



## Cuba

### International Religious Freedom Report 2008

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution recognizes the right of citizens to profess and practice any religious belief within the framework of respect for the law; however, in law and in practice the Government continued to place restrictions on freedom of religion.

The Government continued to exert control over all aspects of social life, including religious expression. Certain groups, particularly Seventh-day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses, faced significant harassment and maltreatment. However, according to the majority of officially recognized religious organizations, there was a slight improvement in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. Various religious groups reported fewer restrictions on politically-sensitive expression, fewer importation and travel restrictions, permission to repair buildings, and significant increases in membership.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. Government urged international pressure on the Government to promote religious freedom and other human rights.

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 68,888 square miles and a population of 11.4 million. There was no independent authoritative source on the size or composition of religious institutions and their membership. The Roman Catholic Church estimates that 60 percent of the population is Catholic. Membership in Protestant churches is estimated to be 5 percent and includes Baptists, Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, Presbyterians, Anglicans, Episcopalians, Methodists, Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), and Lutherans. Other groups include the Greek Orthodox Church, the Russian Orthodox Church, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Baha'is, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). The remainder of the population is either non-practicing of any particular religion, atheist, or agnostic.

Some sources estimate that as much as 80 percent of the population consults with practitioners of religions with West African roots, such as Santeria or Yoruba, for assistance with specific immediate problems such as bearing children, curing illness, or ensuring safe passage. During the reporting period, a historically secretive group affiliated with Afro-Cuban religious practices, the Abalcua Society, opened a public office.

The Cuban Council of Churches (CCC) is a private, officially sanctioned umbrella organization that works closely with the Government and includes 25 religious organizations as full members, 9 associate members, and 3 with observer status. During the reporting period the Greek Orthodox Church and the Pentecostal Church of Sovereign Grace in Cuba became new full members. Three new communities were accepted as fraternal associate members: the Assembly of Christian Churches, the Quadrangular Pentecostal Church, and the Reflection and Solidarity Group Msgr. Oscar Arnulfo Romero. The Christian New Life Church became an observer member. The CCC is structured into 5 "zones" across the island and, according to the CCC's leadership, represents approximately 100,000 Christians. Most CCC members are officially recognized by the State, although several, including the Evangelical Lutheran Church, lack legal status and are recognized through their membership in the CCC. Other officially recognized groups, including the Catholic Church, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the small Jewish and Muslim communities, do not belong to the CCC.

Catholic Church officials estimate that 10 percent of baptized Catholics attend Mass regularly. Membership in

Protestant churches increased and was estimated at 550,000 persons. The Baptists, represented in four different conventions, are possibly the largest Protestant denomination, followed closely by the Pentecostal churches, particularly the Assembly of God. The number of Pentecostals is believed to be rising sharply. Jehovah's Witnesses report more than 86,000 members, the Seventh-day Adventists 30,000, and Methodists 18,000. There are 22,000 Anglicans and 15,000 Presbyterians. The Jewish community has 1,500 members, with 1,200 of them residing in Havana. The Muslim population consists of 6,000 temporary residents and 300 native-born. There are small communities of Quakers (300) and Mormons (30).

Led by the Iranian mission, several embassies offered to build a mosque in Havana; however, the Government has not identified land for this project nor officially accepted the offer.

Foreign missionary groups operate through registered churches. Visits by religious figures are handled by the Religious Affairs Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party.

## Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

### Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution recognizes the right of citizens to profess and practice any religious belief within the framework of respect for the law; however, in law and in practice, the Government places restrictions on freedom of religion. The Constitution has provided for the separation of church and state since the early 20th century. In 1992 the constitution was changed, and references to scientific materialism or atheism were removed. The Government does not officially favor any particular religion or church, but it appears to be most tolerant of those churches that maintain close relations with the state through the CCC.

The Government's main interaction with religious groups is through the Office of Religious Affairs of the Cuban Communist Party. The Office's stated purpose is to encourage dialogue between religious groups and the Government, but many religious figures believe that its real role is to assert the Government's power.

The Government requires religious groups to register with the provincial Registry of Associations within the Ministry of Justice to obtain official recognition. Registration procedures require groups to identify where they will conduct their activities, demonstrate their funding for these activities, and obtain certification from the Registry of Associations that they are not duplicating the activities of a previously registered organization. Registration allows church officials to obtain official permission to travel abroad and receive foreign visitors, accept imported religious literature through the CCC, and meet in officially recognized places of worship. Conversely, members of unregistered religious groups must request exit permits on an individual basis, obtain religious materials through extralegal means, and risk closure of their technically illegal meeting places. Proselytizing in general is permitted on a selective basis.

The law allows for the construction of new houses of worship once the required permits are obtained; however, the Government rarely authorizes new construction permits. Several religious leaders alleged that during the reporting period the Government more readily gave permission to repair or restore existing churches; however, the process of obtaining a permit for an expansion or repair project and purchasing construction materials from government outlets remained lengthy and expensive. A Russian Orthodox Church was built during the reporting period, construction continued on a Catholic seminary, and many churches were expanded.

House churches are subject to numerous regulations, many of which address location and hours of worship. Directive 43 and Resolution 46 require house churches to register with the Government. The vast majority of house churches were unregistered and thus technically illegal; however, most registered religious groups were able to hold services in private homes. Christian Solidarity Worldwide estimates that there are at least 10,000 house churches nationwide. Their numbers have increased in recent years, which religious leaders attributed to the [Government not authorizing construction of new churches](#).

The Government allows for a religious wedding ceremony, but only after a compulsory civil marriage.

The Government observes December 25, commonly associated with Christmas Day, as a national holiday.

Religious literature and materials must be imported through a registered religious group and can be distributed only to officially recognized religious groups. The CCC controls distribution of Bibles to its members and to other officially recognized denominations.

Persons who openly declare their religious faith rarely ascend to senior positions in Government; however, in January 2008 four religious leaders became National Assembly members.

Religious groups are required to submit a request to the local ruling official of the Communist Party before being allowed to hold processions or events outside of religious buildings.

The Government has not registered the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints but maintains a written agreement that allows members to hold weekly meetings and baptize new members. The agreement expressly forbids members from proselytizing, a key component of members' practice in other countries.

The Government does not permit religious education in public schools nor the operation of private primary and secondary schools of any kind, including religious schools, although several international schools in Havana are given considerable leeway in setting their curriculums. Churches provide religious education classes to their members, as well as seminars to wider audiences. During the reporting period some post-graduate courses in the history of religion were instituted at the state-run University of Havana. The Government allows some religious groups, such as the Catholic Church and the Havana Jewish community center, to administer some charities and offer religious education classes and adult education courses on subjects such as computers and foreign languages. During the reporting period, the First Presbyterian Reform Church of Havana established a suicide prevention hotline.

#### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government continued to exert control over all aspects of societal life including religious expression. The Ministry of the Interior continued to engage in efforts to control and monitor religious activities and to use surveillance, infiltration, and harassment against religious groups, religious professionals, and laypersons. Certain groups, particularly Seventh-day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses, faced ridicule and maltreatment.

In September 2007 the Government fined Pentecostal pastor Ernesto Oliva \$50 (1,200 pesos) for erecting without authorization a church on his property in the district of Arroyo Naranjo.

Many Seventh-day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses reported discrimination or dismissal from employment due to refusal to work on Saturdays, or in the case of Jehovah's Witnesses, refusal to serve in the military or pledge allegiance to the flag. There continued 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 for not saluting the flag or singing the national anthem. Punishment reportedly took the form of public ridicule, screamed insults, social isolation, or physical abuse by school staff. Some parents of Jehovah's Witnesses students alleged that officials threatened to prosecute them under Articles 315 and 316 of the Penal Code (Acts Contrary to the Normal Development of a Minor) for not allowing their children to participate in Communist Party activities at school. Many Seventh-day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses reportedly left school in the ninth grade because of ridicule and harassment. Students from these groups who graduated with good grades were reportedly denied university admittance.

Government officials continued to harass, threaten, and fine unregistered religious groups, and state security forces continued to subject officially sanctioned and unregistered house churches to surveillance. Some Pentecostal church officials continued to consider themselves singled out by the Government's house church regulations. Many Pentecostals normally meet in house churches more than twice a week, a practice that would violate the regulations.

There were no reports that the Government approved any official registration for new religious groups. Although no group reported an official denial of their application to the Office of Religious Affairs, many organizations reported that the Government did not reply to their requests nor answered their correspondence.

The Government impedes access to printing by making equipment costly. The diocese of Pinar del Rio's magazine, *Vitral*, having ceased publication from April to June 2007, resumed publication with far less controversial content; however, the John Paul II Bioethics Center in Havana published material and the magazine *Signis* appeared monthly. State security questioned the editor of another religious magazine for covering sensitive political and social issues.

A prisoner held in Boniato in Santiago de Cuba allegedly was refused the visit of a priest despite repeated requests. In general, there were reports that prison authorities did not inform inmates of their right to religious assistance; delayed months before responding to such requests; and limited visits to a maximum of two or three times a year.

Officials of various groups reported that local officials discriminated against religious persons because of ignorance or personal prejudice. Religious persons encountered employment problems in certain professions, such as education.

#### Abuses of Religious Freedom

[On December 4, 2007, police entered an assembly hall on the grounds of the Santa Teresita Catholic Church in Santiago de Cuba](#), beat several persons gathered for Mass who participated in a political protest earlier that day, and detained 18 persons. The Government apologized to the local bishop but not to the parish priest.

On November 20, 2007, police in Santiago de Cuba evicted Pentecostal preacher Alain Tolerano Valiante and his family from their home and demolished the church his congregation had erected without permission in a rural area. Police temporarily detained a member of the congregation who was taking photographs of the incident and confiscated his camera.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

#### Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

#### Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

The Government permitted the Jewish community more visits to Israel. In April 2008 the Government also allowed the importation of \$40,000 of duty-free foodstuffs for Passover and expedited the shipment through customs.

On February 28, 2008, the Government signed the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESC) with reservations. Article 18 of the ICCPR guarantees freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. Although the Government never officially made the treaty texts publicly available, the Catholic Church publication *Palabra Nueva* published the texts. The treaties have yet to be ratified by the Government.

From February 20 to 26, 2008, the Vatican Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarciso Bertone, visited the country and reportedly met with President Raul Castro. On February 23, 2008, Cardinal Bertone unveiled a statue of Pope John Paul II in Santa Clara to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the Pope's visit.

Some religious groups reported fewer restrictions on politically-sensitive expression; for example, some Catholic parishes offered prayers for political prisoners. While religious leaders normally avoided specifically

political commentary, congregations reported increasing boldness in discussions of social issues in sermons without repercussions. Unlike during previous reporting periods, the organization Damas de Blanco (Ladies in White), composed of the relatives and supporters of political prisoners, gathered without government interference on Sundays at the Church of Santa Rita in Havana.

Various religious groups found it somewhat easier to import religious materials; bring in foreign religious workers; travel abroad to attend conferences and religious events; utilize limited Internet access; and restore houses of worship. Outside central Havana, construction continued on the first new Catholic seminary to be built in 50 years, and instruction began in completed classrooms.

Many religious organizations reported a significant rise in membership as well as a revival in interest in religion in general, especially among the young. Most churches reported increased participation in classes for religious instruction for children because the government schools no longer scheduled competing activities on Sundays.

The Government granted the CCC time for periodic radio broadcasts early on Sunday mornings.

### Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. However, the growth of small unregistered Pentecostal and charismatic congregations created divisions among Protestant groups.

Some members of society complained that government officials reportedly granted favors to many babalawos (Santeria priests) in exchange for predictions about the future that were favorable to the Government.

### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. government policy toward the country is to promote a rapid, peaceful transition to democracy and respect for human rights, including religious freedom, and the U.S. Government encourages the development of civil society, which includes the strengthening of religious institutions. Officials from the U.S. Interests Section met frequently with representatives of religious groups.

As in the past, the U.S. Government urged international pressure on the Government to cease its repressive practices, including religious discrimination, harassment, and surveillance.

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