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July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report - Cuba

Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
September 13, 2011

[Covers six-month period from 1 July 2010 to 31 December 2010 (USDOS is shifting to a calendar year reporting period)]

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

The government's respect for religious freedom in law and in practice improved during the 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, the government invited Cuban Catholic Cardinal Jaime Ortega to discuss the release of political prisoners, which by the end of the reporting period had resulted in more than 40 releases.

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 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 and includes Baptists, Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Anglicans, Lutherans, and the

Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), among others. Other groups include Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Bahais, 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 and the small Jewish and Muslim communities, do not belong.

Catholic Church officials estimated that its membership was seven to eight million persons 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 an estimated 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 had not begun by the end of the reporting period.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Please refer to Appendix C in the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for the status of the government's acceptance of international legal standards
<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/appendices/index.htm>.

The constitution protects religious freedom; however, in law and 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 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 requires 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 – 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 sought to register only 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 significant interference from the government.

Although the law allows the construction of new houses of worship, the government rarely granted authorization. Most religious leaders noted that during the reporting period, the government frequently 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, many churches were expanded or repaired.

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

The law requires military service by all males and does 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. The leadership of Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-day Adventists stated that their members usually were offered the option of civic service.

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.

In general, religious groups reported no problems conducting their services. Many religious organizations reported a significant increase 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 and that their members were usually exempted from political activities at school. Seventh-day Adventist leaders stated that their members usually were excused from work on Saturdays. Both groups stated that discrimination and harassment decreased.

Most religious groups reported fewer restrictions on politically sensitive expression. Some Catholic parishes offered prayers for political prisoners, and church officials, including Cardinal Ortega, openly criticized the government on some matters. Many religious leaders stated that they discussed publicly their biblical interpretations of societal issues such as poverty and homosexuality.

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 that authorities generally gave them access to inmates at penitentiaries during the reporting period. In 2009 the Catholic Church and member churches of the CCC began holding regular services in selected prisons, mostly in the province of Havana. The CCC and the Catholic Church 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 reports that prison authorities did not inform inmates of their right to religious assistance, delayed the requests for months before responding, and limited pastoral visits to a maximum of two or three times a year.

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.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government's respect for religious freedom in law and in practice improved during the reporting period, although significant restrictions remained in place. Generally, more-established groups and those associated with the CCC reported greater ability to conduct their activities without government interference or harassment. Despite these reports religious groups were no exception to the government's generalized efforts to monitor all civic activities, and the government often resorted to surveillance, infiltration, and harassment of those under suspicion of opposition activities.

Early in the year a participant in a conference made a clandestine video of a speech by Caridad Diego, head of the Office of Religious Affairs, which subsequently was posted on the Internet. In the speech Diego stated that the government had confiscated homes and places of worship from leaders of a number of unregistered religious movements and had seized religious literature that allegedly had not "entered the country via the appropriate channels."

In the eastern part of the country, state-organized mobs harassed political opposition figures who were on their way to Mass. Police and government-organized mobs continued to harass the family of Orlando Zapata Tamayo, a political prisoner who died in February following a prolonged hunger strike. Zapata's mother, Reina Luisa Tamayo, relatives, and supporters chanted antigovernment slogans as they made their way from

her house to the nearby church to attend Mass and visit Zapata's grave. Mobs and police gathered along the route, chanting insults and progovernment slogans, and on several occasions prevented Tamayo from reaching the church.

Several religious groups viewed the regulations governing the establishment of 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 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 circulated domestically in Catholic print and electronic publications, and a group of Santería elders whose statement received significant coverage in the international media. During the reporting period, several less prominent religious leaders also occasionally publicly criticized the government. The government did not retaliate in these cases.

The government encouraged mass political mobilization and favored citizens who actively participated in activities organized by and in support of the government. 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. 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 censored.

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.

On February 1, the Supreme Court in Havana affirmed the 2009 conviction of Pastor Omar Gude Pérez, a leader of the "Apostolic Reformation" (an association of independent nondenominational churches), for "illicit economic activity" (conducting business in the black market) and falsification of documents. Gude was serving a six-year sentence at the end of the reporting period. He maintained his innocence and claimed he was being persecuted for his religious activities. In June, Gude's wife reported that she was issued an eviction order from the couple's home and claimed that

it was in reprisal for her husband's religious activities. The government had not carried out the eviction order by the end of the reporting period. Leaders of the Apostolic Reformation movement reported continued harassment and detention of church leaders throughout the country, with at least one other pastor serving prison time on charges of "illicit economic activity."

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 easier to bring in foreign religious workers, access the Internet, and restore houses of worship. In November construction was completed on the country's first new Catholic seminary in more than 50 years, located on the outskirts of Havana. President Castro and several other government officials attended the opening of the seminary.

The government released more than 40 political prisoners during the reporting period, including many notable human rights activists arrested in 2003. Although most were released on condition that they accept exile to Spain, during the reporting period the government allowed one to remain in the country. The releases, mediated by Cardinal Jaime Ortega, came in the wake of street protests and severe international criticism following the death of hunger-striking political prisoner Orlando Zapata Tamayo.

The government continued to allow public processions for important Catholic festivals. On August 8, the Catholic Church began an island-wide processional tour of an icon honoring Our Lady of Charity – designated by the Catholic Church as the country's patron saint – to mark the 400th anniversary of her appearance in Cuba. The procession commenced with a Mass, which was broadcast on national television, and was expected to conclude in December 2011 with celebrations in Havana. This was the first country-wide procession since the revolution.

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 Cuba's 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.
