



Ambassador Lianys Torres Rivera
Embassy of the Republic of Cuba
2630 16 St NW
Washington, DC 20009

CC:

Ms. Karima Bennoune, UN Special Rapporteur for Cultural Rights
Ms. Irene Khan, UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Opinion and Expression
Ms. Mary Lawlor, UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights Defenders
Mr. Ahmed Shaheed, UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Religion or Belief

10 May 2021

Dear Ambassador Torres Rivera,

We are writing to you as a diverse group of activists, artists, academics, and non-governmental organizations committed to the protection, strengthening and expansion of freedom of religion or belief around the world. We are deeply concerned about egregious and ongoing violations of freedom of religion or belief and associated fundamental rights like freedom of expression and freedom of assembly in Cuba. These violations are largely taking place under provisions in Legal Decrees 349 and 370.

As you will be aware, Legal Decree 349 came into force in 2018 and gave the government extensive control over all artistic expression on the island including ordering that any artistic activity had to be approved in advance by the Ministry of Culture. Legal Decree 370 was adopted one year later and gives the government the right to fine citizens for publishing any content on social media which it interprets as critical of the Cuban government or of the situation in the country. Many Cubans have expressed concern that Legal Decree 349 stamps out freedom of expression in Cuba by only permitting the existence of government approved 'art' while Legal Decree 370 goes even further by attempting to control how individual Cubans express their opinions and beliefs online on their own social media accounts.

In 2018 a group of Cuban artists, journalists and academics came together and formed the San Isidro Movement to protest official censorship of artistic expression through peaceful and creative means on the island. The group includes many participants who identify with a particular religion or belief. Rather than listening to their concerns, the government has responded harshly. In recent weeks there have been several cases of violations of freedom of religion or belief targeting writers and artists. They include but are not limited to the following:

Yoel Suárez – an award-winning writer, respected journalist and an evangelical Christian who regularly covers freedom of religion or belief issues in Cuba. He has faced consistent harassment over the past few years by the Cuban government and was banned from traveling outside of Cuba. Over the past year, and in violation of COVID-19 restrictions, he was arbitrarily summoned for interrogation by State Security

multiple times. In addition to this, both his mother and his wife were summoned on separate occasions. The two women were threatened with the loss of their jobs if they did not try to ‘influence’ Mr. Suarez to persuade him to stop his journalistic work, specifically his coverage of cases involving violations of freedom of religion or belief. State Security agents have even threatened to remove their young child from Mr Suárez and his wife’s custody.

Luis Manuel Otero Alcantará – an artist and a leader in the San Isidro Movement. On April 27, Cuban police and State Security agents forcibly stopped a Roman Catholic priest and lay leader from visiting Mr. Otero Alcantará. On May 1, a group of Christians, including Yoel Suárez, were also blocked when they attempted to visit Mr. Otero Alcantará to pray for him. Mr. Otero Alcantará has repeatedly peacefully protested government violations of freedom of expression. He has been arrested dozens of times in retaliation over the past three years. At the time of the attempted visits, he was on hunger strike in protest at the government’s unjust actions. This is in violation of both Mr. Otero Alcantará’s freedom of religion or belief and that of those who attempted to visit him to offer spiritual support.

Maykel Osorbo – a rapper who was involved in the hip hop song ‘Patria y Vida’ calling for change in Cuba. Mr. Osorbo still lives on the island, and since the February release of the song and accompanying video he has been repeatedly threatened and arbitrarily detained by the Cuban authorities. On April 12 he was beaten up by individuals who claimed to be part of the Abakuá, a centuries old Afro-Cuban secret society which guards sacred religious beliefs. Members of the Abakuá have declared publicly that the society had no part in the attack, during which State Security agents stood by and recorded the beating which left Mr. Osorbo with a broken nose. It appears that State Security agents are impersonating members of the Abakuá to cover up government involvement in acts of violence against Cuban civilians.

Individual fundamental human rights do not exist in isolation; freedom of religion or belief, especially, overlaps with many other basic human rights. It is worth noting that the right to “freedom of thought, conscience and religion,” “to freedom of opinion and expression,” and the right “to peaceful assembly and association” sit side by side in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Articles 18, 19 and 20.

We are calling for the repeal of Legal Decrees 349 and 370 and for the cessation of all harassment, including arbitrary summons and detention, threats, and acts of violence against the three men mentioned above and all other Cuban citizens who are attempting to peacefully exercise their freedom of religion or belief, freedom of expression or freedom of assembly.

We would be grateful if you would communicate these calls and the concerns outlined in this letter to President Diaz-Canel Bermúdez and to all members of the Politburo and Secretariat of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba.

Respectfully,

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