

CUBA 2023 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution contains written provisions for religious freedom and prohibitions against discrimination based on religious grounds; however, provisions in the penal and administrative codes contravene these protections. The constitution declares the country a secular state and provides for the separation of religious institutions and the state, but the Cuban Communist Party (CCP), through its Office of Religious Affairs (ORA) and the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), regulates religious practice. The law requires all religious groups to apply to the MOJ for official registration. By law, membership in or association with an unregistered group is a crime. The penal code stipulates a minimum sentence of six months' incarceration, a fine, or both for individuals who attempt to conscientiously object to military service or prevent minors from attending public school, including those whose objections are based on their religious beliefs. It also imposes sentences of up to 10 years' imprisonment on persons receiving funding from foreign organizations or for financing activities considered to be directed against the state or its constitutional order. The family code states parents have the responsibility to instill in children love for the homeland, respect for its symbols, and respect for government authorities.

In its annual *Watch List*, the Christian nongovernmental organization (NGO) Open Doors reported an increase in government persecution of Christians from 2019 to 2023, including use of repressive tactics against religious leaders and activists opposing CCP ideology through arrests, exile, arbitrary fines, surveillance, denials of licenses, religious visas, freedom of movement, and physical and mental abuse. According to CSW's (formerly known as Christian Solidarity Worldwide) annual report released in February and covering 2022, there were 657 violations of freedom of religion or belief compared with 272 reported violations in 2021. Pastor Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo, sentenced in 2022 to seven years in prison on charges of disrespect,

assault, criminal incitement, and public disorder, remained in prison at year's end. Free Yorubas of Cuba (Free Yorubas) leaders and married couple Donaida Perez Paseiro and Loreto Hernandez Garcia also remained in prison through year's end. Independent media sources reported authorities routinely denied Hernandez Garcia's family's request for medical attention for him. Three "Ladies in White" – Sayli Navarro Alvarez, Tania Echevarria Mendez, and Sissi Abascal Zamora – remained in prison for their participation in the 2021 public protests against the government. In March, Abascal's mother told Radio Television Marti prison authorities had reduced the three women's food rations by 50 percent. The government continued to pressure regime critics – including religious leaders – to self-exile. In November, a multidenominational group of church leaders, the Alliance of Christians of Cuba (ACC), issued a public declaration calling for political and religious reform, including for the protection of freedom of religion or belief. Religious groups said the ORA and the MOJ continued to deny official registration to certain religious groups and failed to respond to long-pending applications, such as those for Jehovah's Witnesses and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ).

During the year, there were reports of incidents of theft and vandalism of churches, which one cleric described as part of the "growing wave of social indiscipline and societal violence against religious institutions." In October, representatives of Afro-Cuban, Muslim, Jewish religious communities and Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, and evangelical Protestant Christian groups participated in two religious freedom roundtables. State security detained a few participants when traveling to the event, including Pastor Alejandro Hernandez Cepero. Some religious groups and organizations, such as the Catholic charity Caritas, continued to gather and distribute relief items, providing humanitarian assistance to individuals regardless of religious belief.

In public statements and on social media, U.S. government officials, including the Secretary of State, continued to call upon the government to respect the human rights and fundamental freedoms of its citizens, including the freedom of religion or belief. In January and July, Department of State

and embassy officials raised Pastor Rosales Fajardo's case with officials at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. On October 27, in commemoration of International Religious Freedom Day, the Assistant Secretary for Western Hemispheric Affairs tweeted a call for the Cuban government to release Pastor Rosales Fajardo, who was involved in the 2021 protests and is the pastor of the unregistered nondenominational Monte de Scion Church. Embassy officials met regularly with a range of religious groups concerning the state of religious freedom and political activities related to the religious groups' beliefs.

On December 29, 2023, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State designated Cuba a "Country of Particular Concern" for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. For Cuba, existing ongoing restrictions are referenced in 31 CFR 515.201 and the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity (LIBERTAD) Act of 1996 (Helms-Burton Act), pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 11 million (midyear 2023). There is no independent, authoritative source on the overall size or composition of religious groups. The Catholic Church estimates 60 percent of the population identifies as Catholic. Membership in Protestant churches is estimated at 5 percent. According to some observers, Pentecostals and Baptists are likely the largest Protestant denominations. The Assemblies of God reports approximately 150,000 members; the four Baptist conventions estimate their combined membership at more than 100,000. Jehovah's Witnesses estimate their members at 95,000; Methodists 50,000; Seventh-day Adventists 36,000; Presbyterians 25,000; Anglicans 22,500; Episcopalians 10,000; Anabaptists (mostly Iglesia de Los Hermanos en Cristo, the Brethren of Christ) 4,387; Quakers 1,000; Moravians 750; and the Church of Jesus Christ 400 members. There are approximately 4,000 followers of 50 Apostolic churches (an unregistered, loosely affiliated network of Protestant churches, also known as the Apostolic Movement)

and a separate New Apostolic Church associated with the New Apostolic Church International.

According to a representative of the Islamic League, which is associated with the government-approved Council of Cuban Churches (CCC), there are approximately 13,000 Muslims in the country. According to an April article from the official state news agency *Prensa Latina*, the development of the government's diplomatic relations with several Arab and other Muslim countries and the arrival of students from those countries has led to an increase in the number of Cubans converting to Islam. Immigrants and native-born citizens practice several different Buddhist traditions, with estimates of 6,200 followers. The largest group of Buddhists is the Japanese Soka Gakkai; its estimated membership is 1,000. The Jewish community estimates it has 1,200 members, of whom 1,000 reside in Havana. Other religious groups with small numbers of adherents include the Greek Orthodox and Russian Orthodox churches and adherents of the Baha'i Faith.

Many individuals, particularly Afro-Cubans, practice religions with roots across Africa, including Yoruba groups often referred to by outsiders as Santeria but by adherents as the Order of Lucumi or Orisha worship. Bantu-influenced groups refer to themselves as Palo Monte. These religious practices are commonly intermingled with Catholicism and other forms of Christianity, and some require Catholic baptism for full initiation, making it difficult to estimate accurately their total membership. Rastafarian adherents also have a presence on the island, although the size of the community is unknown.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

According to the constitution, "The state recognizes, respects, and guarantees religious liberty" and, "Distinct beliefs and religions enjoy equal

consideration.” The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religious beliefs. It declares the country is a secular state and provides for the separation of religious institutions and the state.

The constitution also “recognizes, respects, and guarantees people’s freedom of thought, conscience, and expression.” It provides for the “right to profess or not profess their religious beliefs, to change them, and to practice the religion of their choice...” but only “with the required respect for other beliefs and in accordance with the law.” At the same time, it states, “Conscientious objection may not be invoked with the intention of evading compliance with the law or impeding another from the exercise of their rights.” Military service is mandatory for all men, and there are no legal provisions exempting conscientious objectors from service. The penal code stipulates a minimum sentence of six months’ incarceration, fine, or both for individuals who attempt to conscientiously object to military service or prevent minors from attending public school, including those whose objections are based on their religious beliefs.

The penal code imposes a sentence for whomever “puts religious belief in opposition to education, the responsibility to work, the defense of the Homeland with weapons, the reverence of its symbols or any others established by the constitution” to six months to one year in prison, a fine of 3,000 pesos (\$125), or both.

The government is subordinate to the CCP; the party’s ORA enlists the entire government, especially the MOJ and the security services, to control religious practice in the country. The ORA regulates religious institutions and the practice of religion. The law requires all religious groups to apply to the MOJ for official registration. The MOJ registers religious denominations as associations on a basis similar to how it officially registers civil society organizations. The application process requires religious groups to identify the location of their activities, their proposed leadership, and their funding sources, among other requirements. Even if the MOJ grants official registration, the religious group must request permission from the ORA each time it wants to conduct activities other than regular services, such as

holding meetings in approved locations, publishing major decisions from meetings, receiving foreign visitors, importing religious literature, purchasing and operating motor vehicles, and constructing, repairing, or purchasing places of worship. Groups that fail to register face penalties ranging from fines to closure of their organizations and confiscation of their property.

The penal code states membership in or association with an unregistered group, including a religious group, is a crime; penalties range from fines to three months' imprisonment, and leaders of such groups may be sentenced to up to two years in prison in addition to fines.

The law regulates the registration of "house churches" (private residences used as places of worship). Two house churches of the same denomination may not exist within 1.2 miles of one another. House churches must provide detailed information – including the number of worshippers, dates and times of services, and the names and ages of all inhabitants of the house in which services are held – to authorities. The law states if authorization is granted, authorities will supervise the operation of meetings; they may suspend meetings in the house for a year or more if they find a house church does not fulfill the requirements. If a neighbor registers a complaint against a church, the house church may be closed permanently and members subject to imprisonment. Foreigners must obtain permission before attending services in a house church; foreigners may not attend house churches in some regions. According to law, any violation will result in fines and closure of the house church.

The constitution states, "The rights of assembly, demonstration, and association are exercised by workers, both manual and intellectual; peasants; women; students; and other sectors of the working people." The constitution does not explicitly address religious association, but it prohibits discrimination based on religion.

A law in force since 2019 curtails freedom of expression on the internet to protect against "disseminating information contrary to the common good,

morals, decency, and integrity through public data transmission networks.” The penalty for violating the law is 3,000 Cuban pesos (\$125) or two to four years in prison.

The penal code also imposes sentences of up to 10 years’ imprisonment on those receiving funding from foreign organizations, including religious groups, or financing activities the government considers to be directed against the state or its constitutional order.

Religious education is highly regulated, and homeschooling is illegal, with parents who homeschool their children subject to arrest. Government-recognized religious groups, however, are allowed to operate after school and weekend programs for children. The family code states parents have the responsibility to instill in children love for the homeland, respect for its symbols, and respect for government authorities.

The country signed the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 2008 but did not ratify it. The government notes, “With respect to the scope and implementation of some of the provisions of this international instrument, Cuba will make such reservations or interpretative declarations as it may deem appropriate.”

Government Practices

Abuses Involving Violence, Detention, or Mass Resettlement

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights published a report on June 9 that found the government responsible for a car crash that resulted in the 2012 deaths of Oswaldo Paya and Harold Cepero. Paya was the founder and leader of the Christian Liberation Movement, a dissident party pushing for a multiparty democracy. The commission found the government violated the rights to residence and freedom of movement of Paya and his family because he was a human rights defender. The government denied his family the chance to collect Paya’s remains; his family was forced to leave the country after receiving threats and harassment from the government.

Cepero was also a human rights activist and the commission found “serious and sufficient evidence to conclude state agents participated in the death(s)” of the two men.

Many religious groups continued to state despite constitutional provisions providing for freedom of conscience and religion and prohibiting discrimination based on religion, the government used threats, detentions, violence, and other coercive tactics to restrict the activities of some religious groups, leaders, and followers, including the right of prisoners to practice religion freely. Sources cited constant government surveillance, intimidation, and interrogation of priests who spoke out on human rights, as well as government pressure on Catholic leadership to silence outspoken priests. Reportedly, all public religious activity was subject to state approval and control, and the government continued to monitor all religious groups, including registered groups and those directly affiliated with the CCC.

On December 17-19, World Council of Churches (WCC) General Secretary Jerry Pillay visited Cuba. According to a WCC press release on Pillay’s visit, Pillay voiced appreciation for religious freedom in Cuba, including during his meeting with Foreign Affairs Minister Bruno Rodriguez Parrilla. Pillay also met with WCC member church, the Presbyterian Church in Cuba, and many other churches that are part of the government recognized CCC. Pillay remarked, “I saw a huge statue of the Christ overlooking the city, which is most unusual in a place accused of restricting religious freedom. He [Parrilla] said the [government approved] churches in Cuba confirmed their freedom to worship and exercise their faith and beliefs.”

On December 28, Outreach Aid to the Americas (OAA) sent a letter to Pillay following his visit. The letter countered WCC’s press release, stating the government’s “systematic violations of religious freedom have been well documented and denounced by human rights monitors and many governments and international bodies.” The letter cited the use of repressive tactics, including “harassment, threats, physical attacks on faith leaders and parishioners; detention and imprisonment; confiscation of property; police summons; defamation and accusations of illegal or immoral

behavior; denial of rights of employment or education, including for family members; repudiation; use of “public opinion agents” to sow rumors; creation of enmity and division between faith groups; restrictions on movement; and fabrication of alleged crimes.”

Leaders of unregistered small and independent churches said the government continued to apply laws in an arbitrary and capricious manner to target religious groups and individuals whose views were incongruent with those of the government.

In its annual *Watch List*, Open Doors, a self-described nondenominational, ecumenical Christian organization, reported an increase in government persecution of Christians from 2019-2023. In 2019, the average pressure on five spheres of life (private, family, community, national, and church life) was 8.9 out of a potential maximum of 16.7. During the year, the average pressure was 12.5. It attributed the continued rise to the government’s increased use of arrests, exile, arbitrary fines, surveillance, denials of licenses and religious visas, and physical and mental abuse against Christian leaders and activists who criticized CCP principles based on their faith. Open Doors also reported the government continued to take administrative reprisals and organized acts of repudiation against Christians who opposed the amendments to the constitution’s new family code. Because religious and political beliefs are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

The Madrid-based NGO Observatory of Cuban Human Rights (OCDH) reported at least 936 instances of violations against religious freedoms in the country during the year. The violations targeted publicly identified religious individuals and those attending religious services sporadically or regularly.

In February, CSW released its most recent annual report on the country. In the report, which covered 2022, CSW said it had documented 657 violations of freedom of religion or belief, which it called “a staggering jump” from 272 reported violations in 2021. According to the report, the government

continued to view religious groups, which together comprise the largest sector of independent civil society, with suspicion and some fear, especially because of their potential to mobilize large groups of individuals.

CSW reported the government continued its practice of detaining religious individuals in the aftermath of unprecedented 2021 nationwide public protests, and it ignored calls for the release of detainees on the two-year anniversary of the protests. In February, prison authorities transferred Pastor Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo, sentenced in 2022 to seven years in prison on charges of disrespect, assault, criminal incitement and public disorder, from a maximum security to a minimum-security prison. The NGO Cubanet reported authorities at the new location continued to mistreat Rosales Fajardo and forced him to do hard labor. In July, Radio Marti reported prison authorities threatened to move Rosales Fajardo back to a maximum-security cell for not attending 'reeducation' programs, which family members stated contravened his religious beliefs.

Leaders of the Free Yorubas, an unregistered religious association, continued to serve their terms in prison for participating in the July 2021 protests. In 2022, Free Yorubas President Donaida Perez Paseiro was sentenced to eight years in prison; Vice President Loreto Hernandez Garcia to seven years; and twin sisters Lisdani and Lisdiani Rodriguez Isaac to eight years each. Independent media reported the Department of State Security (DSE) denied the transfer of the sisters to a less severe prison facility in retaliation for a letter written to commemorate the second anniversary of their imprisonment and for their refusal to stand at attention when prison officials passed by.

In June, Amnesty International called for the immediate and unconditional release of Perez Paseiro and Hernandez Garcia. Independent media sources reported the Ministry of the Interior's Prisoner Office routinely denied Hernandez Garcia's family's request for him to receive critical medical treatment for pre-existing health conditions further exacerbated by prison conditions. In March and August, Ministry of Interior (MOI) officials denied requests for temporary medical leave, supported by documentation from

medical specialists, submitted by a relative of Hernandez Garcia. In the August communication, the MOI response to the request acknowledged Hernandez Garcia's medical needs and referenced him having suffered a heart attack earlier in the year, but the MOI still ordered he remain in prison. In May, Radio TV Marti reported prison guards beat Hernandez Garcia and held him in a “punishment cell” for eight hours, and in November, sources said a guard beat and threw Hernandez Garcia down a flight of stairs and ridiculed his religious beliefs. Media outlets reported authorities routinely stopped his family from providing Hernandez Garcia with food and personal hygiene items.

Media outlets continued to report security officials systematically detained and fined Ladies in White leader Berta Soler Fernandez and several other Ladies in White members every Sunday as they attempted to peacefully express dissent by attending Mass to pray for the freedom of political prisoners. Three Ladies in White – Sayli Navarro Alvarez, Tania Echevarria Mendez, and Sissi Abascal Zamora – remained in prison at year’s end for their public participation in the 2021 protests against the government. In March, self-characterized independent news service *ADN Online* reported Abascal’s mother had told *Radio Televisión Martí* authorities had reduced the three women’s food rations by 50 percent, and they had no access to potable water for more than a week. Abascal's mother reported Abascal suffered fevers as a result. According to media reports, on September 24, police detained Abascal’s parents, Ania Zamora and Armando Abascal, when they tried to go to Mass in Carlos Rojas. They said it was not the first time they were not allowed to go to church.

In March, media sources reported National Revolutionary Police (PNR) violently detained a couple while they attempted to join Sunday Mass at the Nuestra Senora de la Merced parish in Camaguey. PNR officials questioned the couple for more than four hours, during which they told them that at church they were “taking communion against communism.”

In February, Cardinal Beniamino Stella (former Apostolic Nuncio to Cuba) traveled to the country as a special envoy for Pope Francis. While in

country, Cardinal Stella advocated the amnesty of July 11 protesters, including in public interviews with the press.

In July, CSW published a series of articles on exiled religious leaders, entitled, *Into Exile* on its Freedom of Religion or Belief blog. It profiled the cases of Pastor Enrique de Jesus Fundora, who fled to Switzerland in March 2022 after the government threatened him with 30 years' imprisonment for the crimes of rebellion, public disorder, and for being a counterrevolutionary and terrorist; Pastor Alain Toledano Valiente, who fled the country with part of his family in June 2022 after receiving a government ultimatum to leave or face a lengthy prison sentence; Reverend Yordanys Diaz Arteaga, who departed the country with his family in July 2022 after 14 years of harassment and threats; and independent journalist Yoel Suarez, who left in August 2022, but continued to monitor and report on religious freedom from the United States.

Abuses Limiting Religious Belief and Expression

During the year, CSW reported an increase in documented freedom of religion or belief cases involving freedom of conscience, the majority involving young men who were reluctant to present themselves for obligatory military service due to fears that they would be ordered to carry out actions that conflict with their religious beliefs.

Abuses Involving the Ability of Individuals to Engage in Religious Activities Alone or In Community with Others

In May, CSW reported authorities of an unnamed public university threatened a Baptist university student with expulsion because he refused to sign an oath promising to defend socialism and Marxist-Leninism, a requirement by law since 2022. CSW's head of advocacy said, "This student represents thousands of young people across the island who are under pressure to comply with government orders that are in conflict with their deeply held religious beliefs." The student chose to remain anonymous out of fear of reprisals.

In September, government authorities interfered with the evening religious procession honoring Virgen de la Caridad, the patron saint of Cuba, in Esmeralda, Camaguey. According to Father Alberto Reyes' posts on social media, authorities prohibited and rescheduled the procession to a time when weather was likely to deter participation in the procession. According to press reports, Reyes, a priest of the Archdiocese of Camaguey, lamented the government's constant interference in, and control of, religious activities.

Over the course of the year, Afro-Cuban religious actors and activists raised concerns about state authorities engaging in acts of religious intolerance and racism against followers of Afro-descendent religions, calling such acts examples of “religious racism.” In August alone, CSW documented at least four separate instances of state authorities, including officials from the DSE, the PNR, and the Department of Physical Planning, issuing threats or intimidating Afro-Cuban religious groups or leaders based their intent to engage in unregistered religious activities.

In August, a PNR officer and a DSE agent arrived at the home of a Babalao (traditional religious leader of Yoruba practices) in the central part of the country while he was preparing for a ceremony celebrating a religious anniversary of one of his children. The two security officers did not identify themselves and began to interrogate the Babalao as to why he was holding the ceremony in his home. They warned the Babalao that if he did not cease holding religious activities in his place of residence, he would be summoned officially to the police station to give a statement. When the Babalao asked where he should hold such ceremonies, given the absence of a dedicated location for such religious activities, the security officers warned him again to halt his preparations and threatened to intervene physically if the celebration went ahead. The Babalao cancelled the ceremony.

According to sources, the CCP unilaterally and without explanation suspended Christmas *posadas* (a celebration of Joseph and Mary’s journey from Bethlehem to Nazareth in search of a place for Mary to give birth) of

some evangelical denominations in the parishes of Nueva Paz and Los Palos. Children, dressed as Mary and Joseph going door-to-door singing Christmas songs requesting a place for Jesus' birth, had celebrated this tradition for more than 10 years. Some of the impacted communities filed complaints to the ORA but received no official response by the end of the year.

According to CSW, many religious groups continued to state their lack of legal registration impeded their ability to practice their religion. Several religious groups, including Jehovah's Witnesses and the Church of Jesus Christ, still had not received decisions from the MOJ on pending applications for official registration, some dating as far back as 1994. In May, members and leaders of the Church of Jesus Christ visited the country to inaugurate a fifth congregation in the Havana District; however, the Church remained unrecognized, and therefore an illegal organization. Despite a 2019 letter from then Cuban ambassador to the United States, Jose Cabanas, to the First Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ in Salt Lake City stating the denomination was "welcome" in the country, as of year's end, the MOJ again had not acted on the Church's registration request.

Representatives of several religious groups and religious freedom organizations said the government continued to interpret the law on associations as a means for the ORA and the MOJ to deny registration of certain groups. They also said the MOJ's determinations of ineligibilities for registration sometimes included the assertion that another group already had identical or similar objectives, which these representatives said was a government pretext to control and favor certain factions of a religious denomination or one religious group's activities over those of other groups.

At year's end, Soka Gakkai continued to be the only Buddhist organization registered with the government, and the Islamic League was the only registered Islamic organization.

According to religious leaders and former inmates, authorities continued to arbitrarily deny prisoners, including political prisoners, pastoral visits, access to Bibles or other holy texts, and the ability to meet with other prisoners for

worship, prayer, and study. The Baptist-associated Patmos Institute awarded its annual prize for religious freedom to sisters Angelica and Maria Cristina Garrido Rodriguez and brothers Jorge and Nadir Martin Perdomo. The four awardees were imprisoned following their peaceful participation in the nationwide protests of July 11, 2021. CSW reported the four prisoners were repeatedly denied the right to receive visits from religious leaders while in prison, or to participate in religious activities. It also reported the government blocked Marta Perdomo, the mother of the Perdomo brothers, from attending religious services.

In October, CSW reported DSE officials detained Baptist Pastors Alejandro Hernandez Cepero and Luis Maldonado for organizing two interreligious roundtables. In response, CSW's director of advocacy said, "While the Cuban government claims that it respects freedom of religion or belief, a fundamental right enshrined in international law, its internal intelligence apparatus harasses and arbitrarily detains religious leaders simply for their participation in roundtables to build bridges between religious groups and to discuss this right." According to the Patmos Institute, authorities released the two pastors later the same day.

CSW and religious leaders said the Ministry of Interior continued its systematic practice of planting informants in all religious organizations, sometimes by persuading or intimidating members and leaders to act as informants, or by sending informants to infiltrate a church. Consequently, many leaders practiced self-censorship in their sermons and teaching. Parishioners again reported cases of DSE agents filming or recording religious activities. Open Doors reported the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution were the main government informants targeting Christians who expressed faith-based opinions against the government. In its 2023 survey, OCDH reported 65 percent of respondents said the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution surveilled or monitored persons who professed a religion. Open Doors added local communities or private groups also monitored Christians, which generated a climate of mistrust within the community.

Catholic and Protestant Church leaders, both in and outside the government-recognized CCC, continued to report frequent visits from DSE agents and CCP officials, arbitrary vehicle searches, threats, and home surveillance. These leaders said the purpose of the visits was to intimidate and remind them they were under close surveillance as well as to influence internal decisions and structures within the groups.

In July, regime authorities denied evangelical Protestant pastor Manuel Segura, a Cuban citizen resident of Mexico, permission to leave Cuba. Segura had traveled to Cuba to visit his family. According to ADN Cuba, authorities also interrogated the pastor for hours when he arrived in the country.

The government continued to use internet laws restricting freedom of expression of independent journalists, including those promoting freedom of religion or belief and other human rights. CSW also continued to report the government used social media, including Facebook posts and online editorials publicly targeting religious leaders or groups, to harass and defame religious leaders. NGOs said many of the accounts that posted attacks targeting religious leaders were linked to DSE state security.

Religious practitioners continued to express concern regarding the government's restriction on broadcasting religious services over the radio or on television. In its 2023 survey, the OCDH reported 47 percent of religious respondents said they were denied access to media.

According to a July interview in Spanish language daily *ACI Prensa* with Father Reyes, members of the Catholic Church who denounced injustices in the country received calls and threats from the government. Reyes said the exercise of religious freedom should not be limited to worship in churches but should also include the participation of believers in the public life of the country in different areas, such as education, health care, and in the free expression of one's opinion.

In the Vatican-associated Aid to the Church in Need (ACN) *World Religious Freedom Report* released in June, it assessed “freedom of worship is generally respected, but one cannot speak of full religious freedom” because “the control of the state and the Communist Party over religion, as well as over the rest of the aspects of the life of citizens, limits, restricts, and regulates to the extreme many of their actions and movements.”

The Catholic Church and several government-recognized Protestant groups maintained small libraries, print periodicals and other information, and they operated their own websites with little or no formal censorship.

The CCP continued to directly govern religious freedom through the ORA, which has authority over all matters related to religious groups, including their registration, travel outside the country, and building and construction permits. According to OAA, the ORA applied rules in an arbitrary manner, showing favoritism to religious groups seen as cooperative or supportive of the government, while harassing those who were critical and insisted on maintaining organizational independence. These latter groups were again subject to routine harassment and property expropriation, their building or construction permits were denied or delayed, and their leaders were barred from leaving the country.

Abuses Involving Discrimination or Unequal Treatment

According to religious leaders of unregistered churches, the government continued to selectively prevent some religious groups from establishing accredited schools. These leaders said religious groups that were registered with the government and were willing to participate in government events were allowed to operate seminaries, interfaith training centers, before-and-after-school programs, eldercare programs, weekend retreats, workshops for primary and secondary students, and higher education programs. The Catholic Church continued to offer coursework, including entrepreneurial training leading to a bachelor's and master's degree, through foreign partners. Several Protestant communities continued to offer university-level degrees in theology, the humanities, and related subjects through

distance learning. The government, however, did not recognize these degrees.

According to international media, despite increased shortages of food, medicine, and other essential items, authorities greatly restricted many religious organizations' ability to receive and distribute humanitarian assistance. While the government allowed Caritas to continue to assist the needy, it did not allow many smaller religious groups and charities that were not part of the government-recognized CCC to provide aid. Other religious leaders also said the government continued to restrict their ability to receive donations from overseas. Many reported disparities between the official exchange rate and informal rates limited the value and impact of their monetary donations.

Some religious groups continued to report the government allowed them to engage in community service programs and to share their religious beliefs. Other religious groups reported government restrictions varied and were largely based on the government's perceptions of the "political pliancy" of each religious group. Religious leaders continued to report government opposition to and interference in religious groups' providing pastoral services.

Other Developments Affecting Religious Freedom

In September, during the 54th session of the UN Human Rights Council, the OAA and CSW hosted an event highlighting the experience of exiled religious leader Pastor Fundora, who fled to Switzerland in 2022.

In November, the ACC issued a public declaration calling for political and religious reforms following a gathering on November 8 in the province of Santiago de Cuba. The ACC is composed of approximately 50 leaders of registered and unregistered religious denominations and networks as well as leaders of independent churches on the island. The Santiago de Cuba declaration made specific calls for the release of political prisoners, increased respect for basic human rights, and protection of freedom of

religion or belief. The November 8 gathering was the third held by the ACC since its formation in 2022. A CSW source said one of the ACC's key areas of focus was on "the importance of knowing and practicing the inherent rights of human beings, especially freedom of expression, association, and belief."

On November 15, the report on Fourth Cycle of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) on Cuba was presented to the UN Human Rights Commission. Several religious freedom organizations previously submitted reports to the UPR, including the Alliance of Unregistered Cuban Churches, the OAA, the ACN, Prisoners Defenders, and the Patmos Institute, among others.

According to *ADN Cuba Online*, on November 17, Juan Antonio Quintanilla, ambassador to the Permanent Mission of the Republic of Cuba to the United Nations Office in Geneva, stated Cuba would not accept 30 of the recommendations for the country presented in the UPR report, including recommendations regarding freedom of religion and belief. According to OCDH, in a summary of UPR-Cuba stakeholder communications submitted in September, religion-based organizations highlighted the government's restrictions on religious freedom, emphasizing religious leaders who criticized the government could become targets of intimidation, and sometimes detained. The document recommended the government "guarantee freedom of religion" and allow religious groups to function without fear or discrimination.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to online independent news platform *CiberCuba*, in May, Father Kenny Fernandez Delgado reported unidentified persons had committed a second robbery and vandalism of the Church of Catalina de Guines in Guines. Fernandez Delgado said such incidents were occurring in a number of churches across the country. "The regime is not interested or even happy that they occur," he said. According to Patmos, in August, Father Lester Rafael Zayas Diaz, of the Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish in Vedado, Havana,

reported once again youth had vandalized his church, throwing stones at the church façade and breaking windows. Zayas Diaz described the incident on social media as part of “the growing wave of social indiscipline and societal violence against religious institutions.”

International faith-based charitable organizations such as Caritas and Sant’Egidio, both Catholic, and the Salvation Army maintained local offices in Havana. Caritas continued to gather and distribute relief items, providing humanitarian assistance to all individuals regardless of religious belief or non-belief.

In October, Pastors Hernandez Cepero and Maldonado Calvo coordinated two religious freedom roundtables, one on October 8 and another on October 31, in Havana. Separately, on October 31, the Patmos Institute reported similar roundtables were organized in Las Tunas, Santa Clara, and Baracoa. Representatives of multiple religious groups participated, including from Afro-Cuban, Muslim, Jewish religious communities and Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, and evangelical Protestant Christian groups.

In April, an article in *Associated Press News* reported an increasing number of Cubans were turning to Santeria traditions, some sources estimating as many as 70 percent of citizens practiced at least some aspects of Santeria. According to the article, Santeria was one of the few religious practices to endure through decades of prohibitions and stigma by the communist government. One Santeria practitioner (santero) told *AP News* that the religion was growing on the island. Hosting in his home dozens of worshippers who were dancing and making offerings at the altar the Yoruba deity Yemaya, he said, “Right now, Santeria in the country is a sort of bastion.”

According to a September report by an Afro-Cuban Babalao, there was an underreported trend of unknown individuals in society removing the bodies of practitioners of African-based religions from their graves. The report highlighted a 2020 case of an Afro-Cuban spiritual healer, who to date had

not received compensation for spiritual or patrimonial damages suffered at the removal of his father's body from its grave.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In public statements and through social media postings, U.S. government officials, including the Secretary of State, continued to call upon the government to respect its citizens' human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of religion or belief and the freedom of expression. In January and July, Department of State and embassy officials raised the case of Pastor Rosales Fajardo with officials at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. On October 27, in commemoration of International Religious Freedom Day, the Assistant Secretary for Western Hemispheric Affairs tweeted a call for the government to release Pastor Rosales Fajardo, who was involved in the 2021 protests and was the pastor of the unregistered nondenominational Monte de Scion Church.

U.S. embassy and other U.S. government officials continued to meet with leaders of a range of registered and unregistered religious groups, including Catholic, Protestant, Jewish and Afro-religious faith groups. They discussed the principal issues of religious freedom and tolerance, including repression of freedom of peaceful assembly, difficulties in obtaining permission to build or access larger facilities for churches, lack of access to state-owned media to proselytize, and restrictions against establishing private religious schools.

On December 29, 2023, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State designated Cuba a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. For Cuba, existing ongoing restrictions are referenced in 31 CFR 515.201 and the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity (LIBERTAD) Act of 1996 (Helms-Burton Act), pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act.