

# CUBA 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and prohibits discrimination based on religion. The government and the Communist Party, through the Communist Party's Office of Religious Affairs (ORA), continued to control most aspects of religious life. Observers noted the government continued to use threats, travel restrictions, detentions, and violence against some religious leaders and their followers. In May the government officially informed the Assemblies of God (AG) it would not proceed with confiscation orders against 2,000 AG churches or demolish a church in Santiago under zoning laws passed in 2015; however, it did not provide written guarantees to this effect. Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) noted 325 violations of freedom of religion or belief during the year. CSW reported a "significant drop" in the reported cases of violations of religious freedom or belief in the year compared with previous years, which it attributed to the government's verbal rescinding in May of the decree outlawing the 2,000 AG churches. The majority of CSW's reported violations were related to government efforts to prevent members of the human rights organization Ladies in White from attending Catholic Mass, as well as government threats and harassment of members of religious groups advocating for greater religious and political freedom. Religious groups reported a continued increase in the ability of their members to conduct charitable and educational projects, such as operating before and after school and community service programs, assisting with care of the elderly, and maintaining small libraries of religious materials. Some leaders from Catholic, Protestant, and minority religious groups stated the religious freedom environment had improved compared with the previous year, pointing to progress made in a pending permit to build a permanent church structure, while some evangelical Christian groups said religious freedom had not improved for them.

The Community of Sant'Egidio organized the Paths of Peace, an interreligious meeting, in Havana on October 4 and 5. Leaders of different religions and more than 500 participants attended the meeting, which focused on the importance of welcoming and integrating migrants regardless of their religious affiliation or nonaffiliation.

U.S. embassy officials met with ORA officials to discuss the registration process for religious organizations and encourage equal treatment in allowing nonregistered groups to practice their religion. Embassy officials also met with the head of the Council of Cuban Churches (CCC), a government-recognized

organization with close ties to the government and comprising most Protestant groups, to discuss its operations and programs. The embassy met regularly with Catholic Church authorities and Jewish community representatives concerning the state of religious, economic, and political activities. Embassy officials also met with representatives from Muslim, Jehovah's Witness, Santeria, and various Protestant communities. The embassy remained in close contact with religious groups, including facilitating exchanges between visiting religious delegations and religious groups in the country. In social media and other public statements, the U.S. government continued to call upon the government to respect the fundamental freedoms of its citizens, including the freedom of religion.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 11.2 million (July 2017 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 identifies 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 120,000 members and the four Baptist conventions estimate their combined membership at more than 100,000. Jehovah's Witnesses estimate their members at 96,000; Methodists at 40,000; Seventh-day Adventists at 35,000; Anglicans, 22,500; Presbyterians, 15,500; Episcopalians, 6,000; Quakers, 300; and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), 150. Some Christian leaders say they have observed a marked growth of evangelical Protestant groups in the country. The Jewish community estimates it has 1,500 members, of whom 1,200 reside in Havana. According to the local Islamic League, there are 2,000 to 3,000 Muslims, of whom an estimated 1,500 are native born. Other religious groups with small numbers of adherents include Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Buddhists, and Bahais.

Many individuals, particularly those of African descent, 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 their total membership.

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

### **Legal Framework**

According to the constitution, “the state recognizes, respects, and guarantees freedom of religion” and “different beliefs and religions enjoy the same considerations under the law.” The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion. It declares the country to be secular and provides for the separation of church and state, but says the Communist Party of Cuba is “the superior leading force of the society and the State.” It also states no freedom can be exercised contrary to the “objectives of the socialist state.”

The ORA, an organ of the Communist Party, regulates religious institutions and the practice of religion. The law of associations requires all religious groups to apply to the MOJ for official recognition. The MOJ recognizes religious denominations as associations similar to officially recognized civil society organizations. The application process requires religious groups to identify the location of their activities, their proposed leadership, and their funding sources, among other requirements. Ineligibilities for registration include determination by the MOJ that another group has identical or similar objectives, or that the group’s activities could harm the common good. 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 major decisions from meetings, receiving foreign visitors, importing religious literature, purchasing and operating motor vehicles, and constructing, repairing, or purchasing places of worship. Groups failing to register may face penalties ranging from fines to closure of their organizations.

The constitution states “the rights of assembly, demonstration and association are exercised by workers, both manual and intellectual; peasants; women; students; and other sectors of the working people,” but it does not explicitly address religious association. The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion.

Military service is mandatory for all men. For religious groups that actively oppose military participation, there are no legal provisions exempting their members as conscientious objectors; in practice, the authorities allow conscientious objectors to perform alternative service.

The country is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The country notes, “With respect to the scope and implementation of some of the provisions of this international instrument, Cuba will make such reservations or interpretative declarations as it may deem appropriate.”

## Government Practices

*Summary paragraph:* Religious organizations and human rights groups stated the government continued to threaten, detain, and use violence against outspoken religious figures, especially those advocating for human rights and religious freedom or collaborating with independent human rights groups. Security forces took measures, including detentions sometimes accompanied by violence, which inhibited the ability of members of the protest group Ladies in White to attend Catholic Mass. Some members of independent evangelical Christian churches said government authorities closely monitored and detained, for unspecified periods of time, their leadership and family members. Representatives of the Patmos Institute, a religious freedom advocacy organization, said authorities also targeted Christians affiliated with the institute, including through threats, detentions, and expulsions from school and work. One leader, who stated the situation had improved from the previous year, cited the approved permit to build the first new church built in the country since 1959.

Some high level Catholic, Protestant, and minority religious leaders stated the religious freedom environment had improved compared with the previous year; however, some evangelical Christian groups said religious freedom had not improved for their groups. CSW's annual report stated church leaders from all denominations reported consistent harassment and surveillance from state security and officials responsible for religious affairs. It also stated the government continued to severely restrict public religious events. The CSW report counted 325 violations during the year, compared with 2,380 violations in 2016 and over 2,300 violations in 2015. In its report CSW stated the "significant drop" in the reported cases of violations of religious freedom or belief in the year, compared with previous years, was due to the government's verbal rescinding in May of a decree that had outlawed 2,000 AG churches. One leader, who stated the situation had improved from the previous year, cited the approved permit to build a new Catholic church in Pinar del Rio Province – the first new church built in the country since 1959.

According to CSW, human rights activist Jorge Luis Garcia Perez reported state security agents raided the home of Misael Diaz Paseiro on October 22 and confiscated two Bibles, a number of crucifixes and five rosaries. On November 4, police reportedly beat Diaz, tore his rosaries from his neck, and said "in addition to being a counterrevolutionary, you are also a Christian. You should look at us – we are revolutionaries and we don't believe in your god. Our god is Fidel Castro." Diaz was imprisoned on November 22 and reportedly denied visits from a priest

and access to a Bible. *The Christian Post* reported the government charged Diaz with “pre-criminal dangerousness” and sentenced him to 3.5 years in prison.

Reverend Juan Carlos Nunez Velazquez, an Apostolic Movement leader, lost an appeal on February 1 to overturn his sentence of one year under house arrest. Police arrested Nunez in 2016 for disturbing the peace because he failed to comply with police orders to reduce the size and volume of the speakers he used during Sunday sermons at his open-air church.

According to CSW, in February authorities twice interrogated an Eastern Baptist Convention pastor about his work, members of his congregation, and the activities of his church. The authorities also threatened to confiscate the property; however, at year’s end, the government had taken no action against the church.

According to CSW and news sources, on April 27, airport authorities detained and interrogated Felix Yuniel Llerena Lopez, a 20-year-old student and evangelical Christian and religious freedom activist, upon his return to the country. The authorities informed Llerena Lopez he was being investigated for planning terrorist acts, possessing pornographic materials, and meeting with “terrorist” Cuban exiles opposed to the government. The authorities briefly detained Lopez’s mother, expelled Llerena Lopez from the university where he was a part-time student, and banned him from international travel. On October 2, authorities informed Llerena Lopez he would not be charged with any crimes and rescinded his travel ban; however, the university had not reinstated him at year’s end. CSW quoted Llerena Lopez as saying, “After five months of opposition, arrests, being expelled from university, intimidation, threats, and a false accusation, today I can say that solidarity and the dignity of not giving up on principles ... triumphed.”

According to CSW, on November 6, police arrested and briefly detained Leonardo Rodriguez Alonso, a local Patmos coordinator in Santa Clara, without charges. CSW sources said on April 11, Rodriguez’s daughter, Dalila Rodriguez Gonzalez, was fired from her position as a university professor for not being “a good influence on students” and because she “could damage their formation.” According to Rodriguez Alonso, his daughter’s dismissal was revenge for his religious freedom advocacy.

According to CSW, police physically assaulted members of the Ladies in White, a rights advocacy organization, while they were en route to attend religious ceremonies. On February 19, CSW reported that a police officer punched in the face Ladies in White member Magda Onelvis Mendoza Diaz as she was going to

church. On August 13, a police officer in Havana reportedly choked Berta Soler Fernandez, and officers detained her for 24 hours; they subsequently released her without charge.

According to representatives of several religious organizations that had unsuccessfully sought legal recognition, the government continued to interpret the law on associations as a means for the MOJ to deny the registration of certain religious groups. If the MOJ decided a group was duplicating the activities of another, it denied recognition. In some cases, the MOJ delayed the request for registration or cited changing laws as a reason why a request had not been approved.

According to the members of Protestant denominations, some groups were still able to register only a small percentage of “house churches” in private homes; however, most unregistered house churches continued to operate with little or no government interference. A number of religious groups, including the Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Mormons, continued to await a decision from the MOJ on pending applications for official recognition, some dating as far back as 1994. These groups said 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 said state security continued to monitor their movements, telephone calls, visitors, and religious meetings.

According to CSW sources, on September 14, police disrupted an interdenominational Christian service in Santiago; local authorities had previously approved the service. Local authorities said the service was “counterrevolutionary” and threatened to imprison event organizer Pastor Ernesto Lora if he organized a similar event in the future.

According to CSW, on April 3, authorities in Las Tunas fined Reverend Mario Travieso of the Apostolic Church 1,500 pesos (\$1,500) for building a wall next to his church that the authorities considered too high even though he had received written approval from his neighbors. Prior to imposing the fine, authorities had inspected his house in response to a noise complaint; they told him not to pray or sing with neighboring families.

Many religious leaders continued to state they refrained from speaking about overtly political topics. Some said they feared criticizing the government could lead to denials of permits from the ORA, dismantling of religious buildings, or other measures that could limit the growth of their religious groups. The

nongovernmental organization Outreach Aid to the Americas (OAA) reported some instances in which evangelical Christians not supporting Communist Party political activities experienced harassment and threats from government employers and educators.

According to the OAA, the Central University in Santa Clara expelled an 18-year-old student after he began attending Christian group meetings at the university. The OAA said university officials told the student he was expelled because his beliefs “were not compatible with the philosophy taught at the university.”

The OAA said from October 2016 to April 2017, the supervisors of an employee in a government-run company in Taguasco reportedly threatened the employee with termination after learning he had joined a Christian church in 2016. The man reported his harassment and threats to his pastor in April.

The OAA stated in April school administrators had threatened to expel a 17-year-old student enrolled in a pre-university course at the Ernesto Che Guevara Institute of Santa Clara if he continued to participate in Christian group meetings.

In May the government informed the Assemblies of God (AG) it would not proceed with confiscation orders against 2,000 AG churches or demolish a church in Santiago under zoning laws passed in 2015; however, it did not provide written guarantees to this effect.

Many religious groups continued to use private homes as house churches to work around restrictions on constructing new buildings. Protestant leaders’ 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 said authorities approved many applications within two to three years from the date of the application, but either did not respond to or denied other applications arbitrarily.

Representatives from both the Catholic Church and the CCC said they continued 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 provide religious counseling for prison inmates and to provide support for their families. The CCC continued to operate a training facility it opened in 2016, at which it offered courses on chaplain work as well as courses on caring for sacred religious objects, gender and women’s issues, and seminars for international students.

Representatives of religious groups reported their leaders continued to travel abroad generally unimpeded to participate in exchanges between local and international faith-based communities. The majority of religious groups continued to report improvement in their ability to attract new members without government interference, and a reduction in interference from the government in conducting their services. According to local observers, in September authorities prohibited a Baptist journalist from traveling with an interfaith group of religious and civil society activists and journalists to a human rights training seminar in Brazil. The journalist's employer reportedly accused the journalist of selling secret information and of committing treason. Several independent journalists and bloggers reported an increase in government harassment and prohibitions of travel of individuals who questioned government policies.

Some religious leaders reported obstacles preventing them from importing religious materials and donated goods, including bureaucratic challenges and arbitrary restrictions such as inconsistent rules on computers and electronic devices. Several groups said they could import large quantities of Bibles, books, clothing, and other donated goods. The Catholic Church and several Protestant religious group representatives said they continued 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 regular forums at the Varela Center that sometimes criticized official social and economic policies.

By year's end, the government had not granted the Archbishop of Havana's 2016 public request to allow the Catholic Church to reopen religious schools and have open access to broadcast on television and radio. The ORA authorized the CCC to host a monthly radio broadcast, which allowed the council's messages to be heard throughout the country. No other churches had access to media, which are all state-owned. Several religious leaders continued to protest the government's restriction on broadcasting religious services over the radio or on television.

The ORA stated in August the law on associations was being revised, although it did not provide a timeline for when the revisions would be finalized, nor what the changes would be. Members of the AG continued to request the government pass reforms to the law that would validate and legalize the property the church owned, as well as allow the church to build new temples.

Several religious leaders said the ORA continued to grant new permits to repair or restore existing buildings, allowing the expansion of some structures and in some



cases the construction of essentially new buildings on the foundations of the old. In August the an ORA source stated the ORA had granted permission in 2015 for the Catholic Church to build an entirely new church on newly acquired ground in Pinar del Rio Province. The media reported in 2017 the construction was almost complete. Some religious leaders stated the government regularly granted permits to buy properties to be used as house churches, including in some cases when the titleholder to the property did not plan to live there. Other religious groups stated securing permission for the purchase or construction of new buildings remained difficult, if not impossible.

The government continued to prevent religious groups from establishing accredited schools but did not interfere with the efforts of some religious groups to operate seminaries, interfaith training centers, before- and after-school programs, eldercare programs, weekend retreats, workshops for primary and secondary students, and higher education programs. The Catholic Church continued to offer coursework leading to a bachelor's and master's degree through foreign partners. Several Protestant communities continued to offer bachelor's or master's degrees in theology, the humanities, and related subjects via distance learning; however the government did not recognize any of these degrees.

Jehovah's Witnesses leaders continued to state they found the requirements for university admission and the course of study incompatible with the group's beliefs since their religion prohibited them from political involvement. As a result, Jehovah's Witnesses remained ineligible for professional careers in the fields of law, medicine, among others.

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 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.

Some religious leaders said the government continued to restrict 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. Larger, better organized churches reported more success in receiving large donations, while smaller, less formal churches reported difficulties with banking procedures. 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.

Religious groups continued to report the government allowed them to engage in community service programs, including assisting 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. Caritas in particular was very involved in gathering and distributing hurricane relief items.

According to the Western Baptist Convention (WBC), on July 6, members of a family that occupied a Havana property owned by the WBC more than 30 years ago broke into the WBC's new office adjacent to where the family lived. The family reportedly stole the WBC's documents, computers, furniture, and other property and refused to return it to the WBC. The ORA took no action, despite WBC's requests for ORA's intervention. In 1992, a court ruled the family's residency in the property was illegal but did not require the family to leave.

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

The Community of Sant'Egidio, recognized by the Catholic Church as a "Church public lay association," held an interfaith meeting – "Paths of Peace" – in Havana on October 4 and 5 to promote interreligious engagement, tolerance, and joint efforts towards peace. Leaders of different religious groups in the country and more than 500 participants attended the meeting, which focused on the importance of welcoming and integrating migrants regardless of their religious affiliation or lack of affiliation.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

U.S. embassy officials continued to meet with ORA officials and raise concerns about the ability of unregistered churches to gain official status and practice their religion. The ORA officials continued to state their interest in increased engagement with U.S. religious groups and U.S. government counterparts. The U.S. government continued to call upon the government to respect its citizens' fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of religion and expression. For example, the Department of State Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human

Rights, and Labor posted on social media about “fundamental freedoms” on January 6 and about Ladies in White on April 13. The latter post stated “great meeting with Damas de Blanco on human rights in Cuba – we stand with defenders of free expression and assembly.”

Embassy officials met with the head of the CCC and discussed concerns some unregistered churches faced to gain official status.

Embassy officers continued to meet 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, including freedom of assembly, church expansion, access to state-owned media, and their ability to open private religious schools. Embassy engagement with smaller religious groups under pressure from the government included a continuing assessment of how the change in diplomatic relations between the two governments affected these communities.

Embassy engagement focused on facilitating exchanges between visiting religious delegations and religious groups, including between visiting representatives of U.S. religious organizations and local institutions. The groups often discussed the challenges of daily life in the country, such as obtaining government permission for certain activities, and successes, such as closer bonds between Cuban and American churches and an increase in two-way travel between Cuban and American congregations.