

CUBA 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The country's constitution contains written provisions for religious freedom and prohibitions against discrimination based on religious grounds. According to the religious freedom advocacy organization Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), the Cuban Communist Party (CCP), through its Office of Religious Affairs (ORA) and the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), continued to control most aspects of religious life. In its annual *Watch List*, Open Doors reported a continued rise in persecution of Christians in the country. According to media, on July 11, security forces (a general term covering military, police, and vigilante forces) committed acts of violence against, detained, and harassed religious leaders from multiple faith communities who were participating in peaceful demonstrations across the country. According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), security forces beat Roman Catholic priest Jose Castor Alvarez Devesa when he offered aid to an injured person at a protest in Camaguey on July 11. CSW reported Pastor Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo faced up to a 10-year sentence for participating in a march the same day. Rosales Fajardo was found guilty of charges in December and awaited sentencing at year's end. Sissi Abascal Zamora, a member of the Ladies in White opposition group, received a six-year sentence for participating in the July protests. Authorities continued to subject members of the Association of Free Yorubas of Cuba (Free Yorubas) to arbitrary detentions, threats, physical violence, and verbal harassment. The U.S.-based nongovernmental organization (NGO) Global Liberty Alliance reported four members of Free Yorubas faced extended pretrial detention after their arrests following the July protests and prison sentences of up to 10 years. The Spanish NGO Cuban Observatory of Human Rights registered at least 30 acts against leaders and laypersons from multiple faith communities as the government attempted to suppress public support for peaceful protests called for November 15. According to NGO and media reports, those actions included the orchestration of demonstrations (acts of repudiation) in front of the homes of Catholic priests, police surveillance, internet cuts, and the harassment of a nun as she left her residence in Havana to meet a friend. In August, security service officials arrested Apostolic Church pastor Alain Toledano Valiente for "propagating the COVID pandemic" when he held what he said was a socially distanced service. Religious groups reported the ORA and MOJ continued to deny official registration to certain groups, including to several Apostolic churches, or did not respond to long-pending applications, such as those for the 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 Catholic charity Caritas, continued to gather and distribute relief items, providing humanitarian assistance to individuals regardless of religious belief. The Catholic-affiliated Community of Sant'Egidio continued to hold prayer and small group meetings in spite of COVID-19 restrictions.

Due to a lack of government responsiveness, 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 15, 2021, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State again placed Cuba on the Special Watch List for having engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 11 million (midyear 2021). 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 4,387 (mostly Iglesia de Los Hermanos en Cristo, the Brethren of Christ); Quakers 1,000; Moravians 750; and the Church of Jesus Christ 357 members. There are approximately 4,000 followers of 50 Apostolic churches (an unregistered, loosely affiliated network of Protestant churches, also known as the Apostolic Movement) and a separate New Apostolic Church associated with the New Apostolic Church International. According to some Christian leaders, evangelical Protestant groups continue to grow in the country. The Jewish community estimates it has 1,200 members, of whom 1,000

reside in Havana. According to a representative of the Islamic League, there are approximately 4,000 Muslims in the country, of whom fewer than half are native-born. The representative also said that the majority of the Muslim population is Sunni. 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 Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, and Baha'is.

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

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

According to the constitution, “The state recognizes, respects, and guarantees religious liberty” and, “Distinct beliefs and religions enjoy equal consideration.” The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religious beliefs. It declares the country is a secular state and provides for the separation of religious institutions and the state.

The constitution also “recognizes, respects, and guarantees people’s freedom of thought, conscience, and expression.” It provides for the “right to profess or not profess their religious beliefs, to change them, and to practice the religion of their choice...” but only “with the required respect for other beliefs and in accordance with the law.” At the same time, it states, “Conscientious objection may not be invoked with the intention of evading compliance with the law or impeding another from the exercise of their rights.” Military service is mandatory for all men, and there are no legal provisions exempting conscientious objectors from service. Similarly, the penal code prohibits anyone from using a religious basis to oppose “educational objectives, the duty to work, the defense of the Homeland...” and other requirements in the constitution.

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 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. 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 failing 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 one year 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. 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.

A law in force since July 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 (\$120) or two to four years in prison.

Religious education is highly regulated, and homeschooling is illegal, with parents who homeschool their children subject to arrest.

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. Religious groups also said the government applied the law in an arbitrary and capricious manner to target religious groups and individuals whose views were not in line with the government’s. Some religious groups continued to express concerns that the constitution, in effect since February 2019, significantly weakened protections for freedom of religion or belief and diluted references to freedom of conscience, separating it from freedom of religion.

In its annual *Watch List*, Open Doors, a self-described nondenominational, ecumenical Christian organization, reported a continued rise in the persecution of Christians in the country. It attributed the continued rise to the government’s “highly restrictive measures against churches deemed to be opponents of the regime especially non-registered Protestant churches.” The report noted the government used the COVID-19 crisis “as a pretext to hinder church and community activities, monitor church leaders, make arbitrary arrests, confiscate private property and impose extortion fees.”

CSW reported security forces targeted religious leaders amid unprecedented nationwide public protests that began on July 11 and led to state-directed violence, detention, and harassment against religious figures from multiple faith

communities. According to CSW, security officers arrested Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo, pastor of the unregistered nondenominational Monte de Sion Church, and his teenage son in the town of Palma Soriano during one of several peaceful protests across the country on July 11. Authorities charged Rosales Fajardo with committing a series of crimes, including “disrespect” and “public disorder.” He said that while he was in detention, guards subjected him to a brutal beating. Following his December 20-21 trial, Rosales Fajardo was found guilty of the charges and awaited sentencing at year’s end. A sentence could entail up to 10 years in prison. Rosales Fajardo’s son was released following a week in captivity, after his mother paid a fine. Government authorities had previously targeted Rosales Fajardo, including as far back as in 2012 when they seized his church property.

According to HRW, either a state security agent or a member of rapid response, government-affiliated paramilitary forces beat Catholic priest Jose Castor Alvarez Devesa with a bat while he tried to assist an injured protester during a July 11 demonstration in Camaguey. Security forces detained him when he sought medical attention for his injuries. The government later released Alvarez Devesa, but he remained under investigation through year’s end for incitement to commit crimes, and with his movements restricted.

CSW also reported two other pastors detained on July 11 in Matanzas, Yeremi Blanco Ramirez and Yarian Sierra Madrigal, spent two weeks in jail, with no means to communicate with their families, lawyers, or friends before their release to house arrest following international pressure. Both men received fines for joining the protests and remained under police surveillance through year’s end. While they were in custody, a landlord evicted the family of Pastor Sierra Madrigal from their home after state security pressured the landlord, according to CSW. Later, authorities forced both men to sign a document that would justify their imprisonment should they participate in future protests. Also on July 11, security forces detained, released, and later interrogated and threatened with charges of incitement Pastor Yusniel Perez Montejo of the Eastern Baptist Convention of Cuba.

During a visit to the country on September 9, Cardinal Sean O’Malley, Archbishop of Boston, met with President Miguel Diaz-Canel. The Associated Press reported that state media published images of the meeting but provided no details on the topics discussed. On his departure from the country the following day, Cardinal O’Malley wrote in his blog that he had spoken to Diaz-Canel about the July 11

protests “and appealed for clemency for those involved in the demonstrations in a nonviolent way.”

The Global Liberty Alliance reported authorities continued to subject Free Yorubas leaders and members to additional arbitrary detentions, threats, fines, physical violence, and verbal harassment. According to observers, although Yoruba and other African syncretic religious groups were given latitude to practice their beliefs as individuals, the government selectively recognized groups and leaders based on their favorable view of the government. The NGO reported that in March, security forces beat and robbed a Free Yorubas youth leader, Dairon Hernandez Perez, outside his home as he returned from attending a religious event. Hernandez Perez said members of the security forces and members of the government’s Black Berets, commonly described as shock troops and serving as a rapid response brigade, beat him extensively, damaged religious items, confiscated money, and threatened him with imprisonment for “pre-criminal dangerousness.”

In September, the Global Liberty Alliance sought precautionary measures from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights on behalf of four members of the Free Yorubas, who faced extended pretrial detention after their arrests following the July 11 protests. According to the NGO, Donaida Perez Paserio, Loreto Hernandez Garcia, Lisdiani Rodriguez Isaac, and Lisdani Rodriguez Isaac had faced repression from security forces over 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 Free Yorubas detainees, including disobedience, public disorder, and assault or attack, and they sought eight-to-10-year combined prison sentences for the four. At year’s end, all four were awaiting trial.

The Global Liberty Alliance recorded several other instances of Free Yorubas members being detained and fined for peaceful protests in July. Police fined Elizabeth Cintron 3,000 pesos (\$120) in August, thereby making her ineligible to stand trial. Prior to paying the fine, Cintron was in pretrial detention. Also in August, police forced Dayron Dadis Lorrando to pay a 1,000-peso fine (\$40), which is approximately half the official minimum monthly wage, at a Santa Clara police station, a decision that denied him his right to due process.

According to media, in May, authorities released Christian human rights activist Mitzael Diaz Paseiro after he completed his three and a half-year sentence. Diaz Paseiro said he was occasionally placed in solitary confinement, beaten, and

deprived of water. Amnesty International recognized him as a prisoner of conscience.

In May, security forces arrested Pastor Yoel Demetrio, of the Cuban Apostolic Movement in Las Tunas, after eight security agents raided his church. He was later released with a warning that he could face criminal charges for contempt. In March, he had reported that unidentified individuals threw stones at his church in Las Tunas while members of his congregation held a prayer vigil inside. Demetrio told reporters that authorities arbitrarily fined him several times, with no explanation of the reason for the fines.

Media reported police continued to detain members of the Ladies in White. Throughout the year, Ladies in White leader Berta Soler Fernandez reported she faced repeated arrests and short detentions, although the organization had suspended much of its activities due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The group's youngest member, Sissi Abascal Zamora, received a six-year sentence from a municipal court for participating in a July 11 protest. The court found her guilty of contempt, hitting a police officer, and public disorder.

According to media, the potential for additional widespread protests in November led to increased repression against religious leaders, including the staging of "acts of repudiation" in front of their homes. CSW condemned the targeting of religious leaders, which it said was a government attempt to block the November peaceful protests. CSW reported police and state security agents summoned and interrogated many Protestant and Catholic religious leaders to intimidate and dissuade them from participating in the peaceful marches called by civil society groups. The ORA delivered a direct warning to Catholic Church officials that three priests in Camaguey, Alberto Reyes Pias, Jose Castor Alvarez, and Rolando Montes de Oca, would be arrested if they participated in any protests. One of the priests, Alberto Reyes, vowed to join the protests saying, "The gospel of Jesus Christ speaks of freedom, it speaks of justice, it speaks of truth... If being arrested is the price of being true to the teachings of the gospel, so be it." Multiple media outlets reported that on the morning of the proposed march on November 15, a group of CCP officials and sympathizers orchestrated an act of repudiation at the residence of the Archbishop of Camaguey, where Father Reyes was staying, along with Archbishop Wilfredo Pino Estevez. According to press reports, the government used acts of repudiation that directed participants to verbally abuse and intimidate government critics so the critics would not leave their homes. Because of the crowds at the protests and the presence of state security officers, the priests and many other religious leaders remained in their homes on November 15.

The Cuban Observatory of Human Rights registered at least 30 repressive acts against leaders and laypersons associated with various religious groups for showing their support for the proposed November marches. Government actions included multiple acts of repudiation, police surveillance, internet cuts, and the harassment of the Mother Superior of the Daughters of Charity, Sister Nadieska Almeida, whom government supporters harassed on November 15 while she was walking to visit a friend in Havana.

According to CSW, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the government targeted religious leaders by accusing them of hoarding goods, which many religious leaders provided to needy members of their communities. CSW reported that in January, police arrested and detained Pastor Karel Parra Rosabal, the leader of an unregistered Apostolic Church in Las Tunas, on what the NGO said was a false charge of hoarding. The pastor, who operated a small bike repair shop, was reportedly told by authorities he was being arrested “so that you learn that illegal churches in Cuba are not allowed.” Authorities stated he had too many tools for his business without providing evidence that he had acquired them legally. After 10 days in detention, authorities released him, and prosecutors dropped the charges against him. They did not return his confiscated equipment, which he needed to provide for his family.

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. Despite a 2019 letter from Cuban Ambassador to the United States Jose Cabanas to the First Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ in Salt Lake City stating the denomination was “welcome” in the country, the MOJ had not approved the Church’s registration by year’s end.

Representatives of several religious organizations 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 pretext the government used to control and favor certain factions of a religious denomination or one religious group’s activities over others.

Members of Protestant denominations said some groups were still able to register only a small percentage of house churches 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 deny prisoners, including political prisoners, pastoral visits and the ability to meet with other prisoners for worship, prayer, and study. Many prisoners also said authorities repeatedly confiscated Bibles, crucifixes, rosary beads, and other religious items, sometimes as punishment and other times for no apparent reason.

CSW and religious leaders reported that 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. Catholic and Protestant church leaders, both in and outside the government-recognized Council of Cuban Churches (CCC), continued to report frequent visits from state security agents and CCP officials. These church leaders said the purpose of the visits was to intimidate and to remind them they were under close surveillance, as well as to influence internal decisions and structures within the groups.

Many house church leaders continued to report frequent visits from state security agents or CCP 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 their activities.

According to news reports, authorities continued to harass Pastor Alain Toledano, a member of the Apostolic Movement and leader of the Emanuel Church in Santiago de Cuba. Toledano said state security officials arrested him for "propagating the COVID pandemic" in August, when he said he held a socially

distanced service. In the weeks that followed, Toledano reported state security cited or interrogated at least eight members of his church for showing him support.

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 to harass and defame religious leaders, including Facebook posts and online editorials publicly targeting religious leaders or groups. In most instances, accounts posting attacks targeting religious leaders seemed to be linked to state security. According to the annual report of the U.S.-based human rights NGO Freedom House, the country had one of the most restrictive media environments in the world, including in terms of internet freedom such as restrictions on networks, blocking of social networks and websites, and the repression and arrest of individuals for using social media networks. For example, according to HRW, on August 17, the government responded to the July 11 protests by issuing Decree Law 35, which further criminalized online content deemed to be critical of the government or that disseminated “content that violates the constitutional, social and economic precepts of the State” or incites acts that affect public order.

In July, the Cuban Conference of Catholic Bishops released a statement calling for dialogue and imploring the government to respect citizens’ rights to freedom of expression. In November, the Conference of Cuban Religious and Catholic leaders released statements condemning state intimidation of religious leaders, as well as what they termed the systematic repression of voices who criticize the government.

In May, 34 individuals and organizations signed a letter addressed to Cuba’s Chief of Mission at its embassy in Washington, raising concerns about violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief taking place under two decree laws (349 and 370) that limit freedom of expression either through artistic means or online. The letter called for the repeal of the two laws and highlighted the case of independent journalist Yoel Suarez, who regularly reported on religious freedom issues. During the year, state security agents summoned Suarez for multiple interrogations, threatened him with criminal charges, and questioned his wife, reportedly to pressure her to convince him to abandon his work.

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. According to the U.S.-based Patmos Institute, a civil society organization focusing on religious freedom and interreligious dialogue, the Cuban Association for the Divulcation of Islam was unable to obtain a container of religious literature embargoed since 2014. 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 to 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, where participants sometimes criticized official social and economic policies.

According to media, government officials frequently instigated or did not investigate harassment of religious figures and institutions. Although most cases of what CSW defined as religious persecution were directed toward Christians, CSW also reported that religious minorities were also likely to be victims of religious persecution. Patmos continued to report that Rastafarians, whose spiritual leader remained imprisoned since 2012, were among the most stigmatized and repressed religious groups.

Muslim community representatives said the country's small Muslim community was subject to discrimination. The government denied a Muslim woman permission to travel abroad for urgent medical care, a decision she said she believed was linked to her affiliation with an unregistered religious group. According to CSW, Yusdevlin Olivera Nunez was prohibited from travelling due to a five-year sentence of restricted liberty she received upon joining the unregistered Cuban Association for the Dissemination of Islam. At year's end, Olivera Nunez – known as Mercy Olivera – had not received travel documents from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. She said the treatment needed for her medical conditions was not available in the country.

Before her detention following the July 11 protests, Free Yorubas President Perez Paseiro and member Yaimara Reyes Soler filed a legal complaint in June in Santa Clara, stating the government had committed dozens of religious freedom violations against members of their group. The petition stated authorities had erroneously and intentionally determined the Free Yorubas to be a political entity

rather than an association of Yoruba believers and that it forbade them from observing traditional practices such as wearing garments or head coverings in accordance with their faith. Court officials initially refused to even accept the legal filing and by year's end had not acted upon the complaint.

While some religious leaders reported that access to broadcast media had marginally improved during the year, several religious leaders continued to express concern about the government's restriction on broadcasting religious services over the radio or on television.

According to CSW, while movement to, from, and within the country was again highly restricted due to the COVID-19 pandemic, religious travelers said they continued to experience higher levels of scrutiny than others and were often denied freedom of movement, including traveling to religious gatherings outside the country. Patmos reported that immigration officers continued to target religious travelers and their goods and informed airport-based intelligence services of their incoming and outgoing travel.

According to CSW, during the year there were no reported cases of the ORA and immigration officials targeting foreign visitors by denying them religious visas. CSW attributed the change to the government's overall closure of borders to tourists as part of its efforts to limit the spread of COVID-19.

Reportedly because of COVID-19-related restrictions on internal movement, government agencies continued to refuse to recognize changes in residence for pastors and other church leaders assigned to new churches or parishes. These restrictions, not lifted until October, made it difficult or impossible for relocating pastors to obtain government services, including housing. Legal restrictions on travel within the country also limited itinerant ministry, a central component of some religious groups.

According to media, religious discrimination against students continued to be a common practice in state schools, with multiple reports of teachers and CCP officials encouraging and participating in bullying of students belonging to religious groups perceived as being critical of the government.

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 via distance learning; however, the government did not recognize these degrees.

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

On January 27, hundreds of Catholics, including bishops, religious, and laypersons, issued a public appeal for citizens to begin to take control of the future of their country. The appeal stated, "The Cuban people, although slowly, have been overcoming and unlearning helplessness.... This is a very important path to empowerment and recovery of social self-esteem. It is important that we come to feel stronger, that we convince ourselves that we can act and live without being paralyzed by fear, so that we come to express ourselves freely, to seek the good and justice while preserving peace, and to be critical of our reality, because in fact, it is the duty of everyone to contribute to the building of a new Cuba."

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 providing food and other goods to 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.

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

According to media, the Community of Sant'Egidio intensified its activities, despite COVID-19 restrictions. It continued to hold prayer and meetings in small groups. "The community has flourished in the pandemic," said an 80-year-old woman and member of the "Long Live the Elderly" program in Santiago de Cuba. Sant'Egidio established the program to encourage youth to assist elderly individuals in various neighborhoods of Santiago, including Maceo, Cicharrones, Flores, and Marti.

According to a May National Public Radio article entitled, *The Youth of Cuba's Tiny Jewish Minority*, a lack of tourists during the COVID-19 pandemic hit the country's small Jewish community hard because the community relied on tourism for attendance at religious services, for donations, and for solidarity.

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.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials did not meet with or otherwise engage with the ORA during the year due to lack of responsiveness from the government. 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 officials met with the head of the CCC and discussed obstacles unregistered churches faced to gain official status.

Embassy officials met 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 freedom of assembly, church expansion, access to state-owned media, and their inability to open private religious schools.

On November 15, 2021, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State again placed the country on the Special Watch List for having engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom.