



USCIRF Annual Report 2014 - Cuba

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Key Findings

Serious religious freedom violations continue in Cuba, despite some improvements for government-approved religious groups. Reports indicate harassment of religious leaders and laity, interference in religious groups' internal affairs, and pressure to prevent democracy and human rights activists from participating in religious activities. Despite constitutional protections for religious freedom, the Cuban government actively controls and monitors religious practice through a restrictive system of laws and policies, government-authorized surveillance and harassment, and short-term detentions of religious leaders. Based on these concerns, USCIRF places Cuba on Tier 2 in 2014. Cuba has been on USCIRF's Watch List since 2004.

Background

The Cuban government controls religious activities through the Office of Religious Affairs of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party and the Ministry of Justice. The government requires religious communities to undergo an invasive registration procedure with the Ministry of Justice. Only registered religious communities are legally allowed to receive foreign visitors, import religious materials, meet in approved houses of worship, and apply for travel abroad for religious purposes. Local Communist Party officials must approve all religious activities of registered groups, including granting permits to repair or build new houses of worship and granting permission to hold processions or events outside religious buildings. The government also restricts religious practices by denying access to state media and exit visas, requiring the registration of publications, and limiting the entry of foreign religious workers.

The government undertakes efforts to deny human rights activists their religious freedom by pressuring religious leaders to deny human rights activists access to their churches. The government also prevents human rights activists and Ladies in White members from attending religious services either by detaining them for short periods, blocking entrances to churches, or staging "acts of repudiation" where other Cuban citizens violently harass and prevent such activists from accessing churches. Churches and denominations that engage in or speak in favor of human rights and democracy activities are routinely targeted with increased governmental efforts to control their leadership and organizational structure.

Unregistered denominations, churches and church leaders, or those who are perceived as being too independent of government control are frequently threatened with church closures, short-term detentions, and harassment.

Religious Freedom Conditions 2013-2014

Positive Developments

As in previous years, there were some positive developments over the reporting period for the Catholic Church and major registered Protestant denominations, including Baptists, Pentecostals, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Methodists. Catholic and Protestant Sunday masses were held in more prisons throughout the island. Religious denominations continued to report increased opportunities to conduct some humanitarian and charity work, receive contributions from co-religionists outside Cuba, and obtain Bibles and other religious materials. Small, local processions continued to occur in the provinces in 2013. The elimination of the need for Cubans to receive an exit visa, or "white card," from the Cuban government in order to travel abroad allowed many religious leaders to travel outside of Cuba for the first time.

Continued Targeting

As in previous reporting periods, the Cuban government continued to target human rights activists and particular religious communities. At least 130 separate incidents were reported in 2013 of Ladies in White members and other human rights and democracy activists being prevented from attending Sunday masses, either by being arrested before mass and released hours later or by police officers blockading them from reaching their respective churches. At least one such incident was reported every Sunday during the year. Individuals reported being beaten and harassed during their arrests.

There were seven reported incidents of members of an interdenominational Protestant religious community being arrested, sometimes while evangelizing, and held for short periods of time. Those arrested report having their belongings confiscated and occasionally being beaten.

Government Harassment

The Apostolic Reformation, an independent and fast-growing religious community, continued to face government harassment during this reporting period. Such harassment includes: short-term arrests of leaders; "acts of repudiation;" confiscations, destruction or threats of destruction of church property; harassment and surveillance of church members and their relatives; fines on churches; and threats of losses of job, housing or educational opportunities. The Western Baptist Convention, which has supported democracy activists, resisted government pressure to change its administrative structure; fought the closure of three of its churches; and contended with fines, frozen assets, and harassment of pastors, including threats of physical violence.

Increased Efforts to Control

In this reporting period, the Cuban government increased its efforts to control religious communities. The Office of Religious Affairs of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party announced that in 2014, bank accounts will be restricted to one per denomination or religious association and individual churches will no longer be permitted to maintain their finances independently. Given that the Cuban government controls the banks, this move increases its ability to freeze the accounts of disfavoured religious communities. Religious communities also report that the Office of Religious Affairs continues to pressure denominations to change internal governing

structures, statutes and constitutions to be more hierarchical, which would aid government efforts to pressure or control religious communities.

Recommendations for U.S. Policy

Despite the lack of full diplomatic relations, USCIRF urges the U.S. government to press Havana to end the detentions of religious leaders and followers. In addition, USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government should:

- Press the Cuban government to meet the following benchmarks in the context of any discussion about resumption of full diplomatic relations: ending arrests and harassment of religious leaders; ceasing interference with religious activities and religious communities' internal affairs; allowing unregistered religious groups to operate freely and legally; revising government policies that restrict religious services in homes or other personal property; and holding accountable police and other security personnel for actions that violate the human rights of non-violent religious practitioners;
- Encourage the Broadcasting Board of Governors to use appropriated funds to advance Internet freedom and protect Cuban activists by supporting the development of new technologies and distributing programs to counter censorship; and
- Encourage international partners, including key Latin American and European countries and regional blocks, to ensure that violations of freedom of religion or belief and related human rights are part of formal and informal multilateral or bilateral normalization discussions with Cuba.