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CUBA | Christian Leaders Seek Complete Religious Freedom

A cross-denominational group of Christian leaders from some of the largest Protestant denominations in Cuba, led by the Methodist Church of Cuba and Assemblies of God leaders, have launched an unprecedented campaign to push for comprehensive protections for freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in the new constitution, which is currently undergoing public consultation.

The church leaders are encouraging Cubans to sign onto a petition which calls for the addition of two sections to Article 15 of the new Cuban constitution, which will allow them to freely “practice their faith and impact the life of the people through the Word of Christ and through all the social programs that the Christian Church is already implementing.”

Cuba’s National Assembly approved a draft of an updated constitution in July. While the constitution is currently under public consultation and due to be put to referendum in February 2019, it is widely assumed that it will be approved.

The authors of the petition raise several issues with the draft constitution. They note the removal of “freedom of conscience,” a right that is closely linked to FoRB, from the previous constitution. They also express concern that the new constitution does not guarantee churches and other religious institutions the freedom to manifest their religion or beliefs individually and collectively in private or in public.

The campaign is calling for the following clauses to be included in the new constitution:

(66) “The Cuban State guarantees the churches and religious institutions the freedom to manifest their religion or belief and to do so individually and collectively, in public and in private, and the right to teach and practice the corresponding worship and to independently observe their principles and faith.”

(67) “The Cuban government, its bodies and authorities will abstain of interfering with the internal life of religious associations, and of creating organizations to control them.”

If approved, these additions would not only offer guarantees for FoRB not seen in Cuba since before the 1959 Revolution, but would also require the abolishment of entities like

the Office of Religious Affairs (ORA) of the Cuban Communist Party. Religious groups in Cuba have long complained that the ORA exists solely to monitor the activities of religious groups on the island and is responsible for the majority of FoRB violations in Cuba.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "CSW welcomes this cross-denominational petition and fully supports its calls for legal protections for freedom of religion or belief in Cuba. We call on the Government of Cuba to include both proposed paragraphs in the new constitution and to abolish the Office of Religious Affairs so that people of all faiths and none are able to fully enjoy the fundamental right to freedom of religion or belief."