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2011 Report on International Religious Freedom - Cuba

Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
July 30, 2012

[Covers calendar year from 1 January 2011 to 31 December 2011]

Executive Summary

The constitution protects religious freedom, and the government's respect for religious freedom improved, although significant restrictions remained in place. Most religious groups reported 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 religious expression, importation of religious materials, and travel. Religious groups also reported 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. The Cuban Communist Party, through its Office of Religious Affairs, continued to wield regulatory control over most aspects of religious life. The government's repression of peaceful human rights activists included preventing some of them from attending religious services.

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

The U.S. government encouraged the development of civil society, which included strengthening religious institutions. Changes to Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) regulations during the year eased restrictions on religious remittances and exchanges with religious institutions in the United States. The U.S. Interests Section remained in close contact with numerous religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

There is no independent authoritative source on the size or composition of religious institutions and their membership. The Roman Catholic Church estimates that 60 to 70 percent of the population is Catholic but that only 4 to 5 percent regularly attend mass. Membership in Protestant churches is estimated at 5 percent of the population. Baptists and Pentecostals are likely the largest Protestant denominations. Jehovah's Witnesses reported approximately 94,000 members; Seventh-day Adventists and Methodists each estimated 30,000; Anglicans, 22,000; Presbyterians, 15,000; Quakers, 300; and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), 50. The Jewish community estimated 1,500 members of whom 1,200 reside in Havana. According to the Islamic League, there are approximately 6,000 to 8,000 Muslims, although only an estimated 1,000 are Cubans. Other religious groups include the Greek and Russian Orthodox churches, Buddhists and Baha'is.

Many persons 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 syncretistic groups.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution protects religious freedom, although in practice the government placed 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 Cuban Communist Party is empowered with the authority to regulate religious institutions and also the practice of religion through its Office of Religious Affairs.

By law religious groups are required to apply to the Ministry of Justice for official recognition. The application procedure requires religious groups to identify the location of their activities and their source of funding, and requires the ministry to certify that the group is not "duplicating" the activities of another recognized organization in which case, recognition is denied. Once the Ministry of Justice grants official recognition, religious organizations have to request permission from the Office of Religious Affairs to hold meetings in approved locations, to receive foreign visitors, and to travel abroad.

The government observes December 25 as a national holiday. Government declarations and calendars do not assign any religious significance to the day.

Government Practices

There were reports of restrictions on religious freedom. Religious groups were no exception to the government's generalized efforts to monitor all civic activities, and the Communist Party's Office of Religious Affairs monitored and regulated almost every aspect of religious life, including the power to approve or deny religious visits, the construction or repair of religious buildings, the ability to conduct religious services in public, and the importation of religious literature. Except for two Catholic seminaries and several interfaith training centers throughout the island, religious schools were not permitted and military service was mandatory, with no legal exception for conscientious objectors.

A number of religious groups, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons, have been waiting for years for a decision from the Ministry of Justice on their pending applications for official recognition. However, unrecognized religious groups reported they were able to conduct religious activities, hold meetings, receive foreign visitors, and send representatives abroad.

The Office of Religious Affairs rarely granted religious organizations authorization to construct new buildings. Religious leaders noted, however, that the office frequently granted permission to repair or restore existing temples, allowing significant expansion of some structures and in some cases allowing essentially new buildings to be constructed on the foundations of the old. Numerous houses of worship were expanded or repaired.

In response to strict restrictions on the construction of new buildings, many religious organizations used private homes, known as "house churches," for religious services. Estimates on the total number of house churches varied significantly, from just under 2,000 to as many as 10,000. The Office of Religious Affairs allowed this but required that recognized groups seek approval for each proposed location through a separate registration process. Religious groups indicated that while many applications were approved 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 their "house churches." In practice, most unregistered "house churches" operated with little or no interference from the government.

A license from the Office of Religious Affairs is necessary to import religious literature and other religious materials. The government owns nearly all printing equipment and supplies and tightly regulates printed materials, including religious literature. During the year the Catholic Church and some other churches were able to print periodicals and operate their own Web sites with little or no censorship.

The government did not permit religious groups to establish schools. Some religious groups operated afterschool programs and weekend retreats for primary and secondary students and higher education programs for university graduates. The Catholic Church held twice yearly teaching workshops for public school teachers. Although not sanctioned by the government, these programs operated without interference. Jehovah's Witnesses leaders encouraged members to avoid university education, finding the requirements for university admission and course of study incompatible with the group's beliefs prohibiting political involvement. Jehovah's Witnesses also 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.

While the law requires military service by all males and does not make any provision for conscientious objectors, since 2007 the government has unofficially allowed a period of civilian public service to substitute for military service for men who object on religious grounds. The leadership of Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-day Adventists stated that their members usually were permitted to participate in social service in lieu of military service. 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 Office of Religious Affairs or other measures that could stymie the growth of their organizations.

The government took measures to limit support to outspoken religious figures that it considered a challenge to its authority. On June 26, police arrested 23 people and detained them for five hours to prevent them from attending a Sunday prayer session in support of a Methodist minister who was removed from his post by his superiors, partly because of his outspoken criticism of the government. On October 19, police stopped Baptist pastor Mario Felix Leonart, a vocal critic of the authorities in the province of Santa Clara, and detained him for 10 hours.

In February Pastor Omar Perez Ruiz (aka Omar Gude Perez), a leader of the Apostolic Reformation, an association of independent nondenominational churches, was released after serving almost three years of a six-year prison sentence for illicit economic activities and falsification of documents. Perez maintained his innocence and claimed his incarceration was due to his religious activities. Perez's release was conditioned on his refraining from preaching and from leaving the city of Camaguey. Although Perez and his family were granted refugee status in the United States, they were unable to leave because the government did not grant them an exit permit.

As part of its campaign of repression of human rights activists, the government prevented many Catholics from attending religious services. Members of the Ladies in White (Damas de Blanco) group were routinely prevented from attending church, a practice that was particularly pronounced in the eastern provinces of Holguin and Santiago. The government prevented Adisnidia Cruz, mother of political prisoners Marcos and Antonio Lima-Cruz, from leaving her house in Holguin on Sundays to attend mass on dozens of occasions. In other instances the government harassed human rights activists immediately after religious services. On September 8, for example, members of the Damas de Blanco were arrested after attending mass in Santiago to celebrate the day of Cuba's patron saint.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

Religious organizations reported significant ability to attract new members without government interference. Many churches reported increased participation in religious instruction for children because government schools no longer scheduled competing activities on Saturdays or Sundays. The majority of religious groups reported little interference from the government in conducting their services and saw improvement in their ability to import religious materials, receive donations from overseas, and travel abroad to attend conferences and religious events. Some religious groups found it easier to bring in foreign religious workers and restore houses of worship.

The leadership of Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-day Adventists stated that mistreatment and job discrimination, which had been particularly harsh in the past, were now rare and that their members were usually exempted from political activities at school. Seventh-day Adventist leaders stated that their members employed by the state usually were excused from working on Saturdays.

Religious groups reported they were able to continue to provide community service programs with little interference from the government. These programs included 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, had local offices in Havana.

Religious organizations reported increased ability to conduct educational programs over the year. The Catholic Church and the Jewish Community Center offered courses on lay subjects such as computers and foreign languages. In September the Catholic Church opened a cultural center in Havana as a space for art exhibits, debates, and small classes, including a business training program. The Church's business program was offered with the cooperation of the San Antonio University of Murcia, Spain for a master's degree in business.

The Catholic Church continued to publish periodicals that sometimes included criticism of official social and economic policies. As in previous years, the Catholic Church also received permission to broadcast Christmas and Easter messages on state-run radio stations and, in 2011, a televised mass on September 8, the feast day of the Virgin of Charity of El Cobre, the country's patron saint. The Council of Churches, the government-recognized Protestant umbrella organization, was authorized to host monthly two hour-long radio broadcasts.

Both the Catholic Church and the Cuban Council of Churches reported improved access to prisoners during the year, with services offered in prisons and detention centers in most, if not all, provinces. There were some reports, however, 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 per year.

The government worked with the Catholic Church to facilitate the public procession of an icon honoring the Virgin of Charity to mark the 400th anniversary of her appearance in Cuba. The procession concluded in December with a public open-air mass in Havana attended by over 3,000 citizens as well as by government officials. It was the first country-wide religious procession permitted since the Cuban revolution.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

As part of U.S. policy to encourage increased respect for religious freedom, officials from the Interests Section met frequently with representatives of religious groups; they often participated in each other's activities and programs. Changes to OFAC regulations in January eased restrictions on religious remittances and religious exchanges with U.S.-based institutions.

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