

CUBA

Despite some improvements, serious religious freedom violations continue in Cuba. The government detains, sporadically arrests, and harasses clergy and religious leaders, and interferes in church affairs. The Cuban government also controls and monitors religious belief and practices through surveillance and legal restrictions. Based on these concerns, USCIRF again places Cuba on its Watch List in 2012. Cuba has been on USCIRF's Watch List since 2004.

Background

The Cuban government largely controls religious denominations through legal restrictions and government-authorized surveillance and harassment, and at times detention, of religious leaders. The government requires religious communities to undergo an invasive registration procedure. Only registered religious communities may receive foreign visitors, import religious materials, meet in approved houses of worship, and apply for international travel for religious purposes. Local Communist Party officials must approve all registered groups' religious activities. The government also denies the construction or repair of houses of worship; refuses access to state media and exit visas; requires the registration of publications; limits entry of foreign religious workers; denies Internet access to religious organizations; prohibits religious literature, such as Bibles, to prisoners; denies permission to hold processions or events outside religious buildings; and discriminates on the basis of religion in the area of employment.

Religious Freedom Conditions

Arrests of Religious Leaders: In 2011, dozens of religious leaders and followers were arrested and held for short periods of time, including dozens of members of the Apostolic Reformation which is independent of the Cuban Council of Churches (CCC), the government-approved umbrella organization for Protestant denominations. The Apostolic Reformation garnered the attention of Cuban authorities after several CCC pastors left those denominations to join the Apostolic Reformation.

The government placed Baptist pastor and activist Mario Feliz Leonart Barroso under short-term house arrest several times in 2011, and has been harassing him since he gave pastoral support to EU human rights prize-winner Guillermo Fariñas during his hunger strike.

In the last year there were new developments in key cases. Apostolic Reformation pastor Gude Perez was released from jail, after serving two years of a six-year sentence for illicit economic activity and falsification of documents. While he and his family were granted U.S. refugee status, he has been unable to secure an exit visa. Reverend Robert Rodriguez, president of the umbrella Interdenominational Fellowship of Evangelical Pastors and Ministers, had been under house arrest since October 2008 and in September 2011 was found not guilty of "offensive behavior." He was charged after his denomination withdrew from the CCC on account of state interference in internal church affairs. During Rev. Rodriguez's house arrest, pro-government mobs attacked his family and damaged his house, forcing them to move.

Interference in Church Affairs: Cuban religious leaders reported increased government surveillance, interference in internal affairs, and pressure to prohibit democracy and human rights activists from participating in church activities. Most of this harassment occurred in Santa Clara, where two prominent Protestant pastors are no longer at their posts due to government pressure: Baptist pastor Homero Carbonell resigned in protest, and Methodist pastor Yordi Toranzo was removed. Pastor Toranzo's removal prompted protests by his congregation, resulting in the arrests of Leonart Barroso, his wife, and 21 others, who also were prevented from attending church services. In addition, government-supported mobs continue to stop the Ladies in White from attending Sunday mass.

Improvements: Positive developments continued for the Roman Catholic Church and major registered Protestant denominations. According to the State Department, Cuba granted religious communities greater freedom this past year to discuss politically sensitive issues. Reports found that religious denominations have been given increased opportunities to conduct humanitarian and charity work, receive contributions from international co-religionists, and obtain Bibles and other religious materials. The government granted the CCC air time for periodic broadcasts, and Cuba's Roman Catholic Cardinal read Christmas and Easter messages on state-run stations. Additionally, there were fewer reports of illegal house churches being fined, confiscated, or evicted.

Relations between the Catholic Church and the government continue to improve, although the government maintains strict oversight over, and restrictions on, church activities. Cardinal Jaime Ortega has been instrumental in negotiating the release of political prisoners and intervening to stop officials from preventing the Ladies in White from attending mass. March 2012 marks the 400th anniversary of the appearance of the Virgin de Caridad de Cobre (Our Lady of Charity), Cuba's patron saint. Throughout the year, a replica of the Our Lady of Charity statue, *La Mambisa*, has toured the island, drawing large crowds. Pope Benedict XVI traveled to Cuba on March 26, met with Cuban President Raúl Castro and Fidel Castro, and called for religious freedom. Prior to and during the Pope's visit, hundreds of activists were arrested or prevented from attending his masses. Following the visit, the Cuban government made Good Friday a holiday in 2012 and formed a committee to determine if it should be a permanent, national holiday.

Recommendations for U.S. Policy

The United States and Cuba do not maintain full diplomatic relations. U.S.- Cuba policy continues to be dominated by U.S. trade sanctions and the embargo and the continued imprisonment of the "Miami Five," five Cuban intelligence officers convicted in 1966 in Miami of espionage, conspiracy to commit murder, and other illegal activities in the United States. The detention and March 2011 sentencing of USAID contractor Alan Gross to 15 years for crimes against the state also has impeded improvement in relations. Gross has been imprisoned since December 2009, notwithstanding efforts by U.S. government officials and the U.S. Jewish community to secure his release. The U.S. government's programs to promote human rights in Cuba do not adequately promote religious freedom. USCIRF recommends that, in addition to demanding that Havana end the detentions of religious leaders and followers, the U.S. government should:

- Press the Cuban government to meet the following benchmarks before considering resuming full diplomatic relations: stop arrests and harassment of religious leaders; cease interference with religious activities and the internal affairs of religious communities; allow unregistered religious groups to operate freely and legally; revise government policies that restrict religious services in homes or other personal property; and hold accountable police and other security personnel for actions that violate the human rights of non-violent religious practitioners;
- Use appropriated funds to advance Internet freedom and protect Cuban activists by supporting the development of new technologies and distributing programs to counter censorship; and
- Urge international partners to ensure that violations of freedom of religion or belief and related human rights are part of all formal and informal multilateral or bilateral discussions with Cuba.

Please see USCIRF's 2012 Annual Report for a more extensive review and recommendations on Cuba.