

CUBA 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution protects religious freedom, although in practice government policies and practice restricted religious freedom. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year. While there were some advances in the ability of members of established churches to meet and worship, significant restrictions remained. The Cuban Communist Party, through its Office of Religious Affairs, continued to control most aspects of religious life. However, most religious groups reported increased ability to cultivate new members, hold religious activities, and conduct charitable and community service projects, while reporting fewer restrictions on religious expression, importation of religious materials, and travel. The government invited Pope Benedict XVI to visit and assisted in organizing papal masses in public squares in the center of the country's two largest cities. The government's repression of peaceful human rights activists, however, included preventing some of them from attending religious services. This trend was particularly marked during the Pope's March visit, when the Cuban Council of Human Rights (CCDHRN) registered more than one thousand short term detentions.

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

The U.S. government encouraged the development of civil society, including strengthening religious institutions. Changes to Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) regulations in 2011 continued to ease restrictions on religious remittances and exchanges with religious institutions in the United States. Exchanges continued to be an important way for U.S. religious institutions to engage their Cuban counterparts, and to support their right to practice their faith freely. The U.S. interests section remained in close contact with Cuban religious groups, as well as with American religious groups traveling to the country. In public statements, the Department of State called upon the government to respect the fundamental freedoms of its citizens, including freedom of religion.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to the country's National Office of Statistics' 2012 publication on demographics, the population is approximately 11 million. There is no independent authoritative source on the size or composition of religious groups.

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The Roman Catholic Church estimates that 60 to 70 percent of the population is Catholic, but only 4 to 5 percent regularly attend mass. Membership in Protestant churches is estimated at 5 percent of the population. Baptists and Pentecostals are likely the largest Protestant denominations. Jehovah's Witnesses report approximately 95,400 members; Methodists estimate 35,000; Seventh-day Adventists 33,000; Anglicans, 22,000; Presbyterians, 15,000; Quakers, 300; and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), 50. The Jewish community estimates 1,500 members, of whom 1,200 reside in Havana. According to the Islamic League, there are 6,000 to 8,000 Muslims residing in the country, although only an estimated 1,000 are Cubans. Other religious groups include Greek and Russian Orthodox, Buddhists, and Bahais.

Many people, particularly in the Afro-Cuban community, consult with practitioners of religions with roots in West Africa and the Congo River basin, known as Santeria. These religious practices are commonly intermingled with Catholicism, and some even require Catholic baptism for full initiation, making it difficult to estimate accurately the total membership of these syncretistic groups.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution protects religious freedom, although government policies restrict it.

The 1992 constitution abolishes atheism as the state ideology, declares the country a secular state, and provides for the separation of church and state. The government does not officially favor any particular religion or church. The Cuban Communist Party has the authority to regulate religious institutions and the practice of religion through its Office of Religious Affairs.

By law religious groups are required to apply to the Ministry of Justice for official recognition. The application procedure requires religious groups to identify the location of their activities and the source of their funding. The ministry must certify that the group is not "duplicating" the activities of another recognized group; if so, recognition is denied. Once the ministry grants official recognition, religious group must request permission from the Office of Religious Affairs to hold meetings in approved locations, receive foreign visitors, and travel abroad.

The government observes December 25 as a national holiday, and in honor of the Pope's visit, the government declared the Friday before Easter a holiday.

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Government declarations and calendars do not assign any religious significance to the days.

Government Practices

There were reports of restrictions on religious freedom. Religious groups were no exception to the government's generalized effort to monitor and exercise control over all civic activities. The Communist Party's Office of Religious Affairs monitored and regulated almost every aspect of religious life, including the power to approve or deny religious visits; the construction, repair, or purchase of religious buildings; the purchase and operation of motor vehicles; the ability to conduct religious services in public, and the import of religious literature. Religious groups also reported it was easier during the year than previously to obtain government permission to maintain and repair existing places of worship and other buildings, although obtaining permission for the purchase or construction of new buildings remained difficult.

With the exception of two Catholic seminaries and several interfaith training centers, religious schools were not permitted. Military service was mandatory, with no legal exception for conscientious objectors. However, the government continued an unofficial practice of allowing a period of civilian public service to substitute for military service for those who objected on religious grounds. The penalty for not fulfilling military service was imprisonment of three months to one year, although no cases were reported.

A number of religious groups, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons, continued their years-long wait for a decision from the Ministry of Justice on pending applications for official recognition. These established but unrecognized religious groups reported the authorities permitted them to conduct religious activities, hold meetings, receive foreign visitors, make renovations to their buildings, and send representatives abroad. Other groups, principally less well established independent evangelical Protestant churches, reported that the authorities harassed and fined parishioners for gathering to worship, and pastors were sometimes arrested or detained for attempting to preach in public.

The Office of Religious Affairs rarely granted religious groups authorization to construct new buildings or acquire new properties. Religious leaders noted, however, that the office frequently granted permission to repair or restore existing temples, allowing significant expansion of some structures and in some cases

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allowing essentially new buildings to be constructed on the foundations of the old. Many houses of worship were thus expanded or repaired.

In response to tight restrictions on constructing new buildings, many religious groups used private homes, known as “house churches,” for religious services. Estimates on the total number of house churches varied significantly, from fewer than 2,000 to as many as 10,000. The Office of Religious Affairs allowed this, but required that recognized groups seek approval for each proposed location through a separate registration process. Religious groups indicated that while many applications were approved within two to three years from the date of the application, other applications received no response or were denied. Some religious groups were only able to register a small percentage of their “house churches.” In practice, most unregistered “house churches” operated with little or no interference from the government.

A license from the Office of Religious Affairs was necessary to import religious literature and other religious materials. The government owned nearly all printing equipment and supplies and tightly regulated printed materials, including religious literature. The Catholic Church and some other religious groups were able to print periodicals and other information and operate their own websites with little or no formal censorship. The government continued to restrict access to the Internet, however, and permitted access to very few people. The Catholic Church continued to publish periodicals that sometimes criticized official social and economic policies. As in the past, the Catholic Church received permission to broadcast Christmas and Easter messages on state-run radio stations. The Cuban Council of Churches, the government-recognized Protestant umbrella organization, was authorized to host a monthly twenty-minute-long radio broadcast. State-run television and radio stations mentioned a Council of Churches ceremony celebrating Reformation Day.

The Office of Religious Affairs is also responsible for issuing permits allowing religious groups to purchase and operate motor vehicles. On February 6 Reutilio Columbie, a pastor in a Pentecostal church in Holguin, was found unconscious on the street after an apparent assault. At the time of the assault, Columbie was on his way to lodge a protest of the government’s confiscation of a church vehicle. The only thing stolen from him was the paperwork showing the church’s title to the vehicle. Columbie suffered brain damage due to attack. The government did not make public the results, if any, of an investigation into the incident.

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The government did not permit religious groups to establish schools. Some religious groups operated after-school programs, weekend retreats, and workshops for primary and secondary students and higher education programs for university graduates. Some churches reported increased participation in religious instruction for children because government schools no longer scheduled competing activities on Saturdays or Sundays. A cultural center in Havana opened in 2011 by the Catholic Church continued to offer several academic and business administration courses. The Jewish Community Center and some Protestant churches also offered courses on lay subjects, such as computers and foreign languages. Although not specifically allowed by the government, these programs operated without interference.

Jehovah's Witnesses leaders encouraged members to avoid university education, finding the requirements for university admission and the course of study incompatible with the group's beliefs prohibiting political involvement. Jehovah's Witnesses also found incompatible the expectation that students participate in political activities in support of the government, and the requirement that they be available for assignment for government duties for three years after graduation.

The leadership of Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-day Adventists stated that their members generally were permitted to participate in social service in lieu of military service.

The leadership of Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-day Adventists stated that mistreatment and job discrimination, which had been particularly harsh in the past, were now rare and that their members were usually exempted from political activities at school. Seventh-day Adventist leaders stated that their state-employed members were usually excused from working on Saturdays.

Both the Catholic Church and the Cuban Council of Churches reported that they were able to conduct religious services in prisons and detention centers in most provinces. There were reports, however, that prison authorities did not inform inmates of their right to religious assistance, delayed months before responding to requests, and limited visits to a maximum of two or three times per year.

Religious groups reported they were able to engage in community service programs, including providing assistance to the elderly, after-school tutoring for children, clean water, and health clinics. International faith-based charitable operations, such as Caritas and the Salvation Army, had local offices in Havana. Religious groups provided humanitarian assistance to families affected by

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Hurricane Sandy, although some reported that they were not permitted to distribute aid directly to families in need but were obligated to turn it over to government officials for distribution. Several pastors in the Granma region reported the authorities detained them for attempting to distribute aid to hurricane victims and confiscated the aid that they were attempting to distribute.

Most religious leaders reported they exercised self-censorship in what they preached and discussed during services. Many feared that direct or indirect criticism of the government could result in government reprisals, such as denials of permits from the Office of Religious Affairs or other measures that could stymie the growth of their organizations.

The government took measures to limit support for outspoken religious figures it considered a challenge to its authority. On October 30, Pastor Omar Gude Perez (also known as Omar Perez Ruiz), a leader of the Apostolic Reformation, an association of independent nondenominational churches, released an open letter protesting the government's refusal to allow him to work as a pastor or grant him the exit visa necessary to leave the country. The letter also protested his incarceration for three years on false charges. The pastor contended that he was singled out for punishment in retaliation for outspoken sermons and repeated denunciation of religious freedom violations suffered by the churches in his network. Gude Perez and his family were granted asylum to the U.S. in 2011, but were unable to leave the country because the government would not issue the pastor an exit visa.

The government prevented human rights activist worshipers from attending religious services. Members of the peaceful protest group Ladies in White were routinely prevented from attending church, a practice that was particularly pronounced in the eastern provinces of Holguin and Santiago. Before Pope Benedict XVI's visit, many members of the peaceful political opposition were arrested or were prevented from leaving their homes to participate with the Pope in celebrating mass. The CCDHRN registered over one thousand detentions during the month of March in the lead-up to the papal visit. While most of these detentions were short-term, Lady in White Sonia Garro Alfonso and her husband, political activist Ramon Alejandro Munoz Gonzalez, were arrested March 18 and remained jailed without charge at year's end.

On July 22, prominent Catholic lay activist and leading opposition figure Oswaldo Paya Sardinias died in an automobile crash, alongside young leader and Catholic lay activist Harold Cepero Escalante. Although Paya's family called for an

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independent investigation of the crash and of Paya and Cepero's cause of death, none was made. Hundreds of mourners attended Paya's funeral over which Cardinal Jaime Ortega presided. Pope Benedict XVI sent a telegram to be read at the mass. After the funeral, state security forces detained thirty-two mourners for periods ranging from six to twenty-four hours.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

Religious groups reported improved ability to attract new members without government interference. The majority of religious groups reported reduced interference from the government in conducting their services, and improvement in their ability to import religious materials, receive donations from overseas, and travel abroad to attend conferences and religious events. Many religious groups found it easier to bring in foreign religious workers and visitors and restore houses of worship.

The government requested Pope Benedict XVI's visit and provided extensive logistical support during his March 26-29 trip, including allowing the Pope to say mass in the central squares of the two largest cities, and declaring the three days of the visit a national holiday to facilitate citizen participation in the open-air religious ceremonies. Footage of the visit was broadcast on state-run television stations, and the visit was reported in print and radio. A few Protestant churches reported that they were also permitted to hold religious ceremonies in public spaces.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

As part of U.S. policy to encourage increased respect for religious freedom, U.S. interests section officials, including the chief of mission, met regularly with representatives of religious groups. Religious tolerance in a communist society and religious freedom in the country were frequent topics of discussion. U.S. interests section representatives observed religious activities and provided resources to support the work of some faith-based organizations to assist their communities. In public statements, the U.S. Department of State regularly called upon the government to respect fundamental freedoms of its citizens, including the

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freedom of religion. Additionally, public statements drew attention to concerns that peaceful members of the political opposition were prevented from attending religious worship services, a trend that was particularly marked during the visit of Pope Benedict XVI in March.

Changes to Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) regulations in 2011 continued to ease restrictions on religious remittances and exchanges with religious institutions in the United States. Officials from the interests section met frequently with Americans visiting as part of faith-based exchanges and humanitarian aid programs. American faith-based programs engaged directly with Cuban faith-based institutions and promoted religious tolerance through their activities and presence in Cuban communities.