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2010 Report on International Religious Freedom - Cuba

[Covers the period from July 1, 2009, to June 30, 2010]

The constitution recognizes the right of citizens to profess and practice any religious belief; however, in law and in practice, the government places restrictions on freedom of religion.

Many religious groups reported improvements in religious freedom since the last reporting period, although significant restrictions remained in place. Most religious groups continued to report increased ability to cultivate new members, hold religious activities, and conduct charitable and community service projects, while at the same time reporting fewer restrictions on politically sensitive expression, importation of religious materials, and travel. Religious groups also reported that it was easier to obtain government permission to maintain and repair existing places of worship and other buildings, although obtaining permission for construction of new buildings remained difficult. Some members of religious organizations, particularly of churches that were not officially recognized, reported that the government harassed them through regular surveillance and occasional detentions, among other means. In a significant development, in May 2010 President Raúl Castro and the Catholic Cardinal of Cuba, Jaime Ortega, began a series of discussions initially focused on ending ongoing government harassment of the Damas de Blanco (Ladies in White), a well-known civil society group. The group, consisting of female relatives of political prisoners, has been holding marches after attending Mass each Sunday since 2003. In April 2010 police established checkpoints around the church and denied access to some supporters of the group. However, as a result of the high-level discussions, the government relented and the discussions extended far beyond this initial case to include a general conversation about the plight of the country's political prisoners and jail conditions in general. The cardinal stated that this was the first time that the government had engaged with the church as a mediator, and that he believed it signaled a new phase in state-church relations.

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 11.5 million. There was no independent authoritative source on the size or composition of religious institutions and their membership. The 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, among others. 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 roots in West Africa and the Congo River basin, known as Santería. These religious practices are commonly intermingled with Catholicism, and some even require Catholic baptism for full initiation, making it difficult to estimate accurately total membership of these syncretistic groups.

The Cuban Council of Churches (CCC) is an officially sanctioned umbrella organization that includes 27 religious organizations as full members, eight associate members, two with observer status, and 12 interfaith movements. The CCC is structured into six "zones" across the country and, according to its leadership, represents more than 100,000 Christians. Members elect the CCC leadership directly. Membership in the CCC is voluntary, and other officially recognized groups, including the Catholic Church, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the small Jewish and Muslim communities, do not belong.

Catholic Church officials estimated membership at seven to eight million persons (60 to 70 percent of the population) but that only 4 to 5 percent of baptized Catholics regularly attended Mass, while membership in Protestant churches was estimated at 600,000 to 800,000. Baptists, represented in four different conventions, and Pentecostal churches, particularly the Assemblies of God, are probably the largest Protestant denominations. The Assemblies of God reported more than 100,000 members; Jehovah's Witnesses reported approximately 92,000 members; Seventh-day Adventists and Methodists each estimated 30,000; Anglicans 22,000; 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 reside in Havana. Most Protestant churches reported steady growth, including significant increases in the number of Pentecostals.

According to the Islamic League, there are approximately 6,000 to 8,000 Muslims in the country, although only about 1,000 are Cubans. The rest are temporarily resident foreigners, mainly businessmen, students, and diplomats. In 2007 the government declined an offer by foreign donors to build a mosque in Havana, promising to undertake the project itself; however, construction has yet to begin.

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; however, in law and in practice, the government places restrictions on freedom of religion.

The 1992 constitution abolished atheism as the state creed, declared the country to be a secular state, and provided for the separation of church and state. 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 Cuban Communist Party. The office is the government's official liaison with religious groups.

The government has yet to ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which it signed in 2008. Article 18 of the ICCPR guarantees freedom of thought, conscience, and religion.

The government requires religious groups to apply to the Ministry of Justice for official recognition, without which they cannot operate legally. The application procedure requires groups to identify the location of their activities and their source of funding. The ministry must also certify that they are not duplicating the activities of a previously recognized organization. Once received, official recognition allows church officials to travel abroad, receive foreign visitors, and hold meetings in approved locations. Members of religious groups that have not been recognized are subject to the same restrictions on travel and assembly as all other citizens. The government rarely interfered with unrecognized religious groups, but their meetings were technically illegal and thus subject to state intervention. Although neither The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints nor the Jehovah's Witnesses were officially recognized, they were permitted to conduct most activities of recognized religious groups, including receiving foreign visitors and sending representatives abroad.

The CCC has no legal role in the formal recognition process; however, it plays an influential advisory role, providing information and recommendations about applicants to the Ministry of Justice and the Office of Religious Affairs. New Protestant denominations that wish to begin working in the country frequently seek an established church, already a member of the CCC, to act as a sponsor and help with the formal recognition procedures and with the membership process for the CCC.

The government also required that recognized churches seek approval for each proposed meeting location through a separate registration process. The government permitted the use of private homes for religious purposes, an approach that many religious organizations employed to circumvent the strict restrictions on new buildings. In addition to the numerous regulations that applied to all religious groups such as the disclosure of financial information; association with any foreign organization; and inspections of properties, publications and attendance records; "house churches" were subject to additional regulations that limited hours of use and restricted permissible locations. Estimates on the total number of house churches, legal or not, varied significantly, from just under 2,000 to as many as 10,000, most of them unregistered, and therefore illegal. Many religious leaders reported that they only sought to register a small percentage of house churches, citing the difficulty of the process and the possibility of denial. Nonetheless, the vast majority of religious leaders reported that unregistered house churches held services without any significant interference from the government.

Although the law allows the construction of new houses of worship, the government rarely granted authorization. A Russian Orthodox Church, completed in 2008 in Havana, was the most recently built church. Most religious leaders noted that during the reporting period, the government more readily gave permission to repair or restore existing churches, allowing significant expansion of some structures and in some cases allowing essentially new buildings to be constructed on the foundations of the old. During the reporting period, construction continued on a new Catholic seminary, and many churches were expanded or repaired.

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.

The law only recognized the Communist Party and restricted the formation of all other parties, including parties based on religious beliefs or doctrines.

The law required military service by all males and did not make any provision for conscientious objectors. Until 2007 the government actively prosecuted and imprisoned men who refused to serve, including for religious reasons. Since that time the government has, in practice, allowed a period of civilian public service to substitute for military service for men who object on religious grounds.

Religious literature and other religious materials generally are imported through a recognized religious group. The Office of Religious Affairs licenses such importation.

With few exceptions, the CCC imports and distributes printed religious materials for all recognized Protestant churches.

Foreign missionary groups operate through recognized churches. Visits by religious figures are vetted by the Office of Religious Affairs.

To hold processions or other events outside religious buildings, religious groups must request permission from the Ministry of Justice. However, during the reporting period, at least two religious groups held public processions without obtaining a permit without negative consequences.

Religious groups provided religious education classes to their members, as well as to wider audiences. The state-run University of Havana offered some postgraduate courses in the history of religion. The government allowed some religious groups, such as the Catholic Church and the Havana Jewish Community Center, to administer charities and offer courses on nonreligious subjects such as computers and foreign languages. The larger churches were increasingly engaged in community service, such as assistance to the elderly and a 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 in Havana.

Both the Catholic Church and the CCC reported improved access to prisoners during the reporting period. In 2009 member churches of the CCC began holding regular services in selected prisons, mostly in the province of Havana. The CCC reported that the government allowed continued expansion of this program during 2010, with services offered in most if not all provinces. As in the previous reporting period, there were isolated 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.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Many religious groups reported improvements in religious freedom since the last reporting period, although significant restrictions remained in place. Generally, older and more established groups, as well as those associated with the CCC, reported greater ability to conduct their activities without government interference or harassment. However, religious groups were no exception to the government's generalized efforts to monitor civic activities, often resorting to surveillance, infiltration, and harassment of those under suspicion.

Beginning in the spring of 2010, police and government-organized mobs blocked Reina Luisa Tamayo and her family from attending Mass and visiting the grave of her son, Orlando Zapata Tamayo, a political prisoner who died in February following a prolonged hunger strike. Each week, Tamayo and a small group of 10 to 15 supporters attempted to march from her house to the church and cemetery, holding flowers and photographs of Zapata.

Several religious groups viewed the regulations governing house churches as overly restrictive and cumbersome. Most groups indicated that applications either eventually were approved (although the wait could be as long as two to three years) or they received no response, while a minority reported that their applications were denied. Groups generally reported that they continued to use unregistered house churches with little or no interference from the government.

Most religious leaders reported that they exercised self-censorship in what they preached and discussed during services. Although they reported widespread fears that direct or indirect criticism of the government could result in problems with state security, most could not cite specific examples of intimidation or harassment resulting from what they preached or said. Some prominent religious leaders were openly critical of the government, including the Catholic cardinal, whose criticisms were published domestically in Catholic printed and electronic publications, and a group of Santería

elders whose statement received significant coverage in the international media. The government did not retaliate in either case.

The government encouraged mass political mobilization and favored citizens who actively participated. Academic curricula at all levels of schooling were highly politicized. Consequently, groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses experienced difficulties accommodating their prohibitions against political involvement in this environment. For instance, some Jehovah's Witnesses leaders encouraged their members to avoid university education, since political indoctrination pervaded coursework and academic life. Similarly, groups that strictly refrained from work or study on Saturday reported that they avoided professions requiring Saturday activities.

The government tightly regulated the publication of all printed materials (not only religious literature), while tolerating a wider range of electronic media (some of which it censored or filtered from local access). The government had a near monopoly on distribution and sale of printing equipment and supplies, which were costly. The Catholic Church and some other churches published printed periodicals during the reporting period without interference, although they did not have permits. The Catholic Church and other religious organizations also operated Web sites and blogs that were not blocked.

The government did not permit the existence of private primary and secondary schools, including religious schools, although several international schools in Havana operated under agreements with the government and were given considerable leeway in setting their curricula. However, the government allowed only children with foreign passports to attend these schools.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

There were no reports of persons imprisoned or detained for specifically religious reasons. A few religious groups reported cases of members who alleged that the government targeted them for selected prosecution for common crimes because of their religious activities. The CCC denied this allegation and stated that it knew of no case where a person was imprisoned because of religious beliefs or activities.

In February 2010 state security detained two members of the unrecognized denomination "Creciendo en Gracia" (Growing in Grace) in Havana for distributing pamphlets critical of the Catholic Church. State security detained the members for several hours because they reportedly did not have a license to distribute materials publicly. The pamphlets were confiscated and the members were threatened with arrest for "disturbing the peace" if they persisted.

On February 1, 2010, the Supreme Court in Havana affirmed the 2009 conviction of Pastor Omar Gude Pérez. Gude, a leader of the "Apostolic Reformation" (an association of independent nondenominational churches), was convicted of illicit economic activity and falsification of documents and was serving a six-year sentence at the end of the reporting period. Gude was first detained in May 2008 on charges of "human trafficking" that were dismissed in March 2009. Gude remained under detention, however, and in April 2009 he was charged with illicit economic activity and falsification of documents. Gude maintained his innocence and stated he was being persecuted for his religious activities. In June 2010 Pastor Gude's wife reported that she was issued an eviction order from the couple's home because of her husband's religious activities, but that she intended to appeal the order. No further information was available at the end of the reporting period. Leaders of the Apostolic Reformation movement reported continued harassment and arrests of church leaders throughout the country and estimated that in 2009 more than 30 members were detained for brief periods.

In October 2009 state security detained two Baptist pastors who were distributing financial aid to several churches in Guantanamo Province. They were held for approximately two weeks before being released without charge.

In 2009 in Camaguey, state security detained several evangelical pastors for holding an unauthorized meeting. All were released within a few hours without charges.

In 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 2008 state security arrested Reverend Roberto Rodriguez Rodriguez, of the Interdenominational Fellowship of Evangelical Pastors and Ministers in Cuba (CIMPEC), 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 of CIMPEC from the CCC, citing state interference in CCC affairs. The government Registrar of Organizations stripped Rodriguez of his presidency of CIMPEC, which the registrar stated was unconstitutional. Rodriguez and his son, Reverend Eric Gabriel Rodriguez de Toro, were subsequently charged with assaulting a neighbor. The younger Rodriguez was convicted and sentenced to house arrest for a period from three months to one year, while his father was held under house arrest, pending trial, for much of the reporting period, according to the nongovernmental organization Christian Solidarity Worldwide.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

In general the majority of religious groups saw continued improvement in their ability to import religious materials, receive donations from overseas, and travel abroad to attend conferences and religious events. Various religious groups found it somewhat easier to bring in foreign religious workers, access the Internet, and restore houses of worship. On the outskirts of Havana, construction neared completion on the country's first new Catholic seminary in 50 years, while instruction took place in classrooms in the seminary's current quarters in central Havana.

In general, religious groups reported no problems conducting their services. 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. The leadership of Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-day Adventists stated that mistreatment and job discrimination that were particularly harsh in the past were now rare and confined to isolated cases. The leaders stated that their members were usually offered the option of alternative civic service in lieu of mandatory military service, and that their members were usually exempted from political activities at school. The leaders of Seventh-day Adventists stated that their members were usually excused from work on Saturdays. Both groups stated that discrimination and harassment decreased.

The government continued to permit the Catholic Church to conduct Christmas and Easter Masses inside prisons across the country. In addition the CCC reported that pastors were able to hold religious services in several prisons and were working to expand to others. It also reported improved access to Protestant prisoners.

Most religious groups reported fewer restrictions on politically sensitive expression. Some Catholic parishes offered prayers for political prisoners, and church officials, including the cardinal, openly criticized the government. The CCC publicly lamented the death in prison of hunger-striking political prisoner Orlando Zapata Tamayo. Many religious leaders stated that they discussed publicly their biblical interpretations of societal issues such as poverty and homosexuality. One pastor reported that his congregation held a public protest opposing the officially sanctioned "Day Against Homophobia." The government denied the request for a permit, but the congregation

encountered no repercussions for the event.

In 2010 the Catholic Church received permission to broadcast Easter Mass on state-run stations (the state has a monopoly on all broadcast media), having received such permission in the 1990s for Christmas Mass. In addition in 2010 the government authorized the CCC to host a series of hour-long radio broadcasts in provinces throughout the country.

The government continued to allow public processions for important Catholic festivals, such as the annual procession for Our Lady of Charity, designated by the Catholic Church as the country's patron saint.

In a significant development, in May 2010 President Castro and Cardinal Ortega began a series of discussions initially focused on ending ongoing government harassment of the Damas de Blanco, consisting of female relatives of political prisoners. The group has been holding silent protest marches after attending Mass at the Catholic parish of Santa Rita each Sunday since 2003. In April 2010 in an attempt to reduce the size of the marches, police established checkpoints around the church and denied access to some supporters of the group. However, as a result of the high-level discussions, the government removed the checkpoints and the discussions extended far beyond this initial case to include a general conversation about the plight of the country's political prisoners and jail conditions in general. The cardinal stated that this was the first time that the government had engaged with the church as a mediator, and he believed it signaled a new phase in state-church relations.

In June 2010 the Vatican Secretary for Relations with States, Dominique Mamberti, visited the country and met with President Raúl Castro, as well as Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez and others. The Communist Party newspaper commented on the visit and noted the "favorable" development of the relationship with the Vatican.

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

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