

CUBA

Serious religious freedom violations continue in Cuba despite some improvements. Violations by the Cuban government include: detention, sporadic arrests, and harassment of clergy and religious leaders, as well as interference 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 government-authorized surveillance and harassment, and at times detentions, of religious leaders and through its implementation of legal restrictions. The government requires churches and other religious groups to undergo an invasive registration procedure with the Ministry of Justice. Only registered religious communities are legally allowed to receive foreign visitors, import religious materials, meet in approved houses of worship, and apply for travel abroad for religious purposes. Local Communist Party officials must approve all religious activities of registered groups. The government also restricts religious practices by: denying the construction or repair of houses of worship; denying access to state media and exit visas; requiring the registration of publications; limiting the entry of foreign religious workers; denying Internet access to religious organizations; denying religious literature, such as Bibles, to persons in prison; denying permission to hold processions or events outside religious buildings; and discriminating on the basis of religion in the area of employment.

Religious Freedom Conditions

Arrests of Religious Leaders: A number of religious leaders and followers were arrested and held for short periods of time in this reporting period, including dozens of members of the Apostolic Reformation. The Apostolic Reformation garnered the attention of Cuban authorities after it attracted pastors from several churches belonging to Cuban Council of Churches (CCC), the government-approved umbrella organization for Protestant denominations.

Baptist pastor, human rights activist, and blogger Mario Feliz Leonart Barroso was placed under short-term house arrests several times in 2011. The harassment started after he gave pastoral support to EU human rights prize-winner Guillermo Fariñas during his hunger strike. In June, Leonart Barroso, his wife, and 21 others were arrested and prevented from attending church services for protesting the removal of a Methodist pastor from his post (see below).

There were new developments in 2011 in key cases. Apostolic Reformation pastor Gude Perez was released from jail in April 2011, after serving two years of a six-year sentence for illicit economic activity and falsification of documents. While he and his family were granted asylum to the United States, he has been unable to secure an exit visa from Cuban authorities. In September, Reverend Robert Rodriguez, president of the umbrella Interdenominational Fellowship of Evangelical Pastors and Ministers, was found not guilty of “offensive behavior.” Rev. Rodriguez had been under house arrest since October 2008. He was charged with

“offensive behavior” after his denomination withdrew from the CCC due to state interference in internal church affairs. During Rev. Rodriguez’s house arrest, pro-government mobs attacked his family members and damaged his house, forcing them to move; they remain unable to return.

Interference in Church Affairs: Religious leaders throughout Cuba reported increased government surveillance, interference in internal affairs, and pressure to prohibit democracy and human rights activists from participating in their churches’ activities. Most of this harassment occurred in Santa Clara, where two prominent Protestant pastors left their positions due to government pressure – Baptist pastor Homero Carbonell resigned in protest, and Methodist pastor Yordi Toranzo was removed. The removal of pastor Toranzo prompted protests by his congregation.

In related developments, government-support mobs continued to block members of the Ladies in White from attending Sunday mass outside of Havana.

Improvements: Positive developments for the Catholic Church and major registered Protestant denominations, including Baptists, Pentecostals, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Methodists, continued over the last year. The State Department reports that religious communities were given greater freedom to discuss politically sensitive issues. Sunday masses were held in more prisons throughout the island. Religious denominations continued to report increased opportunities to conduct some humanitarian and charity work, receive contributions from co-religionists outside Cuba, and obtain Bibles and other religious materials. Small, local processions continued to occur in the provinces in 2011. The government granted the Cuban Council of Churches time for periodic broadcasts early Sunday mornings, 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 Cuban government continue to improve, although the government maintains strict oversight of, 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 in Havana. March 2012 marks the 400th anniversary of the appearance of the Virgin de Caridad de Cobre (Our Lady of Charity), Cuba’s patron saint. Pope Benedict XVI will travel to Cuba starting on March 26 to participate in the celebrations, at which time he will be received by Cuban President Rául Castro. Throughout the year, a replica of the Our Lady of Charity statue, *La Mambisa*, has toured the island, drawing large crowds.

Recommendations for U.S. Policy

The United States and Cuba do not have full diplomatic relations, and U.S.-Cuba policy continues to be dominated by U.S. trade sanctions and the travel embargo on Cuba. The detention and March 2011 sentencing of USAID contractor Alan Gross to 15 years for crimes against the state also has impeded improved U.S.-Cuban relations. Gross has been imprisoned since December 2009, despite efforts to secure his release by U.S. government officials and the U.S. Jewish community.

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 concerning religious freedom prior to considering resuming full diplomatic relations with the country: stop arrests and harassment of clergy and 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 on 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 from harassment and arrest by supporting the development of new technologies, while also immediately distributing proven and field-tested programs to counter censorship; and
- Encourage international partners, including key Latin American and European countries, 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.