



Cuba

International Religious Freedom Report 2007

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.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the reporting period, which included the transmission of authority from Fidel Castro to his brother Raul Castro as a result of the former's incapacitation. Overall human rights conditions remained poor. Some religious figures who criticized the Government's totalitarian system in sermons were subjected to intense harassment. In general, unregistered religious groups continued to experience varying degrees of official interference, harassment, and repression. The Government maintained its policy of permitting apolitical religious activity to take place in government-approved sites. However, state security forces continued to subject to surveillance citizens worshipping in officially sanctioned churches, and the Government continued its efforts to maintain a strong degree of control over religion. In 2005 the Government implemented new regulations that restricted the operation of house churches but eased its policy on issuing work permits to foreign clergy.

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

Visiting U.S. Members of Congress raised human rights in a general way with the Government and were rebuffed. Overall the Government refused to discuss human rights or religious freedom with the U.S. Government, although it claimed to be an international model of respect for human rights. The U.S. Government continued to urge international pressure on the Government to cease its repressive practices. In Havana, officers assigned to the U.S. Interests Section engaged a broad range of religious leaders in discourse and on many occasions invited them to representational events.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 68,888 square miles and a population of 11.2 million. There is no independent authoritative source on the size or composition of religious institutions and their membership. According to the U.S.-based Puebla Institute, 40 to 45 percent of the population identify themselves, at least nominally, with the Catholic Church. Some sources estimated that as much as 70 percent of the population practices Santeria, which has its roots in West African traditional religions.

The Baptists, represented in four different conventions, were possibly the largest Protestant denomination, followed closely by the Pentecostal churches, particularly the Assemblies of God. In March 2006 membership in the Cuban Council of Churches (CCC) increased to 23 groups when World Wide Missions, a Pentecostal church, joined. Other members include Presbyterian, Episcopalian, and Methodist groups, but not the Catholic Church. The CCC is structured into five "zones" across the island and, according to the CCC's leadership, represented approximately 100,000 Christians. Most CCC members are officially recognized by the state, although several, including the Evangelical Lutheran Church, lacked legal status and were recognized through their membership in the CCC. Other officially recognized groups, including Jehovah's Witnesses and the small Jewish and Muslim communities, did not belong to the CCC.

Catholic Church officials estimated that 10 percent of baptized Catholics attend Mass regularly. Membership in Protestant churches increased and was estimated at 530,000 persons. No statistics on Pentecostal membership are available, but members of the church indicated that membership has risen sharply in recent years. Jehovah's Witnesses claim more than 86,000 active members, and the Seventh-day Adventists report 30,000 persons. There are 22,000 Anglicans, and 14,000 Presbyterians. Methodists claim that since 1999 their clergy has grown from 330 to 1,100, and overall membership is now 18,000. The Jewish community has 1,200 members, approximately half residing in Havana. The Muslim population was estimated at no less than 300. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) has an estimated 15 members.

There are 344 Catholic priests, 61 permanent deacons, and 628 religious sisters in the country, many fewer than the total

prior to 1960. These numbers remained essentially constant during the reporting period. Fewer than half of all Catholic "religious" priests, as opposed to "diocesan" priests, are of Cuban origin; most of the others were from Spain or Mexico. Most new arrivals replaced retiring priests or those whose time of service in the country had ended. The replacements came from the same religious orders.

Foreign missionary groups operate in the country through registered churches. Visits by religious figures, including that of Rabbi Arthur Schneier, President of the Appeal of Conscience Foundation, are handled by the Religious Affairs Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. In November 2006 on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Havana's Jewish Community, Rabbi Schneier, accompanied by Seton Hall University President Monsignor Robert Sheeran, visited Havana.

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 placed 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 maintained close relations with the state through the CCC.

The Government requires churches and other 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. In March 2007 Yoruba and other Santeria religious groups, Greek and Russian Orthodox, some Baptist, Buddhist, and Islamic religious groups were granted full legal recognition.

The Government tolerates some religions, such as the Baha'i Faith and a small group of Mormons, that were relatively new to the country. Proselytizing in general is permitted on a selective basis. Members of Jehovah's Witnesses were allowed to proselytize quietly door-to-door and generally were not subject to overt government harassment; however, there continued to be reports of discrimination in schools. A Protestant pastor reported that state security warned him not to proselytize in a poor Havana neighborhood or his actions would be interpreted as political agitation.

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. On some occasions, churches or church groups distributed Bibles without government permission and without incident.

Since 1992 the Communist Party has admitted as members persons who openly declared their religious faith; however, such persons rarely ascended to senior positions in the Government.

The Government does not permit religious education in public schools nor the operation of private schools of any kind, including religious schools, although several international schools in Havana are given considerable leeway in setting their curricula. The Government allows the Catholic Church and the Havana Jewish community center to administer small charities and to offer religious education classes and self-improvement courses on subjects such as computers and foreign languages.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government's main interaction with religious denominations is through the Office of Religious Affairs of the Cuban Communist Party. The Office is intended to encourage dialogue between churches and the Government, but many religious figures believed that its real role is to assert the Government's power. The Ministry of Interior, through its state security apparatus, continues to engage in efforts to control and monitor the country's religious institutions, including surveillance, infiltration, and harassment of religious professionals and laypersons. In 2004 an independent journalist interviewed a former Ministry of Interior official who reported widespread government infiltration of religious organizations, especially targeting Afro-Caribbean religious groups due to their high rates of participation and grassroots threat to the

Government.

The law allows for the construction of new churches once the required permits are obtained; however, the Government rarely authorized construction permits, forcing many churches to resort to expanding existing houses of worship. According to CCC President Rhode Gonzalez, none of the group's member churches or church confederations received government permission to construct a new church building during the reporting period. However, the CCC President said many churches were expanded during this period. The process of obtaining a permit for an expansion or repair project and purchasing construction materials from government outlets remained lengthy and expensive.

Most registered religious groups are able to hold services in private homes. The numbers have increased in recent years, and many religious leaders attributed this to the Government's refusal to authorize the construction of new churches. In September 2005 the Government implemented a controversial directive that many religious groups viewed as restricting the operation of house churches. Directive 43 and Resolution 46 require house church operators to register with the Government, thus "legalizing" their existence. To register a house church, an operator must meet several requirements, some of which infringe on religious freedom: the house church cannot host more than three meetings per week; it must not be located within 2 kilometers of another house church; and it may be open only between 5 p.m. and 10 p.m. on workdays, and between 9 a.m. and 10 p.m. on other days. The new regulations also state that the use of a sound system requires permission from neighbors and that no house church can operate in a multifamily residence.

The vast majority of house churches were unregistered and thus technically illegal. All religious groups complained that the registration process was arduous. House churches were difficult to quantify, but Christian Solidarity Worldwide estimated that there are at least 10,000 nationwide. According to a leading Baptist Church official, of the 1,500 Baptist house churches in the western region, no more than 20 had been "legalized" by the time the directive was issued in April 2005. Methodists claim 750 house churches.

Church officials from several denominations said that the Government had made the new regulations widely known but had not undertaken sweeping action to implement the new rules. Some Pentecostal church officials considered themselves singled out by the directive, and a Baptist church leader also judged it a threat. The Pentecostals said that, unlike members of other denominations who seldom meet in a house church more than once or twice a week, many Pentecostals attend such meetings three or four times a week. They also noted that Pentecostal church membership rose sharply in recent years. At least one Baptist church leader criticized the requirement that a house church not be located within 2 kilometers of another house church, arguing that the directive would be difficult to obey in a congested city.

The Government continued to allow foreign Catholic priests and religious workers into the country, generally to replace foreign priests and nuns who had died or whose residence permits had expired. Previously, the Government adhered to a policy of approving new applicants only to the extent that they replaced clergy who had departed. However, in June 2005 the Government eased this policy and granted work permits to several foreign priests and nuns who entered as nonreplacements. The Government also communicated to the Catholic Church that it would not allow priests who visited as tourists to be involved in active ministry. Non-Catholic religious groups reported that foreign clergy generally visited for short periods, not exceeding 6 months.

Government officials criticized the Catholic Church for refusing to register church and lay group publications with the Ministry of Culture, as required by law of all publications. The Cuban Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCB) indicated that the Church has declined to register because registration would force it to cede control to the state regarding the content and format of church publications. The Government did not block the printing or distribution of Catholic magazines; however, the state impedes access to printing by making equipment costly or placing restrictions on its sale. Several Catholic dioceses and lay groups published magazines, including Palabra Nueva of the Havana Archdiocese and the free-thinking Vitral of the Pinar del Rio Diocese. However, in April 2007 Vitral's editor announced that he was ceasing publication due to a lack of paper and ink. The Vitral editorial board also lost their Internet access at that time. The new Bishop of Pinar del Rio Diocese disputed the claim that Vitral was forced to close; however, without necessary supplies the magazine would not be able to continue production. Vitral resumed publication under new editorial management in June 2007.

Catholic priests and other clergy were able to deliver sermons without advance screening by government censors, and some made pointed references to the totalitarian state. However, those who did were sometimes subjected to intense harassment. State security closely watched outspoken Santiago priest Jose Conrado Rodriguez Alegre, who has called attention to the country's human rights record, throughout the reporting period.

The Government generally did not allow the Catholic Church access to public media, but Church officials revealed in February 2006 that the Government had offered it the opportunity to broadcast a radio program on the FM band, via a small, low-power radio station. The Church rejected the offer because the transmitter and the proposed hour of use were "inconvenient." In April 2006 authorities allowed the Catholic bishops in Holguin and Bayamo to broadcast a 12-minute Holy Week radio message, which was the first such message in Holguin in 46 years. In 2007 an educational channel aired

the Good Friday portion of the Pope's Easter "Via Crucis" and film footage of Easter Sunday was shown on the country's nightly TV news show.

In July 2006 Fidel Castro's incapacitation took him out of the public eye. There were no reports that acting leader Raul Castro met with senior Church officials during the reporting period. In April 2007 the Secretary General of the Cuban Bishops Conference, Monsignor Juan de Dios Hernandez Ruiz, issued a statement that the Church and the Government had "entered a process of better understanding."

The Jewish community had a modus vivendi with the regime that allowed the main synagogue and community center to function with the support of foreign charities based mostly in the United States and Canada. Jews were permitted to emigrate to Israel through a liaison office in the Canadian Embassy.

Religious officials were allowed to visit prisoners; however, prison officials sometimes refused visits to certain political prisoners. For a religious visit to take place, the prisoner had to submit a written request, and the prison director had to grant approval. Some prisoners reported that prison officials ignored repeated written requests for religious visits. In punishment cells, prisoners were denied access to reading materials, including Bibles.

Churches found it exceedingly difficult to purchase computers, fax machines, photocopiers, and other equipment, since the Government required a special permit for such purchases. Government decisions were officially made on a case-by-case basis, but in practice very few churches received permits.

The Government controlled the Internet, and any group seeking legal access was subject to its controls. The Government denied Internet access to some religious groups that it deemed unreliable. Following a November 2005 meeting with Fidel Castro, the country's 13 bishops were allowed access at the CCCB's Havana headquarters; however, the clergy had only tightly restricted access at their offices.

Members of the Armed Forces do not attend religious services in uniform, probably to avoid possible reprimand by superiors.

Education is secular, and no religious educational institutions are allowed. Religious instruction in public schools is not permitted. Churches provided religious education classes to their members, as well as seminars to wider audiences. Catholic Church officials reported that the number of children attending catechism classes continued to drop, mostly because of other activities, usually scheduled by local school authorities. There were no reports of parents being restricted from teaching religion to their children.

Officials of various groups reported cases of religious persons experiencing discrimination because of ignorance or personal prejudice by a local official. Religious persons encountered employment problems in certain professions, such as education.

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 Catholic Church decided to stop requesting permits for processions in areas where they historically have not been permitted. There were smaller, local processions throughout the provinces during the reporting period. In 2007 larger processions for Easter were permitted in Camaguey and Santa Clara provinces. Eight hundred youth participated in a special Easter observance just outside of Havana.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

The Government monitored all religious groups, including registered and established institutions. The authorities also monitored church-run publications. Government harassment of private houses of worship continued.

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. There were continued reports that local Communist Party and government officials harassed Jehovah's Witnesses.

State security agents or their Communist militant proxies warned the wives of several political prisoners that they would be arrested if they joined other wives of political prisoners for Mass at Havana's Santa Rita Catholic Church. In March 2007 government-directed mobs physically prevented some wives from traveling to Havana for the Mass, although others evaded state security detection and were able to attend. At Santa Rita Church, state security officers sat near the spouses of political prisoners during Mass in an attempt to intimidate them. Many of the women belonged to the Ladies in White organization (joint winner of the European Parliament's 2006 Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought). Many of the group members expressed concern about government retaliation against them or their jailed husbands. The Government also

impeded access by political prisoners' spouses to Mass at Santa Rita Church by scheduling phone calls and prisoner visits at inconvenient times.

In February 2006 prison authorities broke up a prayer group of more than 15 inmates at Havana's Combinado del Este prison. The Government continued to deny access to the country's prisons to international groups focused on fundamental rights, including religious rights.

The Government gave Santeria advantages and privileges not available to other religions, on the grounds that Santeria represented the country's culture. As a result, unlike other religious groups, Santeria is a regular feature of television programming and is given wide coverage in the media.

There were reports of discrimination against members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. For the Adventists, Saturdays are days of observance and therefore their children do not participate in school activities. Some Adventist children were subjected to humiliation and maltreatment by school teachers for their nonattendance on Saturdays. According to reports, one child who was mistreated at school developed anxiety and depression and was diagnosed by a psychologist with "unfavorable development."

Denial of religious assistance to prisoners was not uncommon. At the end of the reporting period, human rights activist Diosdado Gonzalez Marrero remained unable to receive religious assistance. In the past year he submitted at least 67 written requests to prison authorities to allow for a Catholic priest to visit him at the Kilo 5 ½ prison facility in Pinar del Rio. Ministry of Interior officials denied having received such requests.

Jehovah's Witnesses are also subject to discrimination and harassment by the Government for refusing to serve in the military and pledging allegiance to the flag. On March 24, 2007, Ray Luciano Lopez Moreno was detained for 3 days before being taken to a civil court for refusing to fulfill the compulsory military service requirement. Lopez Moreno was sanctioned and fined by the court.

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.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

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

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.

The U.S. Government was not granted access to the Government to be able to raise religious freedom or other human rights matters. In December 2006 a visiting Congressional Delegation raised human rights in a general way and was rebuffed. The U.S. Interests Section in Havana continued to maintain regular contact with the various religious leaders and communities and to support nongovernmental organization initiatives that aided religious groups. The U.S. Government regularly sought to facilitate travel to and from the country by religious persons as well as the delivery of donated material that in some cases was provided to religious institutions. As in the past, the U.S. Government continuously urged international pressure on the Government to cease its repressive practices, including religious discrimination and harassment.

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