



## 2014 Report on International Religious Freedom - Cuba

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### Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and prohibits discrimination based on religion. The government monitored religious groups, and the Cuban Communist Party, through its Office of Religious Affairs (ORA), continued to control many aspects of religious life. The government harassed outspoken religious leaders and their followers, including reports of beatings, threats, detentions, and restrictions on travel. Religious leaders reported the government tightened controls on financial resources. Religious groups reported a continued increase in the ability of their members to conduct some charitable and educational projects, such as operating after-school and community service programs, and maintaining small libraries of religious materials, including fewer restrictions on the importation of Bibles.

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

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. diplomatic mission in Cuba remained in close contact with religious groups. 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 million (July 2014 estimate). There is no independent, authoritative source on the overall size or composition of religious groups. The Roman Catholic Church estimates 60 to 70 percent of the population is Catholic. Membership in Protestant churches is estimated at 5 percent of the population. Pentecostals and Baptists are likely the largest Protestant denominations; the Assemblies of God reports approximately 110,000 members; and 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 1,500 are

Cubans. Other religious groups include Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Buddhists, and Bahais.

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

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

### *Legal Framework*

According to the constitution, "the state recognizes, respects, and guarantees freedom of religion." It also states that "the different beliefs and religions enjoy the same considerations under the law." It prohibits discrimination based on religion. It also declares the country a secular state, provides for the separation of church and state, and declares "the Communist Party of Cuba ... is the superior leading force of the society and the State ... "

The Cuban Communist Party through its ORA regulates religious institutions and the practice of religion. The 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 importation of religious literature.

By law religious groups are required to apply to the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) for official recognition. The application process requires religious groups to identify the location of their activities and the source of their funding. The MOJ must certify the group is not duplicating the activities of another recognized group, or it will deny recognition. Once the ministry grants official recognition, the religious group must request permission from the ORA to conduct activities such as holding meetings in approved locations, publishing any decisions or minutes from internal meetings, receiving foreign visitors, importing religious literature, purchasing and operating motor vehicles, and constructing, repairing, or purchasing places of worship. Groups that fail to register may face penalties ranging from fines to closure of their organizations.

Military service is mandatory for all men.

### *Government Practices*

The government harassed, detained, and restricted travel for outspoken religious figures, especially those who discussed human rights or collaborated with human rights groups. The government harassed Baptist pastor and religious freedom activist Reverend Mario Felix Lleonart Barroso and members of his congregation on many occasions. According to Reverend Lleonart, state security officials detained younger members of his congregation and demanded they sever all ties with Lleonart or face harsher punishment. Additionally members reported that on several occasions the police confiscated invitations from religious and human rights groups in the United States to attend trainings, presentations, and networking events, stating invitees would not be allowed to travel outside of Cuba at that time. Members of Lleonart's church were beaten by state security officials and threatened with further legal actions.

Some independent evangelical Protestant churches also reported that government authorities harassed and detained their leadership and members of their families. Pastors and members of these groups were often detained and told to cease all religious activity. In July several independent sources implicated the state police in the destruction of Pastor Esmir Torreblanca's house in Jose Marti District in Santiago de Cuba. The house had been the headquarters of the

Kingdom of God Church for four years. In June Pastor Jose Miguel Ramirez Perez, leader of Pastors for Truth in Las Tunas, reported that unidentified assailants severely beat and injured him with sharp objects and stones and called him "worm" (a derogatory term for "defector") and "garbage talker." He stated he and his family had suffered threats and harassment for years.

Other evangelical groups reported lesser known members of their churches were sometimes arrested or detained. Jose Miguel Martinez of Pastors for Change said he and several members of his church were detained in June and again in July for holding religious meetings that discussed human rights violations. Members of Pastors for Change stated their wives and children were harassed at work and at school, and were also detained.

In April the pastor of Alianza Cristiana de Cuba, Manuel Morejon Soler, staged a hunger strike for several weeks. He demanded the government enact a law to end the harassment and discrimination against pastors and members of their congregations.

Most religious leaders reported they exercised self-censorship in what they preached and discussed during services. Some said they 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.

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 substantial renovations to their facilities, and send representatives abroad. They also reported, however, that their members were exposed to some harassment by state security, including monitoring of their movements, telephone calls, visitors, and religious meetings.

The ORA allowed the use of private homes, known as "house churches," for religious services but required that recognized groups seek approval for each proposed house church location through the formal registration process. Many religious groups used private homes for this purpose in response to tight restrictions on constructing new buildings. Estimates of the total number of house churches varied significantly, from fewer than 2,000 to as many as 10,000. 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. Religious leaders, however, reported improvement in their ability to import religious materials. Several groups were successful in importing large quantities of Bibles and the Catholic Church was able to print and distribute a pastoral plan that was critical of many aspects of Cuban governance. The Catholic Church and Protestant religious groups were able to maintain small libraries, print periodicals and other information, and operate their own websites with little or no formal censorship. The Catholic Church continued to publish periodicals and hold debates that sometimes criticized official social and economic policies, and was 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 radio broadcast.

On October 28, the Catholic Church reported that the ORA granted approval for the construction of a new church in Sandino, Pinar del Rio, which would hold up to 200 people. Some religious leaders stated that the ORA granted permission to repair or restore existing buildings more

frequently than in years past, allowing significant expansion of some structures and in some cases allowing essentially new buildings to be constructed on the foundations of the old. Other religious groups, however, stated that securing permission for the purchase or construction of new buildings remained difficult, if not impossible.

Many religious leaders, particularly those from smaller, independent house churches or Santeria communities, expressed concern that the government was less tolerant of groups that relied on informal locations to practice their beliefs, which they attributed in part to broader constraints on free assembly.

Many groups stated the ORA tightened controls on financial resources for churches. Religious leaders reported new restrictions on their ability to receive donations from overseas. They cited a new measure that prohibited churches and religious groups from using individuals' bank accounts for their organizations, and required existing individual accounts to be consolidated into one per denomination or organization. According to religious leaders, the new regulations allowed the government to curb the scope and number of activities of individual churches and to single out groups that could be held accountable for withdrawing money intended for purposes not approved by the government. In April the government allowed financial operations to restart for the First Baptist Church in Santa Clara, after its accounts had been frozen for several years. Religious leaders reported that withdrawals from Cuban bank accounts, however, were limited.

With the exception of two Catholic seminaries and several interfaith training centers, the government did not permit religious groups to establish accredited schools. Although not specifically allowed or accredited, the government permitted some religious groups' after-school programs, weekend retreats, workshops for primary and secondary students, and higher education programs to operate without interference. The Catholic Church offered coursework that led to a bachelor's degree and master's degree through foreign partners and several Protestant communities offered, via distance learning, bachelor's degrees or master's degrees in theology, the humanities, and related subjects. Religious groups continued to report they were able to engage in community service programs, including providing assistance to the elderly, providing potable water to small towns, growing and selling fruits and vegetables at below-market prices, and establishing health clinics. International faith-based charitable operations, such as Caritas and the Salvation Army, maintained local offices in Havana.

Leaders of Jehovah's Witnesses 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 specifically objected, based on incompatibility, to the expectation that students participate in political activities in support of the government and the requirement they be available for assignment to government duties for three years after graduation. By avoiding university institutions and corresponding political activities, Jehovah's Witnesses were ineligible for some professional careers.

The government took measures to restrict the freedoms of expression and assembly, which prevented some human rights activists from attending religious services. The police took measures, including detentions, that prevented members of the peaceful protest group Ladies in White from attending Catholic Mass.

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. Church leaders submitted official letters to a military committee, which then decided whether to grant these exemptions. Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-day Adventist leaders stated their members generally were permitted to perform social service in lieu of military service.

Both the Catholic Church and the Cuban Council of Churches reported they were able to conduct religious services in prisons and detention centers in some provinces. The Protestant seminary in Matanzas reported it was allowed to train chaplains to go into prisons and provide religious counseling for inmates, and to provide support for their families.

Religious groups reported their leaders continued to travel abroad more freely to increase two-way exchanges between local faith-based communities and the rest of the world. Additionally, they reported this easing of travel restrictions had permitted voices of dissent and opposition to denounce violations of religious freedom. The majority of religious groups continued to report improvement in their ability to attract new members without government interference, and a further reduction in interference from the government in conducting their services.

### Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

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

U.S. diplomats, including the Chief of Mission, met regularly with representatives of religious groups. Religious tolerance in a society lacking free assembly and religious freedom were frequent topics of discussion. The U.S. diplomatic mission 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.

Officials from the U.S. diplomatic mission met frequently with U.S. citizens visiting as part of faith-based exchanges and humanitarian aid programs and encouraged these faith-based representatives to engage directly with local faith-based institutions and promote religious tolerance through their activities and presence in communities in the country.

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