent of the population is Catholic. Membership in

Protestant churches is estimated at 5 percent of the population. Baptists and Pentecostals are likely the largest Protestant denominations; the Assemblies of God report approximately 110,000 members; the four Baptist conventions estimate their combined membership at more than 100,000 members. Jehovah's Witnesses report approximately 96,000 members; Methodists estimate 36,000; Seventh-day Adventists 35,000; Anglicans, 22,500; Presbyterians, 15,500; Quakers, 300; and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), 50. The Jewish community estimates 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 1,000 are Cubans. Other religious groups include Greek and Russian Orthodox, Buddhists, and Bahais.

Many individuals, particularly in the Afro-Cuban community, consult with practitioners of religions with roots in West Africa and the Congo River basin, known as Santeria. These religious practices are commonly intermingled with Catholicism, and some even require Catholic baptism for full initiation, making it difficult to estimate accurately the total membership of these syncretic groups.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### *Legal/Policy Framework*

The constitution protects religious freedom, although government policies restrict it. The constitution declares the country a secular state and provides for the separation of church and state. The government does not officially favor any particular religion or church. The Cuban Communist Party is delegated the authority to regulate religious institutions and the practice of religion and does so through its ORA. The Communist Party's ORA monitors and regulates almost every aspect of religious life, including approval or denial of religious visits; the construction, repair, or purchase of religious buildings; the purchase and operation of motor vehicles; the ability to conduct religious services in public; and the import of religious literature.

By law religious groups are required to apply to the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) for official recognition. The application procedure requires religious groups to identify the location of their activities and the source of their funding. The ministry must certify that the group is not duplicating the activities of another recognized group; if so, recognition is denied. Once the ministry grants official recognition, the religious group must request permission from the ORA to conduct such activities as holding meetings in approved locations, receiving foreign visitors, importing religious literature, purchasing and operating motor vehicles, and constructing, repairing, or purchasing churches and temples.

Military service is mandatory for all men. There is no legal exception for conscientious objectors. The penalty for not fulfilling military service is imprisonment of three months to one year.

### *Government Practices*

The government prevented some human rights activists from attending religious services. The police routinely took measures, including detentions, to prevent members of the peaceful protest group Ladies in White from attending Catholic Mass. This practice was particularly pronounced in the provinces of Matanzas, Holguin, Villa Clara, and Santiago. The authorities also harassed Ladies in White, sometimes violently, as they exited church services to prevent them from engaging in

peaceful protests. On July 14, members of a government organized mob pushed and hit Lady in White Sonia Alvarez Campillo, breaking her wrist, as she left Mass in the province of Matanzas.

The government took measures to limit support for outspoken religious figures. Authorities finally permitted Pastor Omar Gude Perez (also known as Omar Perez Ruiz), a leader of the Apostolic Reformation Movement, an association of independent nondenominational churches, to leave the country on January 31 after he publicly protested the government's refusal to allow him to work as a pastor or to issue him an exit visa. Gude and his family were granted asylum in the United States in 2011, but were unable to leave the country because the government would not issue the pastor an exit visa. The pastor stated that he was incarcerated for nearly three years on false charges. He added that he was singled out for punishment in retaliation for his outspoken sermons and repeated denunciation of religious freedom violations experienced by churches in the Apostolic Reformation Movement.

Prior to his departure, Gude Perez took steps to transfer title of his residence to another pastor in the Apostolic Reformation community, Yiorvis Bravo Denis. In September, however, the provincial court in Camaguey determined that the transfer was not valid. On October 5, the government tried to evict Bravo and his family. Police cordoned off the residence, and the government organized a mob to surround the residence and chant pro-government slogans for four days. Bravo stated that he and his family were singled out for eviction because they were holding religious meetings, including Bible study classes, in the residence.

A number of religious groups, including the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, continued their years-long wait for a decision from the MOJ on pending applications for official recognition. These groups reported the authorities permitted them to conduct religious activities, hold meetings, receive foreign visitors, make minor renovations to their buildings, and send representatives abroad, but their members were exposed to harassment by state security, including pervasive monitoring of their movements, telephone calls, visitors, and religious meetings.

Some religious groups, principally independent evangelical Protestant churches, reported that government authorities harassed and fined parishioners for gathering to worship. On November 12, national television carried a program that called evangelical churches "subversive organizations." Panelists on the program stated that evangelical churches appealed to youth and families, were led by dynamic pastors, and were successful in attracting new members. The program concluded that evangelical churches are "part of a grand plan by the U.S. government to undermine the Cuban government."

Other evangelical groups reported that pastors were sometimes arrested or detained for attempting to preach in public. On June 1, police detained eight church leaders from Pastores por el Cambio (Pastors for Change), an association of independent evangelical churches, for up to six hours after proselytizing in an open-air local farmer's market in Bayamo, Granma province. Police officers told the church leaders that if the church members continued to evangelize in public, they would be incarcerated again. Church officials stated that until June they were able to preach regularly in the market without incident. Following the June detentions, members of Pastores por el Cambio continued to proselytize in public every weekend. Police officers intermittently detained them for up to several hours and levied fines.

The ORA rarely granted religious groups authorization to construct new buildings or acquire new properties. Religious leaders noted, however, that the office frequently granted permission to repair or restore existing buildings, allowing significant expansion of some structures and in some cases allowing essentially new buildings to be constructed on the foundations of the old. Religious groups reported an increased ability during the year to obtain this permission, although securing permission for the purchase or construction of new buildings remained difficult.

In response to tight restrictions on constructing new buildings, many religious groups used private homes, known as "house churches," for religious services. Estimates of the total number of house churches varied significantly, from fewer than 2,000 to as many as 10,000. The ORA allowed the use of homes for this purpose but required that recognized groups seek approval for each proposed location through a separate registration process. Religious groups indicated that while authorities approved many applications within two to three years from the date of the application, other applications received no response or were denied. Some religious groups were only able to register a small percentage of house churches. In practice, most unregistered house churches operated with little or no interference from the government.

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 tightly regulated printed materials, including religious literature. The Catholic Church and some other religious groups were able to print periodicals and other information and operate their own websites with little or no formal censorship. The Catholic Church continued to publish periodicals that sometimes criticized official social and economic policies and was again able to broadcast Christmas and Easter messages on state-run radio stations. The ORA continued to authorize the Cuban Council of Churches, the government recognized Protestant umbrella organization, to host a monthly twenty-minute-long radio broadcast.

Although the government expanded internet access incrementally during the year, religious leaders reported that continued limited access to e-mail and the internet reduced their opportunity to connect with colleagues and counterparts both abroad and within Cuba.

With the exception of two Catholic seminaries and several interfaith training centers, the government did not permit religious groups to establish accredited schools. Some religious groups operated after-school programs, weekend retreats, and workshops for primary and secondary students as well as higher education programs. The Catholic Church offered coursework that led to a bachelor's degree and master's degree and several Protestant communities offered, via distance learning, bachelor's degrees or master's degrees in Theology and related subjects. Although not specifically allowed or accredited by the government, these programs operated without interference.

Jehovah's Witnesses leaders encouraged members to avoid university education in Cuba, finding the requirements for university admission and the course of study incompatible with the group's beliefs prohibiting political involvement. Jehovah's Witnesses also stated that they found incompatible the expectation that students participate in political activities in support of the government, and the requirement that they be available for assignment for government duties for three years after graduation. By avoiding university institutions and corresponding political activities, Jehovah's Witnesses were ineligible for professional careers; their participation in the workforce was therefore limited to the technical trades and manual labor.

Religious groups continued to report that they were able to engage in community service programs, including providing assistance to the elderly, after-school tutoring for children, clean water, and health clinics. International faith-based charitable operations such as Caritas and the Salvation Army maintained local offices in Havana. Religious groups continued to provide humanitarian assistance to families affected by Hurricane Sandy, which struck eastern Cuba in 2012. Some organizations, however, reported that they were not permitted to distribute aid directly to families in need but were obligated to turn it over to government officials for distribution.

Most religious leaders reported they exercised self-censorship in what they preached and discussed during services. Many feared that direct or indirect criticism of the government could result in government reprisals, such as denials of permits from the ORA or other measures that could limit the growth of their religious groups.

In spite of the legal requirement for military service, the government continued an unofficial practice of allowing a period of civilian public service to substitute for military service for those who objected on religious grounds. Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-day Adventists leaders stated that their members generally were permitted to participate in social service in lieu of military service.

Both the Catholic Church and the Cuban Council of Churches reported that they were able to conduct religious services in prisons and detention centers in most provinces. There were reports, however, that prison authorities did not inform inmates of their right to religious assistance, delayed months before responding to requests, and limited visits to a maximum of two or three times per year.

#### *Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom*

On January 14, the government eased restrictions on both migration and temporary foreign travel for Cuban citizens by eliminating previously required exit permits. Religious groups reported that this change allowed their leaders to travel more freely and increased two-way exchanges between local faith-based communities and the rest of the world. The majority of religious groups also reported continued improvement in their ability to attract new members without government interference, a further reduction in interference from the government in conducting their services, and additional improvement in their ability to import religious materials, receive donations from overseas, bring in foreign religious workers and visitors, restore houses of worship, and conduct educational activities. Religious organizations also reported that the government returned several church properties that had been confiscated by the state in 1961.

### **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.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

U.S. interests section officials, including the Chief of Mission, met regularly with representatives of religious groups. Religious tolerance in a communist society and religious freedom were frequent topics of discussion. U.S. interests section representatives monitored religious activities and

provided resources to support the work of some faith-based organizations to assist their communities. In public statements the U.S. Department of State regularly called upon the government to respect fundamental freedoms of its citizens, including the freedom of religion, and drew attention to concerns that peaceful members of the political opposition were prevented from attending religious worship services.

Officials from the U.S. interests section met frequently with U.S. citizens visiting as part of faith-based exchanges and humanitarian aid programs. U.S. faith-based representatives engaged directly with Cuban faith-based institutions and promoted religious tolerance through their activities and presence in Cuban communities. The U.S. government encouraged these programs.

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