



Rooftops in Havana. Photo: Carlos Llamelas

CUBA

FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

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Between January and July 2017 Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) continued to receive multiple reports of violations of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in Cuba. Christians across a wide range of denominations have been affected, including members of the Roman Catholic Church, the Apostolic Movement, the East and West Baptist Conventions, the Evangelical League and Assemblies of God.

To date this year, CSW has recorded 185 separate violations of FoRB, many of these cases involving large numbers of victims. This is markedly fewer than the numbers recorded in 2015 and 2016, as the decree which outlawed 2,000 Assemblies of God churches during these years was verbally rescinded in May 2017. Despite this, should violations continue to be recorded at a similar rate over the next five months, 2017 will represent the third highest number of violations of FoRB recorded in any year of the current decade. One pastor recently stated that the Church is currently experiencing "the most savage of witch hunts" since the revolution.

The violations documented include:

- Confiscation of church property
- Arbitrary detention
- Prevention from attending religious services
- Arbitrary fines
- Close surveillance and interrogation of religious leaders
- Harassment of children of religious leaders
- Registration of seminaries
- Blocking Cubans from travelling abroad and international visitors from coming to Cuba on a religious visa.

Reports of these violations will be described in sections below.

These violations take place in various regions across the island, and are predominantly perpetrated by the Office of Religious Affairs (ORA).¹ Although Cuba has signed the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), both of which contain strong protections for religious freedom, neither treaty has yet been ratified. This omission demonstrates the government's lack of commitment to upholding human rights.

Developments in Cuba's international relations in 2016 led some to believe the country was moving towards greater levels of freedom, but the FoRB violations documented in this report suggest that this has not yet translated into any tangible improvements for religion or belief communities.² While US President Donald Trump announced changes to US-Cuba relations in June, citing the worsening human rights situation, it remains to be seen whether this will prompt any action from the Cuban government.³

1 The ORA operates out of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party, and is directed by Caridad del Rosario Diego Bello. The ORA does not operate within any other official guidelines or legal framework, giving its officials sweeping and arbitrary power over religious groups and associations, and individuals associated with those groups.

2 Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 'Cuba: CSW Urges EU to keep human rights on the agenda', 12 December 2016 www.csw.org.uk/2016/12/12/press/3379/article.htm

3 *Guardian*, 'Trump keeps rolling back Obama legacy by tightening travel and trade with Cuba', 16 June 2017 www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/16/trump-cuba-trade-travel-restrictions-miami-speech

CONFISCATION OF CHURCH PROPERTY

CSW recently received a report written by an interdenominational group of Protestant leaders from inside Cuba, which indicates that the problem of confiscation of church properties under Legal Decree 322 is far more widespread than was previously known. This legislation, which was announced on 5 September 2014 and came into effect on 5 January 2015, was supposedly established to regulate private properties and enforce zoning laws. However, it has been and is being used by government officials to seize church properties. In many cases the churches are given the 'option' to become 'permanent tenants of the state' and to pay rent to the government for the use of their own property. The report by Cuban Protestant leaders states,

The Cuban authorities have used this law to threaten the expropriation of churches which function in houses of worship, and many denominations have suffered the confiscation of hundreds of houses which served as churches, with the government demanding that they pay a lease in order to function. Leaders of congregations have lost permission to use their houses for Christian meetings.

The first half of 2017 saw no developments in the return of church properties that had been confiscated during earlier periods of open persecution, such as the land belonging to the Western Baptist Church in Yaguajay. Despite the fact that the church has followed all the correct legal procedures, the state has ignored numerous appeals and has built offices for some of its companies on the land.⁴

In what CSW tentatively considers to be a positive development, the 2015 decree which declared 2,000 Assemblies of God (AoG) churches to be illegal no longer appears to be in effect. In May 2017 the head of the denomination met government officials who gave verbal assurances that they were no longer going to proceed with the confiscation of the churches. One AoG leader in Santiago whose church was designated for demolition received an official stamped document rescinding the order.

However, these developments are dependent upon implementation; CSW will therefore continue to closely monitor the situation to see if there are any changes, positive or otherwise, to the churches' status. It should also be noted that in the same meeting the denominational leader, who was due to travel internationally soon after the meeting, was asked to tell international contacts that the Cuban government respects religious freedom.

⁴ Patmos Institute, Bi-Annual Report: January-June 2017, Violations of Religious Freedom in Cuba, 13 July 2017 <http://cubanoconfesante.com/patmos-institute-bi-annual-report-january-june-2017-violations-of-religious-freedom-in-cuba/>

ARBITRARY DETENTION

As in previous years, the first half of 2017 has continued to see weekly countrywide arrests of women affiliated with the Ladies in White (an opposition movement comprising the wives and other female relatives of jailed dissidents), as well as many other human rights activists. These arrests prevent the Ladies in White from attending Sunday Mass, and are carried out by state security and political police as women leave their homes or the Ladies in White headquarters, or as they arrive at services.⁵ So far this year CSW has received reports of the arrests of over 1,100 Ladies in White and 320 human rights activists.⁶

Arrests are often violent: the Ladies in White have reported various instances of women being beaten, scratched, punched, threatened and dragged by the feet by police. On 19 February in Palma Soriano, a state security agent named Yuniel punched Magda Onelvis Mendoza Díaz and told her that he was going to "ruin her face". As well as violence, the women are regularly subjected to arbitrary fines, threats of imprisonment, and detainment for periods of 24 hours or more. The Ladies in White have also reported instances in which women have been detained and held in direct sunlight for hours, and released in remote locations, forcing them to make their own way home. Over the past seven months, there have been several particularly concerning cases of abuse of the Ladies in White:

1 February, La Havana: Maria Cristina Labrada Varona is arrested as she leaves her house. Later that day a state security agent informs her that the reason for her arrest is that she had organised to meet with six Ladies in White to attend church. She is also told that these women will not be permitted to attend Mass at any church in the country on any day for the rest of 2017.

26 March, La Havana: Daisy Artilles del Sol is released in handcuffs in front of her 79-year-old mother, who has high blood pressure, heart problems and diabetes. This appears to have the premeditated intention of making her mother panic.

1 May, Ciego de Ávila: Mayden Maidique Cruz is subject to an 'act of repudiation': this involves government officials encouraging mobs and children to harass and abuse her.

25 June, Ciego de Ávila: Mayden Maidique Cruz, the same woman, is detained for over 24 hours without any medical attention despite having a fever.

9 July, La Havana: Daisy Artilles del Sol is arrested, beaten and insulted by five officials, causing her to lose consciousness. After receiving medical treatment she was held in a cell without water until Thursday 13 July. Ms Artilles del Sol is 52 years old and has breast cancer.

⁵ The political police are a police force division which deals with political dissidents.

⁶ These figures are almost certainly a significant underestimate, as the Ladies in White have not published reports for every week that they have attempted to attend Sunday Mass in 2017.

16 July, Matanzas: Lazara Rodríguez Roteta is subject to an 'act of repudiation', has her electricity cut off, and stones are thrown at her house.

While government officials have primarily focused on Sunday morning activities, as they have in previous years, women have also been arrested on weekdays to prevent them attending other services and religious activities. This is consistent with a long term government tactic of trying to socially isolate Cubans involved in human rights or pro-democracy activities, by forcibly separating them from their communities of faith.

ARBITRARY FINES, SURVEILLANCE AND INTERROGATION

As observed throughout 2016,⁷ cases of moderate to severe harassment of religious leaders from both registered and unregistered religious groups have continued over the first half of this year. Forms of harassment reported to CSW over the last seven months include close surveillance by state security and the political police, and church leaders being summoned to police interviews and questioned about their faith and the activities and membership of their churches.

On 23 January 2017 Pastor Fran Iron Pupo of the Apostolic Movement reported that his home in Moa was visited by the director of the Department of Physical Planning, who asked to inspect his property deeds, and for the names of those living there. This is an intimidation strategy regularly employed by the government. In early February Pastor Maday González, also of the Apostolic Movement, was visited on numerous occasions by inspectors named Damallanti Soler Maceo and Liudmila Torres Mayedo from the Department of Physical Planning, at her family home in Camaguey. Pastor González was arbitrarily fined and was visited by an inspector named Julien Molinet, who has reportedly been harassing the family since 2004. Another church leader, who requested anonymity, reported that a stranger visited his home and informed him that his house was going to be raided. At the time of writing no information is available as to whether the raid took place.

CSW also received reports that a number of church leaders and religious freedom defenders had had their email accounts hacked, apparently by government operatives. In one case the hackers sent politically compromising messages to everyone in the victim's contacts list, including their boss and colleagues and family members. As the victim had no way to access the email account on the day the messages were sent, they were able to prove that the account had been accessed by someone else. In another case, government officials hacked into a church leader's personal email account and later showed him a series of emails he had sent and received while abroad in an apparent, but unsuccessful, attempt to blackmail him into cooperation with state security.

⁷ Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Cuba: Freedom of religion or belief, 6 February 2017 www.csw.org.uk/2017/02/06/report/3451/article.htm

Forms of harassment like the above have been common for some time. The aforementioned report by Cuban Protestant leaders states:

Over the last five years, government officials have interrogated religious leaders across the country regarding the legal situations of religious properties. The officials regularly confiscate property deeds from their legal owners, leaving religious communities vulnerable to charges for owning illegal properties, and said properties at risk of destruction and expropriation.

Religious leaders have also been prohibited from carrying out their work in the first half of 2017. A key example is the ongoing case of Reverend Juan Carlos Núñez Velázquez of the Apostolic Movement, who was placed under house arrest for the supposed crime of 'disobedience' in February 2017, and was thus prohibited from working as a pastor for one year. Other religious leaders were prevented from carrying out planned religious events including one organised for children.

REVEREND MARIO TRAVIESO

Reverend Mario Travieso, leader of the Strong Winds Church, which belongs to the Apostolic Movement, has been the victim of ongoing government harassment.

6 January 2017: Las Tunas authorities send inspectors from the political police to Rev Travieso's house to complain about a noise nuisance. As this is how the sentencing of Rev Juan Carlos Núñez Velázquez began,⁸ Rev Travieso is worried that he will be similarly sentenced.

Week of 16 January: An official from the regional justice department visits Rev Travieso's home accompanied by government officers, and tells him that he should not pray or sing with neighbouring families.

15 February: Rev Travieso is summoned to the police station in Las Tunas and interrogated for over two hours. During the interrogation he is threatened with the confiscation of his church building in Las Tunas, which he inherited from his mother, and is informed that he will be under constant surveillance.

3 April: Rev Travieso is fined 1,000 Cuban pesos (approximately GBP29 or USD38) and 500 Cuban pesos (GBP15 or USD19). He is told that the fines were for building a wall too high next to his church – despite the fact that he had obtained permission from his neighbours. At the time of writing he has not paid these fines.

⁸ Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 'Cuban pastor awaits outcome of appeal', 1 November 2016 www.csw.org.uk/2016/11/01/news/3333/article.htm

12 May: Rev Travieso is summoned to a meeting with the Department of Physical Planning, where he is again interrogated for over two hours and told that he cannot leave the city or country. Pastor Travieso is concerned that this is another step towards the demolition of his church.

REVEREND ALAIN TOLEDANO

Reverend Alain Toledano first reported harassment in 2005 and has been repeatedly persecuted ever since. Unsurprisingly, this harassment has continued into 2017.

15 May 2017: Two police officers visit Pastor Toledano's home with the intention of driving him to the local police station. The church's assistant tells the officers that Pastor Toledano and his wife are out of the country in the Dominican Republic.

June: His home is visited again by officials, who show him an 'acta de advertencia', or a pre-arrest warrant, which the pastor believes will be used to prevent him from travelling.

26 June: He reports that the government have attempted to force him to pay two electricity bills dated April and May 2016, despite the fact that the building they referred to had been demolished on 5 February 2016.⁹

Pastors associated with Reverend Toledano's church regularly receive noise complaints, even though other parties and rituals which make far more noise into the early hours of the morning are free from governmental opposition.¹⁰

PASTOR ROINELBIS PUPO

Pastor Roinelbis Pupo of the Majagua Baptist Church in Ciego de Ávila, which is affiliated with the Eastern Baptist Convention, has been subject to a particularly disturbing form of harassment. Individuals have been throwing rotting animal corpses onto his property and against the walls of his church. The pastor complained to the ORA, but has not received any response – leading Pastor Pupo to believe that they are involved in the harassment. This has happened on seven occasions.

⁹ Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 'Cuba: Church demolished and hundreds arrested', 9 February 2016 www.csw.org.uk/2016/02/09/news/2977/article.htm

¹⁰ CSW was told by Reverend Toledano as well as other pastors, affiliated with registered and unregistered churches in Santiago, that the harassment is coordinated by Robert Noa Frómata, the local head of the ORA.

FÉLIX YUNIEL LLERENA LÓPEZ

Another noteworthy case of ongoing harassment is that of Félix Yuniel Llerena López, a 20-year-old religious freedom defender affiliated with the Patmos Institute and member of the Western Baptist Convention.

April 2017: Mr Llerena López visits the USA to take part in advocacy meetings organised by CSW in Washington D.C., to raise concerns about continued violations of FoRB in Cuba.

27 April: He returns to Cuba and is held and interrogated by agents at the airport for hours.

28 April: He is detained and threatened by two high ranking state security officers.¹¹ Mileidis López Sosa, Mr Llerena López's mother, is also detained and interrogated in what appears to have been an attempt to further intimidate him.

8 May: He is informed that he has been expelled from the Enrique José Varona Pedagogical University in La Havana due to supposed excessive absences, despite the fact that he intentionally cut short his trip abroad so as to meet the attendance requirements for enrolment.¹²

17 June: He is prevented from boarding a flight, and state security agents inform him that he has been subject to a travel ban since his April trip to the USA, although no reason is given for the ban.¹³

20 July: He is arrested and told that he may have criminal charges raised against him for the possession of 'pornographic' materials. These accusations are completely false and appear to be an attempt to destroy his reputation as a practising Christian.

HARASSMENT OF CHILDREN OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND ACTIVISTS

CSW received increased reports of the government targeting the children and other family members of church leaders and activists. This has long been a strategy of government officials to put additional pressure on church leaders and activists.

8 January 2017: Two policemen detain and interrogate the son and granddaughters (one of whom is pregnant) of Lady in White Norma Cruz Casas in La Havana, threatening to make her son disappear.

¹¹ Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 'Cuban religious freedom activist threatened', 2 May 2017 www.csw.org.uk/2017/05/02/news/3543/article.htm

¹² Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 'Cuban activist expelled from university', 10 May 2017 <http://www.csw.org.uk/2017/05/10/news/3554/article.htm>

¹³ Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 'Cuba: Religious freedom defender blocked from leaving', 19 June 2017 www.csw.org.uk/2017/06/19/news/3593/article.htm

April: Dalila Rodriguez, the adult daughter of religious freedom defender Leonardo Rodriguez,¹⁴ is fired from her job as a professor of linguistics at the Universidad Central 'Marta Abreu' de Las Villas. University president Andrés Castro Alegría tells Ms Rodriguez that she is being fired after ten years as a Professor of Linguistics because she is "not considered to be a good influence on students and could damage their formation."

The young children of Protestant church leaders have also been subject to harassment. One leader reported that his daughter's primary school teachers have attempted to involve her in activities which contradict her Christian faith. The pastor also reported that one teacher defends other students who bully his children about their beliefs, claiming that Christians are incapable of defending themselves.

REGISTRATION OF SEMINARIES

Many churches are continually denied authorisation to re-establish institutions of theological training. This is the case for the University of Pentecostal Theology of Cuba, which was founded by the Assemblies of God church in 1939 but had its facilities confiscated in 1963. Despite this, the University has created places of study on 17 campuses, which are either subsidiaries or Centres of Theological Studies, across all the provinces of Cuba. It is currently training approximately 7,000 church leaders, with a large interdenominational influence. This institution is recognised by the Caribbean Evangelical Theological Association, which is associated with the International Council for Evangelical Theological Education; however, their request for accreditation from the Cuban Ministry of Higher Education was denied due to the fact that it had not been authorised by the Cuban government.

A number of other denominations also run seminaries that have been denied recognition. These include the Luis Manuel González Peña Baptist Theological Seminary in Santa Clara, associated with the Western Baptist Convention, whose requests have been repeatedly refused.

TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS

While the government requirement for an exit visa was dropped in 2013, there has been an increase in the number of Cuban activists involved with independent civil society organisations and the defence of human rights or democracy being blocked from leaving the country. Karina Gálvez works with Convivencia, an independent civil society organisation in Pinar del Rio. The government has brought trumped up charges against her which prevent her from leaving the country.

In other cases, like that of Mr Llerena López (see above), and Berta Soler and Sayli Navarro, both of the Ladies in

White, who were prevented from leaving the country on separate occasions last month, officials have simply blocked them from boarding flights out of the country with no official justification given. CSW was also told that the government has delayed the issuing of passports to some religious leaders, in what they believe is an effort to derail their travel plans.

Over recent months, the government has also restricted the travel of foreigners attempting to visit Cuba on religious visas. In order to interact legally in any capacity with local religious groups, apart from simply attending church services, foreigners are required to obtain a religious visa. This must be solicited by the inviting religious group, on behalf of their guest. According to religious leaders, the government has used this mechanism to pressure churches and other groups to cooperate with them, to shut down church-run outreach programmes, and to bar individuals and groups perceived to be promoting religious freedom. Sonia García García, the second in command at the ORA, has reportedly created a blacklist of foreigners barred from receiving religious visas, and of Cuban pastors and other religious leaders banned from travelling abroad.

CONCLUSION

Freedom of religion or belief conditions in Cuba remain severe despite a reduction in the number of violations compared to the past two years. As in 2016, CSW has received reports of harassment, arbitrary detention, threats and fines on an almost daily basis. The primary perpetrator of these violations is the ORA, which continues to crack down on religious groups that are perceived as unsupportive of the regime. As many of these groups are unregistered and therefore lack legal permission to exist in the country, the government is free to persecute them openly.

While recent developments in Cuba's international relations have led some to believe that the government is working to improve human rights in the country, this has not happened thus far. It is essential that the European Union, the United States, and other governments in dialogue with Cuba use their positions to press for improvements to religious freedom and the general human rights situation in the country.

On a positive note, the decree which outlawed 2,000 Assemblies of God churches no longer appears to be in effect, according to verbal assurances made by government officials and some action on their behalf. If true, this is good news, but it is vital that attention is still paid to the status of these churches, to ensure that any positive legal reforms are fully implemented. In addition, this development must not obscure the wider situation of ongoing violations of freedom of religion or belief.

¹⁴ Leonardo Rodriguez works as a coordinator for the Patmos Institute, an independent civil society group that promotes inter-religious dialogue and defends FoRB.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the government of Cuba

- Respond to increasing calls by many religious leaders and their congregations for the better protection of FoRB, by abolishing the Office for Religious Affairs (ORA) and adopting legislation that protects FoRB for all
- Facilitate the registration of all religious groups who wish to register
- Loosen state controls and streamline procedures concerning registration of churches, accreditation of seminaries, and building and renovation of church buildings
- Reform Legal Decree 322 to ensure it cannot be used to arbitrarily expropriate property, including property belonging to religious associations
- Return church properties confiscated by the government, including under Legal Decree 322
- End the practices of interfering with internet access and censoring online and print media
- Enact and implement legislation allowing for the legalisation of house churches, and for churches to purchase property or receive it as a donation transferred by the owner
- Fully ratify both the ICCPR and ICECSR
- Fully cooperate with the UN Special Procedures and issue a standing invitation to the Special Procedures to visit Cuba with unhindered access to all parts of the country.

To the United Nations and UN Member States

- Strongly urge Cuba to follow the recommendations listed above
- Encourage Cuba to fully ratify relevant international instruments, including the ICCPR and ICECSR
- Urge Cuba to fully cooperate with the UN Special Procedures and issue a standing invitation to the Special Procedures to visit Cuba with unhindered access to all parts of the country
- Encourage Cuba to implement the recommendations of the first and second UPR cycles, and to actively engage with the third UPR cycle in 2018
- Ensure that freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression are consistently raised in all appropriate high-level correspondence with Cuba, including during high-level visits and other bilateral exchanges with Cuba as well as at UN Human Rights Council sessions and during the Universal Periodic Review, raising specific incidents of concern both in public and in private

- Monitor the human rights situation in Cuba; if there is independently verifiable political will to improve the human rights situation, provide technical assistance to the government of Cuba to implement its human rights commitments.

To the government of the United States

In addition to the recommendations above:

- Raise violations of FoRB, including those mentioned in this report, with Cuba at every opportunity
- The US Embassy in Havana should continue to closely monitor freedom of religion or belief in Cuba and engage with religious leaders of all faiths and denominations, registered and unregistered, across the island; while taking into consideration the political sensitivities under which many religious leaders must work
- Encourage Cuba to grant invitations to UN thematic Special Rapporteurs such as those with mandates on freedom of religion or belief, torture, and freedom of expression and opinion; to the US Ambassador at Large for Religious Freedom (when he/she is appointed); and to the US Commission on International Religious Freedom.
- As the United States regularly reviews its policy towards Cuba, it should establish specific criteria for Cuba to meet (e.g. ratification of the ICCPR and ICESCR) in order to more effectively measure progress in regard to human rights and democratic reform.

To the European Union and EU Member States

- Use the first EU-Cuba cooperation agreement to pressure Cuba to improve its human rights situation
- Ensure that EU institutions and Member States visiting Cuba are fully briefed on the situation of FoRB, as outlined in the 2013 EU Guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief
- Proactively promote and defend FoRB by seeking new ways to support and strengthen vulnerable groups inside Cuba, in line with existing EU human rights commitments
- Raise FoRB violations regularly in all dialogues with the Cuban authorities, including with the head of the Office of Religious Affairs (ORA), and establish clear benchmarks for progress
- Insist on the full ratification and implementation of the ICCPR and ICECSR
- Encourage Cuba to invite the UN Special Procedures to visit the country, and to accept and implement recommendations from UN mechanisms and bodies
- Urge Cuba to implement the recommendations listed above.

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