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## CUBA | Priest Detained, Pressured

Cuban Yoruba priest, Alexei Mora Montalvo, was forcibly detained by the Cuban political police Jan. 5. Mora Montalvo was travelling on a moped with Guillermo del Sol Pérez, an independent journalist who reports on issues related to the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). During Mora Montalvo's detention, state security agents attempted to entice him to join a government-linked religious association. He is a priest associated with the Free Yoruba Society, an unregistered religious group in Cuba.

The two men were travelling in Placetás, a town in the central province of Villa Clara, when they were stopped and arrested by the new local police chief in charge of threats to state security, Arturo, also known as "Tendedera." Mora Montalvo reported that their arrest appeared to be in response to a public statement by the Free Yoruba Society in late December challenging the legitimacy of La Letra del Año, or Letter of the Year, published in state media and issued by the Yoruba Cultural Association, which has close links to the government. The Letter of the Year is an important prophetic ritual in the Yoruba Calendar.

During his detention, Mora Montalvo was threatened by Chief Tendedera with an ultimatum, "You [The Free Yoruba Society] will pay a heavy price for the statement you made, because you have no respect for the revolutionary santeros [priests] who are a part of the renowned Yoruba Cultural Association, which we recognise as legitimate, unlike you who spend your time questioning our revolution."

Chief Tendedera also said, "We'll offer you economic and financial protection, and even access to our media channels, if you renounce your position and join the Cultural Association."

Mora Montalvo refused the bribe and was released two hours after his arrest. Guillermo del Sol Pérez was also released later that day.

In a statement to Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), Mora Montalvo and two other Free Yoruba Society leaders expressed concern that some of their devotees and family members have received death threats and threats of sexual harassment via anonymous phone calls.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "While we welcome the release of Alexei Mora Montalvo and Guillermo del Sol Pérez, they never should have been arrested in the first place. We are deeply troubled by the attempts of Cuban state security to coerce religious leaders, like Mora Montalvo, to join religious groups that are more supportive of the government and its policies. We continue to call on the Cuban government to cease the harassment and arbitrary detention of independent journalists and religious leaders, and its attempts to manipulate them, and to instead turn its attention to addressing ongoing violations of freedom of religion or belief."