

Cuba: Freedom of religion or belief

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Introduction

Most religious groups have experienced religious repression in Cuba since the 1959 revolution.

After some reforms and tolerance in the 1990s, in recent years violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) have increased significantly in number and severity. These violations take place in regions across the island and are predominantly perpetrated by the Office of Religious Affairs (ORA), which oversees all religious activity on the island, and is part of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party.

The recent election of President Miguel Diaz-Canel has not resulted in any improvements to the situation of religious groups in the country, as FoRB violations have continued to be widely reported. Although a citizens' consultation of a new, government-proposed draft constitution is currently underway, few are optimistic about the improvement of human rights, given that the constitution explicitly recognises the socialist state as the only legitimate political entity on the island.

Registration

Religious groups can be divided between those that are registered and those that are unregistered. Most religious groups that existed prior to the revolution are registered and as such have legal recognition. This includes the Roman Catholic Church and large Protestant denominations such as the Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Methodists, the Assemblies of God (AoG) and most Baptists.

Some groups, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Berean Baptists, had their registration arbitrarily rescinded in the 1970s and have not been able to re-register, thus making them technically illegal. Some groups, such as the Afro-Cuban Asociación Yorubas Libres, are not registered because they wish to remain independent of government influence or control. Other groups which were not present prior to 1959 but have a growing presence on the island, most notably the Protestant Apostolic Movement, have been refused the right to register. While all religious groups experience FoRB violations, unregistered groups are most vulnerable and suffer some of the most egregious violations as their unregistered status means that their very existence is illegal.

Targeting of church properties

Restrictive regulations targeting house churches, where a significant percentage of Christians meet for worship, were put in place in 2006. They have been implemented sporadically and to varying degrees in different parts of the country, but their existence puts house churches and their leaders in a permanently vulnerable position.

In January 2015 Legal Decree 322 came into effect. This legislation was supposedly established to regulate private properties and enforce zoning laws, but it has been and is being used by government officials to seize church properties. Churches from the Eastern and Western Baptists Conventions, the Methodist Church of Cuba and the Evangelical League, among others, have been affected.

Approximately 2,000 churches linked to the AoG, the largest Protestant denomination on the island, were declared illegal under the decree. The government initiated a process of expropriation of 1,400 of these and designated 100 in three provinces for demolition. The situation remained unchanged until May 2017, when government officials gave verbal assurances to the AoG leadership that they were no longer going to proceed with the confiscation of the churches, and presented the leadership with paperwork rescinding the demolition order for one church which they had already attempted to destroy.

The government has been involved in the demolition of several churches. In 2016 four large churches linked to the Apostolic Movement in different parts of the country were destroyed in large-scale operations involving the blocking of streets, the deployment of police and state security agents, and the arbitrary detention of the pastors and owners of the properties for the duration of the demolitions. Church leaders also reported that property belonging to the church, such as benches, musical instruments and audio equipment were confiscated during some of the demolitions.

Harassment

Religious leaders regularly report close surveillance and harassment of varying forms. Examples include arbitrary fines, interrogation, home visits by officials, and restrictions on travel and the freedom to carry out pastoral duties. FoRB defenders are also regularly targeted.

The government have long employed the strategy of targeting family members of religious leaders and activists as a way of placing additional pressure on them. In 2017 the two adult children of FoRB defender Leonardo Rodríguez Alonso, who is also affiliated with religious freedom organisation the Patmos Institute, were arbitrarily fired from their positions at two universities. In her dismissal, Mr Rodríguez Alonso's daughter was told that she was being fired because she was a poor moral influence on students.

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Members of independent Afro-Cuban religions such as the Asociación Yorubas Libres also report regular harassment. According to their leaders, many Yoruba priests have been subjected to ridicule at institutions of higher learning and in the workplace because of their beliefs.

Arbitrary detention

Arbitrary detention is common. For example, in February 2017 Pastor Ramon Rigal and his wife, of the Church of God in Cuba, were arrested following their attempt to home school their children for religious reasons. Their sentences were later reduced to house arrest. The police regularly make use of 'Actas de Advertencia', a form of pre-arrest warrant which can be used to justify future arrests and criminal charges, and to restrict travel.

Every week for the past decade, large numbers of women affiliated with the Ladies in White movement have been arbitrarily detained in order to prevent them from attending Sunday Mass, as well as religious services, during the week. Arrests are often violent, and the women are frequently threatened, fined and held without charge for over 24 hours. In 2018 the Ladies in White suspended their campaign between 27 May and 1 July due to pressure from the government on their movement. At the time, three members of the Ladies in White, Martha Sánchez González, Nieves Caridad Matamoros González and Aymara Nieto Muñoz, were being held in El Guatao, a prison for female offenders, on trumped up charges including disobedience and contempt.

Travel restrictions

The government makes use of travel restrictions to impede the activities of religious leaders and adherents. Religious leaders have faced delays in the issuing of passports, in what they believe is an effort to derail their travel plans. Many religious leaders and FoRB defenders have been arbitrarily blocked from leaving the country, despite holding passports and visas to travel abroad.

The government also regularly restricts the issuing of religious visas to foreign visitors as a way of pressuring or punishing the religious group that invited them. In order to interact legally with religious groups in any capacity beyond the attendance of religious services, foreigners are required to obtain a religious visa. This must be solicited by a registered religious group in Cuba on behalf of the visitor. According to religious leaders from almost every major denomination, the government uses this mechanism to pressure churches and other groups to cooperate with them, to shut down church-run outreach programmes, and to bar individuals and groups perceived to be promoting FoRB.

Sonia García García, the second in command at the ORA, has reportedly created a blacklist of foreigners barred from receiving religious visas, and of pastors and other religious leaders banned from travelling abroad.

Recommendations

- Call on the Cuban government to reinstate legal status to religious groups which have had their registration arbitrarily revoked, and to ensure that all other religious groups or institutions seeking to register are able to do so.
- Urge the Cuban government to repeal or review legislation that is being used to seize, demolish and restrict the activity of churches across the country.
- Encourage the Cuban government to protect religious minorities, as well as human rights defenders, from arbitrary arrest, expulsion from education, termination of employment, arbitrary travel restrictions and all other forms of harassment.
- Ensure the Cuban government allows all Cubans, especially the Ladies in White, to participate in religious activities without hindrance, and that religious leaders face no negative repercussions for opening the doors of their religious associations to all without discrimination.

As Christians, we stand with everyone facing injustice because of their religion or belief.