

KEY FINDINGS

During the reporting period, religious freedom conditions in Cuba remained poor. The Cuban government engaged in harassment campaigns that included detentions and repeated interrogations targeting religious leaders and activists who advocate for religious freedom. Officials threatened to confiscate numerous churches and interrogated religious leaders countrywide about the legal status of their religious properties. The government continues to interfere in religious groups' internal affairs and actively limits, controls, and monitors their religious practice, access to information, and communications through a restrictive system of laws and policies, surveillance, and harassment. While the Cuban constitution guarantees freedom of religion or belief, this protection is limited by other constitutional and legal provisions. At the end of the reporting period, 55 religious communities were registered; only registered religious communities are legally permitted to receive foreign visitors, import religious materials, meet in approved houses of worship, and apply to travel abroad for

religious purposes. The Cuban Communist Party Office of Religious Affairs (ORA) answers only to the Party and so it has broad, largely unchecked power to control religious activity, including approving some religious ceremonies other than worship services, repair or construction of houses of worship, and importation of religious materials. Authorities prevent human rights and pro-democracy activists from participating in religious activities, sometimes using force. Almost every Sunday in 2017, the government prevented members of Ladies in White from attending Mass. In a positive development, officials verbally promised the Assemblies of God that the government would not confiscate 1,400 of their churches as it threatened to do in 2015 and 2016. Based on these concerns, in 2018 USCIRF again places Cuba on its Tier 2 for engaging in or tolerating religious freedom violations that meet at least one of the elements of the "systematic, ongoing, egregious" standard for designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA).

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Publicly denounce violations of religious freedom and related human rights in Cuba;
- Press the Cuban government to:
 - Stop harassment of religious leaders;
 - End the practice of violently preventing democracy and human rights activists from attending religious services;
 - End destruction of, threats to destroy, and threats to expropriate houses of worship;
 - Lift restrictions on religious communities buying property, building or repairing houses of worship, holding religious processions, importing religious materials, and admitting religious leaders;
 - Allow unregistered religious groups to operate freely and legally, and repeal government policies that restrict religious services in homes or other personal property;
- Allow registered and unregistered religious groups to conduct religious education;
- Cease interference with religious activities and religious communities' internal affairs; and
- Hold accountable police and other security personnel for actions that violate the human rights of religious practitioners, including the religious freedom of political prisoners;
- Increase opportunities for Cuban religious leaders from both registered and unregistered religious communities to travel to, exchange aid and materials with, and interact with coreligionists in the United States;
- Apply the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, Executive Order 13818, or other relevant targeted tools, to deny U.S. visas to and block the U.S. assets of specific officials and agencies identified as responsible for violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief, including considering responsible officials from the ORA for such measures;
- Use appropriated funds to advance internet freedom and widespread access to mass media, and protect Cuban activists by supporting the development and accessibility of new technologies and programs to counter censorship and to facilitate the free flow of information in and out of Cuba, as informed by the findings and recommendations of the Cuba Internet Task Force created pursuant to the National Security Presidential Memorandum, "Strengthening the Policy of the United States Toward Cuba"; and
- Encourage international partners, including key Latin American and European countries and regional blocs, to ensure violations of freedom of religion or belief and related human rights are part of all formal and informal multilateral or bilateral discussions with Cuba.

COUNTRY FACTS

FULL NAME

Republic of Cuba

GOVERNMENT

Communist State

POPULATION

11,147,407

GOVERNMENT-RECOGNIZED RELIGIONS/FAITHS

55 registered religious communities

RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY*

60–70% Roman Catholic (commonly syncretic, mixed with traditional African religions, especially Santería)

5% Protestant

25% Unaffiliated

*U.S. Department of State

BACKGROUND

President Raúl Castro and his inner circle rule with absolute authority, and the Communist Party is the country's only constitutionally recognized party. Despite previous statements that President Castro would leave office in February 2018, the Cuban parliament voted unanimously in December 2017 to extend his mandate until April 2018, citing the need to respond to the devastation wrought by Hurricane Irma.

Authorities engage in arbitrary, short-term, and politically motivated detentions; assaults against human rights and pro-democracy activists and dissidents; extensive surveillance and intimidation; and organizing “acts of repudiation,” incidents in which government-recruited mobs harass and at times assault activists, religious leaders, and others targeted by the government.

The Cuban government does not allow human rights organizations to operate legally, and it controls all access to media, printing, and construction materials. The government severely restricts internet access in the country, denying access to many and limiting even approved users to a tightly controlled intranet. While home access became legal in December

2016 in some urban areas, legal restrictions, high prices, and extremely slow connections mean the internet remains unavailable for most Cubans. Internet content relating to human rights, including the site for the Ladies in White, is blocked entirely, and content cannot run contrary to “Cuban society’s moral principles.”

While the Cuban constitution guarantees freedom of religion or belief, this protection is limited by other constitutional and legal provisions. Article 8 affirms that “the State recognizes, respects, and guarantees religious freedom,” and article 55 further guarantees the right to “change religious beliefs or not have any,

and to profess, within the confines of the law, the religious worship of his/her preference.” However, article 62 qualifies that all rights can be limited based on the “aims of the socialist State and the nation’s determination to

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build socialism and communism.” The Cuban penal code’s Abuse of Liberty of Worship clause permits the imprisonment of any person the government determines abuses constitutional religious freedom protections by placing religious beliefs in conflict with other state goals.

The Cuban government controls religious activities through the ORA of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party and the Ministry of Justice (MOJ). The government requires religious communities to register with the MOJ, a process that includes disclosure of funding sources and locations for activities and certification that they are not duplicating the activities of other registered religious communities. The ORA has final authority over registration decisions and is accountable only to the Party itself. It therefore holds broad, largely unchecked power to control legal religious practice in Cuba.

At the end of the reporting period, 55 religious communities were registered, primarily Christian denominations, more than half of which have some form of association with the government-recognized Cuban Council of Churches (CCC). Only registered religious communities are legally permitted to receive foreign visitors, import religious materials, meet in approved houses of worship, and apply to travel abroad for religious purposes. Local Communist Party officials must approve all religious activities of registered groups other than regular worship services, such as repairing or building houses of worship and holding processions or events outside religious buildings.

The government also restricts religious practice by denying independent religious communities access to state media, limits exit visas, requires the registration of publications, limits the entry of foreign religious workers, and restricts bank accounts to one per denomination or religious association. Further, the ORA continues to pressure religious communities to make their financing, internal governing structures, statutes, and constitutions more hierarchical, which aids government efforts to control them. Religious freedom advocates report that community officials discriminate against Christians in employment and schools, including denying some Christian children food in schools.

Non-Christian groups are subject to similar levels of restrictions, including practitioners of the syncretic tradition of Santería, which draws upon Yoruba reli-

gion and is among the most populous traditions in the country. In one example of this dynamic of cooptation and resistance, the government-controlled Yoruba Cultural Association of Cuba issues an annual prophecy for the year to come, which is disavowed by independent, unregistered groups like the Free Yoruba Association of Cuba. Cuba's Jewish population, estimated to number around 1,000 people, generally operates within the restrictions imposed by the ORA.

In 2005, the Cuban government implemented a law to regulate house churches (congregations that gather for worship in private homes). Many Protestant denominations rely on house churches due to government restrictions on new building construction; the State Department reports there are an estimated 2,000–10,000 house churches in Cuba. The law, known as Directive 43 and Resolution 46, requires all house churches to register

and submit to the government detailed information on their membership, the house church's inhabitants, and the schedule of services. It permits no more than three meetings to be held per week, bars foreign citizens from participating in services without government

permission, and requires house churches of the same denomination to be at least two kilometers apart.

In January 2015, the Cuban government announced Legal Decree 322, the General Law on Housing, purportedly to regulate private properties and zoning laws. However, Cuban authorities have used Legal Decree 322 to threaten expropriation of churches.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS 2017

Detention and Harassment of Religious Leaders and Activists

Throughout 2017, the Cuban government engaged in harassment campaigns against targeted religious leaders and activists who advocate for religious freedom on the island.

In January, Dr. Óscar Elías Biscet, recipient of the U.S. Presidential Medal of Freedom, was briefly detained and then released with a warning to cease

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his activism. Dr. Biscet, who served nine years of a 25-year sentence for human rights activities including opposing the Cuban government's abortion practices, was honored in 2016 by the Patmos Institute, which promotes interfaith dialogue and religious freedom in Cuba. In June 2016, USCIRF met with Dr. Biscet and his wife Elsa Morejón.

Over the past year, Church of God in Cuba Pastor Ramón Rigal endured arbitrary decisions and uncertainty in his prosecution for homeschooling his children according to his religious beliefs. On February 21, 2017, Pastor Rigal and his wife Ayda Expósito were arrested and charged with "acting contrary to the normal development of a minor." They were released the next day and ordered to report to the police every week in person until their trial. On April 25, a Cuban court sentenced Pastor Rigal to a year in prison and his wife to one year of house arrest. On July 6, a judge reduced Pastor Rigal's sentence to six months of house arrest if his children attended a state school. On July 31, government officials informed Pastor Rigal he would be prohibited from serving as pastor of his church and ordered him instead to work checking local houses' water supplies for mosquitoes. In early August, the local courts overturned the ruling, allowing him to serve. On September 5, a Guantanamo Province court reversed this decision, barring the pastor from seeking private employment and forcing him to take up a low-paying government job.

In April, religious freedom activist and Patmos Institute member Félix Yuniel Llerena López traveled to the United States to raise awareness about conditions in Cuba. During this trip, Llerena López met with USCIRF, as well as Congressional offices and other U.S. government officials. Upon his return to Cuba on April 27, security agents detained him at the Abel Santamaría Airport in Santa Clara and inspected his luggage. The following day, police interrogated him and his mother and forced him to sign a pre-arrest warrant for public disorder. On May 8, Llerena López was expelled from the Enrique José Varona Pedagogical University in Havana. On June 17, he was prevented from leaving the country and was informed that since April he had been subject to a travel ban. A month

later, he was arrested, released later that day, and told that charges of possessing pornographic materials would be brought against him. On October 2, Llerena López was informed that all charges against him had been dropped and the travel ban lifted.

Several other individuals associated with the Patmos Institute also were harassed or expelled from universities, either as students or professors, due to their actual or suspected religious beliefs or activities. Central Cuba coordinator Leonardo Alonso was detained in November 2017, while his daughter Professor Dalila Rodríguez was expelled from her teaching position at the Marta Abreu Central University of Las Villas earlier in the year. Rodríguez reported that she was questioned about her father's religious freedom activities and any contact with Baptist pastor and activist Mario Félix Leonart Barroso, with whom USCIRF met repeatedly in 2017. After having been detained and arrested multiple times over their years of activism, Pastor Leonart Barroso and his wife Yoaxis Marcheco have received asylum in the United States.

The Cuban government continued to try to close down Reverend Mario Jorge Travieso's Strong Winds Church. Although the government demolished the Strong Winds church in 2016, Reverend Travieso continued to hold services outside on the grounds. Authorities visited Rev. Travieso multiple times during the reporting period to complain about "noise nuisance" during services, including parishioners praying and singing. In February, police summoned Rev. Travieso, interrogated him for two

hours, and threatened to confiscate the church property. On April 3, the government fined him 1,500 Cuban pesos (\$57) for building a wall too high. On May 12, the Department of Physical Planning

interrogated Rev. Travieso for two hours.

In September, security officers disrupted an interdenominational Christian service held in the city plaza of El Cristo, Santiago de Cuba Province. Although the organizers stated that they had received permission to hold the service, the officers shut it down and issued a pre-arrest warrant and a warning to the lead pastor, Ernesto Lora.

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Since 2005, authorities have harassed religious freedom advocate Rev. Aláin Toledano Valiente. In 2017, police presented Rev. Toledano with a pre-arrest warrant; no further action was taken by the end of the reporting period.

Threats to Churches

In 2017, officials used Legal Decree 322 to threaten confiscation of multiple churches; officials offered churches the option to continue to use the buildings in exchange for rent.

Throughout the reporting period, authorities continued to threaten to confiscate or demolish the Fire and Dynamism Church in Camagüey, the Paths of Justice Church in Santiago, the Kingdom of God Church in Santiago, and the Baptist Berean Mission Church in Las Tunas.

Government officials also interrogated religious leaders countrywide about the legal status of their religious properties. In some cases, the officials confiscated property deeds, leaving the religious communities vulnerable to charges of maintaining illegal properties and the risk of such properties being destroyed or confiscated.

On July 6, the building that houses the World Missions Council of the Western Baptist Convention of Cuba was occupied by illegal residents, who remained there at the end of the reporting period. Although the Convention alerted the police and the ORA to the situation, the government has not taken action to return the building.

Denial of Religious Freedom for Democracy and Human Rights Activists

As in previous reporting years, the Cuban government continued to deny pro-democracy and human rights activists their constitutional and international rights to freedom of religion or belief. Human rights activists detained on their way to religious services, mostly Catholic Mass, were frequently beaten and held for up to 24 hours without charge. Church leaders continued to report that government officials pressured them to expel or shun such activists. Other activists and their

family members were denied access to religious materials or practices in detention.

Almost every Sunday during the year, countrywide, the government prevented an average of about 60 members of the Ladies in White from attending religious services. Ladies in White are the wives and relatives of dissidents imprisoned in 2003; they wear white during weekly marches to Sunday Mass to increase attention to the imprisonment of their husbands, sons, or others in Cuba. In the majority of cases, these individuals were detained on their way to Mass and released hours later. Individuals reported being beaten, harassed, subjected to arbitrary fines, and detained for 24 hours or more. In an increasing number of instances, Ladies in White were released in remote areas far from their homes or otherwise publicly humiliated. In particular, Ladies in White leader Berta Soler Fernández is

often targeted for violent arrest and strangled by security forces, while others including Daisy Artiles del Sol, María Josefa Acon Sardiñas, and Magda Onelvis Mendoza Díaz reported being beaten during detention. In July

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2017, outspoken critics of the regime, Catholic priests José Conrado Rodríguez and Castor Álvarez Devesa, held a mass at the headquarters of the Ladies in White in protest of the group's being denied access to church ceremonies and to highlight their concern about religious freedom conditions.

Positive Developments

In April, officials verbally promised the Assemblies of God that the government would not confiscate or demolish their churches as it threatened to do in 2015 and 2016. The government declared 2,000 Assemblies of God churches "illegal" in 2015, jeopardizing their leaders and congregants, and had slated 1,400 of those for confiscation.

U.S. POLICY

U.S.-Cuban relations deteriorated in 2017. During the reporting period, the State Department confirmed that 24 U.S. diplomats (and some spouses) suffered attacks

leading to such injuries as mild brain trauma, hearing loss, severe headaches, and loss of balance, among other symptoms. The source of the attacks, which started in late 2016, is unknown. The Cuban government has denied involvement in or knowledge of the attacks. In response to the attacks, the U.S. government withdrew 60 percent of its embassy staff, suspended the issuance of visas to Cubans, and required the Cuban Embassy in the United States to reduce its staff by two-thirds.

In 2017, the Trump Administration reversed the Obama Administration's policies to increase travel to and trade with Cuba, reflecting the Trump Administration's position that increased trade opportunities should follow demonstrated religious freedom and human rights improvements. President Trump issued a June 2017 National Security Presidential Memorandum entitled "Strengthening the Policy of the United States Toward Cuba." The memo focused on the need for human rights and free enterprise in Cuba, instructing the federal government to ensure that specific policies, including democracy promotion and travel guidelines, benefit the Cuban people, rather than the government. The policy further instructed the secretary of state to provide a report to the president on the degree to which the Cuban government has fulfilled the requirements of a transition government, as outlined in the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity (LIBERTAD) Act of 1996. In January 2018, after the end of the reporting period, the State Department convened a Cuba Internet Task Force, which was mandated by the new policy memo to "examine the technological challenges and opportunities for expanding internet access in Cuba."

In an October 2017 speech, President Trump named Iran, North Korea, Cuba, and Venezuela as "repressive regimes," reiterating that "we will not lift the sanctions on [them] until they restore political and religious freedom for their people." The following month, the Trump Administration announced new regulations that prohibited individual travel to Cuba but permitted group travel for approved specific purposes, barred U.S. citizens from patronizing listed hotels and restaurants that benefit Cuban officials, and restricted commercial exchanges with 180 entities. The new policies do not impact travel or business plans

already contracted, only those initiated after the publication of the regulations in the Federal Register. U.S. airlines and cruise ships can continue to operate.