



CUBA

Key Findings

During the reporting period, religious freedom conditions in Cuba deteriorated due to increased government actions and threats to close, demolish, or confiscate church properties. In addition, the Cuban government continues to harass religious leaders and laity, interfere in religious groups' internal affairs, and prevent democracy and human rights activists from participating in religious activities. Despite constitutional protections for religious freedom, the Cuban government actively limits, controls, and monitors religious practice through a restrictive system of laws and policies and government-authorized surveillance and harassment. Based on these concerns, USCIRF again places Cuba on Tier 2 in 2016. Cuba has been on USCIRF's Tier 2 since 2004.

50. An unknown number of Greek and Russian Orthodox Christians, Buddhists, and Baha'is also live in Cuba.

While the Cuban constitution guarantees freedom of religion or belief, this protection is limited by other constitutional and legal provisions. Article 8 affirms that "the State recognizes, respects, and guarantees religious freedom," and article 55 further guarantees the right to "... change religious beliefs or not have any, and to profess, within the confines of the law, the religious worship of his/her preference." However, article 62 qualifies that all rights can be limited based on the "aims of the socialist State and the nation's determination to build socialism and communism..." The Cuban Penal Code's Abuse of Liberty of Worship clause permits the imprisonment of any person who the government determines abuses constitutional religious freedom protections by placing religious beliefs in conflict with other state goals.

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Background

Religious adherence continues to grow in Cuba, although there are no reliable statistics of Cubans' religious affiliations. Sixty to 70 percent of the population is estimated to be Roman Catholic and five percent Protestant. According to the State Department, various religious communities approximate their membership numbers as follows: Assemblies of God, 110,000; the four Baptist conventions, 100,000; Jehovah's Witnesses, 96,000; Methodists, 36,000; Seventh-day Adventists, 35,000; Anglicans, 22,500; Presbyterians, 15,500; Muslims, 2,000-3,000; Jews, 1,500; Quakers, 300; and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons),

The Cuban government controls religious activities through the Office of Religious Affairs (ORA) of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party and the Ministry of Justice. The government requires religious communities to register with the Ministry of Justice, including the disclosure of funding sources and locations for activities and certification that they are not duplicating the activities of other registered religious communities. The ORA has final authority over registration decisions. Currently, 54 religious communities are registered. Only registered religious communities are allowed to receive foreign visitors, import religious materials, meet in approved houses of worship, and apply to travel abroad for religious purposes. Local Communist

Party officials must approve all religious activities of registered groups other than regular worship services, such as repairing or building houses of worship and holding processions or events outside religious buildings. The government also restricts religious practices by denying some religious communities access to state media to air services, limiting exit visas, requiring the registration of publications, limiting the entry of foreign religious workers, and restricting bank accounts to one per denomination or religious association. Further, the ORA continues to pressure denominations to make their internal governing structures, statutes and constitutions more hierarchical, which aids government efforts to control religious communities.

In 2005, the Cuban government implemented a new law to increase oversight over house churches. Known as Directive 43 and Resolution 46, the law requires all house churches to register and submit to the government detailed information on their membership, the house church's inhabitants, and the schedule of services. It permits no more than three meetings to be held per week, bars foreign citizens from participating in services without government permission, and requires house churches of the same denomination to be at least two kilometers apart.

from February to August 2015 without trial for "illegal religious activities" for leading an unregistered church.

The government also used a new legal decree to expropriate church properties and require them to pay rent to the government. In January 2015, the Cuban government announced Legal Decree 322, the General Law on Housing, purportedly to regulate private properties and zoning laws. However, Cuban authorities used Legal Decree 322 to expropriate 15 Methodist churches, as well as other churches of various denominations in the more politically-active eastern part of the country.

Continued Targeting and Harassment of Independent Religious Communities

The government continued to harass the Apostolic Reformation and the Eastern and Western Baptist Conventions. These independent, vocal, and large religious communities are resistant to government interference. As in past reporting periods, the Apostolic Reformation has been targeted for government harassment including: short-term arrests of leaders; government-organized mob attacks; confiscations, destruction of, or threats to destroy church property; harassment and surveillance of church members and their relatives;

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Religious Freedom Conditions 2015–2016

Threats to Houses of Worship

During the reporting period, the Cuban government increasingly targeted houses of worship with closure, confiscation, and destruction. Since 2005, authorities rarely enforced the registration requirement for house churches and infrequently registered house churches that did submit applications; this changed in 2015. In the most egregious example, the government designated 2,000 Assemblies of God churches as illegal and ordered their closure, confiscation, or demolition, although these actions have not been taken. Also, Protestant Pastor Jesús Noel Carballeda was imprisoned

finances on churches; and threats to leaders and members of loss of employment, housing, or educational opportunities. Of particular concern is the ongoing harassment of Apostolic Reformation Reverend Yiorvis Bravo Denis and government efforts to seize his family home and church, the latter serving as the religious community's headquarters. Both the Eastern and the Western Baptist Conventions continued to report surveillance and harassment by state officials, including receiving death threats and being victims of "acts of repudiation" (demonstrations against them by government supporters). The two denominations also reported threats of church destruction or confiscation.

Denial of Religious Freedom for Democracy and Human Rights Activists

As in previous reporting periods, the Cuban government continued to deny democracy and human rights activists their constitutional rights to freedom of religion or belief. More than 100 separate incidents were reported in 2015 of Ladies in White members and other human rights and democracy activists being prevented from attending Sunday Masses. In the majority of cases, these individuals were detained on their way to Mass and released hours later. Individuals reported being beaten and harassed during their detentions. In a new development, they also reported being prevented from attending Bible study groups and prayer meetings. More than 150 democracy and human rights activists were detained during Pope Francis' trip to Cuba in September, preventing them from attending the pontiff's Mass. Further, church leaders reported pressure from government officials to expel or shun such activists. Religious leaders who did not comply were threatened with church confiscation or destruction.

were dominated by the U.S. trade sanctions and travel embargo on Cuba imposed in 1960 and reinforced by the 1996 Helms-Burton Act. The U.S. government's imprisonment of five Cubans arrested in 1998 for spying (known as the "Cuban Five"), and Cuba's detention of USAID contractor Alan Gross, also significantly hampered the relationship.

Since December 2014, the United States and Cuba re-established embassies in each other's capitals. The United States also removed Cuba from the State Sponsor of Terrorism list; eased restrictions on authorized travel to Cuba; and increased remittance levels, the import of Cuban products, the export of U.S. telecommunications equipment, and U.S.-led training opportunities for and exportation and/or sale of goods and services to Cuban private businesses and farmers. U.S. institutions were permitted to open banking accounts with Cuban financial institutions and U.S. credit and debit cards were permitted to be used in Cuba. Also Secretary of State John Kerry traveled to Cuba in July to re-open the U.S. Embassy; he was the first Secretary of State to travel

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Positive Developments

As in previous years, positive developments continue for the Catholic Church and other religious communities, such as the Episcopal Church and the Presbyterian-Reformed Church. These religious denominations continued to report increased opportunities to repair houses of worship, receive exit visas, import religious materials, receive contributions from co-religionists outside Cuba, and conduct charitable, educational, and community service projects.

U.S. Policy

In December 2014, President Barack Obama announced a "New Course on Cuba," starting a process of normalizing diplomatic relations between the countries and significantly lifting trade and travel restrictions. For decades, U.S.-Cuban policies and relations

to the country in 70 years. The White House announced in February 2016 that President Obama would travel to Cuba March 21-22, the first sitting president to do so since 1928.

This was the third time the Obama Administration eased U.S. sanctions on Cuba. In April 2009, the President lifted restrictions on the number of times Cubans in the United States can travel to Cuba and the amount of money they can send to relatives in the country. On the same day, President Obama also announced that the United States would begin issuing licenses for companies to provide cellular telephone and television services in Cuba. In March 2010, President Obama announced that technology companies would be permitted to export Internet services to Cuba to increase freedom of expression and allow human rights activists to collect and share information.

Recommendations

As part of the U.S.-Cuba ongoing discussions, the U.S. government should take significant action to convey that the change in policy does not diminish the Cuban government's need to improve religious freedom conditions on the island. As such, USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government should:

and materials with, and interact with co-religionists in the United States;

- Reinvigorate the U.S.-Cuba human rights dialogue and include religious freedom in the discussions;
- Use appropriated funds to advance Internet freedom and protect Cuban activists by supporting the devel-

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- Press the Cuban government to:
 - stop arrests and harassment of religious leaders;
 - end the practice of preventing democracy and human rights activists from attending religious services;
 - cease interference with religious activities and religious communities' internal affairs;
 - allow unregistered religious groups to operate freely and legally and revise government policies that restrict religious services in homes or other personal property;
 - lift restrictions on the building or repairing of houses of worship, holding of religious processions, importation of religious materials, and admittance of religious leaders; and
 - hold accountable police and other security personnel for actions that violate the human rights of religious practitioners;
 - Encourage Cuban authorities to extend an official invitation for unrestricted visits by the U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, USCIRF, and the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief;
 - Increase opportunities for Cuban religious leaders from both registered and unregistered religious communities to travel to, exchange aid
- opment and accessibility of new technologies and programs to counter censorship and to facilitate the free flow of information in and out of Cuba; and
- Encourage international partners, including key Latin American and European countries and regional blocs, 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.