



## Cuba

### International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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 during the period covered by this report. 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's continued its efforts to maintain a strong degree of control over religion. During the period covered by this report, the Government implemented new regulations that restricted the operation of house churches but eased its policy on issuing work permits to foreign Catholic clergy.

The relationship among religious groups in general was amicable.

The U.S. government attempted to raise human rights issues, including religious discrimination and harassment, with government officials; however, the Government refused to discuss such matters. 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 was no independent authoritative source on the size or composition of religious institutions and their membership. A 1953 survey indicated that 93 percent of the population identified themselves as Roman Catholic. According to more recent information from the U.S.-based Puebla Institute, approximately 40 to 45 percent of the population were believed to identify themselves, at least nominally, with the Catholic Church. Some sources estimated that as much as 70 percent of the population practiced 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. Membership in the Cuban Council of Churches (CCC) increased to twenty-three when World Wide Missions, a Pentecostal church, joined in March 2006. Other members included Presbyterian, Episcopalian, and Methodist groups, but not the Catholic Church. The CCC was structured into five "zones" across the island and, according to the CCC's leadership, represented approximately 100,000 Christians. Most CCC members were 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 approximately 10 percent of baptized Catholics attended Mass regularly. Membership in Protestant churches increased and was estimated at 530,000 persons. No figures on the number of Pentecostals were available, but their numbers were believed to be increasing sharply. Jehovah's Witnesses claimed more than 86,000 active members, and the Seventh-day Adventists reported approximately 30,000 persons. Anglicans were estimated to number 22,000 members, and Presbyterians 14,000. The Jewish community had approximately 1,000 members, around half of them resident in Havana. The Muslim population was estimated at no less than 300, some of whom reportedly received support from the Iranian government. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) had an estimated active membership of fifteen.

There were approximately 344 Catholic priests, 61 permanent deacons, and 628 nuns in the country, many fewer than the total prior to 1960. Fewer than half of all Catholic "religious" priests, as opposed to "diocesan" priests, were 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.

Foreign missionary groups operated in the country through registered churches. Visits by religious figures, including that of Nation of Islam minister Louis Farrakhan in March 2006, are handled by the Religious Affairs Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party.

#### 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 places restrictions on freedom of religion. The constitution has provided for the separation of church and state since the early twentieth 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 appeared 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 carry out their activities, demonstrate that they have the 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, receive 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.

The Government appeared to have halted registration of new denominations; however, no groups were known to have applied for and been denied registration during the period covered by this report. Authorities continued to ignore religious groups' pending applications for legal recognition, thereby subjecting members of such groups to potential charges of illegal association; however, no such charges had been filed by the end of the period covered by this report.

The Government tolerated some religions, such as the Baha'i Faith and a small group of Mormons, that were relatively new in the country. 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.

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. In early 2006 a Presbyterian youth group in Santa Clara passed out copies of the New Testament at a public park without being arrested or detained. Similarly, a small number of fundamentalist Christians were reported to have occasionally given impromptu testimonials at certain parks in Havana; no one was arrested.

Since 1992 the Communist Party has admitted as members persons who openly declare their religious faith.

The Government does not permit religious education in public schools and does not permit 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 has allowed 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, continued 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 civil and religious organizations. The former official reported that Afro-Caribbean religious groups were even more heavily targeted for infiltration than political opposition organizations. Some estimates stated that 70 percent of the population practiced these religions in some form, and therefore these groups were seen as a more grassroots threat to the power and authority of the Government.

The law allows for the construction of new churches once the required permits are obtained; however, the Government rarely has 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 period covered by this report. 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 were able to hold services in private homes. However, during the period covered by this report, the Government implemented a controversial directive that many religious groups viewed as restricting the operation of house churches. Such facilities have grown in number in recent years, and many religious leaders attributed this to the Government's refusal to authorize the construction of new churches. The vast majority of house churches were unregistered with the Government and thus technically illegal. Directive 43 and Resolution 46 require house-church operators to register their house churches with the Government, thus "legalizing" their existence. House churches were difficult to quantify, but Christian Solidarity Worldwide estimated their number at no less than 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. To register one's house church, an operator must meet a number of requirements, some of which infringe on religious freedom: The house church must host no more than three meetings per week; it must not be located within two 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, among other things, that the use of a sound system requires permission from neighbors and that no house church can operate in a multifamily residence.

Church officials from a number of 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 has risen sharply in recent years. At least one Baptist church leader criticized the requirement that a house church not be located within two kilometers of another house church, arguing that the directive would be difficult to obey in a congested city.

The Government continued to allow foreign priests and religious workers into the country 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 stopped working in the country. However, in June 2005 the Government eased this policy, and during the period covered by this report it granted work permits to at least eight foreign priests and fourteen foreign nuns who entered the country as nonreplacements. In addition, for the first time in many years the Government allowed into the country three new Catholic congregations, or orders, including Franciscan nuns from Colombia. The applications of 104 priests and nuns remained pending.

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 concede control to the state regarding the content and format of church publications. Several Catholic dioceses and lay groups published magazines, including *Palabra Nueva* of the Havana archdiocese and *Vitral* of the Pinar del Rio diocese.

The Government has not blocked printing or distribution of Catholic magazines; however, the state impedes access to printing by making equipment costly or placing restrictions on sales. The Government has accused the editor of one religious magazine of subversive behavior for writing about sensitive political and social issues.

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. In January and February 2006, unknown assailants repeatedly stoned the home of outspoken Santiago priest Jose Conrado Rodriguez Alegre. Rodriguez's church was robbed at least six times during the period covered by this report. One robbery cost the church its microphones and ventilator, and the police arrived to investigate at the start of Mass on Sunday morning. Police confiscated the vehicle Rodriguez used, and his dog was poisoned. Rodriguez, who has called attention to the country's human rights record, was watched closely by state security and received a citation to appear before government authorities.

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." However, in April 2006 authorities allowed two Catholic bishops, in Holguin and Bayamo, to broadcast a Holy Week radio message. In Holguin the twelve-minute program was the first such message in forty-six years.

Senior Catholic Church officials occasionally gained an audience with senior government leaders. The highest-level meeting known to have occurred during the period covered by this report was on February 17, 2006, between Fidel Castro and Cardinal Renato Raffaele Martino, head of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. During the visit, the Vatican made public a letter from Pope Benedict XVI, calling on Cubans to show more tolerance.

The Jewish community had a modus vivendi with the regime that allowed the main synagogue and community center to function with 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 must submit a written request, and the prison director must 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. At the end of the period covered by this report, human rights activist Rene Gomez Manzano, detained on July 22, 2005, had been held at three prisons and at all three was denied visits from Catholic priests. However, he was allowed to receive and read a Bible provided by a visiting family member.

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 controls the Internet, and any group seeking legal access is subject to its controls. The Government denies Internet access to some religious groups that it deems unreliable. Following a November 2005 meeting with Castro, the country's thirteen bishops were allowed access at the CCCB's Havana headquarters. However, they lacked access at their homes and 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 provide 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. However, during the period covered by this report some Jehovah's Witness children were denied participation in school field trips because of their religion.

Officials of various groups have reported cases of religious persons experiencing discrimination because of ignorance or personal prejudice by a local official. Religious persons have 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 has 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 period covered by this report.

#### 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 2006 government-directed mobs physically prevented at least five such wives from traveling to Havana for the Mass, keeping them from leaving the cities of Puerto Padre, Sancti Spiritus, and Ciego de Avila; two of the five were removed from buses. 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's 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.

Guards at the Villa Clara Youth Prison in Santa Clara destroyed Santeria altars and other religious articles on December 17, 2005, the Day of Saint Lazarus, a date celebrated not only by those who practice Santeria but also by many Catholics. The altars, a throne, and other items crafted by inmates, among them Lester Gonzalez Penton, were kicked to pieces by the guards. At the same facility, guards forced prisoner Cosme Manuel Chamizo Moreno to take down an altar he had established for his own worship.

Also in December 2005 the Government reportedly gave the order for the destruction of a Protestant church in the eastern Havana community of Alamar. The congregation did not have government permission to build the church, allegedly used by hundreds of worshippers.

In February 2006 at Havana's Combinado del Este prison, prison authorities broke up a prayer group of more than fifteen inmates without explanation. The incident was revealed in a note smuggled out of the prison. The Government continued to deny access to the country's prisons to international groups focused on fundamental rights, including religious rights.

There were reports that independent Santeria priests were pressured to join the government-sanctioned Yoruba Cultural Association.

There were no reports of persons being detained on religious grounds, but at least three religious figures were in prison on other grounds. Ricardo Santiago Medina Salabarría, an Orthodox Church clergyman, was held without formal charges in connection with a protest in which he took part outside the French embassy in Havana.

#### 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

The relationship among religious groups in general was amicable, and organized religious groups were widely respected in society.

#### 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 attempted to raise human rights issues, including religious discrimination and harassment, with government officials, but the Government refused to discuss such matters. 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 delivery of donated goods and materials that in some cases were provided to religious institutions. The Interests Section continued to raise issues of human rights, including religious discrimination and harassment, with government officials; however, the Government refused to discuss these concerns. 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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