

THIRTY QUESTIONS FOR THE CUBAN REGIME

Current Religious Freedom Violations in Cuba: Questions formulated by the Patmos Institute which brings together diverse faith groups on the island. (April 2017)

Given its main objective, its need for international support in order to remain in power since the fall of socialism in Eastern Europe, the government in Havana has attempted to fool the world and has managed to convince some that in Cuba religious freedom is no longer violated as it once was. Constitutional changes at the beginning of the 1990s, when the State ceased calling itself an atheist state and proclaimed itself to be secular (laico), and the papal visits are the regime's principal arguments to call positive attention to itself.

However, the truth is that religious freedom continues to be trampled upon daily due to policies emanating from the highest levels of the central government. The Religious Affairs Office of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party is the body at the very top of power and issues guidelines about how to treat any religious group or individual who has decided to exercise their freedom of faith, whatever that may be. It is therefore inconceivable that, as if it did not already have a political monopoly as the only party, and as it is ideologically communist, it has an office dedicated to pressure, manipulate and blackmail historically established religious groups and is dedicated to contain, confront or eliminate new religious movements, when they do not align with their political interests, to keep themselves in power at any cost.

Given that despite the facts to the contrary, the Cuban system claims that it no longer violates religious freedom the way it once did (as if the unquestionable fact of having violated religious liberties in the past does not morally invalidate it to continue to exercise power in the present), we put together at least thirty questions directed to the regime in Havana; the answers continue accusing them, without even speaking about the rest of the civil, social and political rights that they also ignore. Our questions are:

1. Why does it maintain the Office for Attention to Religious Affairs of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba, which attempts to organize anything to do with religion in line with political interests, ?
2. Why does there continue to be an absence of any Law of Worship which is necessary for a country as profoundly religious as Cuba, despite the fact that various religious groups have not only requested but have developed proposals for such a law?
3. Why don't they return the majority of properties confiscated during the years of open persecution, or reimburse the affected religious groups for their losses?
4. Why do they threaten to confiscate properties which are used for religious services, arguing to that they are not legal churches or house churches, when they themselves are unwilling to legalise them?
5. Why are religious groups which request registration, and which have the same rights as those which are historically recognized, denied access to the Registry of Associations at the Ministry of Justice?
6. Why do they coerce, threaten and repress new religious groups, taking advantage of the legal limbo to which they have condemned them, including the demolitions of their churches which took place frequently in 2016, including the churches affiliated with the Apostolic Movement "Rey

de Gloria" pastored by Juan Carlos Núñez, in Las Tunas; "Fuego y Dinámica" pastored by Bernardo de Quesada in Camagüey; "Sendas de Justicia" pastored by Alain Toledano Valiente in Santiago de Cuba; "Viento Recio", pastored by Mario Travieso in Las Tunas; or the "Estableciendo el Reino de Dios", pastored by Marcos Antonio Perdomo Silva in Santiago de Cuba?

7. Why do they refuse to give legal recognition to new churches (house churches), presented by legally registered associations, and in the few cases where they have granted legal recognition they have imposed harsh restrictions which include days, schedules and the number of those who can attend?
8. Why are they so reticent to give permission to build new church buildings or to make essential repairs to those which already exist?
9. Why haven't they officially asked forgiveness for the imprisonments, for those interned in the concentration camps known as UMAPs, or even the murders of those who held different ideologies?
10. Why hasn't anyone been held to account for the wave of repression which took place during the visits of Pope Benedict XVI in 2012 or Pope Francis in 2015 when hundreds of people were arbitrarily detained and threatened?
11. Why do they continue to deny access to mass media to the entirety of religious groups, recognised and unrecognised?
12. Why do they continue to hold a monopoly on education in their hands, without allowing religious groups to open campuses, despite their own urgent admission that the Cuban people need a moral and civic education to re-instill the values held by Cubans all over the world and which today are absent, refusing even to allow preschool type models such as 'kindergarten'?
13. Why do they impose an education that is supposedly secular, but is full of atheism and political doctrines which uphold violence, upon the children of believers, for example the symbols and slogans that students are forced to wear and repeat? And why do they target, through imprisonment, the parents who prefer to educate their children at home because they are not in agreement with an extremely politicised obligatory education?
14. Why aren't the majority of the biblical and theological seminaries in the country recognized by the Ministry of Superior Education, despite being recognized by their religious associations, and why doesn't even one of the universities in the country have a Faculty of Theology?
15. Why does the Office dedicated to religion in the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party, assuming pontifical airs, meet regularly with leaders of the historically recognized religious groups to encourage, promote and instigate divisions and hatred towards other religious groups to which they do not extend the same rights that are their due?
16. Why haven't religious groups which were banned in 1976, for example the notorious cases of the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Berean Baptists and others, which to this day are condemned to illegality, been reinstated on the Registry of Associations of the Ministry of Justice?
17. Why do they detain, deport and even imprison people who visit the island to demonstrate solidarity with religious groups and churches, exemplified by the past case of US citizen Alan Gross, for having supported the Cuban Jewish community with technology, and who now serves as a warning and a lesson to anyone else who would decide to show solidarity with any other existing religious community?

18. Why, does the Office of Religious Affairs make it so difficult to obtain religious visas for the visit of religious delegates from abroad, and when they do grant them why do they limit the movement of those who have received the visas, forcing them into a rigid and extremely exclusionary and monitored itinerary? Why do they repeatedly deny this type of visa to recognised evangelical leaders, for example as in the case of well known Latin American evangelist Alberto Mottesi despite having the support of various recognised conventions, united in this request for many years.
19. Why are the members of the pro-human rights women's group, known as the Ladies in White, blocked from free access to churches, at times using extreme violence to do so?
20. Why are those religious leaders who insist on opening the doors of their places of worship to any Cuban, regardless of political affiliation (including political dissidents), threatened, punished and harassed?
21. Why do they put obstacles in the way of many social projects that religious groups attempt to carry out, confiscating aid that is meant for those who have been affected by natural disasters, especially in the case of hurricanes?
22. Why do they arbitrarily punish historically established churches when they adopt any position that conflicts with their exclusionary and unjust political positions, denying them the rights that are theirs by law?
23. Why do they attempt to isolate specific religious leaders, blocking any access to them and detaining and even deporting foreigners who attempt to visit them?
24. Why do they take advantage of their monopoly over the banking system, using churches' bank accounts against them as a means of coercion? This is illustrated in the frozen dollar account of the Trinity Baptist Church in the city of Santa Clara, where they also refuse to legally recognise the Luis Manuel Gonzalez Peña Baptist Theological Seminary.
25. Why as of January 2014, was each religious association limited to only one bank account and bank accounts of individual churches were cancelled?
26. Why do the content of minutes and agreements taken within religious associations have to be made available to and approved by the Office of Religious Affairs?
27. Why do lodges and fraternal societies, whose services are not open to the public, forced, ignoring their right to confidentiality, to turn over lists of their members?
28. Why, as they themselves have admitted on their television program "The reasons of Cuba", do they have religious and fraternal groups under strict surveillance, including infiltrating them with spies at the highest levels, as in the notorious case of the highest leader of the Grand Masonic Lodge of Cuba?
29. Why, if they say that the deaths of believers like Juan Wilfredo Soto Garcia, Laura Pollan and Oswaldo Paya Sardinias, were not extrajudicial executions, do they refuse to permit any impartial investigations as have been requested and which would only confirm their innocence?
30. Why, do some prisoners, especially political prisoners, continue to be denied the right to religious attention and why does the government continue to reserve the right to approve or block specific religious leaders from carrying out prison ministry, including those who have been approved by their denomination to do so?

There remain many more questions which challenge the claim that in Cuba the same system, which in the past violated religious freedom, today respects it. Just as is noted in the Pastoral "Hope Does not Disappoint," published by the Cuban Conference of Catholic Bishops in 2013 political change is necessary, and in our view fundamental political change must happen; the fact is those who have held onto power for almost 60 years and who have an ample, scandalous and systematic history of violating religious freedom must cede their place to others who will uphold and respect those rights democratically. We will pray for this to take place in a peaceful but immediate way, because we have now been too long without freedom. We hope that the new Cuba which all of us hope for will also include religious freedom and that not even one of these thirty questions or other will have to be asked.

Coordinators at the Patmos Institute