

CUBA 2022 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. According to the penal code, membership in or association with an unregistered group is a crime. An amendment to an existing law, in effect since December 1, increases the minimum sentencing for individuals who attempt to conscientiously object to military service or public schooling, including those whose objections are based on their religious beliefs. An additional law, also in effect since December, 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, a law that could target independent civil society, including religious groups.

In its annual *Watch List*, the Christian nongovernmental organization (NGO) Open Doors reported the government intensified its repressive tactics against Christian leaders and activists opposing CCP ideology through arrests, exile, arbitrary fines, surveillance, denials of licenses and religious visas, and physical and mental abuse. According to CSW, formerly known as Christian Solidarity Worldwide, the government continued to detain religious leaders from multiple faith communities and handed down harsh prison sentences for participating in July 2021 protests. In May, the government informed the family of Pastor Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo that a court had sentenced him to seven years in prison on charges of disrespect, assault, criminal incitement, and public disorder. In March, a court sentenced Donaida Pérez Paseiro, President of the faith-based Association of Free Yorubas of Cuba (Free Yorubas), to eight years in prison, and Vice President Loreto Hernández García to seven years. Beginning in January, security officials detained and fined Ladies in White leader Berta Soler Fernández and other members every Sunday as they attempted to attend Mass to pray for the

freedom of political prisoners. Authorities imposed prison sentences of between five and eight years on several Ladies in White members, including an additional five years for a member who was weeks from completing a four-year prison sentence. Reportedly, the government increasingly pressured critics into forced exile, including religious leaders. In March, the government forced Pastor Jesús Fundora Pérez of the Apostolic Movement to leave the country, reportedly threatening to charge him with sedition and criminal incitement if he remained. In June, authorities summoned Pastor Alain Toledano Valiente and gave him 30 days to permanently leave the country or “suffer the consequences.” In July, Toledano went into exile with his family. In September, the government refused to renew the residency permit of Superior of the Jesuits in Cuba, Father David Pantaleón, a citizen of the Dominican Republic, because he criticized the government’s abuse of human rights. According to Outreach Aid to the Americas (OAA), 52 of 56 faith leaders surveyed on the island said the government took repressive measures against them; 21 reported being subjected to threats, violence, detentions, and acts of repudiation. Religious groups said the ORA and the MOJ continued to deny official registration to certain religious groups or did not 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).

Some religious groups and organizations, such as the Roman Catholic charity Caritas, continued to gather and distribute relief items, providing humanitarian assistance to individuals regardless of religious belief.

U.S. embassy officials did not meet with or otherwise engage the ORA during the year. 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 fundamental freedoms of its citizens, including the freedom of religion. Embassy officials met regularly with a range of religious groups concerning the state of religious freedom and political activities related to religious groups’ beliefs.

On November 30, 2022, 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.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 11 million (midyear 2022). 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.

The Jewish community estimates it has 1,200 members, of whom 1,000 reside in Havana. According to a representative of the Islamic League, which is associated with the government-approved Council of Cuban Churches (CCC), there are approximately 4,000 Muslims in the country, most of whom are Sunni and fewer than half of whom were born in the country. 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. Other religious groups with small numbers of adherents include the Greek Orthodox and Russian Orthodox Churches, and Baha'is.

Many individuals, particularly Afro-Cubans, practice religions with roots across Africa, including Yoruba groups often referred to by outsiders as Santería 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.

A new penal code, in effect since December 1, expanded the minimum 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 (\$130), or both. The previous penal code’s minimum prison sentence for this clause was three months.

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 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 the requirements are not fulfilled. If an individual 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 (\$130) or two to four years in prison.

A law in effect since December 1 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. The amended family code states that 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

Many religious groups said that despite constitutional provisions providing for freedom of conscience and religion and prohibiting discrimination based on religion, the government continued to use 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. While some groups faced greater government restrictions than others, civil society reported that the government continued to monitor all religious groups, including registered groups and those directly affiliated with the CCC.

CSW reported the government increased its tactic of pressuring religious leaders into exile during the year. Religious groups also said the government applied laws in an arbitrary and capricious manner to target religious groups and individuals whose views were incongruent with the government’s. Some religious and local independent and international civil society groups continued to express concerns that some constitutional changes in effect since 2019 had significantly weakened protections for freedom of religion or belief and diluted references to freedom of conscience, separating it from freedom of religion.

Many religious groups opposed some amendments to the constitution’s family code passed by referendum in September. Religious groups said the government could use these new provisions to justify removing children from their parents if

the government determined the parents were teaching their children religious beliefs or values perceived as in opposition to the government. Some religious groups also objected to amendments establishing the rights of all citizens, regardless of sexual orientation, to marry and adopt children.

In September, the Cuban Conference of Catholic Bishops published a press statement expressing its disapproval of the new family code's provisions that are contrary to Catholic faith and values, while stating its support for provisions on domestic violence and protection of the rights of the elderly and youth. While some evangelical Protestant representatives also voiced concern regarding the family code's same-sex marriage provisions, one Baptist theologian broke from his church to become the first officiant of a formal same-sex marriage in the country.

In its annual *Watch List*, Open Doors, a self-described nondenominational, ecumenical Christian organization, again reported a rise in the persecution of Christians in the country. Open Doors 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 said this crackdown followed increased protests during the year. Open Doors also reported that the government took 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.

CSW reported the government continued to hold religious actors in detention in the aftermath of unprecedented 2021 nationwide public protests. On April 29, the government informed the family of Pastor Rosales Fajardo of the unregistered nondenominational Monte de Scion Church that a court had sentenced him to seven years in prison on the charges of disrespect, public disorder, assault, and criminal incitement, for his participation in the protests. A court had secretly sentenced Rosales Fajardo in December 2021, but the government did not reveal the sentence to him or his family until after responding to a United Nations inquiry expressing concern on his behalf. Authorities had detained him since July 2021, with periods of incommunicado detention. Rosales Fajardo said that during his detention, guards subjected him to brutal beatings and humiliating treatment.

Authorities had previously targeted him, including as far back as 2012, when they seized his church property. In June, an appeals court upheld Rosales Fajardo's sentencing following a two-day trial, during which judicial authorities permitted only the prosecutor's side to introduce evidence, which included the testimony of 12 police officers.

In March, a court sentenced four members of the Free Yorubas to prison. Free Yorubas President Donaida Pérez Paseiro was sentenced to eight years in prison; Vice President Loreto Hernández García to seven years; and twin sisters Lisdani and Lisdiani Rodríguez Isaac to eight years each. In September 2021, the foreign-based NGO Global Liberty Alliance (GLA) had sought precautionary measures from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights on behalf of the four, who faced extended pretrial detention without charges after their arrests following the July 2021 protests. According to the GLA, the four faced repression from security forces for many years because the government did not recognize the Free Yorubas as a religious organization. Prosecutors in Santa Clara cited a range of charges against the four Free Yorubas members, including disobedience, public disorder, and assault.

Media outlets reported that beginning on January 23, security officials detained and fined Ladies in White leader Berta Soler Fernández and several other Ladies in White members every Sunday throughout the year as they attempted to peacefully express dissent by attending Mass to pray for the freedom of political prisoners. In past years, the Ladies in White had faced regular detentions but had paused their weekly protest during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Three Ladies in White – Sayli Navarro Álvarez, Tania Echevarría Méndez, and Sissi Abascal Zamora – remained in prison at year's end for their participation in the July 2021 protests. Prosecutors charged the women with crimes such as disrespect, public disorder, and assault. In March, a court sentenced Navarro Álvarez to eight years in prison, and in April, officials imprisoned Echevarría Méndez after upholding a six-year sentence. The group's youngest member, Abascal Zamora, who was 23 years old when arrested, remained in prison after receiving a six-year sentence in December 2021. According to media reports in February, a fourth Ladies in White member, Aymara Nieto Muñoz, was weeks from completing a four-year prison sentence for participating in an earlier protest when authorities convicted and sentenced her to five additional years, based on

what CSW called questionable charges. According to media reports, Nieto Muñoz declined the government's offer of exile in the days prior to the new sentence.

CSW reported that in April, the government forced Pastors Mario Jorge Travieso and Velmis Adriana Medina Mariño, a married couple who led the Mighty Wind Ministry in Las Tunas, to cancel a "Breaking of Chains" prayer event for the families of political prisoners. On April 11, state security agents detained Travieso and Medina and interrogated them for six hours. Authorities reportedly threatened them with prison if they did not suspend the event, cordoned off their home, and threatened other event organizers. Due to the threats, the couple cancelled the event.

In August, men in plainclothes arrested Marcos Antonio Pérez Cruz, librarian of the Bernardo Fernández Catholic Dioceses, on his way to Mass. Authorities reportedly physically accosted Pérez Cruz and held him incommunicado for two days before informing his mother of his detention. In October, *Cibercuba*, a digital news outlet headquartered outside the country, reported authorities charged him with disobedience and contempt. While in detention, Pérez Cruz spent at least 21 days out of 60 in isolation. As of year's end, he still had not faced trial.

According to CSW, following the July 2021 protests, the government increased its use of forced exile against critics, including religious leaders. OAA reported in March that the government forced Apostolic Movement Pastor Jesús Fundora Pérez to leave the country for Switzerland, reportedly threatening him with sedition and criminal incitement if he remained. Fundora had ministered to family members of detained protestors. Also in March, Pastor Carlos Sebastián Hernández Armas, secretary general of the Western Baptist Convention, fled the country after he and his family faced increased harassment and threats for several years due to his sermons promoting freedom of expression, religion, and other rights.

According to CSW, in May, authorities prevented Alain Toledano Valiente, a pastor of the unregistered Apostolic Movement Church, from traveling to the IX Summit of the Americas to participate in a panel on religious freedom. After the summit, authorities summoned Toledano and gave him 30 days to permanently leave the country or "suffer the consequences." In July, Toledano left the country

with his family, following two decades of regime-led repression, multiple detentions, harassment of him and his family, and two church demolitions.

In September, CiberCuba reported the government had expelled Father Pantaleón, who served as Superior of the Jesuits in Cuba and president of the Cuban Conference of Religious Men and Women (CONCUR), by refusing to renew the residency permit for the native Dominican. Under Pantaleón's leadership, CONCUR provided religious services to the family members of detained protestors. Pantaleón and other priests regularly criticized the government's violation of human rights in the Jesuit publication, *Vida Cristiana*. According to a September *Diario de Cuba* interview with Pantaleón, the ORA cited his support for political prisoners and the Jesuits' critical positions toward the regime as the main reasons for his expulsion.

According to OAA, 52 of 56 faith leaders, including some no longer residing in the country, who chose to respond to an online survey, said the government took repressive measures against them. Twenty-one said they suffered acts of repression monthly or even weekly, including threats, violence, detentions, and acts of repudiation. Nine of the respondents said they had been forced to leave the country.

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, continued to await decisions from the MOJ on pending applications for official registration, some dating as far back as 1994. In November, a senior leader of the Church of Jesus Christ, Elder Ulisses Soares, visited the country and met with the head of the ORA. After the meeting, Soares said, "This has been a very positive meeting. The Church is advancing with firm steps, and we feel very optimistic about the future." Despite a 2019 letter from then Cuban Ambassador to the United States José Cabañas to the First Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ in Salt Lake City stating the denomination was "welcome" in the country, the MOJ again had not acted on the church's registration request by the end of the year.

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.

Members of Protestant denominations said some groups were able to register only a small percentage of house churches located in private homes, although some unregistered house churches could operate with little or no government interference. CSW reported authorities continued to rely on two 2005 government resolutions limiting house churches to impose complicated and repressive restrictions on them.

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

According to religious leaders and former inmates, authorities continued to arbitrarily deny prisoners, including political prisoners, pastoral visits and the ability to meet with other prisoners for worship, prayer, and study. According to CSW, on multiple occasions, prison authorities denied imprisoned Pastor Rosales Fajardo permission to participate in religious ceremonies within the prison. Some prisoners also said authorities repeatedly confiscated Bibles, crucifixes, rosary beads, and other religious items, sometimes as punishment and at other times for no apparent reason.

CSW and religious leaders said the government, through the Ministry of Interior, continued to systematically plant 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. The objective was to monitor and intimidate religious leaders and report on the content of sermons and on church attendees. As a result, CSW said many leaders continued to practice self-censorship, avoiding stating anything that might possibly be construed as anti-Castro or counterrevolutionary in their sermons and teaching. Parishioners continued to report cases of state security agents filming or recording religious activities. For example, in September, a government agent reportedly recorded the entire homily and part of the Mass celebrated by Father

Jorge Luis Pérez Soto, parish priest and advisor of the Youth Pastoral of Havana. Catholic and Protestant church leaders, both in and outside the government-recognized CCC, continued to report frequent visits from state security agents and CCP officials, arbitrary vehicle searches, threats, and home surveillance. These church 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. According to OAA, on July 10, Catholic priest Father Kenny Fernández said the government subjected him to arbitrary vehicle searches, threats, and home surveillance to intimidate him.

The government continued to closely monitor religious leaders and laypersons who traveled internationally. According to OAA, on March 9, state security agents summoned and interrogated Catholic layman Dagoberto Valdés, following his trip to the United States to participate in a religious conference. On March 31, state security agents summoned and interrogated Mildrey Betancourt Rodríguez, a member of the Alliance of Nonregistered Churches, the day before she planned to travel to the United States to participate in church and ministry activities. They warned her to stop associating with persons working to subvert the government or she would not be allowed to return to the country. Betancourt Rodríguez ultimately traveled abroad and returned to Cuba. According to the Observatory for Religious Freedom in Latin America's Violent Incidents Database, at least four priests left the country due to constant pressure from police and community surveillance for expressing dissent regarding the government and the CCP.

During the year, the government used internet laws restricting freedom of expression of independent journalists, including those promoting freedom of religion or belief and other human rights. In addition, CSW 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 state security. According to the annual report of the human rights NGO Freedom House, the country maintained a very restrictive media environment, including restrictions on networks, blocking of social networks and websites, and repression and arrest of individuals for using social media networks. For example, the government enforced laws, such as Decree Law 370, that criminalize speech, including social media content deemed critical of the government or "content that violates the constitutional, social, and

economic precepts of the State” or incites acts that affect public order. According to media reports, in October and November, authorities fined Catholic layman and journalist Adrián Martínez Cádiz for “disseminating, through public data transmission networks, information contrary to the interests of society, morals, good customs, and people’s safety,” based on posts he authored on social media.

Religious practitioners continued to express concern regarding the government’s restriction on broadcasting religious services over the radio or on television. In a survey conducted by the Madrid-based NGO Cuban Observatory for Human Rights (OCDH), 75 percent of religious respondents perceived broad impediments to the use of media by churches and religious institutions. In the same survey, 61 percent of respondents also stated they felt it a risk to discuss matters related to their faith on social media.

According to CSW, Christian leaders from all denominations said a scarcity of Bibles and other religious literature continued, primarily in rural areas. Some religious leaders continued to report government obstacles, including bureaucratic obstruction and arbitrary restrictions, such as inconsistent rules on importing computers and electronic devices, prevented them from importing religious materials and donated goods. In some cases, the government held up religious materials or blocked them altogether. Several other groups, however, said they continued to import large quantities of Bibles, books, clothing, and other donated goods.

The Catholic Church and several government-recognized Protestant groups continued to maintain small libraries, print periodicals and other information, and operate their own websites with little or no formal censorship. The Catholic Church also continued to hold regular forums at the Varela Center, where participants sometimes criticized official social and economic policies.

According to CSW, on numerous occasions during the year, prison officials prevented Pastor Maridilegnis Carballo Castellano from delivering religious literature to her imprisoned husband, Pastor Rosales Fajardo.

The CCP directly governed 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 that were critical and insisted on maintaining organizational independence. The groups were 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. According to CSW, in February, members of the Physical Planning and Housing Authority repeatedly harassed Mario Jorge Travieso, a pastor of an unregistered church, requesting he submit property papers for his church and claiming a wall marking the border between his and his then neighbor's properties was not in compliance with code. Despite these threats, there were no reports that his church was confiscated. On November 9, the housing authority informed Osmany Lovaina, a pastor of another unregistered church, of an order for the immediate confiscation of the property where his congregation met. While authorities did not seize the property, the confiscation order remained in effect through year's end.

According to media outlets, government officials frequently instigated or did not investigate harassment of religious figures and institutions. In a survey conducted by the OCDH between January 25-February 25 and released in June, 67 percent of respondents, including nonreligious citizens, said they had been or knew someone who had been harassed, repressed, threatened, or hindered in their daily life for reasons related to faith. OCDH conducted the survey in 11 of the country's 16 provinces through 891 personal interviews with data entry assisted by mobile phones. The margin of error was 3.35 percent.

Although most cases of what CSW defined as religious persecution were directed toward Christians, CSW reported that religious minorities were also likely to be victims of religious persecution. For example, CSW reported that in February, a member of a local Committee for the Defense of the Revolution, a CCP-affiliated organization that seeks to ensure neighborhood compliance with party ideology, entered a private home without the homeowner's permission to observe a Jewish wedding ceremony. The homeowner later received a call from a state security officer warning him not to hold religious ceremonies in his home.

Muslim community representatives said the country's small Muslim community was subject to discrimination. In October, the government denied Imam Abu Duyanah permission to travel outside the country, for reasons of "public interest,"

preventing him from making a planned pilgrimage to Mecca. According to CSW, in March, Credit and Commerce Bank employees in Holguin prevented a woman from entering the bank's building because she was wearing a hijab.

According to OAA, faith organizations were charged high utility rates. While most nonstate entities received subsidies to offset these costs, religious associations reportedly did not receive this benefit. OAA reported that one pastor was jailed when he went to the electric company to complain. OAA reported that faith leaders said high utility costs were "asphyxiating their operations, including humanitarian services, likely by design of the government." OAA also said faith leaders, adherents, and family members encountered discrimination in their access to education and employment.

According to CSW, in May, a Catholic university student was informed that she could not continue to study at a public university because her attitude was counterrevolutionary and because she was a member of an illegal religious group.

According to CSW, the government denied religious visas to several professors who were scheduled to teach at the seminary of the Christian Reformed Church. Authorities also threatened to revoke or failed to renew the religious visas of Catholic priests who ministered to political prisoners or their families and criticized the government's human rights abuses.

On December 14, Father Alberto Reyes, a Catholic priest of the Archdiocese of Camagüey, wrote on his Facebook page that there was no religious freedom in the country because the ORA controlled the practice of religion and oversaw "every movement of the Church." Reyes wrote that in the country, "Laity, religious [men and women], and priests who express opinions different from those of the government" are continually harassed with "warning calls" from authorities.

According to religious leaders, the government continued to selectively prevent some religious groups from establishing accredited schools. These leaders said religious groups with connections to the government and 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; however, the government 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.

According to ARTICLE 19 MX-CA, an organization headquartered in Mexico that "defends the rights of freedom of expression," authorities could interpret a law that went into effect December 1 as part of the new penal code to further restrict the activities of independent civil society, including religious organizations and practitioners that receive funds from foreign organizations and use funds for activities considered to be against the state.

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.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

International faith-based charitable operations 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.

In October, Father Fernández denounced on his Facebook page that government sympathizers had thrown garbage and debris in front of the Madruga parish

church in Mayabeque Province. According to Father Fernández, the assailants had attempted to desecrate the place of worship.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials did not meet with or otherwise engage with the ORA during the year. 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' fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of religion and expression.

Embassy and other U.S. government officials continued to meet with leaders of a range of registered and unregistered religious groups, including Catholics, Protestants, and other 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 November 30, 2022, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State designated Cuba a CPC for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On December 4, media outlets reported the government had rejected the U.S. government's designation. Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez Parrilla stated, "The arbitrary listing shows that the U.S. government ... needs to resort to dishonest accusations to keep an unsustainable policy of abuse against the Cuban people."