

## OPINION

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### **Cuba’s new constitution fails to guarantee fundamental freedoms. Cubans saw through the charade.**

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In the days before the so-called “national referendum” on revisions to Cuba’s constitution, the Assemblies of God Pastor Robert

Veliz Torres was arbitrarily detained for two hours by an agent from the Technical Department of Investigations (DTI). He was accused of directing members of his congregation to vote No.

Also, the president of the Western Baptist Convention received a call from Sonia García García, the deputy head of the Office of Religious Affairs, an arm of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party, in which she said that, “From now on, Carlos Sebastián [the convention’s general secretary] will no longer be treated as a pastor, but as a counter-revolutionary.” Sebastian’s crime was that he told his church members that the new constitution lacked fundamental a “freedom of religion” language and for that reason he intended to No.

There were other reported arrests, intimidations and abuses leading up to the referendum. Government-produced billboards, posters and media messages urged citizens to vote Yes.

On Feb. 24, Cubans went to the polls to vote on a new constitution. The result, according to international press headlines, was that Cubans voted overwhelmingly for change, with 86 percent of voters approving the new constitution

The truth, however, is that we don’t know the real numbers. Like all elections in Cuba, there is no transparency and no observers from civil society or the international community. What we do know is that the government of



Pastor Mario Felix Leonart being arrested in Cuba for his advocacy

Cuba drew a line in the sand and resorted to hard-nosed measures to ensure that advocates for a No vote were identified and threatened.

On Feb. 21, Madrid-based CubaData published the results of a poll showing widespread rejection of the regime's new constitution. The poll showed that 41.60 percent of Cubans were willing to vote No, and that 16 percent would abstain. CubaData's results were based on a sample of 1,000 Cubans from all over the country, polled from Feb. 16-18. The minimal difference between Yes voters (424) and No (416) constituted a technical tie only three days before the vote.

In response to the published results, U.S. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo said in an official statement that, "No one should be fooled by this exercise, which achieves little beyond perpetuating the pretext for the regime's one-party dictatorship.

"The entire process has been marked by carefully managed political theater and repression of public debate." He added that while the regime claimed that the vote was democratic, "Cuban authorities harassed and detained dozens of observers and peaceful protesters, confiscating phones and devices."

According to Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), in the run-up to the vote, the government singled out potential opposition to the new constitution and ensured they knew they were being watched. What the Cuban government did not anticipate was two petitions drafted by religious leaders who objected to a constitutional article allowing same-sex marriage as well as constitutional language that diluted freedom of religion guarantees.

The same-sex marriage article was later dropped when 179,000 Cubans signed the petitions — an unprecedented show of dissent in authoritarian Communist Cuba. The Cuban Conference of Catholic Bishops followed with a strong public statement denouncing various articles of the new constitution while pointing out that it was not compatible with the church's moral, ethical or civic values.

As the referendum approached, CSW reports, church pastors were detained, worshipers were threatened and young church members were given pre-arrest warrants. Other dissenters who tried to vote were reportedly taunted and ridiculed by pro-government elements outside the polling stations.

As sad as this is, CSW's report describes it as a watershed moment: "The churches' reluctance to engage politically changed dramatically in the last eight months. For the first time, we saw religious leaders across the island working together, openly expressing their criticism of the constitution."

The Cuban government wants the world to believe that all Cubans are of one mind, committed to the Castros' socialist state. But we know better. Cubans suffer daily from the broken promises of a failed state, and there is a growing chorus of those that want legitimate, democratic reform.

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