

Cuba



Religion is not a part of the ideal Communist society, so the Cuban government has limited and discouraged its practice. Pastors take it for granted that the government regularly sends its agents to infiltrate the congregations and keep watch over what the pastors and members of the congregation say.

Background

Cuba is an island nation in the Gulf of Mexico just south of Florida in the United States and east of the Yucatan Peninsula. The population is ethnically mixed; the ancestry of most Cubans includes African, European, and Taino (the pre-Colombian indigenous group on the island) heritage. A strict social hierarchy was part of the Spanish colonial society, but Socialism, under the leadership of Fidel Castro has supposedly obliterated class divisions. The authorities have also placed some limits on religious expression, however the number of Cubans who consider themselves to be religious has actually increased since the 1959 Revolution. According to official reports over 50% consider themselves to be non-religious, but it is believed that the government may have manipulated this number. Relations between Cuba and the international community have varied in recent decades and is characterized by a highly antagonistic relationship with the United States. The collapse of the USSR in the early 1990's had had a severe impact on Cuba. Sugarcane production, the backbone of the Cuban economy, dropped to a 30-year low in 1993 and continued to worsen, causing a severe economic emergency. Thousands of Cubans began to try to flee the country, many in dilapidated boats to Florida — a treacherous 90-mile journey. In the last few years, Castro has cultivated a strong relationship with Hugo Chavez, the president of Venezuela, and as a result Cuba has

increased economic support and most importantly, access to Venezuela's oil reserves. Fidel Castro is now in his late 70s and has held power since 1959. In recent years there have been rumours that his health is failing. Cuba's future in the inevitable event of Castro's death is unclear but speculation points to his younger brother and vice-president, Raul, as successor.

Human rights

International human rights organisations are not permitted to visit Cuba. All political and civil liberties are limited in Cuba. Any form of political dissent is a punishable offence and this is frequently enforced. There are estimated to be over 300 political prisoners held predominantly on charges of 'disseminating enemy propaganda' or 'dangerousness'. Many of them are Christians. Dissenters are labelled 'counter-revolutionary criminals'. The punishment for this crime can include the confiscation of property, beatings and intimidation by security agents and imprisonment. The exact health conditions inside prisons and psychiatric hospitals (where many dissidents have been sent) are unknown as International Red Cross officers have not been allowed to inspect since 1990. But prisoners who have managed to smuggle out letters report degrading treatment and appalling conditions.

History in brief

- 1492 Christopher Columbus discovers the island during his first voyage west. The native inhabitants, the Ciboney, are practically extinct by the 16th century.
- 1830 A widespread move toward independence gains strength among the dissatisfied population.
- 1868 Cuba declares its independence from Spain.
- 1902 The Spanish-American War results in Cuba's independence.
- 1952 Former President Batista takes power with military backing.
- 1956 Fidel Castro and Che Guevara lead a rebellion against Batista's corrupt government.
- 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. The US imposes a naval blockade.
- 1990 The break up of the USSR has disastrous effects on Cuba's economy.
- 1998 Pope John Paul II makes the first papal visit to Cuba since the revolution.
- 2002 Oswaldo Paya presents the Varela Project to the Cuban Congress as a petition for a public referendum on human rights and democracy. This is ignored by the government.
- 2003 The Cuban government cracks down on the growing human rights movement, arresting and imprisoning more than 75 Cuban activists.

Above: Human Rights activist, Dr. Oscar Elias Biscet



**Christian
Solidarity
Worldwide**

Tel: 020 8942 8810
Fax: 020 8942 8821
admin@cswworldwide.org.uk
www.cswworldwide.org.uk

Religious Freedom in Cuba

Because religion is not a part of the ideal Communist society, the Cuban government has limited and discouraged its practice. However, thousands of believers continue to meet in church buildings across the country, many of which were built over a century ago. Churches that do not belong to the government sanctioned Council of Cuban Churches often find it very difficult to receive authorisation for repairs or enlargements to these buildings. The result is that many of the churches are severely run down and overcrowded, with worshippers forced to stand in the aisles and even in the streets. Pastors also take it for granted that the government regularly sends its agents to infiltrate the congregations and keep watch over what the pastors and members of the congregation say.

As a result, the Christians of Cuba have had to be creative in finding ways to express their religious beliefs. Small churches have formed through lay people willing to open up their homes for meetings and there are now estimated to be thousands of these house churches across the island. Some of these groups have grown to be very large. House churches have not for the most part been formally legalised, leaving them open to charges of illegal association should the government decide to crackdown. In 2005 the government announced new legislation that many feared might lead to widespread closures of house churches. However, while some churches were threatened with closure and at least one was demolished, the law has not yet been fully implemented.

Cuban Christians also often face discrimination in schools and in the workplace because they are not considered “trustworthy” by members of the Communist Party.



Dr Biscet

Committed Christian and founder of the Lawton Foundation for Human Rights, Dr. Oscar Elias Biscet was arrested on December 6 2002 and charged with ‘disrupting public order and disobedience’ and was later sentenced to 25 year prison sentence. This arrest and incarceration came a little over a month after his release having completing a 3 year term for marching in support of human rights and freedom for political prisoners. While in prison, Dr. Biscet has suffered solitary confinement and has been denied access to visitors on numerous occasions. He is also prohibited from any access to reading materials including his Bible, and continues to be denied effective medical treatment. His wife has stated that he is in extremely poor health, but from letters he has managed to smuggle out of the prison, he appears to be mentally and emotionally strong.

Above: Elsa Morejon, wife of Dr Biscet.



Factfile

Annual Population Growth: 0.37%	
Area:	110,860 sq km
Capital:	Havana
Ethnic Groups:	Mixed African/ European descent 51% White 37% Black 11% Chinese 1%
Religious Groups:	Roman Catholic 33% Atheist 50%

Pray >>>

- ▶ Pray for the momentum of the revival that is becoming more apparent across Cuba. Pray particularly for the courage of new Christians in the face of difficult circumstances.
- ▶ Pray for Christian dissidents and human rights activists who are currently being held in horrible conditions in prison. Ask God to protect their health and pray for their freedom.

Protest >>>

- ▶ Write to your Member of Parliament at the House of Commons, Westminster, SW1A 0AA or your MEP at the European Parliament, rue Wiertz, Brussels B-1047, Belgium, expressing your concern over Cuba's poor human rights record. Ask your MP to raise your concerns with the Foreign Secretary and ask your MEPs to raise this in appropriate international forums.

- ▶ Write a polite letter to the Cuban Ambassador to your country urging him to ensure that Cuban legislation maintains the standards of religious liberty set out in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

H.E Rene Mujica Cantelar
Embassy of the Republic of Cuba
167 High Holborn,
London WC1V 6BA
Tel: (020) 7240 2488
Fax: (020) 7836 2602