



A statue in Havana, Cuba. Photo: CSW

CUBA

FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

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Between January and July 2016 there was a continuation of serious violations of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in Cuba, affecting a wide cross section of Christian groups. The month of June saw the highest number of cases, indicating a continued deterioration in respect for FoRB. Over the six-month period CSW recorded 1,606 separate religious freedom violations; many cases involved large numbers of victims.

The violations documented include:

- Demolition and confiscation of church buildings
- Destruction of church property
- Arbitrary detention
- Other forms of harassment, particularly the confiscation and seizure of personal belongings of religious leaders
- Over 1,000 Protestant churches are still under threat of confiscation and have not had their 'illegal' status overturned.

In line with previous years, these religious freedom violations are predominantly carried out by Cuban government officials and the Office of Religious Affairs (the ORA),¹ and take place in many regions throughout the island. The leader of one of the largest Protestant denominations has denied that the religious freedom situation in Cuba has improved, stating, "At this very moment, the government's repression against the church has increased. The Cuban government always needs to sell an image which is just an apparent truth, which is actually much more dangerous than an outright lie."

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; however, neither treaty has been ratified. This further demonstrates the government's lack of commitment to upholding human rights.

TARGETING OF CHURCH PROPERTIES

A key example of the government targeting church properties occurred in March 2016, with a church and pastoral home in Havana belonging to the Eastern Baptist Convention. While the pastor² of the church was away, Ministry of Housing officials and Lieutenant Batista Leyva from Internal Intelligence visited his home and asked for documentation related to the property. A church member turned over the property deeds, not knowing what else to do. These deeds have not been returned by the officials, who maintain they are carrying out an 'investigation', without clarifying what they are investigating. Without the property deeds the pastor cannot demonstrate his ownership of the property, and they are unable to hold religious services. He is also unable to prove his permanent residence, and as a result he and his family cannot receive the state rations which most Cubans rely on to survive.

A particularly concerning trend is the rise in the number of churches which have been demolished or have had their property otherwise attacked. Since January 2016

² Name kept confidential due to security concerns.

¹ The ORA operates out of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party, and is directed by Caridad del Rosario Diego Bello.

the government has demolished four large churches linked to the Apostolic Movement, in three different parts of the country: in Camaguey and Santiago, and two in Las Tunas. The most recent demolition took place on 9 April 2016 when hundreds of government officials surrounded the Strong Winds Ministry Church in Las Tunas, and used heavy machinery to destroy its foundations, pews and a large quantity of church equipment. They also confiscated numerous items including sound equipment and the pews, from the church, the value of which amounts to more than 50,000 Cuban pesos (approximately £1,400).

Each church demolition has followed a similar pattern: police and state security agents block main roads surrounding the church, in many cases dragging pastors and their families out of bed in the very early hours of the morning, detaining them in separate police stations for the duration of the demolition. In some cases, such as that of the Fire and Dynamism Church in Camaguey on 8 January 2016, around 40 church members were temporarily detained – apparently to stop them from protesting. Similarly, on 5 February 2016 in Santiago de Cuba, state security agents detained around 40 church leaders and church members in a local school. Hundreds of others were held in police units across the region. In all four cases, government officials then used heavy machinery, including bulldozers, to raze the churches to the ground. In the Santiago demolition, they also demolished the pastor's family home, leaving them homeless.

LEGISLATION

While the church demolitions highlight one key way in which the Cuban government has attacked the property rights of religious groups, it is also important to note that Legal Decree 322 remained in effect. 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 2015 around 2,000 churches linked to the Assemblies of God (AOG) denomination, the largest Protestant denomination in Cuba, were declared illegal by the government. 1400 of these church buildings, many of which are house churches, are in the process of being expropriated by the government – despite the fact that the denomination has refused to sign the orders of confiscation. Although the government made verbal promises in early 2016 to the denominational leadership not to go ahead with the expropriation, neither the ORA nor the Ministry of Housing have made any effort to halt this process.

The government has also failed to keep its promises to other churches and religious groups. The Maranatha Baptist Church, part of the Eastern Baptist Convention, was notified in December 2015 that the order for the confiscation of their church under Legal Decree 322 had been rescinded.³ They were informed that they would also be able to build a new church, as the current building is in poor condition and too small for their congregation of 800. However, the government has not followed through with the necessary permits for the new construction.

ARBITRARY DETENTION

The government continues to employ arbitrary detention to target church leaders perceived as 'uncooperative', with nine such violations occurring since January 2016 (including those detained during demolitions – see above). Leonardo Rodriguez, a church leader and religious freedom activist in Villa Clara, Pastor Bernardo de Quesada, and Pastor Yiorvis Bravo Denis were arrested arbitrarily between January and June 2016, without an arrest warrant. In many cases the families of these pastors were detained or held under house arrest by government agents, in order to stop them assisting their loved ones or communicating with the outside world. In one of the most serious cases, Reverend Mario Felix Leonart Barroso was arrested on 20 March, just hours before US President Barack Obama arrived in Cuba on an official visit. Rev Leonart Barroso's wife and two young daughters were placed under house arrest during the 55 hours he was held.

As in previous years, over the last six months government agents have continued to publicly harass and detain dozens of women across the country every week on their way to Sunday Mass. These women, affiliated with the Ladies in White group, a non-violent human rights movement, are systematically detained on a weekly basis. In most cases they are violently dragged away by security agents as they leave their homes, or as they arrive at services. A large number of other human rights activists have also been detained before Mass to stop them attending services.

On most Sundays over 80 women are arrested. They are detained until Mass is concluded, after which many are dropped off in remote locations and left to find their own way home. Sunday 26 June and Sunday 3 July saw a particularly high number of arrests: on both occasions over 100 Ladies in White were detained before Mass, and many were injured. On 10 July Aliuska Gómez García lost consciousness after being handcuffed and beaten by a group of state security agents and political police.⁴ She was taken to hospital to see a neurosurgeon, who advised that she needed an X-ray of her spine due to the extent of her injuries. However, the X-ray results were handed to state security agents.

³ Christian Solidarity Worldwide (2016), Cuba January 2016 report www.csw.org.uk/2016/01/15/report/3210/article.htm

⁴ The political police are a police force division which deals with political dissidents.

HARASSMENT

CSW received regular reports of moderate to severe harassment of religious leaders throughout the first half of 2016. Government officials and state security agents continued to intimidate, threaten and physically harass pastors and their families. On numerous occasions church leaders reported being followed by state security agents who warned them that they were under strict observation, and in some cases declared that the church leaders were not permitted to worship or hold seminars and religious meetings in certain areas. Government agents sometimes tried to instigate community hostility towards a local church by asking loaded questions such as "The church bothers the neighbourhood, doesn't it?" In one case in Santiago, government agents employed neighbours to carry out surveillance on the church leaders by following them and taking photographs of them.

CSW has received an increasing number of reports of airport security and customs officials seizing and confiscating the belongings of church leaders, upon their return to Cuba after trips abroad. Between January and July 2016 there were five occasions on which church leaders, and in some cases their families, had their belongings seized and meticulously examined. All five incidents involved the same two church leaders, namely Reverend Mario Felix Lleonart Barroso and Reverend Bernardo de Quesada, and three of the incidents took place in June and July 2016. After an exhaustive examination of their luggage, both men and their families had items such as documents, religious materials, business cards of friends and contacts abroad, and personal laptops confiscated. Rev Lleonart Barroso has not had any of his personal belongings returned, including the memory card for his mobile phone.

CONCLUSION

Religious leaders continue to blame the ORA for many of the restrictions on religious groups across the island. However, as the ORA increasingly cracks down on unregistered religious groups and other groups that it perceives as unsupportive of the government, many activists are becoming increasingly bold in their efforts to defend FoRB. A younger generation of church leaders is becoming more defiant and outspoken in their calls for religious freedom.

Religious groups who suffer the most, in many cases those who have been refused registration by the ORA, have been the most active in publicly standing up to government pressure. Members of the Fire and Dynamism Church in Camaguey, whose church was demolished on 8 January 2016, met to worship on the site of their church on the Sunday after the demolition. Similarly, since the Emanuel Apostolic Movement church in Santiago de Cuba was demolished by state security on 5 February 2016, the congregation has continued meeting in smaller groups in houses and apartments across the region.

It is essential that the European Union, the United States and other governments do not allow the Cuban government to continue to repeatedly breach the rights of religious groups in Cuba. It is also imperative that these bodies do not view the government's attempt to cover up repression of religious groups, by granting certain privileges to a select few, as an improvement in FoRB.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the government of Cuba

- Respond to increasing calls by many religious leaders and their congregations for better protection of FoRB, by abolishing the Office for Religious Affairs (ORA) and adopting legislation that facilitates the registration process and protects FoRB for all
- Reform Legal Decree 322 to ensure it cannot be used to arbitrarily expropriate property, including property belonging to religious associations
- Nullify the designation of 2,000 Assemblies of God churches across the country as illegal, halt the process of confiscating 1400 of those churches, and cease the demolitions of other church properties.

To the United States

- Raise violations of FoRB, including those mentioned in this report, with Cuba at every opportunity. The Special Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom should visit Cuba to meet religious leaders and assess the situation for FoRB.

To the European Union, United States and other governments

- Urge Cuba to legalise all churches
- Insist on the full ratification and implementation of both the ICCPR and ICECSR.

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CSW is a Christian organisation working for religious freedom through advocacy and human rights, in the pursuit of justice.

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