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## **Despite Opening to U.S., The Castros Continue to Persecute Cuban Christians**

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The Obama administration has continued its effort to expand contact between the U.S. and Cuba by easing restrictions on travel, exports, and export financing. Commerce Secretary Penny Pritzker spoke of "building a more open and mutually beneficial relationship."

However, the administration expressed concern over Havana's dismal human rights practices. Although Raul Castro's government has continued economic reforms, it has maintained the Communist Party's political stranglehold. Indeed, despite the warm reception given the Pope last fall, the regime has been on the attack against Cubans of faith.

In a new report, the group Christian Solidarity Worldwide warned of "an unprecedented crackdown on churches across the denominational spectrum," which has "fueled a spike in reported violations of freedom of religion or belief." There were 220 specific violations of religious liberties in 2014, but 2300 last year, many of which "involved entire churches or, in the cases of arrests, dozens of victims." In contrast, there were only 40 cases in 2011.

Even in the best of times, the Castros have never been friends of faith in anything other than themselves. The State Department's 2014 report on religious liberty reported that it was easier for Cubans to engage in some charitable and educational projects and import Bibles. However, "the government harassed outspoken religious leaders and their followers, including reports of beating, threats, detentions, and restrictions on travel. Religious leaders reported the government tightened controls on financial resources."

Last year, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was similarly critical. The number of believers is growing, but the regime attempts to closely control religious practices. The Commission explained: "Serious religious freedom violations continue in Cuba, despite improvements for government-approved religious groups." Never mind the papal visit, "the government continues to detain and harass religious leaders and laity, interfere in religious

groups' internal affairs, and prevent democracy and human rights activists from participating in religious activities."

Now CSW has issued its own report. There long has been discrimination against Christians in employment, university, and primary/secondary education. Communist Party members who convert and leave the party "face particular discrimination," including threats made against them and their families.

However, last year's increase in persecution "was largely due to the government declaring 2000 Assemblies of God (AoG) churches illegal, ordering the closure or demolition of 100 AoG churches in three provinces, and expropriating the properties of a number of other denominations, including the Methodist and Baptist Conventions." Indeed, many church groups suffered at the Cuban government's hands. For instance, Berean Baptists and Jehovah's Witnesses were stripped of their official registration, placing them outside of the law; the Vitero-Catholic Church was prevented from registering. Noted CSW: "Religious groups across the spectrum reported varying degrees of hostility from the government."

This wide-ranging campaign was led by the Office of Religious Affairs. Noted CSW:

In 2015, the ORA continued to deny authorization for a number of religious activities and in cooperation with other government agencies, issued fines and threats of confiscation to dozens of churches and religious organizations. The ORA also sanctioned the arbitrary expropriation of historic, registered church properties and the actions against the AoG churches.

Through the ORA the Communist Party has been given general control over religious activities. Indeed, reported CSW, the Office "exists solely to monitor, hinder and restrict the activities of religious groups." It often blocks church activities, building repairs, and clerical travel. Last year the ORA worked with the Ministry of Housing to shut or destroy churches. Religious officials argue that religious activities should only be subject to government oversight, and only when there is a demonstrated need. However, in the Castro regime's view, "need" is entirely political.

The regime also has increasingly targeted church leaders and congregants, for the first time in years jailing one of the former and detaining many of the latter. In early January two churches were destroyed, church members arrested, and three church leaders held incommunicado. In some cases pastors' homes were surrounded, nearby roads were blocked, cell phones were disrupted, and even children were held captive.

One of the government's more odious practices, according to CSW, has been to threaten churches with closure if they "do not comply with government demands to expel and shun specific individuals." Failure to surrender can result in sustained surveillance, pressure on congregants to file complaints against church leaders, and approaches to denominational

leadership. This attempt to socially isolate believers "has been utilized by the Cuban government since the earliest days of the Revolution."

The government's repression has triggered public demonstrations. In October hundreds of people marched in Santiago de Cuba, Contramaestre, and Guantanamo to protest the planned destruction of an AoG church in Santiago. Church members also organized a sit-in at the sanctuary. Unfortunately, the regime apparently learned its lesson. In early January the government initiated mass arrests and blocked phones in an apparent attempt to preclude similar protests with the demolition of two other churches.

The regime's destructive activities have been justified under a legal decree issued last year nominally to enforce zoning laws. But in practice the measure is a subterfuge to shut down churches. Alas, there's no reason to believe that the regime plans to stop with AoG sanctuaries. Noted CSW, legislation approved in 2005 "imposes complicated and repressive restrictions on house churches, which likely constitute the majority of churches in Cuba." While not consistently implemented in the past, "church leaders have repeatedly expressed concern at its potential to close down a large percentage of house churches."

The Castros have ruled Cuba for more than a half century. They obviously still fear losing control. CSW concluded that the ongoing crackdown was an attempt to limit calls for social reform which would complement ongoing, though limited, economic changes. Detentions initially were concentrated on "Cubans considered by the government to be political dissidents," including the Ladies in White movement, Catholic women who protest by dressing in white and walking city streets, carrying gladioli. The regime crackdown later "expanded to include other individuals associated with independent civil society, including human rights and democracy activists."

The Obama administration was right to engage Cuba. After more than 50 years, the embargo serves no useful purpose. Continuing this failed policy will not bring freedom to the island in the future. However, even lifting all economic restrictions won't turn Cuba into a democracy. Only sustained pressure from within and without Cuba is likely to force the Castro regime to yield control to the Cuban people.

Americans should forthrightly encourage freedom in Cuba. Religious believers here should be particularly vocal in supporting people seeking to live out their faith under Communist oppression. Some day autocracy will give way to liberty even in Cuba.

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