



December 28, 2023

Reverend Professor Dr. Jerry Pillay
General Secretary
World Council of Churches
Geneva

Dear Reverend Pillay,

I write to you in a spirit of Christian brotherhood and shared concern for the suffering and injustice experienced by the world's poor and vulnerable - causes I know you care deeply about. I want to express my serious concerns regarding your recent visit to Cuba on December 17-19.

It troubles me that it seems your visit, apparently closely orchestrated by the Cuban government, has failed to provide you an accurate understanding of the state of the fundamental right to freedom of religion or belief in Cuba. Worse, we are seeing that the Cuban government is using your visit, and specifically your statements celebrating religious freedom in Cuba, to bolster its absurd claim that Cubans do enjoy this fundamental freedom.

The Cuban government's systematic violations of religious freedom have been well documented and denounced by human rights monitors and many governments and international bodies. According to these sources, the Cuban Communist Party's repression tactics include harassment, threats, physical attacks on faith leaders and parishioners; detention and imprisonment; confiscation of property; police summons; defamation and accusations of illegal or immoral behavior; denial of rights of employment or education, including for family members; repudiation; use of "public opinion agents" to sow rumors; creation of enmity and division between faith groups; restrictions on movement; and fabrication of alleged crimes. In a survey of a diverse set of Cuban independent faith leaders carried out by my organization two years ago, 52 of 56 leaders said that they are actively repressed, suffering government repression acts monthly or even weekly. Nine of the respondents had been recently forced to migrate. My faith-based organization, Outreach Aid to the Americas (OAA), also reviewed the Cuban government's performance against 36 freedom of religion or belief indicators developed by the previous UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Ahmed Shaheed, and found that Cuba's constitutions and laws completely fail to meet 33 indicators and partially meet only three indicators.

The Cuban government's repression of faith communities is state policy directed from the very top. Through the Office of Religious Affairs (ORA), which is part of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, the state closely regulates all matters related to religion. ORA shows favoritism

to religious groups that are seen as cooperative with the government, while harassing and refusing registration to those critical of the regime and that insist on organizational independence. The ORA has authority over religious groups' registration, faith leaders' travel outside of the country, and building and construction permits, and routinely uses these powers to punish disfavored groups. Operating outside of the country's legal and constitutional framework, the ORA's decision making is obscure, arbitrary, and in clear violation of basic standards relating to freedom of religion or belief.

Besides the organization I lead, OAA, numerous independent civil society organizations around the world, including Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Race and Equality, CSW, the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America, and Civil Rights Defenders, have documented these abuses in great detail. Such abuses include the almost weekly crackdowns on the Ladies in White, wives and mothers who peacefully walk to church while calling for the release of their loved ones from prison; the constant harassment and threats against dissenting pastors and priests; and the continued unjust imprisonment of religious leaders such as Pastor Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo, who is serving a seven-year sentence for the "crime" of participating peacefully in the mass citizen protests of July 11, 2021, and Yoruba leader Loreto Hernández García, who also participated in the July 11 protests. Both men have reportedly been terribly mistreated while in prison, and García has been denied leave to receive desperately needed medical care. OAA and several human rights organizations have reported that certain Cuban "minority faiths," including Islam and the Afro-Caribbean faiths, have been particularly ill-treated by the government, and that the government creates its own proxy faith umbrella organizations to supposedly represent – but actually control – these religious groups and their leaders.

The Cuban Observatory on Human Rights, as well, reported that in 2022, there were at least 1,030 repressive actions by the Cuban government against the exercise of religion, and in a report published in July of this year, found that 68 percent of Cubans say that "they or someone they know who professes a religion has experienced varying degrees of harassment, repression, threats, or obstruction in practicing their faith." We know from reports by other human rights organizations that this is just a limited "snapshot" of the widespread abuses suffered by Cuba's religious community.

Based on these rights violations, the U.S. in 2022 designated Cuba one of the world's worst violators of religious freedom, and in July of this year the European Parliament passed an important resolution that "condemns the lack of religious freedom in Cuba." As well, several United Nations Special Rapporteurs (UNSRs), including the rapporteurs on freedom of religion or belief, on freedom of opinion and expression, and on the situation of human rights defenders, have published official communications and issued statements condemning the Cuban government for grave violations of religious freedom. The UNSR for Freedom of Religion or Belief requested a visit to Cuba in December 2020 to discuss these issues; not surprisingly the Cuban government rejected this request.

Reverend, at your installation as General Secretary of the World Council of Churches in February of this year, you gave a heartfelt address calling on the church to "stand where God stands with

the poor, wretched, neglected, and suffering in the world.” And you asked, “Where will you stand?” My most sincere hope is that you will appreciate the dark reality lived by the faithful in Cuba, one where there is no true religious freedom. We need men of faith, of moral stature, like you, to lift up your voice on behalf of the afflicted and oppressed in Cuba.

I encourage you and your staff to review the reports of independent human rights organizations that provide clear analysis of the tragic state of religious freedom in Cuba. I hope, based on this, that you can actively advocate for effective government reforms that better enable Cubans to practice the faith of their choosing.

I would be happy to further discuss this issue with you and share any relevant documentation that I have on hand.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Teo Babun', with a large, sweeping flourish above the name.

Dr. Teo Babun
President and CEO
Outreach Aid to the Americas