



RELIGIOUS FREEDOM UNDER SIEGE IN CUBA

An Update by the Office of David Anderson, MP

Introduction

Cuba has a population of just over 11 million. An estimated 60 to 70 percent of the population are Catholic, but just 4 to 5 percent of them regularly attend mass. There also exists a mixture between Catholicism and African religions – notably Santeria. Five percent of the population is Protestant. Included in this number are all Protestant denominations as well as Mormonism, Jehovah’s Witnesses and those of the Bahá’í Faith.¹ There are approximately 9,000 Muslims in Cuba and the number is reportedly growing.² Twenty-five percent of the population have no religious affiliation.

In Cuba’s 1992 constitution, atheism was removed as the official state creed and articles were included to allow for freedom of religion. Article 8 asserts that the state recognizes, respects and guarantees religious freedom; and Article 55 guarantees the right to change one’s religion and openly practice that religion, provided those practices do not violate state laws. However, Article 62 of the constitution states that all rights can be restricted according to the objectives of the state and the goal to build socialism and communism. Additionally, the Cuban penal code includes a clause that allows the government to imprison anyone it believes is using their religious liberties to interfere with state goals.³ According to a U.S. State Department report, “the constitution protects religious freedom; however, in law and practice, the government places restrictions on freedom of religion.”⁴

¹ “Cuba”, U.S. Department of State, accessed 2 May 2018, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/171775.pdf>, 1.

² Lucy Westcott, “Why Cuba’s Muslim Population Is Growing,” Newsweek, last modified 27 December 2016, <http://www.newsweek.com/2017/01/06/why-cubas-muslim-population-growing-535773.html>.

³ “Cuba: Tier 2,” United States Commission on International Religious Freedom Annual Report 2018, USCIRF, last modified April 2018, accessed 2 May 2018, http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/Tier2_CUBA.pdf, 2.

⁴ “Cuba”, U.S. Department of State, 1.

Means of Control

The Cuban government maintains its control of religious institutions through its Office of Religious Affairs (ORA). The ORA is part of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba and the Ministry of Justice (MOJ). Religious organizations are required to register with the MOJ. The ORA makes final decisions on registration and is accountable only to the Communist Party. Therefore, it “holds broad, largely unchecked power to control legal religious practice in Cuba.”⁵

The government places a host of restrictions on religious organizations to limit their operation. These restrictions include denying access to state media, limiting exit visas, requiring publications to be registered, limiting the entry of foreign religious workers, and restricting bank accounts to one per denomination or religious organization. The Communist Party requires that religious groups be registered and all activities other than regular worship services be approved by officials.⁶

In 2005, the government introduced a law to regulate house churches. Many congregations resorted to house churches because of the government’s restrictions on new buildings. It is estimated that there are anywhere from 2,000 to 10,000 house churches in Cuba.⁷ According to the most recent USCIRF report, this law 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.”⁸

In addition to this, the Cuban authorities have reportedly used ‘legal decree 322’, regarding private property and zoning laws, to threaten the expropriation of churches.⁹

A news release by World Watch Monitor states that a major problem facing churches in Cuba remains the lack of legal recognition. Although they have applied for a permit, many churches have been waiting for over 2 decades for the right to legally exist.¹⁰ Many continue to operate illegally while fearing retribution of the state. The

⁵ “Cuba: Tier 2,” USCIRF, 3.

⁶ Ibid., 3.

⁷ Ibid., 3.

⁸ Ibid., 3.

⁹ Ibid., 3.

¹⁰ Mariusa Reyes, “Cuba’s new leader ‘not a Reformer,’” World Watch Monitor, last modified 19 April 2018, accessed 2 May 2018, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/04/cubas-new-leader-not-a-reformer/>.

state apparently does not place the same restrictions on Muslim groups or traditional Afro-Cuban religions.¹¹

Increasing Incidences of Violations of Religious Freedom

Cuba had a long history of religious persecution and repression under the Castro family. Despite the hopeful articles pertaining to religious freedom in the 1992 constitution and the recent resumption of diplomatic relations with the United States, harassment of religious affiliates remains a prevalent problem on the island nation.

According to a report by Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), from 2011 to 2014 there was a steady increase in violations of religious freedom year after year. The numbers were 40 in 2011, 120 in 2012, 180 in 2013 and 220 in 2014.¹² These numbers are small compared to what was reported by the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America in 2017, with 1,322 arrests, 873 cases of physical or mental abuse, four sentences and seven attacks on the homes of religious ministers.¹³

Specific Incidences

Throughout 2017, the Cuban government frequently harassed, detained and intimidated various religious leaders and political activists. Several members of Ladies in White, a group of women who wear white on their Sunday walk to mass – to protest the detainment of their husbands – were arrested. The Ladies in White have reported that these arrests have involved them being beaten, punched, scratched and dragged by the feet by the arresting officers.¹⁴ One of the members, Maria Cristina Labrada Varona, was told she was arrested because she had organized with six of the Ladies in White to attend church. On July 9, 2017, Daisy Artilles del Sol was arrested and beaten, even losing consciousness; and then was locked in a cell and not given water for a number of days.¹⁵

In January 2017, Reverend Mario Travieso, pastor of the Strong Winds Church, had officers come to his house to complain about noise. In the same month, a minister from the Department of Justice came to tell him not to sing and pray with neighbouring families. Then, in February of that year, the police interrogated him for

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Lucinda Borkett-Jones, "Religious freedom worsening in Cuba: 'There is a crackdown happening,'" Christian Today, last modified 26 January 2015, accessed 9 May 2018, <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/religious-freedom-worsening-in-cuba-there-is-a-crackdown-happening/46769.htm>.

¹³ Reyes, "Cuba's new leader 'not a Reformer.'"

¹⁴ "Cuba: Freedom of Religion or Belief," Christian Solidarity Worldwide, last modified July 2017, accessed 2 May 2018, <http://www.csw.org.uk/2017/08/02/report/3654/article.htm>, 2.

¹⁵ Ibid., 2.

more than two hours in the police station and threatened to confiscate the church property. In May, the pastor was again interrogated and told not to leave the city.¹⁶

Felix Yuniel Llerena Lopez is a religious freedom defender associated with the Patmos Institute and also a member of the Western Baptist convention. After returning to Cuba from the United States, where Lopez was attending meetings and raising concern about violations of religious freedom in Cuba, he was detained at the airport and interrogated for hours. The following day, high ranking state security officers detained and interrogated Lopez and his mother. Later that year, Lopez was expelled from his university for the spurious reason of excessive absences. Upon trying to board a flight, he was refused and informed that a travel ban had been placed on him.¹⁷

Very Little Sign of Change

On February 28, 2018, Leonardo Rodriguez Alonso was arrested and detained for 2 days without charge. Alonso, like Lopez, is a religious freedom advocate and regional coordinator for the Patmos Institute.¹⁸ The government continues its campaign of fear and intimidation against religious leaders and rights activists on the island. One church leader reports that the government seems to be easing its control of churches.¹⁹ However, this seems to contradict the increasing amounts of reported incidences like those mentioned above.

The 2018 annual USCIRF report on Cuba mentions one positive development. Officials promised the Assemblies of God that they would not appropriate or destroy their churches. In 2015, the government declared 2,000 of their churches illegal and planned the demolition or confiscation of 1,400 of them.²⁰

In April of 2018, after nearly 6 decades of Castro rule, the leadership was passed on to Miguel Diaz-Canel. Despite hopeful expectations, it appears that this will change little to nothing. Raul Castro remains the head of the Communist Party and the military, and Diaz-Canel has publically declared himself to be a 'defender of the revolution'. Additionally, political analysts do not expect this change to bring greater political or religious openness to the country.²¹

¹⁶ Ibid., 3-4.

¹⁷ Ibid., 4.

¹⁸ "Cuba: Religious-freedom advocate freed after two days' detention," World Watch Monitor, last modified 6 March 2018, accessed 2 May 2018, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/coe/cuba-religious-freedom-advocate-freed-after-two-days-detention/>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ "Cuba: Tier 2," USCIRF, 5.

²¹ Reyes, "Cuba's new leader 'not a Reformer.'"

Therefore, we call on the Government of Cuba:

- To end the threats, harassment and intimidation of religious leaders and human rights activists;
- To repeal laws that infringe upon the rights of religious practitioners and institutions;
- Allow for religious workers to freely enter and exit the country;
- Allow for religious institutions to carry on the practical business of building and repairing places of worship;
- Remove the restrictions on house churches;
- Allow both registered and non-registered religious groups to freely carry out religious services and other activities, including conducting religious education;
- Cease the interference in the internal affairs of religious organizations; and
- Hold officers guilty of violating the rights of religious practitioners to account.