

CUBA 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and religion and prohibits discrimination based on religion; however, the Cuban Communist Party, through its Office of Religious Affairs (ORA) and the government's Ministry of Justice (MOJ), continued to control most aspects of religious life. Observers said the government continued to use threats, international and domestic travel restrictions, detentions, and violence against some religious leaders and their followers, and restricted the rights of prisoners to practice religion freely. Media and religious leaders said the government continued to harass or detain members of religious groups advocating for greater religious and political freedom, including Ladies in White leader Berta Soler Fernandez, Christian rights activist Mitzael Díaz Paseiro, his wife and fellow activist Ariadna Lopez Roque, and Patmos Institute regional coordinator Leonardo Rodriguez Alonso. In March the government registered the New Apostolic Church, which does not have a connection with Apostolic churches, also known as the Apostolic Movement. The ORA and MOJ, however, continued to use the law on associations to deny official registration to certain religious groups, such as a number of Apostolic churches, or failed to respond to long-pending applications, such as those for the Jehovah's Witnesses and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Many religious groups said the lack of registration impeded their ability to practice their religion. A coalition of evangelical Protestant churches, Apostolic churches, and the Roman Catholic Church pressed for reforms in the draft constitution, including registration of religious groups, ownership of church property, and new church construction. On October 24, the Cuban Catholic Bishops Conference issued a statement calling for the constitution to strengthen protections for religious activities. In September Protestant groups signed a petition opposing the removal of freedom of conscience in the draft constitution and sought the reinstatement of individual and collective rights to manifest one's religion and beliefs in private and in public. Human rights advocacy organization Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) reported government harassment of religious leaders increased "significantly in parallel with" the churches' outspokenness regarding the draft constitution. According to CSW, some religious groups said the government increased its scrutiny of foreign religious workers' visa applications and visits. Some religious groups reported an increase in the ability of their members to conduct charitable and educational projects. According to the religious advocacy group EchoCuba and CSW, the government gave preference to some religious groups and discriminated against others. During the year, the Sacred Heart of Jesus became the first Catholic church

built since the country's 1959 revolution. It was the first of three Catholic parishes to be completed and the first Catholic church ever located in Sandino, a remote town in the country's westernmost province.

The Community of Sant'Egidio again held an interfaith meeting – “Bridges of Peace” – in Havana on October 12-14 to promote interreligious engagement, tolerance, and joint efforts towards peace. Leaders of different religious groups in the country and participants from 25 countries attended the meeting.

U.S. embassy officials continued to meet with government officials and raise concerns about unregistered churches' inability to achieve legal registration and gain the official status it conveys. The embassy met regularly with Catholic Church authorities, evangelical Protestants, and Jewish community representatives concerning the state of religious, economic, and political activities. Embassy officials also met with representatives from Muslim, Jehovah's Witnesses, and various Protestant communities. Embassy officials met with the head of the Council of Cuban Churches (CCC), a government-registered organization with close ties to the government composed mostly of Protestant groups and associated with the World Council of Churches, to discuss its operations and programs. The embassy remained in close contact with religious groups, including facilitating exchanges between visiting religious delegations and religious groups in the country. In social media and other public statements, the U.S. government continued to call upon the government to respect the fundamental freedoms of its citizens, including the freedom of religion.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 11.1 million (July 2018 estimate). There is no independent, authoritative source on the overall size or composition of religious groups. The Catholic Church estimates 60 to 70 percent of the population identifies as Catholic. Membership in Protestant churches is estimated at 5 percent of the population. According to some observers, Pentecostals and Baptists are likely the largest Protestant denominations. The Assemblies of God (AG) 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 96,000; Methodists 50,000; Seventh-day Adventists more than 35,000; Anglicans 22,500; Presbyterians 25,000; Episcopalians 6,000; Quakers 1,000; Moravians 750; and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 150 members. During the year, the Episcopal

Church of Cuba was readmitted as a diocese of the U.S.-based Episcopal Church after being separated in 1966, a possible explanation for the increase from 300 members in 2017. 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 some Christian leaders, there is a marked growth of evangelical Protestant groups in the country. The Jewish community estimates it has 1,200 members, of whom 1,000 reside in Havana. According to the local Islamic League, there are 2,000 to 3,000 Muslims, of whom an estimated 1,500 are native born. Other religious groups with small numbers of adherents include Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Buddhists, and Baha'is.

Many individuals, particularly those of African descent, practice religions with roots in West Africa and the Congo River Basin, known collectively as Santeria. These religious practices are commonly intermingled with Catholicism, and some require Catholic baptism for full initiation, making it difficult to estimate accurately their total membership.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

According to the constitution, “the state recognizes, respects, and guarantees freedom of conscience and religion” and “different beliefs and religions enjoy the same considerations under the law.” The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion. It declares the country is a secular state and provides for the separation of religious institutions and the state; however, the constitution also places the Communist Party above religious freedom as “the superior leading force of the society and the State.” It also states that no freedom may be exercised contrary to the “objectives of the socialist state” and an article of the penal code criminalizes conscientious objection.

The government is subordinate to the Communist Party; the party's organ, the ORA, works through 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 of associations 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. Ineligibilities for registration can include determinations by the MOJ that another group has identical or similar objectives, or the group's activities could harm the common good. If the MOJ grants official registration, the religious group must request permission from the ORA each time it wants to conduct activities, 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 failing to register face penalties ranging from fines to closure of their organizations.

The law regulates the registration of "house churches" (private residences used as places of worship). According to CSW, the directive states two house churches of the same denomination may not exist within two kilometers (1.2 miles) of one another and 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 – must be provided to authorities. The law states that 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 the requirements are not fulfilled. If an individual registers a complaint against a church, the church may be closed permanently and members may be subject to imprisonment. Foreigners must obtain permission before attending service in a house church; foreigners may not attend house churches in some regions. 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," but it does not explicitly address religious association. The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion; however, in practice, the government does not allow the unimpeded exercise of these rights.

Military service is mandatory for all men, and there are no legal provisions exempting conscientious objectors from service for religious reasons.

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

Many religious groups said that despite constitutional provisions providing for freedom of conscience and religion and prohibiting discrimination based on religion, the government used threats, detentions, and other coercive tactics to restrict certain religious groups and leaders' activities and applied the law in an arbitrary and capricious manner. According to a known human rights activist, Christian rights activist Mitzael Diaz Paseiro, in prison since November 2017, staged a hunger strike in July and August, demanding his rights as a political prisoner and protesting repression and harassment of his family. According to Radio Television Marti, on September 20, police arrested his wife, Ariadna Lopez Roque, also a political activist, in Santa Clara for demonstrating publicly against the government, calling for the government to respect freedom of conscience in the draft constitution, and burning a copy of the draft constitution. Police detained her for five days. On November 28, 2017, Diaz Paseiro was sentenced to 3.5 years in prison for "pre-criminal dangerousness."

According to CSW and other sources, on February 28, police arrested and detained Leonardo Rodriguez Alonso, a regional coordinator in Santa Clara for the Patmos Institute, a religious freedom advocacy organization. According to CSW, the Provincial Unit for Investigations in Santa Clara held him without charge and released him on March 2. CSW reported Rodriguez Alonso was returning home to Santa Clara from the town of Caibarien, where he met with human rights defenders to discuss how to respond to a series of religious freedom violations affecting loosely affiliated, unregistered Apostolic churches in the central and eastern areas of the country. Rodriguez Alonso said police officer Erik Francis Aquino Yera notified him the government would not allow him to travel to Geneva to denounce the lack of religious freedom in the country. According to CSW, Reverend Mario Felix Lleonart Barroso, a founder of the Patmos Institute, said Aquino Yera told members of Rodriguez' family that the government considered the Patmos Institute a counterrevolutionary organization.

According to the CSW annual report, in late July national and local security agents threatened one pastor with eviction and prison because he had distributed pamphlets related to the government's campaign to adopt a new constitution. Authorities previously denied the same pastor permission to travel abroad.

Police continued their repeated physical assaults against members of the Ladies in White, a rights advocacy organization, on their way to Mass as reported by CSW

and the news services Agency EFE, Marti Noticias, and Diario de Cuba. The group's members typically attend Mass and then gather to protest the government's human rights abuses. Throughout the year, Berta Soler Fernandez, the group's leader, reported regular arrests and short detentions for Ladies in White members when they attempted to meet on Sundays. The Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation (CCDHRN) reported 224 arbitrary arrests of individuals in September, more than half of whom were women, mostly Ladies in White members. According to CCDHRN, police briefly arrested Berta Soler Fernandez, the group's leader, on September 30. CCDHRN also stated police harassed and were physically aggressive toward individuals who were not detained.

According to the CSW annual report, prisoners, including political prisoners, reported authorities denied the right to pastoral visits and the right to meet with other prisoners for worship, prayer, and study. CSW stated many also reported that authorities repeatedly confiscated Bibles and other religious literature, sometimes as punishment and other times for no apparent reason. According to CSW, prison authorities blocked Eduardo Cardet, whom Amnesty International has identified as a "prisoner of conscience," from receiving visits from a pastor and confiscated his Bible as punishment at different points throughout the year.

According to CSW, in February authorities physically blocked Pastor Barbaro Guevara from visiting Ariadna Lopez Roque at her home while she was on a hunger strike to protest how prison authorities were treating her husband Mitzael Diaz Paseiro.

In spite of the legal requirement for all men to perform military service, the authorities allowed conscientious objectors to perform alternative service.

Several religious groups, including the Jehovah's Witnesses and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, continued to await a decision from the MOJ on pending applications for official registration, some dating as far back as 1994. These groups reported they had to seek the authorities' permission to conduct religious activities, hold meetings, receive foreign visitors, make substantial renovations to their facilities, and send representatives abroad. They also said state security continued to monitor their movements, telephone calls, visitors, and religious meetings. According to CSW, Berean Baptist pastor Daniel Josue Perez Naranjo, based in the province of Las Tunas, has been waiting for the reregistration of his denomination since submitting the request in 1997.

According to representatives of several religious organizations that had unsuccessfully sought legal registration, the government continued to interpret the law on associations as a means for the ORA and the MOJ to deny the registration of certain religious groups. If the MOJ decided a group was duplicating the activities or objectives of another, it denied registration and advised Apostolic churches to join other registered churches. In some cases, the MOJ delayed the request for registration or cited changing laws as a reason why a request had not been approved. Toward the end of the year, MOJ officials notified the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that under the draft constitution it should be able to legally register as a recognized religious entity, but as of the end of the year was unable to do so.

According to EchoCuba, the ORA approved some registration applications, but it took as many as two to three years from the date of the application. Other applications received no response or were denied without explanation, while some groups continued to wait for up to 25 years for a response. EchoCuba said Apostolic churches repeatedly had their attempts to register denied, forcing these churches to operate without legal status.

In October leaders of Apostolic churches including Bernardo de Quesada, Alain Toledanos, and Marco Antonio Perdomo, issued an official statement on behalf of nonregistered groups, which they said are “in practice discriminated against,” urging the government to establish a new statute formally defining and granting the right to, and laying out procedures for, legal registration of religious organizations by the MOJ. The ORA and the MOJ did not announce any progress on revising the law on associations, announced in August 2017.

In March the New Apostolic Church, not affiliated with the many loosely affiliated Apostolic churches, registered with the MOJ.

According to CSW’s annual report, authorities continued to rely on two 2005 government resolutions to impose complicated and repressive restrictions on house churches. Religious groups said the government applied these laws in an arbitrary manner and sometimes used them to target specific churches or religious groups.

According to members of Protestant denominations, some groups were still able to register only a small percentage of house churches in private homes; however, some unregistered house churches still could operate with little or no government interference. According to an EchoCuba report, several religious leaders, particularly those from smaller, independent house churches or Santeria

communities, expressed concern that the government was less tolerant of groups that relied on informal locations, including private residences and other private meeting spaces, to practice their beliefs. They said the government monitored them, and, at times, prevented them from holding religious meetings in their spaces. CSW said in other cases the government and Cuban Communist Party officials harassed leaders of house churches and owners of homes where house churches met. Many house church leaders also reported frequent visits from state security agents or Cuban Communist Party officials. Some reported warnings from the agents and officials that the education of their children, or their own employment, could be “threatened” if the house church leaders continued with their activities.

According to CSW, in March Bernardo de Quesada said government officials in Camaguey interrupted Bible studies held in private homes and attempted to intimidate the homeowners into stopping their religious activities. De Quesada said government inspectors from the Physical Planning Department also attempted to enter his family’s property, where his church meets, while he was abroad. According to CSW’s annual report, in August a government official visited several house churches associated with one pastor in central Cuba and pressured the homeowners to stop using their homes for religious activities. The official threatened one owner, an elderly woman, with criminal charges if more than 10 persons met in her home at any one time.

According to the CSW annual report, in February two MOJ officials entered a prayer meeting at an unregistered house church and tried to intimidate approximately 50 persons in attendance, primarily teenagers and children. At the same time, police stationed three cars outside the property. The same week, security agents visited the property, demanded documents from the owners, and pressured them to stop hosting prayer meetings in their home.

According to an NGO, in May an official from the Provincial Directorate for Physical Planning entered a ranch to deliver a summons and investigate a church that meets on the property. He threatened to demolish the building and prohibit the church from meeting within the property. Reportedly, in October another pastor was fined and the official threatened to demolish his house for conducting religious services at home.

According to the CSW annual report, reports of harassment of religious leaders increased in parallel with churches’ outspokenness regarding the draft constitution. A coalition of evangelical Protestant churches, Apostolic churches, and the

Catholic Church continued to request that the government, particularly during the constitutional reform's consultation process, pass reforms to facilitate the registration of religious groups, legalize ownership of church property by certain groups, and permit construction of new churches. In September the AG, Methodist Church, Western and Eastern Baptist Conventions, Evangelical League, and other Pentecostal and evangelical Protestant churches (representing approximately 405,000 members in all) delivered a joint petition to the government entitled "Proposal of Modifications of Some Articles of the Draft of the Constitution." The petition called for the reinstatement of freedom of conscience and of individual and collective rights to manifest one's religions and beliefs both in private and in public.

The AG reported the ORA opposed the AG collecting signatures in support of its campaign to oppose some aspects of the draft constitution and reported the government pressured AG leadership and supporters to abstain from signing the petition. The AG stated authorities had warned it that "collecting signatures was forbidden." The Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCB) reported no government reaction to its letter on the draft constitution issued on October 24 that called on believers and nonbelievers to express their political opinions freely during the national consultation process on constitutional reform.

According to the CSW annual report, in February a religious leader who had organized a cross-denominational evangelical event fled the country after state security officials threatened to charge him with "acting against the independence or territorial integrity of the State," which carries a sentence of 10 to 20 years in prison under the penal code.

According to the CSW annual report, Christian leaders from all denominations said there was a scarcity of Bibles and other religious literature, primarily in rural areas. Some religious leaders continued to report government obstacles preventing them from importing religious materials and donated goods, including bureaucratic challenges and arbitrary restrictions such as inconsistent rules on computers and electronic devices. In some cases, the government held up religious materials or blocked them altogether. Several groups, however, said they continued to import large quantities of Bibles, books, clothing, and other donated goods. The Catholic Church and several Protestant religious group representatives said they continued to maintain small libraries, print periodicals and other information, and operate their own websites with little or no formal censorship. The Catholic Church continued to publish periodicals and hold regular forums at the Varela Center that sometimes criticized official social and economic policies.

By year's end, the government had not granted the CCB's public requests to allow the Catholic Church to reopen religious schools and have open access to broadcasting on television and radio. The ORA continued to permit the CCB to host a monthly 20-minute radio broadcast, which allowed the council's messages to be heard throughout the country. No other churches had access to mass media, which are all state-owned. Several religious leaders continued to protest the government's restriction on broadcasting religious services over the radio or on television.

According to the CSW annual report, the government continued to impose harsh restrictions on the construction of new church buildings. All requests, even for minor building repairs, needed to be approved by the ORA, which awarded permits according to the inviting association's perceived level of support for or cooperation with the government. According to an EchoCuba report, the difficulty of obtaining approval to build new churches, together with the fact that it remained illegal to organize religious activities in buildings not registered for religious use, meant that many communities had no legal place to meet for church services. According to the report, this situation particularly affected worshippers in more remote rural areas. Members of the AG said the government prevented them from expanding their places of worship, including carrying out construction. Instead, they stated, the government threatened to dismantle or expropriate some of their churches because they were holding illegal services. The Berean Baptist Church, whose request for registration has been pending since 1997, has been unable to repair existing church buildings because as an unregistered group it could not request the necessary permits.

According to media sources, construction was completed of the Catholic Sacred Heart of Jesus Church in Sandino, Pinar del Rio – the country's first new Catholic church since 1959. The church was one of three new Catholic churches the government authorized as part of its agreement with the Vatican. St. Lawrence Catholic Church in Tampa, Florida financed the construction of the church.

According to EchoCuba, the government continued to apply its system of rewarding churches that were obedient and sympathetic to "revolutionary values and ideals" and penalizing those that were not. Similarly, the government continued to reward religious leaders who were cooperative with the government and threatened revocation of those rights for noncooperative religious leaders. EchoCuba reported that, in exchange for their cooperation with the government, CCC members continued to receive benefits other nonmember churches did not

always receive, including building permits, international donations of clothing and medicine, and exit visas for pastors to travel abroad. EchoCuba said individual churches and denominations or religious groups also experienced different levels of consideration by the government depending on the leadership of those groups and their relationship with the government.

According to EchoCuba, the government continued to single out religious groups critical of the government, such as the unregistered Apostolic Movement, for particularly severe persecution, destroying their churches, confiscating properties, and banning travel of their pastors. In contrast, the government allowed The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, also unregistered, to operate with little intervention because the Church continued to maintain a close relationship with the government and did not question the country's laws. Some religious leaders said the government continued to grant permits to buy properties for use as house churches, including in some cases when the titleholder to the property did not plan to live there. Other religious groups said securing permission for the purchase or construction of new buildings remained difficult, if not impossible.

According to the CSW annual report, a number of cases of arbitrary confiscation of church property remained unresolved – including land owned by the Western Baptist Convention the government confiscated illegally in 2012 and later handed over to two government companies. The report said that many believed the act was retaliation for the refusal of the Convention to agree to various demands by the ORA to restructure its internal governance and to expel a number of pastors designated by the ORA. One denomination reported that the Ministry of Housing would not produce the deeds to its buildings, which were required to proceed with the process of reclaiming property. The ministry stated the deeds had all been lost. The Methodist Church of Cuba said it continued to struggle to reclaim properties confiscated by the government, including a theatre adjacent to the Methodist church in Marianao, Havana. According to the report, the Methodist Church submitted all the paperwork to recuperate the building and government officials told them that the Church's case was valid; however, the government took no action during the year.

The government continued to prevent religious groups from establishing accredited schools but did not interfere with the efforts of some religious groups 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 leading to a bachelor's and master's degree through foreign partners. Several

Protestant communities continued to offer bachelor's or master's degrees in theology, the humanities, and related subjects via distance learning; however, the government did not recognize these degrees.

According to the CSW Annual Report, some nonaccredited seminaries, especially those affiliated with registered non-CCC denominations, reported government interference in their activities, including frequent threats of eviction made by Housing Ministry officials and other government inspectors, which were often followed up with citations and burdensome fines. They also said state security agents regularly posed as students in an attempt to infiltrate the seminaries.

Jehovah's Witnesses leaders continued to state they found the requirements for university admission and the course of study incompatible with the group's beliefs since their religion prohibited them from political involvement.

Some religious leaders said the government continued to restrict their ability to receive donations from overseas, citing a measure prohibiting churches and religious groups from using individuals' bank accounts for their organizations and requiring individual accounts to be consolidated into one per denomination or organization. Reportedly, it continued to be easier for larger, more organized churches to receive large donations, while smaller, less formal churches continued to face difficulties with banking procedures.

The CSW annual report stated that, according to a Cuban legal expert, immigration offices targeted religious travelers and their goods and informed airport-based intelligence services of incoming and outgoing travel. CSW stated the government continued to block some religious leaders and activists from traveling, including preventing an Apostolic church leader from attending the Summit of the Americas in Peru in February. According to the CSW annual report, in March and September the government blocked leaders from the Afro-Cuban Free Yoruba Association from traveling outside the country to attend a religious freedom event. In December the state security sector chief reportedly summoned and interrogated a pastor regarding his upcoming trip abroad. The pastor said he was allowed to travel, but upon his return was detained for four hours as security officials interrogated him about where he stayed and what contacts he made with churches abroad.

According to the CSW annual report, the ORA and immigration officials continued to withhold or deny visas for foreign religious visitors, depending on the relationship of the inviting organization with the government, and that the

government increased its scrutiny of visiting foreign religious leaders. Groups such as the Apostolic churches were not able to request religious visas because of their unregistered status. According to CSW, the ORA withdrew visas for a U.S.-based pastor and his team to visit at the invitation of AG leadership. According to AG leadership, ORA leaders said they revoked the visas because the U.S. pastor “has access to the media, can gather multitudes of individuals, and could influence public opinion.” CSW also reported two cases involving the harassment of religious travelers by immigration officials in March. In one case, immigration officials reportedly summoned a group of pastors from the United States for visiting an “illegal church.” In another, Canadian missionaries were reportedly harassed and summoned by immigration officials and accused of distributing food and medication. The group was also threatened for visiting an “illegal church.” CSW stated some religious groups, mostly members of the CCC, reported few or no problems inviting foreign visitors or traveling abroad.

According to EchoCuba, government agencies regularly refused to recognize a change in residence for pastors and other church leaders assigned to a new church or parish. A decree continued to place restrictions on internal movement and migration, making it difficult, if not impossible, for pastors and their families to register their new place of residence if they transferred to a church that lost its pastor due to death or retirement. To engage with even the smallest of bureaucratic details, pastors refused the right to reregister needed to travel to wherever they were officially registered and submit the paperwork there. Legal restrictions on travel within the country also limited itinerant ministry, a central component of some religious groups. According to EchoCuba, the application of the decree to religious groups was likely part of the general pattern of government efforts to control their activities. Some religious leaders said the decree was also used to block church leaders from travelling within the country to attend special events or meetings. Church leaders associated with the Apostolic churches regularly reported they were prevented, sometimes through short-term detention, from travelling to attend church events or carry out ministry work.

Religious groups continued to report the government allowed them to engage in community service programs and to share their religious beliefs. International faith-based charitable operations such as Caritas, Sant’Egidio, and the Salvation Army maintained local offices in Havana. Caritas helped gather and distribute hurricane relief items, providing humanitarian assistance to all individuals regardless of religious belief.

Some religious groups reported a continued increase in the ability of their members to conduct charitable and educational projects, such as operating before- and after-school and community service programs, assisting with care of the elderly, and maintaining small libraries of religious materials.

According to the CSW annual report, local governments and Cuban Communist Party officials and police frequently encouraged communities to harass religious leaders and their congregations. CSW stated authorities in Sancti Spiritus allowed loud parties to take place outside a church and pastor's home and refused to stop participants from harassing church members and disrupting services.

In December a pastor reported the ORA threatened to demolish his church and that local communist officials visited some church members in their homes where they warned them not to participate in church activities. Another pastor reported several instances of drones hovering outside his church after services. He said he believed the surveillance was an effort to intimidate members of his church.

According to the CSW annual report, in February a church leader in the central part of the country was threatened after he put up posters in front of his church advertising a Christian concert he was organizing. CSW stated the MOJ prevented the concert from taking place.

There were reports of cases of government harassment and intimidation of church leaders who called for changes to the proposed constitution. In October a local Cuban Communist Party summoned several pastors. When an ORA official entered the room, she shouted accusations about "mercenary pastors" who received funds from antigovernment organizations, calling this behavior an act of treason against the Cuban state. One of the pastors said he believed the accusations were due to their involvement in the nationwide campaign calling for more religious freedom in the new constitution. In another case that same month, a pastor reportedly hosted a meeting with other church leaders to discuss the changes to the constitution. The pastor and his family received death threats from the government and were under surveillance.

In November ORA reportedly summoned a pastor and told him his trips outside the country had been monitored and there was concern about outside groups "manipulating" pastors in Cuba. An ORA official told him he must support the draft constitution and instruct his congregation to vote "yes" on the referendum. He said ORA threatened him with expulsion from his denomination, denial of permits for his church, and being transferred to another part of the country. In

December a pastor said buses serving churches involved in the constitutional debate were confiscated and the drivers detained and threatened with incarceration because of their relationship with these churches.

The annual Instituto Patmos report mentioned several cases of local police refusing to investigate or even file reports of threats and harassment against Jews. According to Patmos, in December authorities expelled a Jewish group from a hospital during a post-circumcision ceremony. They had to leave the hospital even though the children were still in need of medical care. In another case, police interrupted a Jewish ceremony, entering the property with police dogs without a warrant and harassing members of the congregation. Police officers said they were investigating a reported robbery, but no member of the congregation had reported a robbery.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The Community of Sant'Egidio, recognized by the Catholic Church as a “Church public lay association,” again held an interfaith meeting – “Bridges of Peace” – in Havana on October 12-14 to promote interreligious engagement, tolerance, and joint efforts towards peace. Leaders of different religious groups in the country and participants from 25 countries attended the meeting, which focused on the importance of peaceful interfaith coexistence.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy officials continued to meet with ORA officials and raise concerns about the ability of unregistered churches to gain official status and practice their religion. The ORA officials continued to state their interest in increased engagement with U.S. religious groups and U.S. government counterparts. In social media and other public statements, the U.S. government continued to call upon the government to respect its citizens’ fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of religion and expression.

Embassy officials met with the head of the CCC and discussed concerns unregistered churches faced to gain official status.

Embassy officials continued to meet with a range of religious groups, including Protestants, Jews, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Muslims, and Catholics, to discuss the principal issues of religious freedom and tolerance affecting each group, including freedom of assembly, church expansion, access to state-owned media, and their

ability to open private religious schools. Embassy engagement with smaller religious groups under pressure from the government was less frequent than in 2017 because of the embassy's reduction in staff.

Embassy engagement included facilitating exchanges among visiting religious delegations and religious groups, including among visiting representatives of U.S. religious organizations from California, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, North and South Carolina, and other states and local institutions. The groups often discussed the challenges of daily life in the country, including obtaining government permission for certain activities, and successes such as closer bonds between Cuban and U.S. churches and an increase in two-way travel between Cuban and U.S. congregations.