



The ORA: Essential Information

Provided By:

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The Office of Religious Affairs (ORA)

Religious groups and associations in Cuba are not regulated by any government body, but instead come under the authority of the Department of Religious Affairs of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba and is best known as the “Office of Religious Affairs of Cuba” (ORA). This puts them in the peculiar position of having to submit all requests for authorization to a non-government entity without any recourse for appeal. The ORA has repeatedly demonstrated that it is focused almost entirely on controlling and restricting the public and private manifestation of religious faith, not on upholding and protecting the religious freedom of Cuban citizens.

The ORA, under the long-time direction of Caridad del Rosario Diego Bello, a member of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party, maintains a consistently antagonistic relationship with religious groups. Representatives at both the provincial and municipal levels interface with local religious groups, but all decisions and permits are issued from the main office in Havana. The ORA does not operate within any official set of guidelines or legal framework, giving its officials immense power over religious groups and associations and individuals associated with those groups. The office habitually refuses or doesn’t respond to the requests of pastors to be allowed to build additions to or make repairs to their church buildings, frequently fails to grant authorization for large church activities, and in the past has regularly and arbitrarily denied church leaders the right to travel out of the country.

While religious activity comes under the purview of the ORA, government agencies, including the Ministry of Housing and the Ministry of Public Planning, frequently work with the ORA to target religious groups, with the aim of monitoring, discouraging, or discontinuing their work.

Many religious groups have turned to using private homes for worship in response to restrictions on constructing new buildings. Estimates of the total number of house churches for Protestant groups vary significantly, from fewer than 2,000 to as many as 10,000. The ORA allows the use of private homes, known as “house churches,” for religious services but requires that recognized groups seek approval for each proposed location through the formal registration process. Religious groups report that, while authorities authorize many applications within two to three years from the date of the application, other applications receive no response or are denied without explanation.

According to the Protestant community, some groups are only able to register a small percentage of house churches. In practice, most unregistered house churches operate with little or no interference from the government. A number of religious groups, including the Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Mormons, continue to wait for a decision from the ORA on pending applications for official recognition. These groups report that they need 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 report that state security typically monitors their movements, telephone calls, visitors, and religious meetings.

The ORA also requires religious groups to obtain a license to import religious literature and other religious materials. The government owns nearly all printing equipment and supplies and regulates printed materials, including religious literature. Lately religious leaders are reporting improvement in

their ability to import religious materials. The Catholic Church continues to publish periodicals and hold forums that sometimes criticize official social and economic policies. The Church also broadcasts Christmas and Easter messages on state-run radio stations (this was negotiated by the Vatican during the last two visits by the Pope). The ORA has authorized the Cuban Council of Churches (CCC) to host a monthly radio show which is broadcast throughout the country.

Government Interference and Systematic Barriers

Recently more religious groups in Cuba have been reporting that the ORA is tightening its control of financial resources for churches. A few religious leaders have reported restrictions on their ability to receive donations from overseas. They cited a measure that prohibited churches and religious groups from using individuals' bank accounts for their organizations, and required existing individual accounts used in this way to be consolidated into one per denomination or organization. According to these religious leaders, the regulations allowed the government to curb the scope and number of activities of individual churches and to single out groups that could be held accountable for withdrawing money intended for purposes not approved by the government. Other religious leaders reported that withdrawals from bank accounts in the country were limited compared to their ability to get funds from external sources, which they described as "easier" than years before.

Refusal to Register New or Independent Religious Groups

The government requires that churches and other religious groups register at their provincial office of the Registry of Associations, which is part of the Ministry of Justice. However, church groups and other societies, such as the Freemasons, also fall under the authority of the ORA, directed by Caridad Diego, which, as explained previously, is part of the Central Committee of the CCP and not technically a government institution.

There are approximately 54 state-registered denominations or church groups. More than half of these are members of the Cuban Council of Churches (CCC), which has historically received some privileges in return for its support of the government. In theory, registration allows churches and religious leaders to receive foreign visitors, buy religious materials, and meet in approved houses of worship. However, church leaders report that the registration process is often made extremely difficult, and is at times impossible.

The Apostolic Movement, a very large and fast-growing network of independent Charismatic churches, has repeatedly had its attempts to register denied, forcing its churches to operate without legal status. Problems are usually encountered when permits are sought from the ORA. Other groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses have been excluded from the list of officially registered religious groups. Even when registered, churches still report legal difficulties.

Although CCC denominations make up more than half of those registered, as far as membership numbers, the CCC churches account for a small percentage of the total number of Protestants in Cuba.

Restrictions on Movement within Cuba

Government agencies regularly refuse to recognize a change in residence for pastors and other church leaders who have been assigned to a new church or parish and have had to relocate. Under Decree 217, signed by Fidel Castro in 1997, which set in place restrictions on internal movement and migration, it can be difficult, if not impossible, for pastors and their families to register their new place of residence, if, for example, they are transferred to a church which has lost its pastor due to death or retirement. There are far more churches than pastors or priests in Cuba, and the nature of their work means that most pastors and other church leaders in Cuba can expect to work in multiple locations over the course of their ministry.

The inability to reregister has implications for almost every aspect of life, including the receipt of government rations, participation in elections, and applications for travel and exit visas. In order to engage with even the smallest of bureaucratic details, pastors who have been refused the right to reregister must travel to wherever they are officially registered and submit the paperwork there. Travel can be particularly challenging as non-tourist transport infrastructure in Cuba is virtually non-existent in many parts of the country, particularly from city to city.

Most denominations continue the practice of assigning and transferring pastors to new locations, in some cases as often as every few years, because of frequent vacancies as older pastors retire, leave the country, or pass away. Sadly, the daily struggle with the bureaucracy, paperwork, and difficulties in travel is now considered part and parcel of the job description of a pastor who is unable to reregister place of residence. In addition, legal restrictions on travel within the country also mean that itinerant ministry, a central component of the work of some religious groups, notably the Methodist Church, is severely limited.

Decree 217 was originally put in place to prohibit the migration of Cubans from rural areas to the cities, where there are often more opportunities in terms of housing and employment. The regulation bars most state institutions from permanently transferring staff from city to city. Its application to civil society, in this case religious groups who have valid reasons for relocating pastors and priests, appears to be part of the general pattern of government attempts to control the activities and growth of religious groups as much as possible. It has also been used to block certain individuals, mostly human rights and prodemocracy activists but also church leaders, from travelling within the country to attend special events or meetings. Church leaders associated with the Apostolic Movement regularly report that they are physically prevented, sometimes through short-term detention, from travelling to attend church events or carry out ministry work.

While most house churches are affiliated with a historic, recognized denomination, the number of independent house churches or house churches linked to unrecognized religious groups has grown in recent years. Since these newer groups did not exist prior to 1959, they lack registered buildings designated for religious use; as such their entire physical infrastructure consists of house churches. These are a particular target of the government and are especially vulnerable as they lack a recognized religious covering. In one example, a Latter Days Saints (Mormon) Church in Havana was targeted in the second half of 2012. The church made numerous attempts to register with the ORA. All requests were denied or ignored. In mid-October, agents from Department 3 (responsible for cultural affairs) of the Ministry of the Interior (MININT) shut down and sealed the building. The involvement of

MININT, which oversees and carries out domestic intelligence and is responsible for internal security, is notable and indicates that the order to close the church came from the highest levels.

In 2010, Caridad del Rosario Diego Bello spoke to CCC leaders in Havana and stated clearly that the ORA, presumably with the backing of the government, was working to shut down all new religious groups, singling out the Apostolic Movement and the Growing in Grace religious group. In her speech, a recording of which was passed on to Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), she specified that this would be done through the confiscation and destruction of homes where religious activities are held. This policy has not changed over the past three years, and in 2012 churches affiliated with these groups regularly reported receiving threats from local officials that their buildings would be shut down, confiscated, or destroyed.

Restrictions on Construction

With a few exceptions, the government, through the ORA and the Ministry of Housing, continues to severely restrict the construction of new church buildings. The government has permitted construction of only a very limited number of new churches across the country since 1959. This, together with the fact that it is technically illegal to organize religious activities in buildings not officially registered for religious use, means that many Christian communities do not have a legal place to meet for church services. This double-bind situation particularly affects worshippers in more remote rural areas. In light of the rapid increase in the number of practicing Christians in Cuba over the past twenty years, this practice constitutes a serious violation of religious liberty in that it prohibits many Cuban Christians from freely exercising their right to gather together for worship.

Most of the churches built prior to the Revolution have been allowed to continue to function as places of religious activity. However, any changes to the structure, including expansions and/or repairs and renovations, may be carried out only with the permission of the Office of Religious Affairs. Church leaders have reported that in recent years authorization is being granted more frequently; however, repairs and renovations are difficult to carry out because of a lack of affordable building materials. In some cases, the government has refused to allow Cuban churches to receive donations in the form of materials from abroad, and in other cases has confiscated materials upon arrival. In some cases, like that of the Trinidad Baptist Church, donated funds and goods for repairs have been frozen or have disappeared, preventing their use. In practice, this means that many church buildings are far too small to accommodate their congregations or are now structurally unsound.

In recent years, notably in 2012 in the wake of the Pope's visit to the island, the government announced that the Catholic Church would be granted permission to construct a limited number of new buildings. In Eastern Cuba, government officials returned two churches and a parish building confiscated by the government in the 1960s. Two additional pieces of property were also given to the Catholic Church to build two new churches. While some media reported this as indicative of increased respect for religious freedom, CSW views this development as problematic, as the right to build new places of worship is not being extended to any other denominations or religious group. This creates a situation of religious inequality, not religious freedom; reinforces the government's control over the construction of any building for religious use; and avoids addressing the root cause of the problem which is that the ORA and the Ministry of Housing consistently block legitimate and legal requests for building or renovation permits. Non-Catholic religious groups in Cuba have expressed deep concern regarding this

development and continue to ask that the government establish legal mechanisms to simplify and regularize the application process for such permits for all religious groups.

Various religious leaders stated that the ORA granted permission to repair or restore existing buildings more frequently than in years past, allowing expansion of some structures and in some cases construction of essentially new buildings on the foundations of the old. Other religious groups stated that securing permission for the purchase or construction of new buildings remained difficult, if not impossible. Members of the Assemblies of God Church 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.

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 house churches and private meeting spaces, to practice their beliefs. They reported being monitored, and, at times, prevented from holding religious meetings in their spaces.

Public and Social Ministry

In cases where groups carried out public activities without permission, they were met with severe consequences. For example, a group of pastors and church leaders from various denominations in the city of Bayamo in eastern Cuba were fined, beaten, and arrested by state security agents on a monthly basis as they attempted to pass out gospel tracts at the bus station and to carry out public evangelism in the streets of the city. In one incident in February 2012, Pastor Juan Moreno was beaten so badly that he required hospitalization. When six more local pastors gathered at the local police station to all for the release of the other church leaders who had been passing out tracts with Pastor Moreno, they were also detained and forced to sign “pre-arrest” documents, also called “acts of notice,” that essentially allow for them to be legally detained without cause in the future. In December, local and regional leaders of the CCC member churches in Bayamo were summoned to a meeting with Caridad del Rosario Diego Bello and other ORA and CCP officials. They were warned to distance themselves from the interdenominational group of pastors engaged in public evangelism, and were told that they should expel any pastors or other leaders in their own denomination who might be linked to the “counter-revolutionary” group.

Legal Framework and Background

While the constitution of Cuba recognizes the right of freedom of religion and individual belief, there is an alarming discrepancy in how that right is enabled and practiced. In effect, the Government of Cuba (GOC) and the Communist Party, which espouses atheism, through its Office of Religious Affairs, are active regulators--and repressors--of religion and belief. This has evolved during a period of remarkable growth in Protestant church membership in Cuba, including multiple religious groups that have become targets of a government that clearly tolerates some churches and not others. In 2016, Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), a partner of Outreach Aid to the Americas (OAA), recorded 2,380 violations of religion or belief: 2,009 involved entire church congregations, and 260 involved groups of women or other activists arrested for attending mass or other church services.

In addition, despite a period of political détente between the U.S. and Cuba, the level of religious repression actually grew exponentially from 220 cases in 2014 to 2300 cases in 2015. Government targeting of churches it does not favor--notably certain Evangelical, Apostolic and Pentecostal churches, but others as well--is unambiguous, with the demolition of buildings, confiscation of church property, mistreatment of church leaders, and artificial bureaucratic barriers to church registration, construction or tenancy.¹ In 2015, in one of its most blatant actions, ORA ruled the 2000 Assemblies of God (AOG) churches illegal.²

The GOC and ORA use legal decrees, legislative resolutions and laws (e.g. civil, commercial, mortgage, notary), and regulations to restrict religion in Cuba. Rampant, but often harder to document, are the bureaucratic impediments thrown in the way of churches seeking to comply with government requirements. Through a combination of legal and non-legal means to impede churches, church leaders, church social services, whole congregations, and individual believers, the GOC can arbitrarily “dial up” enforcement, surveillance, treatment, and sentencing based on its perception of the threat that the church or practitioner represents to the state. The treatment can be rough: practitioners and even their family members are ostracized, threatened, harassed and beaten, and often lose access to educational and employment rights, while activists and church leaders are detained or imprisoned as a result of activities that international norms--and their own constitution--define as a human right.

The number of reported violations is likely only a subset of a much larger incidence of GOC religious repression. CSW, as an example, has been limited in its ability to enumerate a more comprehensive nationwide survey due to limited resources and a pronounced level of fear of reprisal by cooperants from the religious and human rights advocacy communities. Due to these limitations, it has also been difficult to gauge the extent of the fear that makes people hesitant to practice their faith or engage in activities that might attract attention of state actors. Likewise, international advocacy for improved religious freedom is hobbled as a result of partial information that in effect minimizes the true picture.

Although officially the Cuban Government has established laws and rules that appear to give the church more freedom, in practice, the government continues to deny the Church the liberties that most of the western world is accustomed to. In 1996 the Cuban Constitution was modified to provide freedom of religion, but in practice there is no separation of church and state; the two institutions remain heavily connected. The Cuban constitutional law in itself does not guarantee the actual practice of said individual’s religious rights, including the rights of the religious institutions to practice their ecclesiastical activities without government intervention.

According to the constitution, “the state recognizes, respects, and guarantees freedom of religion.” It also states that “different beliefs and religions enjoy the same considerations under the law.” It prohibits discrimination based on religion. It also declares the country a secular state, provides for the

¹ Certain churches are perceived to be favored by the GOC. Members of the Cuban Council of Churches (CCC), which includes Cuba’s largest faith, the Catholic Church, are not only registered but have recognized status, and can operate with less government oversight and scrutiny. CCC members tend to be less vocal about the right of newer denominations to be registered, build churches and expand their congregations.

² Estimates of the size of AOG worshippers vary widely, from 100,000 to 800,000, exemplifying problems with data quality when addressing the role of the church in Cuba.

separation of church and state, and declares “the Communist Party of Cuba ...is the superior leading force of the society and the State.”

The Cuban Communist Party, through the ORA, monitors attempts to regulate most religious institutions and the practice of religion. By law, religious groups are required to apply to the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) for official recognition. The application process requires religious groups to identify the location of their activities, their proposed leadership, and the source of their funding. If the MOJ decides that the group is duplicating the activities of another recognized group, it will deny recognition. Once the ministry grants official recognition, the religious group must request permission from the ORA to conduct activities such as holding meetings in approved locations, publishing any decisions or minutes from internal 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 may face penalties ranging from fines to closure of their organizations.

FACT SHEET OFFICE OF RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS (ORA)

(Department of Religious Affairs of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba)

- Cuba's Office of Religious Affairs (ORA) is a Department of Religious Affairs of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba and a type of "Religion Police."
- ORA, under the long-time direction of Caridad del Rosario Diego Bello, a member of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party, maintains a consistently antagonistic relationship with religious groups. Its representatives at provincial and municipal levels interface with local religious groups, but all decisions and permits are issued from the main office in Havana.
- ORA mandate is focused almost entirely on controlling and restricting the public and private manifestation of religious faith, not on upholding and protecting the religious freedom of Cuban citizens. ORA controls and suppresses faith-based gatherings, constraining religious activity to narrow parameters that serve the needs of the state. Activities outside those parameters are often labeled "dissident."
- ORA does not operate within any official set of guidelines or legal framework, giving its officials immense power over religious groups, associations and individuals associated with those groups.
- ORA's office habitually refuses or fails to respond to the requests of pastors to build additions to or make repairs to their church buildings, fails to grant authorization for large church activities, and in the past has regularly and arbitrarily denied church leaders the right to travel out of the country.
- ORA uses decrees, legislative resolutions, laws (civil, commercial, mortgage and notary, as examples) and several mechanisms and regulations to restrict religion in Cuba.
- ORA uses rampant (often hard to document) bureaucratic impediments and a combination of legal and non-legal means to impede churches, church leaders, church social services, whole congregations and individual believers seeking to comply with government requirements.
- ORA allows the use of private homes, known as "house churches" for religious services but requires that recognized groups seek approval for each proposed location through the formal registration process.

- In 2015, in one of its most blatant actions, ORA ruled that 2,000 Assemblies of God (AOG) churches are illegal³.
- ORA can and do arbitrarily increase the enforcement, surveillance, treatment and often sentence based on its perception of the threat that the church or practitioner represents to the State.
- The Cuban Government's religious entity, Cuban Council of Churches (CCC) is the only one authorized by ORA to host a monthly radio broadcast. No other religious entity is permitted to use the radio waves.
- Some Cuban religious leaders have reported restrictions on their ability to receive donated financial resources from overseas. In this context, they cited a prohibition of ORA, which banned churches and religious groups from using individuals' bank accounts for their organizations, and required existing individual accounts used in this way to be consolidated into one per denomination or organization.
- Many Cuban religious people have faced the government's reproach through ORA.
- ORA coercive techniques have become one of the greatest challenges to U.S. churches and ministries.
- A number of religious groups, including the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons, continue to wait for a decision from ORA on pending applications for official recognition. These groups report that State Security typically monitors their movements, telephone calls, visitors, and religious meetings.
- Through ORA, the Cuban Communist Party directly indirectly intimidates U.S. churches/ministries and their mission, often without their full knowledge. ORA takes advantage of vulnerabilities stemming from a Christ-based willingness to extend fellowship and charity--values inherent in Christian work, such as basic trust in human goodness, a willingness to be self-sacrificing to do God's work, and an assumption of mutual goodwill and understanding.

³ Estimates of the size of AOG worshippers vary widely, from 100,000 to 800,000, exemplifying problems with data quality when addressing the role of the church in Cuba.