

# **CUBA 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **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 the Office of Religious Affairs (ORA), continued to control most aspects of religious life. The government harassed some religious leaders and their followers, with reports of threats, detentions, confiscation of religious materials, and restrictions on travel. Several evangelical religious leaders reported the government attempted to expropriate some religious properties under new zoning laws. Religious groups reported a continued increase in the ability of their members to conduct some charitable and educational projects, such as operating before- and after-school and community service programs and maintaining small libraries of religious materials, including fewer restrictions on the importation of Bibles. Pope Francis traveled to various cities in September and engaged with people from all walks of life. The government released more than 3,500 prisoners in connection with the pope's visit, including some foreigners; many were scheduled for release, and the Department of State did not identify any political prisoners in the group. The government detained several human rights activists before and during the visit in an attempt to prevent them from attending Mass or interacting with the pope.

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

The U.S. government encouraged the strengthening of religious institutions by supporting exchange visits by members of U.S. religious institutions with their Cuban counterparts. The U.S. embassy requested to meet with officials in the ORA and the head of the Council of Cuban Churches, a quasi-governmental organization comprising most Protestant groups. The embassy remained in close contact with religious groups, including facilitating exchanges between visiting religious delegations and religious groups in the country. In public statements, the 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 2015 estimate). There is no independent, authoritative source on the overall size or composition of religious groups. The Roman Catholic Church estimates 60 to 70

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percent of the population identify as 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 it has 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 which an estimated 1,500 are Cubans. Other religious groups include Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Buddhists, and Bahais.

Many individuals, particularly in the African Cuban community, practice religions with roots in West Africa and the Congo River Basin, known collectively 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 "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 the ORA, monitors attempts to regulate most religious institutions and the practice of religion.

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, their proposed leadership, and the source of their funding. If the MOJ decides that the group is duplicating the activities of another recognized group, it will deny recognition. Once the ministry grants official recognition, the religious group must request permission from the ORA to conduct

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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. For those religious groups that actively oppose military participation, there are no legal provisions exempting them as conscientious objectors. In practice, the authorities allow conscientious objectors to perform alternative service.

### **Government Practices**

The government harassed, detained, and restricted travel for outspoken religious figures, especially those who discussed human rights or collaborated with independent human rights groups. The government often detained and threatened a Baptist pastor and religious freedom activist as well as members of his congregation. They also confiscated religious materials. The pastor said state security officials detained younger members of his congregations and threatened imprisonment if they continued their activities.

Many religious leaders stated they exercised self-censorship in what they preached and discussed during services. Some said they feared 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.

Some independent evangelical churches reported that government authorities closely monitored and detained, for unspecified periods of time, their leadership and members of their families. Pastors and members of these groups were often prevented from attending some church events and told to cease all religious activity. One evangelical organization reported in May that state security forces threatened to harm its leader, his family, and members of their church. The pastor of the evangelical organization said officials had confiscated religious materials from his home and had not returned them.

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 location through the formal registration process. Many religious groups

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used private homes for this purpose in response to restrictions on constructing new buildings. Estimates of the total number of house churches for Protestant groups 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. According to the Protestant community, some 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. A number of religious groups, including the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons, continued their 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 that state security monitored their movements, telephone calls, visitors, and religious meetings.

Relatives of a pastor of an unregistered church in Havana reported the government arrested the pastor in February for holding unauthorized religious services and released him on August 31. He was not charged or tried, but while in prison, government officials told him that he was being held as punishment for his continued unauthorized religious activity.

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 regulated printed materials, including religious literature. Religious leaders reported improvement in their ability to import religious materials. Several groups were successful in importing large quantities of Bibles. 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 forums that sometimes criticized official social and economic policies. The Church also broadcast Christmas and Easter messages on state-run radio stations. The ORA authorized the Cuban Council of Churches to host a monthly radio broadcast, which allowed the council's messages to be heard throughout the country.

Some Protestant religious leaders reported they had religious material confiscated by immigration authorities at the airport. In October a Protestant pastor reported

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customs authorities took several religious books, and another pastor reported a similar incident in October, this time at the airport in Camaguey.

Some Protestant religious leaders reported the government attempted to stop or limit activity by threatening to expropriate property. Leaders of the Maranatha First Baptist Church in Holguin reported local government officials informed them in May that the government would confiscate their property pursuant to new legislation that went into effect in January. The property belonged to the church since 1947. After an outpouring of international support, church leaders said government officials informed the church in July they would review the decision. In December the government informed the church that it would not confiscate the property.

A number of registered and unregistered religious groups reported other churches had similarly been threatened with confiscation of their property. Methodist leaders reported threats of expropriation. They report that, to date, the government has expropriated 15 Methodist Church properties, and converted the original property owners into “permanent tenants of the state.” They said the authorities also designated nearly 100 Methodist establishments for forced closure or demolition in the provinces of Contramaestre, Santiago, and Guantanamo. A government decree in January granted government officials additional powers to expropriate property under new zoning restrictions and to change the status of the churches to rent paying tenants.

Several members of the Apostolic Movement, a Protestant denomination which the government has not registered, reported that state security officers threatened to evict them from their premises. A pastor continued his fight against the government’s expropriation of his property in Camaguey. Another member of the Apostolic Movement who heads a house church in Santiago de Cuba reported that in October he was advised he would be evicted from his home to accommodate a government project in his neighborhood. In response to the January decree, which involved expropriation of multiple house churches, members of a Baptist church in Santiago de Cuba reported they staged a “sleep in” with more than 500 protestors in early November. By year’s end, their church had yet to be expropriated.

Some religious leaders stated the ORA granted permission to repair or restore existing buildings more frequently than in years past, allowing expansion of some structures and in some cases construction of essentially new buildings on the foundations of the old. Other religious groups stated that securing permission for

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the purchase or construction of new buildings remained difficult, if not impossible. Members of the Assemblies of God Church said the government prevented them from expanding their places of worship, including carrying out construction. Instead, they stated, the government threatened to dismantle or expropriate some of their churches because they were holding illegal services.

Several religious leaders, particularly those from smaller, independent house churches or Santeria communities, expressed concern the government was less tolerant of groups that relied on informal locations, including house churches and private meeting spaces, to practice their beliefs. They reported being monitored, and, at times, being prevented from holding religious meetings in their spaces.

More religious groups complained the ORA tightened controls on financial resources for churches. A few religious leaders reported restrictions on their ability to receive donations from overseas. They cited a measure that prohibited churches and religious groups from using individuals' bank accounts for their organizations, and required existing individual accounts used in this way to be consolidated into one per denomination or organization. According to these religious leaders, the 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. Other religious leaders reported that withdrawals from bank accounts in the country were limited compared to their ability to get funds from external sources, which they described as "easier" than years before.

With the exception of two Catholic seminaries and several interfaith training centers, the government continued to prevent religious groups from establishing accredited schools. Churches challenged the limits on establishing religiously affiliated schools, but their appeals were denied. Although not specifically allowed or accredited, the government did not interfere with the efforts of some religious groups to operate before- and after-school programs and elder care, weekend retreats, and workshops for primary and secondary students, and higher education. The Catholic Church offered coursework that led to a bachelor's and master's degree through foreign partners, and several Protestant communities offered bachelor's or master's degrees in theology, the humanities, and related subjects via distance learning.

Leaders of Jehovah's Witnesses encouraged members to avoid university education in the country, finding the requirements for university admission and the

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course of study incompatible with the group's beliefs prohibiting political involvement. Jehovah's Witnesses specifically objected, based on incompatibility with their beliefs, 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.

Pope Francis traveled to the country in September and conveyed messages promoting religious freedom and tolerance. The government provided resources for his trip, and released more than 3,500 prisoners, including some foreigners, before the pope arrived. Reports suggested, however, that state police prevented prominent human rights leaders Miriam Leiva, Berta Soler, and Martha Beatriz Roque from attending a ceremony to greet the pope and a subsequent church service led by him at a cathedral in Old Havana. Additionally, authorities detained members of the Ladies in White and other human rights activists as they attempted to attend the pope's Mass in Havana's Revolutionary Square.

Church leaders reported the government continued an unofficial practice of allowing civilian public service to substitute for mandatory 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 and churches in Pinar del Rio continued to train chaplains and laypersons to go into prisons and provide religious counseling for inmates, and to provide support for their families. During the year, they reported an increase in individuals interested in taking this training.

Religious groups reported their leaders continued to travel abroad to participate in two-way exchanges between local faith-based communities and the rest of the world. They reported being detained upon re-entry and questioned about their activity. Additionally, they stated that an easing of travel restrictions beginning in 2013 allowed voices of dissent and opposition to denounce violations of religious freedom when they were abroad. The majority of religious groups continued to report improvement in their ability to attract new members without government

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interference, and some reduction in interference from the government in conducting their services.

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, Sant'Egidio, and the Salvation Army maintained local offices in Havana.

### **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**

The U.S. embassy requested to meet with officials in the ORA and the head of the quasi-governmental Council of Cuban Churches to raise concerns with regard to religious freedom, including harassment and detention of religious leaders, threats to religious leaders, government monitoring of religious groups, limitations and restrictions of the activities of religious groups and their leaders, and the denial of government recognition to some religious groups. Requests for official meetings went unanswered.

In public statements, the Department of State called upon the government to respect fundamental freedoms of its citizens, including the freedom of religion.

The embassy met frequently with a wide range of religious groups, including Protestants, Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslims, and Catholics to discuss the principal issues of religious freedom and tolerance affecting each group. Religious groups noted a wide range of concerns, including those involving free assembly and church expansion. Embassy engagement with smaller religious groups under pressure from the government included an assessment of how the recent change in diplomatic relations affected these communities.

Embassy engagement included facilitating exchanges between visiting religious delegations and religious groups, including between visiting representatives of religious organizations from the United States and local institutions. Officials from the U.S. embassy met frequently with U.S. citizens visiting as part of faith-



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based exchanges and humanitarian aid programs and encouraged these faith-based representatives to engage directly with local faith-based institutions.