



Pastor Esmir Torreblanca standing in the ruins of the Establishing the Kingdom of God Church. Photo: CSW

CUBA

FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

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Despite government claims of increased respect for religious freedom, documented violations of religious freedom in Cuba continued to increase in 2014. From January to December CSW recorded 220 separate religious freedom violations, many of which involved dozens of victims. This followed 180 documented cases in 2013, compared with 120 in 2012 and 40 in 2011.¹ Religious groups across the spectrum all reported varying degrees of hostility from the government. Few reported any notable improvement.

Government agents continued to employ more brutal and public tactics than witnessed in the first decade of the millennium. CSW continued to receive regular reports of severe harassment and sporadic reports of violent beatings of Protestant pastors and lay leaders in different parts of the country. Week after week, scores of women affiliated with the Ladies in White dissident group were violently dragged away by state security agents from Sunday morning services. Many were beaten in the process and most were arbitrarily detained until after the conclusion of religious services.

The government continued to employ a strategy of frequent, temporary arbitrary detention to target those it views as political dissidents. This tactic is also applied to religious leaders who are viewed by the authorities as 'problematic', for whatever reason. A number of church leaders reported being temporarily detained and imprisoned multiple times over the course of the past year. Reverend Mario Felix Lleonart Barroso of the Western Baptist Convention and his wife Yoaxis Marcheco Suarez, were both arrested and pressured to sign a pre-arrest warrant, or Acta de Advertencia, on separate occasions in 2014. In November Reverend Edi Yanela Área, a leader of an Apostolic Movement-affiliated church in Santiago de

Cuba, was arbitrarily arrested and imprisoned for three days.

The government continued to give contradictory signals in regard to property rights. Positive moves included official permission to construct two new Catholic churches in Santiago de Cuba and in Pinar del Rio. However, other denominations including the Cuban Methodist Church, which was permitted to build a new church in Ciego de Avila in 2013, reported government threats to confiscate a church building in Matanzas. Church properties confiscated by the government in recent years, such as the First Baptist Church of Yaguajay, saw no progress on their cases despite filing multiple legal objections. Some religious groups were told they could apply for the return of properties confiscated in the early years of the Revolution; however, those involved with the process said numerous obstacles put in place by the government has made this virtually impossible for many religious groups. One denomination reported that the Ministry of Housing would not produce the deeds to their buildings, which are necessary documents to proceed with the process of reclaiming property, and claimed that the deeds had been lost in their entirety. Unregistered religious groups, including churches linked to the Apostolic Movement network, reported ongoing threats of confiscation of property. In November Pastor Alain Toledano made a public appeal for international support, when Communist Party officials and state security agents threatened to evict his family from their home and confiscate the property, despite their possession of all the required legal documents and deeds. At least one church was completely destroyed in July in Santiago de Cuba, when the government evicted the pastoral family from their home in the early hours of the morning and proceeded to

¹ CSW has been maintaining a log of documented religious freedom violations in Cuba since 2005 in order to measure positive and negative trends. CSW receives reports on a weekly basis of violations of religious freedom, which range in severity and come from a wide spectrum of religious groups including Afro-Cuban societies, Roman Catholics, Vetero-Catholics and Protestant churches of all denominations.



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raze the Establishing the Kingdom of God Church using heavy equipment.

Religious leaders also reported a lack of consistency when it came to receiving permission to carry out repairs or renovations of existing, registered churches. While some denominations received permits from the government to carry out these works, many others, like the Bethel Baptist Church in the town of Vueltas, did not. In September the leader of the church, Reverend José Enrique Pérez Pérez, publicly called on the government to address their case. The church has been seeking permission to make urgent repairs, including essential repairs to the roof, since 2006. Permission has been denied repeatedly by local and provincial authorities. The church has submitted requests to construct a new building to meet the needs of the growing congregation, and to address safety concerns, but these requests have also been denied. On 20 October 2013 the church submitted a formal request to the government of Raul Castro, at the highest levels, to take this project forward. To date they have received no response; their church building continues to deteriorate and is in an unsafe state. Roman Catholics also reported problems. In 2014 the historic Franciscan monastery in Guanabacoa shut its doors after waiting years for government permission to carry out necessary repairs. Most of the monks, whose order has been present in Cuba for centuries, will be leaving Cuba as a result, with only four remaining in the country.

Religious leaders continue to put much of the responsibility for ongoing abuses of religious freedom on the Office of Religious Affairs (ORA), an arm of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party. They object to the Communist Party being given direct authority over all religious activities and business, rather than dealing with these issues through normal legal channels. The consistently antagonistic relationship between the director of the ORA, Caridad del Rosario Diego Bello, and the leadership of many religious groups is evidence to many Cuban religious leaders that the office exists solely to monitor and restrict the activities of religious groups. One long time and well respected Baptist leader, Reverend Homero Carbonell, received asylum in the United States in late July 2014. He cited severe and extended harassment on the part of the ORA as a main factor in his move to leave Cuba after 52 years of ministry. Over the past year, the ORA denied authorisation for a number of religious activities and has, in cooperation with other government agencies, issued fines and threats of confiscation to dozens of churches and religious organisations. The ORA apparently also gave the green light to the July 2014 demolition of the Establishing the Kingdom of God Church in Santiago de Cuba (see above).

The continued deterioration in respect for religious freedom in Cuba in 2014, even as the government continues to promote an image of respect for religious freedom, is troubling. The negative trend seems to be part of a general attempt by the government to eliminate the potential for any social upheaval by cracking down on any groups it perceives as potentially problematic. This includes groups that the government believes are calling or could call for social and political reforms, alongside the limited economic reforms the government has enacted. At the same time, more and more religious leaders are openly demanding increased religious freedom and this has provoked a harsh response from government officials at every level, although the approach appears to vary somewhat in different parts of the country.

Cuba signed both the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) in early 2008. Seven years later Cuba has yet to make any move to ratify either. According to church leaders representing the full spectrum of denominations in Cuba, the reforms that have taken place have been mostly cosmetic: in reality privileges granted to a few religious groups with the aim of improving Cuba's image in the outside world. All of this indicates that rather than moving towards a more open society, the government under the leadership of Raul Castro still views religious organisations, and in particular their leaders, as potentially dangerous entities to be controlled as much as possible.

Many observers have been quick to interpret concessions given to a few religious groups, in particular the Roman Catholic Church, as indicative of a commitment to respect for religious freedom. However, the increase in documented religious freedom violations recorded by CSW and reported by a wide spectrum of denominations and religious groups is evidence of the opposite. Real religious freedom can only exist if it is enjoyed by all religious groups without discrimination. It is vital that the European Union, United States and other governments around the world do not allow the Cuban government to pretend that granting limited privileges to one or two religious groups over others constitutes an improvement in religious freedom. This is especially the case when these privileges have no basis in any legal reforms but are only one-off handouts given by a government which retains the right to rescind them at any time. Progress in religious freedom must be measured in terms of how all religious groups benefit, and should also be grounded in legal systems and protections that will uphold these rights for all without discrimination or favouritism.

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CSW is a Christian organisation working for religious freedom through advocacy and human rights, in the pursuit of justice.

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