



# CUBA

## Key Findings

Serious religious freedom violations continue in Cuba, despite improvements for government-approved religious groups. The government continues to detain and 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 2015. Cuba has been on USCIRF's Tier 2 since 2004.

## 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; Jewish community, 1,500; Quakers, 300; and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), 50. An unknown number of Greek and Russian Orthodox, Buddhists, and Baha'i also live in Cuba.

The Cuban government controls religious activities through the Office of Religious Affairs of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party and the Ministry of Justice. The government requires religious communities 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 to travel abroad for religious purposes. Local Communist Party officials must approve all religious activities other than regular worship services of registered groups, such as repairing or building houses of worship and holding processions or events outside religious buildings. The government also restricts religious practices by denying, in many cases, access to state media and exit visas, requiring the registration of publications, and limiting the entry of foreign religious workers. The Cuban government in 2014 started restricting bank accounts to one per denomination or religious association, preventing individual churches from maintaining their finances independently. The Office of Religious Affairs continues to pressure denominations to make their internal governing structures, statutes, and constitutions more hierarchical, which would aid government efforts to control religious communities.

The government principally targets for arrest or harassment religious communities and leaders deemed too independent from government control or those who support democracy and human rights efforts. Government officials also regularly restrict the religious rights of democracy and human rights activists. All religious communities, including those with working relationships with the government, are subject to the control mechanisms listed above.

## Religious Freedom Conditions 2014–2015 Positive Developments

As in previous years, positive developments continue for the Catholic Church and major registered Protestant denominations, including but not limited to Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Methodists. These religious denominations continued to report increased opportunities to meet, worship, engage in public processions, receive exit visas, recruit new members, import religious materials, receive contributions from co-religionists

outside Cuba, and conduct charitable, educational and community service projects. In October, the Cuban government announced that the Catholic Church will be allowed to build its first new church on the island in more than 55 years. This follows the building of a new Catholic seminary. Catholic and Protestant Sunday worship services continue to be held in prisons throughout the island.

### **Continued Targeting and Harassment**

The government continued to harass the Apostolic Reformation, an independent and fast-growing religious community, during this reporting period. Such harassment includes: 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; fines on churches; and threats to leaders and members of loss of employment, housing, or educational opportunities.

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.” The two denominations also reported increased threats of church destruction or confiscation.

In three separate incidents, independent evangelical and interdenominational pastors were detained for short periods; several others received police summons and were questioned about their alleged role in “counter-revolutionary” activities.

As in previous reporting periods, the Cuban government continued to target human rights activists and particular religious communities. More than 100 separate incidents were reported in 2014 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. In other instances, police officers blockaded them from reaching their respective churches. Individuals reported being beaten and harassed during their detentions.

Prior to the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States summit in January 2014, two religious leaders and human rights activists – Independent Evangelical Church Pastor Yordani Santi and Ebenezer Baptist Church Pastor Mario Felix Leonart Barasso – were

harassed; Pastor Mario Felix was placed under house arrest until the summit ended. Several times during the reporting period Pastor Mario Felix and his wife were arrested and later released.

### **U.S. Policy**

In December 2014, President Barack Obama announced a “New Course on Cuba” that starts a process of normalizing diplomatic relations between the countries and significantly lifting trade and travel restrictions. On the morning of the announcement, President Obama and Cuban President Raul Castro spoke on the phone for more than one hour, the first presidential-level communication between the countries since the Cuban revolution. For decades, U.S.-Cuban policies and relations have been 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.

The changes to U.S.-Cuba policy announced in December include: re-establishing a U.S. Embassy in Havana to be led by an Ambassador to Cuba; immediately reviewing the designation of Cuba as a State Sponsor of Terrorism; easing restrictions for passage to Cuba for travelers from 12 authorized categories; increasing remittance levels from \$500 to \$2,000 per quarter; increasing U.S.-led training opportunities for and exportation and/or sale of goods and services to Cuban private businesses and farmers; authorizing U.S. institutions to open banking accounts with Cuban financial institutions; allowing the use of U.S. credit and debit cards in Cuba; increasing the export to and establishment of telecommunications equipment on the island; easing the application of Cuba sanctions in third countries; and permitting U.S. citizens to import \$400 of Cuban products (with a \$100 limit on tobacco and alcohol).

In addition to the above changes, the Cuban government released USAID contractor Alan Gross, who was imprisoned in 2009 and later sentenced to 15 years imprisonment for crimes against the state, as well as a U.S. intelligence officer jailed in Cuba for more than 20 years. The U.S. government released the three remaining members of the Cuban Five. All the men were returned to their respective countries on the day of the announcement.

A number of Cuban and religious leaders welcomed the new Cuba policy. In particular, the Catholic Church has long advocated for lifting the embargo, and Pope Francis was a key initiator of and mediator to the U.S.-Cuba discussions.

President Obama's announcement to start a process to normalize U.S.-Cuba relations and review Cuba's placement on the State Sponsors of Terrorism list met with both approval and criticism from Congress. Supporters of the new policy argue that Cuban authorities will be held more accountable to their own people because they will no longer be able to blame the embargo for the country's poor economy, trade and travel will provide a new market for U.S. goods, and increased contact with U.S. citizens will bring person-to-person diplomacy that could lead to changes on the island. Critics of the new policy argue that the U.S. government did not get much in return for lifting trade and travel restrictions, the Cuban government remains repressive, and that any lifting of sanctions should be conditioned on improved human rights and democracy conditions on the island.

President Obama has said that the United States government will continue to strongly press for and support improved human rights conditions and democratic reforms in Cuba. For fiscal year 2016, the Administration is requesting \$20 million to support humanitarian assistance to victims of political repression and their families, strengthen independent civil society, and improve freedom of expression in Cuba.

The Administration notes that as part of the December agreement, the Cuban government released 53 political prisoners who had long been the focus of concern among the human rights community, agreed to allow Internet access, and approved the return of International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and UN human rights officials. At this writing, those visits have yet to take place.

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 to visit and the amount of money they can send to relatives in that 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.

As part of the new U.S.-Cuba policy, Assistant Secretary of State Roberta S. Jacobson travelled to Havana in January and March 2015 for U.S.-Cuban migration talks. Migration talks have been ongoing for several years.

## **Recommendations**

As part of the U.S.-Cuba ongoing discussions, USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government should:

- 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, a practice which infringes on their religious freedom rights;
  - cease interference with religious activities and religious communities' internal affairs;
  - allow unregistered religious groups to operate freely and legally; 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 processes, 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 non-violent religious practitioners;
- Use appropriated funds to advance Internet freedom and protect Cuban activists by supporting the development 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.