

CUBA: Summary of Concerns

There have been some subtle shifts in the Government's relationship with religious groups over the past year. On the surface conditions appear to have improved. A new ongoing dialogue with the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church, and the registration and legalisation of some former house churches, give some reasons for hope that the government has turned over a new leaf. Church leaders representing all denominations in the country, however, have greeted these new developments with a degree of scepticism and are urging the outside world to be cautious in its interpretation, saying, in the words of one pastor, *"Religious repression has taken a different form. It is more subtle now and more refined and probably more effective."*

The government is now focusing on more targeted pressure on church leaders. Church leaders from the Roman Catholic Church and Protestant churches, both those belonging to and outside of the Cuban Council of Churches (CCC), report frequent visits from and meetings with State Security agents and Cuban Communist Party (CCP) officials. These visits and meetings seem to have the objective of intimidating the church leaders and making them aware that they are under close surveillance. Heavy pressure is regularly applied to denominational leaders to expel church leaders that have upset the government in some way.

Church leaders continue to complain about the authority granted to the Office of Religious Affairs, an arm of the Central Committee of the CCP, over all religious groups and associations. They object, virtually unanimously, to the Communist Party being given direct authority over all religious activities and business, rather than officially bringing these issues under government oversight. The consistently antagonistic relationship between the director of the Office of Religious Affairs, Caridad Diego, and the leadership of the various denominations has left religious communities with the impression that the office exists solely to monitor, hinder and restrict the activities of religious groups. Over the past year, the office has refused authorisation for a number of religious activities and, church leaders suspect, is also behind the authorities' failure over the past year to grant exit visas to a number of church leaders who have never been denied permission to leave the country in the past. Church leaders also continue to report receiving threats from the authorities that their churches will be forcibly shut down. There is wide agreement among church leaders of all denominations that the Apostolic Movement has been singled out for direct and severe persecution.

One apparent improvement, announced in September 2009, was the government's authorisation of Protestant and Roman Catholic religious services in Cuban prisons. Feedback on the implementation of this new policy, however, has been mixed, with many church leaders pointing out that it has not been applied uniformly in prisons across Cuba and that not all prisoners are allowed to participate. There is no provision for non-Christian religious groups, including Afro-Cuban groups, to provide or participate in their own services. Religious rights are often violated as a form of punishment, religious literature is confiscated or prisoners are denied religious visits, particularly in the cases of prisoners of conscience.

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. Three 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, aimed at 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; and as a result continues to exert as much control as possible over their activities.

Recommendations

- To define 'measurable progress' by establishing specific criteria for the Cuban authorities to meet (e.g. ratification of the ICCPR and ICESCR) and to maintain and renew the Common Position on Cuba until these criteria are met;
- That the European Union (EU) raise religious freedom as regularly as possible in its dialogues with the Cuban authorities, including the Minister of Religious Affairs, and encourage the Cuban Government to take seriously the recommendations listed above;
- That the EU representations in Havana, including the Commission Delegation and the embassies of member states, maintain an open dialogue with religious leaders from all denominations and religious groups, while taking into consideration the political sensitivities under which many religious leaders must work;
- That the EU encourage the Cuban Government to grant invitations to United Nations (UN) thematic special rapporteurs such as those with mandates on torture and freedom of expression and opinion;
- That the EU continue to seek ways of engaging with members of Cuban civil society, offering support when appropriate;
- That the EU continue to establish and maintain contact with the families of political prisoners, and to raise its concerns regarding continued violation of the prisoners' rights, including denial of religious rights, with the Cuban authorities.