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## Religious leaders in Cuba are bravely confronting the regime's oppression | Opinion

**BY TEO BABUN**

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Catholic leaders in Cuba were prohibited from attending the funeral of Cardinal Jaime Ortega y Alamino, the archbishop of Havana who died in July at 82.

Despite claims that it respects freedom of religion and belief, the Cuban government views religious advocates as problematic “counter-revolutionaries.” Through its Office of Religious Affairs — the main perpetrator of religious repression in Cuba — the government treats religious activists like common criminals. It divides the faith community by including a few in its tightly controlled Cuba Council of Churches, while treating others as troublemakers.

Last year, Catholic and Protestant religious leaders and followers called for stronger protections for freedom of religion and freedom of conscience to be included in the new constitution before it went to public referendum. Church leaders bravely united to expose the Cuban government’s efforts to water down previous constitutional guarantees of freedom by initiating two petitions, one signed by 180,000 Cuban citizens.

The Cuban government is retaliating. Last week, the Office of Religious Affairs canceled the National Catholic Youth Day, even though all permits were granted. Catholic priest Jorge Luis Perez said the arbitrary cancellation affected more than 3,000 young people's spiritual retreat. In addition, the regime prohibited Catholic lay leaders from attending funeral services for Cardinal Jaime Ortega y Alamino, who died last month. And some of the largest Protestant denominations, including the Methodist Church, the Evangelical League and the Eastern Baptist Convention, reported that they are banned from receiving foreign visitors in apparent retaliation for the formation of an independent Cuban Evangelical Alliance.

Last April, Rev. Ramon Rigal and his wife, Ayda Expósito, were jailed because they refused to send their children to government-run schools. The family, members of the Church of God, was given 30 minutes' notice before their trial began, thus denying them legal representation. Their children have been studying through an accredited international homeschooling program given the parents' concern about how the regime indoctrinates young Cubans in socialism and atheism. Christian Solidarity Worldwide reports other such cases in Cuba. Numerous religious groups, including the Catholic Church, have repeatedly advocated for reform, to no avail.

Last month, Cuban government officials told the heads of five evangelical denominations that they were prohibited from leaving the island to attend the second annual international Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in Washington, which more than 1,000 religious advocates from 110 countries attended. The five pastors are founders of the Cuban Evangelical Alliance. Another leader, the president of the Baptist Convention of Cuba, was also blocked from attending.

The government's action followed the [arbitrary detention of religious freedom defender](#) Ricardo Fernandez Izaguirre on July 12. He was held in a small cell, incommunicado and without access to medicines, before being released a week later. for 30 days. He never was told why. Advocates for freedom are reacting. Kimberly Breier, undersecretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, criticized the Cuban regime, asking, "Why does the [Cuban government] prevent religious leaders from attending? The people of Cuba will never reach their potential under a government that does not respect fundamental freedoms and restricts the movement of religious leaders and other courageous defenders of human rights."

Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo lamented the "thuggish, intolerant nature of the current regime in Havana."

Through the Office of Religious Affairs, the government is increasing threats, travel restrictions, detentions and violence against religious leaders and followers, even restricting the rights of prisoners to worship. The government harasses and detains people advocating for religious and political freedom, including the well-known Ladies in White, who are not allowed to attend Catholic Mass.

Freedom of religion is intrinsic to social good and, like freedom of expression and assembly, is central to the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. But these essential liberties, as well as the development of a truly independent civil society, are restricted by a government that fears upheaval, legitimate reform and loss of power.

This is a watershed moment. Despite harsh and inevitable government reprisal, independent church leaders have emerged as Cuba's most powerful — and respected — civil-society activists for freedom of religion and belief and the intersectional rights of expression, assembly, association, education, nondiscrimination, privacy and due process. This is the time to support efforts both on the island and internationally for engagement, advocacy and action on fundamental liberties in Cuba.

*Teo Babun is president and CEO of Outreach Aid to the Americas, Inc., also known as EchoCuba.*



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