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Support Cubans who demand that freedom of religion be part of island's new constitution

BY TEO BABUN
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Pastor Rafael Solano Silvera and his parishioners live in fear that the Cuban government will demolish their Familia Cristiana Baptist Church. Sadly, they're not alone. Across the island, religious leaders, their families and churches are reporting increased harassment that many see as a reaction to their demands for stronger protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) in the new constitution.

On Feb. 24, Cubans will vote Yes or No in a referendum for a new constitution, currently under public review. Its most recent draft eliminates references to freedom of conscience and significantly reduces protections for FoRB. Louise Tillotson, of Amnesty International, told Al Jazeera that the language "continues to be quite hazy and opens the door for criminal laws to be applied towards people that are deemed to be 'subversive'."

FoRB violations in Cuba have steadily increased over the past decade, with alarming spikes in recent years. Widespread repression and violence include church demolitions, harassment and detention of religious activists, and declaring more than 1,000 churches illegal. Buses serving churches involved in the constitutional referendum have been impounded, their drivers detained and threatened. Priests have been warned to abstain from commenting on the constitution.

As head of Outreach Aid to the Americas, (OAA), I have worked with my team and partners for more than two decades to strengthen the church in Cuba and empower citizens to affirm their basic human right to practice the religion or belief of their choice. In the face of increasing government manipulation to control and divide churches, we work to build the capacity and promote unity among church leadership.

Recently, church leaders have been shifting from maintaining their customary low profile to taking great risks to cast light on government efforts to weaken constitutional guarantees of freedom and conscience. Churches joined together to force transparency during a "constitution's consultative process," which presents a false front while intimidating people of faith. They have delivered two petitions to the Cuban government, one signed by more than 179,000 citizens. We support their brave efforts and call on all people of faith and conscience to stand behind them.

One of our partners, Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), reports that the Cuban government continues to commit serious FoRB violations. Informants infiltrate and report on religious groups while a relentless, sometimes violent, campaign discourages members of independent civil society organizations from participating in religious activities.

CSW's report reinforces statements from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), as well as 30 individuals, religious groups, the Cuban Catholic Bishops Conference and Protestant leaders across the island. USCIRF's Kristina Arriaga has said: "The integrity of this historic process is in serious question if religious leaders are being ignored, then pressured to publicly support a new constitution that fails to protect their rights."

CSW Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas stresses that the current proposal that reduces protections for religious freedom is unacceptable. Both Arriaga and Thomas urge the Cuban government to immediately halt intimidation and fully consider citizens' input. Thomas calls on the international community "to push Cuba to ensure that its new constitution, including provisions on thought, conscience and religion, is fully in line with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights."

Citizens in the Americas — and around the world — should not let this crucial opportunity for substantive change in Cuba's constitution pass by. They can contact the U.S. Department of State and the White House to urge them to reach out to the

United Nations, European Union and Latin American countries with constructive influence with the Cuban government to show them that they are being watched, and to demand that this new wave of persecution ends.

All Cubans should have the basic human right to have a say in their new constitution and vote freely without undue pressure or manipulation. Help us ensure that Cuba's new constitution meaningfully addresses FoRB so that millions of Cuban citizens can breathe easy and practice their faith freely for generations to come.

Teo Babun is president and CEO of Outreach Aid to the Americas Inc., which is based in Miami.

