

CUBA

U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom: 2013 Annual Report

Bottom Line: Despite some improvements for government-approved religious groups, religious freedom has deteriorated in Cuba with a sharp rise in the number of violations, primarily due to government pressure to prevent democracy and human rights activists from participating in religious activities.

Serious religious freedom violations continue in Cuba, despite some improvements for government-approved religious groups. Reports indicate a tripling in the number of violations, such as detentions and sporadic arrests of clergy and religious leaders, harassment of religious leaders and laity, interference in religious groups' internal affairs, and pressure to prevent democracy and human rights activists from participating in religious activities. Despite constitutional protections for religious freedom, the Cuban government actively controls and monitors religious practice through a restrictive system of laws and policies. Based on these concerns, USCIRF places Cuba on its Tier 2 list in 2013. Cuba had 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 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 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 permits to construct or repair houses of worship; denying access to state media and exit visas; requiring the registration of publications; limiting the entry of foreign religious workers; denying religious literature, such as Bibles, to persons in prison; and denying permission to hold processions or events outside religious buildings.

Religious Freedom Conditions

Denial of Religious Freedom to Human Rights/Democracy Activists: At least 75 separate incidents were reported of Ladies in White members and other human rights/democracy activists being prevented from attending Sunday masses, either by being arrested before mass and released hours later or by police officers blockading them from reaching their respective churches. In addition to these 75 incidents, Cuban human rights groups estimate that at least 200 activists were arrested and imprisoned for the duration of Pope Benedict XVI's visit in March, preventing them from attending the Pope's mass.

Arrests of Religious Leaders: Several religious leaders and followers were arrested, held for short periods of time, and sometimes mistreated in 2012. The most serious incident occurred on February 6, when Pentecostal pastor Reutilio Columbie was attacked on his way to file a complaint with regional authorities regarding the arbitrary confiscation of the church vehicle by local officials in late 2011. Pastor Columbie suffered permanent brain damage as a result of the beating, which he believes to have been orchestrated by local Communist Party officials since the only thing taken from him was the document proving his legal ownership of the vehicle. There were also three separate incidents (on February 25, August 11, and October 6) in which evangelical pastors were beaten and detained for several hours after public preaching at bus stations.

Targeting of Religious Communities: The government harassed the Apostolic Reformation and the Western Baptist Convention in 2012. Harassment of the Apostolic Reformation, an independent and fast-growing religious community, includes: short-term arrests of leaders; confiscation, destruction or threats of destruction of church property; harassment and surveillance of church members and their relatives; fines on churches; and threats of losses of job, housing or educational opportunities. The Western Baptist Convention—targeted

presumably because of its support of democracy activists—resisted government pressure to change its administrative structure in a manner to ease government’s interference in or control of the religious community; prevented closure of three its churches; and contended with fines, frozen assets, and harassment of pastors, including threats of physical violence.

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. Catholic and Protestant 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 2012.

Relations between the Catholic Church and Cuban government continued to improve. March 2012 marked the 400th anniversary of the appearance of the Virgin de Caridad de Cobre (Our Lady of Charity), Cuba’s patron saint. Pope Benedict XVI travelled to Cuba March 26-29 to participate in the celebrations, at which time he met Fidel Castro and Cuban President Raúl Castro. Throughout the year, a replica of the Our Lady of Charity statue toured the island drawing large crowds.

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
- Encourage international partners, including key Latin American and European countries and regional blocks, 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 2013 Annual Report for a more extensive review and recommendations on Cuba.