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INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM



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United States Commission on International Religious Freedom**

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**ON THE COVER:** Members of Pakistan's Women Action Forum in Lahore, Pakistan rally against the presence of Taliban and militants in the northwest of Pakistan on Thursday, February 12, 2009. The banners condemn religious extremism, domestic violence, and the burning down of girls' schools in Swat. (AP Photo/K.M. Chaudary)

## Cuba

Religious belief and practice continue to be tightly controlled in Cuba. Although Cuba seeks to project the image that the right to religious freedom is respected, the potential influence of religious organizations is perceived by state authorities as a threat to the revolution and hence, the government's legitimacy. Within this reporting period, the government expanded its efforts to silence critics of its religious freedom policies and crack down on religious leaders whose churches operate outside of the government-recognized umbrella organization for Protestant denominations. Furthermore, despite becoming a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and some positive developments regarding the Catholic Church, President Raul Castro and the government have yet to institute or indicate plans for large-scale improvements in freedom of religion or belief and related human rights. While welcoming the small, positive steps taken by the Cuban government in the past year, the Commission continues to place Cuba on its Watch List, and will monitor conditions of freedom of religion or belief in Cuba to determine if they rise to a level warranting the country's designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC.

The government's main interaction with, and control over, religious denominations is through the regular surveillance, infiltration, and/or harassment of religious professionals and lay persons and administrative mechanisms. The Cuban government requires churches and other religious groups to register with the relevant provincial office of the Registry of Associations within the Ministry of Justice. Registration requires religious communities to identify locations and funding sources for activities, as well as a government certificate that states the community is not duplicating the activities of other registered religious communities. Registration permits religious leaders to receive foreign visitors, import religious materials, meet in approved houses of worship, and if permitted, travel abroad for religious purposes. There are approximately 50 state-recognized religious groups,

primarily Christian denominations, more than half of which have some form of association with the government-recognized Cuban Council of Churches (CCC). The government has not prevented activities of the Baha'is and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), groups that are not officially registered, and has registered groups that do not belong to the CCC, including the Jehovah's Witnesses. There is also a small Jewish community, primarily in Havana. In recent years, the government has not granted recognition to new religious groups.

According to the State Department, the Cuban government is most tolerant of those religious groups that maintain "close relations" with the state or those who "often [support] government policies." In 2008, the Greek Orthodox Church and Pentecostal Church of Sovereign Grace in Cuba became full CCC members and three churches became associate members. The CCC is the distributor of Bibles.

As in past years, government permission to build new houses of worship is difficult to obtain, although in 2008 a new Russian Orthodox church opened and construction of a Catholic seminary continued. While it is still administratively difficult for existing houses of worship to repair or expand facilities, according to the CCC and the State Department, in 2008 many houses of worship did receive permission. Construction, however, remains logistically expensive and time-consuming.

Because of the difficulty in obtaining permission to build new houses of worship, many religious groups, registered and unregistered, hold services in private homes or similar accommodations, commonly known as "house churches." There are reports that at least 10,000 house churches exist nationwide, the majority of which are technically illegal. A September 2005 law requires the registration of all house churches and the submission of detailed information on the number of members, schedule of services, and names and ages of the house's inhabitants. Moreover, no more than three meetings may be held per week, no foreign citizens may participate in services without government permission, and a house church cannot be within two kilometers of another house church of the same

denomination. The State Department reports that Pentecostal church officials feel targeted by these regulations because they meet more than three times a week. If a complaint is made against a house church meeting, it can be broken up and the attendees imprisoned. Although there is no evidence that the new legislation has resulted in a systematic crackdown on house churches, since 2005 several house churches from registered and unregistered denominations reportedly have been confiscated or destroyed. In many of these cases, local authorities told house church leaders and members that their buildings were “unsuitable” and then seized the buildings. There are also reports that individual worshippers have received citations and some churches are forced to pay large fines. Such reports continued in 2008.

All publications are required to be registered with the Ministry of Culture. However, the Cuban Conference of Catholic Bishops has refused to register its publications, arguing that such registration would mean a loss of content and format control. Although the government has not blocked the printing or publication of Catholic publications, increased government pressure in recent years, sometimes in the form of questioning by state security agents and blocking the distribution of supplies, has led to the closing of several publications. In April 2007, *Vitral* magazine, an independent Catholic magazine that in the past published articles critical of the Cuban government, announced that due to a lack of paper, ink, and Internet access, it would shut down. The magazine resumed publication in June 2007 under new management and with less politically sensitive content.

Other means by which the government restricts religious practice include: the enforcement of a regulation that prevents any Cuban or joint enterprise, except those with specific authorization, from selling computers, facsimile machines, photocopiers, or other equipment to any church other than at the official—i.e. exorbitant—retail prices; an almost total state monopoly on printing presses; a prohibition on private religious schools; limitations on the entry of foreign religious workers; denial of

Internet access to religious organizations; restrictions on making repairs to church buildings; and denial of religious literature such as Bibles to persons in prison. Additionally, there is a requirement that religious groups receive permission from local Communist Party officials prior to holding processions or events outside of religious buildings. Refusal of such permission often is based on the decision of individual government officials rather than in accordance with the law. According to the State Department, since 2005 the Catholic Church has not sought permits for religious processions in some areas.

In the past year, both registered and unregistered religious groups continued to be subject to varying degrees of official interference, harassment, and repression. Because an estimated 70 percent of the Afro-Caribbean population engages in at least some religious practice, which the government views as a potential grassroots threat, the government targets religious groups in these communities more heavily than political opposition organizations. According to the State Department, in the past year, independent Santeria priests have been threatened and pressured to assimilate into the government-sanctioned Yoruba Cultural Association.

The government continues to harass churches whose members include pro-democracy or human rights activists and the leaders of such churches. On March 20, 2008, state security agents and members of the Cuban Revolution Association and the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDRs) surrounded the First Baptist Church of Santa Clara during a church service. Several pro-democracy activists were present during the service. In May 2008, state security agents and Rapid Response Brigade members were present at an inter-denominational event organized by the same church. The agents’ presence was meant to intimidate the 300 participants, including 15 pro-democracy and human rights activists, as they publicly celebrated the Baptist campaign, “Fifty Days of Prayer for Cuba.” Harassment continued of church leaders of the Santa Teresita de Nino Jesus Roman Catholic Church in Santiago, where on Dec. 6, 2007, security officers

forcefully entered the church and beat several human rights activists attending mass.

In 2008, the government expanded efforts to threaten religious leaders who are perceived to be critical of the government or outside of the government's control of religion. For example, religious leaders who have withdrawn from denominations that are part of the CCC have reportedly been watched, had their phones tapped, or faced other threats. Some have fled the country due to state harassment. Several evangelical pastors whose churches are outside of the CCC and who have attracted large followings, as well as pastors who have criticized the government's interference in their churches, have been arrested and detained in the past year.

A father and two sons were arrested and charged with "offensive behavior" in October 2008. The previous month, the father, Reverend Robert Rodriguez, president of the Interdenominational Fellowship of Evangelical Pastors and Ministers, had pulled out of the CCC after publishing a letter complaining about state interference in church affairs. Prior to the arrest, the Cuban government stripped Reverend Rodriguez of his position as president of the umbrella organization, a move the organization condemned as unconstitutional. One of his sons, Pastor Eric Gabriel Rodriguez, was convicted of "offensive behavior" and sentenced to three months to one year of house arrest, with the possibility of imprisonment if he "re-offends". The trial date for his father, originally set for December 29, 2008, was moved to late February 2009, and then to March 19, 2009. The trial has since been suspended again, and no new date has been set.

One pastor, Omar Gude Perez, has been imprisoned since May 2008 because of his leadership position in the "Apostolic Reformation," a growing evangelical non-denominational and non-political religious movement. His family was told he would be charged with "human trafficking," but thus far no charges have been filed and no date set for his trial. Similar charges also were brought against another evangelical pastor in 2006 after he criticized the state's interference in his church, though those

charges were eventually dropped. Following Pastor Perez's imprisonment, government officials conducted a full inventory of his family's home and threatened to confiscate the house and possessions. Leaders of the unregistered Apostolic Nations for Christ Movement have reported that their phones are tapped, they are watched and threatened, and their members have been threatened with loss of employment if they do not leave their churches.

In December 2008, parishioners of an unregistered church in Havana were abused by men who entered their church and threatened them with the loss of their jobs if they continued to attend the church. Also in the past year, some pastors from non-CCC churches have had their work deemed "illegal," and have received threats that unless they stop their activities, their homes would be confiscated.

There are also reports that the Bible Committee of the CCC is refusing to supply non-CCC denominations and churches with Bibles to distribute. Reportedly, the Bible Committee has acknowledged that a denomination's refusal to join the CCC is the reason for the denial of Bibles.

Political prisoners continue to be limited in their right to practice their religion, although the State Department reports access to religious leaders has improved in the past year. These prisoners report that they are not being informed of their right to religious assistance, there are frequent delays in their receiving responses to requests for religious visits, they are denied the right to receive visits from clergy members, Bibles and rosaries are confiscated, and they are prevented from attending religious services with other prisoners.

The government sometimes discriminates in the area of employment. Converts to Christianity are reportedly encouraged to "retire," are not given promotions or pay raises, or are excluded from work functions or meetings because colleagues no longer consider them "trustworthy." Unofficially, people who are overtly religious also are excluded from diplomatic work or careers in journalism.

Additionally, many are prohibited from joining the police, military, or other security forces.

Discrimination against Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-day Adventists persists. There continue to be many reports of discrimination and maltreatment in schools, in part because of the groups' refusal to participate in mandatory patriotic activities on Saturdays. Students who are Jehovah's Witnesses reported being severely punished, including public ridicule and physical abuse by school staff, for not saluting the flag or singing the national anthem. The State Department reports that many Seventh-day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses reportedly left school after the ninth grade because of ridicule and harassment and students from these groups who graduated with good grades reportedly were denied university admittance.

There were some small, positive religious freedom developments in Cuba in 2008, particularly for the Catholic Church following a February 2008 visit by the Vatican's Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone. In November, the Catholic Church held its first beatification ceremony in Cuba. President Castro and thousands of followers attended the ceremony, which was publicized countrywide leading up to the event. Additionally, for the first time in 50 years, five Catholic bishops celebrated Christmas mass in Cuba's largest prison, Combinado del Este penitentiary. The bishops were able to speak with inmates after the mass. The auxiliary bishop of Havana also said mass at La Condesa, a prison for foreigners in Havana province. More generally, there are reports that in the aftermath of the three hurricanes that hit Cuba in the fall of 2008, the government permitted religious organizations to expand their social service operations to assist those affected by the storms.

In 2008, the "Ladies in White"—the wives of those arrested on "Black Spring," the day in 2003 when 75 human rights activists, independent journalists, and opposition political figures were arrested on various charges—were for the most part not harassed as they attended Santa Rita Church in Havana, nor were they prevented from attending mass. However, the women were prevented from

attending a mass in January 2009 at which Argentina President Kristina de Kirchner was in attendance.

Religious denominations were granted some increased access to the state media. As in years past, Santeria, viewed as representative of the country's culture, is a regular feature of television programming. The government granted the CCC time for periodic broadcasts early Sunday mornings, and the Catholic Church, generally not allowed access to the public media, was permitted 15 minutes on Christmas day to air the Cardinal's Christmas mass.

### **Recommendations for U.S. Policy**

With regard to Cuba, the Commission recommends that the U.S. government should use all diplomatic means to urge the Cuban government to undertake the following measures aimed at bringing Cuba into compliance with its international legal obligations with respect to the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief:

- instruct, publicly and officially, the state security agencies to end the following practices and to hold those involved in any further such practices accountable for their conduct: the harassment of religious persons and other human rights activists, including those recently released from prison; the mistreatment of indigenous religious communities; and the harassment during religious services of the spouses of imprisoned human rights activists;
- revise government Directive 43 and Resolution 46 restricting religious services in homes or on other personal property, as well as other national laws and regulations on religious activities, to bring them into conformity with international standards on freedom of religion or belief;
- cease, in accordance with international standards, interference with religious activities and the internal affairs of religious communities, such as denials of visas to religious workers, limitations on freedom of movement of religious workers, infiltration and intimidation of religious

communities, arbitrary prevention of religious ceremonies and processions, and attempted interference in elections in religious bodies; and

- take immediate steps to end restrictions on religious activities protected by international treaties and covenants, including:
  - ending the practice of arbitrarily denying registration to religious groups, as well as detaining or harassing members of religious groups and interfering with religious activities because of that unregistered status;
  - issuing permits for construction of new places of worship;
  - ending the practice of evictions and requisition of personal property of religious individuals or communities without due process, restitution, or provision of alternative accommodation;
  - securing the right to conduct religious education and distribute religious materials; and
  - lifting restrictions on humanitarian, medical, charitable, or social service work provided by religious communities and protecting persons who conduct such.