

While statistics are not reliable, Afro-Cuban religions or beliefs likely comprise some of the most widely practiced in Cuba. These include Santería (also referred to as Yoruba, Regla de Ocha, Regla Lucumi, Lucumi), Palo (also referred to as Las Reglas de Congo), Abakuá (also referred to as Ñañaguismo), and Arara. The structure of each differs, with Abakuá, for example, operating as a secret, male only, society; while Santería, with its syncretic nature, overlaps significantly with Roman Catholicism and has traditionally been practiced across the island in autonomous local groups, and usually in private homes, rather than formal places of worship. Partly due to these features, and their non-collective or centralised nature, the groups have also been more difficult for the Cuban government to monitor, pressure, or co-opt.

One exception to this is the Yoruba Cultural Association (YCA), which can be compared to the Cuban Council of Churches (CCC). Both are legally recognised and enjoy a relatively positive relationship with the government, receiving privileges in return for support, explicit or tacit, for government policies. Both the YCA and the CCC are also often presented by the Cuban government, domestically and internationally, as representative of the wider Afro-Cuban religious community, and the Protestant Church, respectively.

In recent months, CSW has noted an increase in government targeting of Afro-Cuban religious groups which appears to be part of a large crackdown on independent civil society and systematic harassment of religious groups and especially their leaders. Cases received by CSW have been documented in four different provinces across the island, all involving religious ceremonies or celebrations being observed in private homes. Those responsible for the violations include officials with the Department of State Security (DSE), the National Revolutionary Police (PNR), neighbourhood and municipal representatives of the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (CDR), and inspectors with the Department of Physical Planning.

The cases listed below are emblematic of the types of reports that CSW has received. All of the following occurred just in the month of August:

Case 1: In early August, in a city in eastern Cuba, a Babalao¹ and his wife were interrupted by the neighbourhood CDR delegate, as they were making preparations to celebrate a religious anniversary. The CDR delegate informed them that she had been questioned by a DSE agent about their behaviour but was unable to respond to the agent's questions specifically about how they funded their religious activities. Despite the Babalao's wife's explanation that they use their own money and buy supplies for their religious activities from legal markets, the CDR delegate warned them that if they did not cease their religious activities, she would report them to the DSE agent, and they would likely be fined, and their belongings

confiscated. The CDR delegate departed, and the couple went ahead with the celebration.

Case 2: In late August, a high-ranking police officer arrived without warning at the home of an Abakuá initiate. The officer spoke in a derogatory manner of the fact that the Abakuá is made up of only men and warned the initiate that the DSE was monitoring the society and suspected them of involvement in violent gangs and counter-revolutionary activities in marginalised neighbourhoods. When the initiate protested this characterisation, the officer threatened members of the society with prosecution if they did not disband.

Case 3: A PNR officer and a DSE agent arrived at the home of a Babalao in a city in central Cuba, one morning in late August, as the religious leader was making preparations for a ceremony celebrating a religious anniversary of one of his children. The two security officers did not identify themselves and began to interrogate the Babalao as to why he was holding the ceremony in their home. They warned the Babalao that if he carried on with the ceremony and did not cease holding religious activities in his place of residence, he would be summoned officially to the police station to give a statement. When the Babalao asked where he should hold such ceremonies, given the absence of a dedicated location for such religious activities, the security officers warned him again to halt his preparations and threatened to intervene physically if the celebration went ahead. The Babalao cancelled the religious ceremony.

Case 4: In mid-August in a city in central Cuba, the CDR president (who was known to the resident) arrived at the home of a Babalao along with a Physical Planning Inspector and a DSE agent, neither of whom identified themselves. The Babalao was reminded that he did not have permission to hold religious activities in his place of residence and was ordered to stop. The government officials claimed that the crowds that gathered to attend religious ceremonies were likely to incite counter-revolutionary acts and the situation would grow out of his control. The Babalao explained that he intentionally plans activities to take place in the morning while his neighbours are at work, so as not to disturb them. Later the same month, the same Babalao received his godfather and co-religionists at his home in order to carry out a religious ritual. Before they could begin, a PNR sector chief arrived and claimed that there had been complaints from neighbours about the noise. When the Babalao pointed out that most of their neighbours were present at the ceremony, the sector chief threatened to return with police back up to force them to stop. The PNR sector chief left and the Babalao carried on with the ceremony.

One of the most severe cases involving a practitioner of an Afro-Cuban religion is that of Loreto Hernandez Garcia and

1 The term Babalao means 'father of secrets' and refers to a recognised religious leader within the Santería tradition.

his wife Donaida Pérez Paseiro. Mr. Hernandez García, Ms. Pérez Paseiro, and two other members of the Association of Free Yorubas were all imprisoned as part of a government crackdown on protestors who participated in spontaneous and peaceful [demonstrations across the island](#) on 11 July 2021.

Mr. Hernandez García was detained on 16 July 2021 and is serving a seven-year sentence on charges of “disrespect” and “public disorder”. Ms. Pérez Paseiro is serving an eight-year sentence, having been convicted of the same charges and an additional charge of assaulting a government officer. Both are imprisoned in Guajamal Prison in the province of Villa Clara. The Association of Free Yorubas has a long history of being targeted by the government, in part because of their decision to remain independent of Afro-Cuban religious groups with strong ties to the government.

The US Commission on International Religious Freedom considers Mr Hernández García and Mrs. Pérez Paseiro to have been ‘[imprisoned for their religious identity, religious activity, and religious leadership role](#).’ Amnesty International has declared Mr. Hernández García and Mrs. Pérez Paseiro [prisoners of conscience](#).

Treatment in prison

While in prison, Mr. Hernández García has been repeatedly denied critical medical treatment for serious health conditions including asthma, diabetes, a cardiac condition, and hypertension. Members of his family have also been informed by medical specialists that he is experiencing symptoms that may be indicative of pancreatic cancer.

On 29 May 2022 he was transferred out of the prison to a nearby hospital after experiencing a medical emergency. He received medical treatment there until being forced to return to prison [one week later](#) on 7 June 2022 after State Security ordered that he be expelled from the hospital.

In March 2023, a request for temporary medical leave was denied. The request had been submitted by a relative of Mr Hernández García on 26 October 2022 along with supporting documentation from medical specialists. On 19 March 2023 Major Arturo Montenegro Sotelo informed Mr. Hernández García that the request had been refused by the Ministry of the Interior, which oversees Cuba’s internal security and intelligence.

In May 2023, Mr. Hernández García was beaten by prison guards and put in a punishment cell for eight hours. As of the writing of this report, he continues to be denied medical treatment.

In August 2023, Mr. Hernández García was again notified that a request for permission to leave the prison temporarily to receive medical treatment had been denied. The notification from the Ministry of the Interior acknowledged Mr. Hernández García’s medical needs, and mentioned that he had suffered a heart attack, but nevertheless ordered that he remain in prison.

Mr. Hernández García has also been subjected to humiliating treatment by prison officials because of his religion. On 10 November, he was beaten and thrown down a flight of stairs by a guard who identified himself as “Carlitos”, and who also ridiculed his religious beliefs.

Mrs. Pérez Paseiro lives with diabetes and hypertension. In December 2021, she was temporarily hospitalised outside the prison after experiencing severe abdominal pain for two days and vomiting blood. Members of her family have reported that she has been pressured by prison authorities to renounce her religious beliefs.

Recommendations

To the EU:

- Demand an urgent meeting with the Cuban government under Article 85(3) of the EU-Cuba Political Dialogue and Cooperation Agreement (PDCA), to formally investigate and review its compliance with PDCA human rights obligations – as also called for by the European Parliament in multiple recent resolutions;
- Introduce Magnitsky sanctions on individuals responsible for human rights violations;
- The EU Delegation to Cuba and the embassies of member states should maintain an open dialogue with religious leaders from all denominations and religious groups, including independent Afro-Cuban religious group – while taking into consideration the political sensitivities under which many religious leaders must work;
- Make public statements regarding the FoRB violations and the mistreatment of political prisoners, calling for their immediate release.

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