

CUBA

Share:  

Pressure on church leaders remains high following referendum

28 Feb 2019



At least one pastor was arrested and another was prevented from voting in the run up to and during Cuba’s constitutional referendum on 24 February. Pressure on church leaders and members has remained high following the Cuban government’s announcement the new constitution was reportedly approved by 86.8% of voters.

On 23 February, Assemblies of God [Pastor Robert Veliz Torres](#) was arbitrarily detained for two hours by an agent from the Technical Department of Investigations (DTI) who accused him of directing members of his congregation to vote ‘no’ in the referendum.

Two high profile pastors with the unregistered Apostolic Movement, Apostle Bernardo de Quesada and Apostle Alain Toledano, were held for seven hours by customs agents in the Havana airport upon their return from Argentina. Religious materials they brought back with them were confiscated because “their content was against the government,” according to customs officers.

Baptist Reverend Sandy Cancino, one of the most prominent voices in the ‘no’ campaign, reported that he was blocked from voting at the Cuban Embassy in Panama despite showing identification and proof that he resides in Havana.

The new constitution replaces the 1976 constitution that was updated in 1992. CSW shares the concerns of Cuban religious leaders that the new clauses on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) and freedom of conscience are considerably weaker than the Constitution adopted in 1992.

Religious groups of all types and across the country, which have historically been wary of speaking on political issues, engaged in the process to an unprecedented degree, suggesting amendments and publicly sharing analysis of the content of the draft constitution. The largest Protestant denominations and the Catholic Bishops Conference issued highly critical public statements in the weeks before the referendum.

Numerous religious groups raised concerns about [the lack of protections for freedom of religion or belief \(FoRB\) in the final draft constitution](#). Despite these concerted warnings, Cuba’s National Assembly failed to amend the draft accordingly.

CSW remains highly concerned for the safety of the leaders and members of religious communities who have openly voted ‘no’ or who abstained from voting in light of the harassment and intimidation they faced ahead of the referendum.

The leader of a major protestant denomination reported that hired drivers from the state-owned bus company were fired from their jobs after providing services to members of the church. The leader also said that the government has withdrawn permits for forthcoming events which involved delegations visiting from abroad. *“We believe the percentage of the*

'no' vote was in reality greater [than the official figures]" said the leader who asked to be kept anonymous, "because not only the churches but many people disagreed with the new constitution."

"It is horrible what is happening in our country," another church leader told CSW. "The terror of the 'no' [campaign] has made [the government] paranoid. A friend in my church was fired from his job. A 16 year old student was questioned on how she was going to vote and because she said 'no' they issued a pre-arrest warrant against her and took the case to the municipal level...there are many other [similar] stories."

CSW's joint Head of Advocacy Anna Lee Stangl said: *"We remain deeply concerned regarding the way the Cuban government will approach freedom of religion or belief and freedom of conscience under the new constitution. Religious groups together make up the largest component of independent civil society on the island but most have historically deliberately stayed away from anything political. This changed dramatically over the last eight months as we saw religious leaders across the island working together at both the national and local levels and energetically engaging in the process, openly expressing their criticism of the constitution. Despite the legal setback for freedom of religion or belief and freedom of conscience, we believe an even more significant step forward has been taken in terms of religious groups engaging on larger issues."*

Notes to Editors

1. Constitution of Cuba 2019, Article 15 "The State recognises, respects and guarantees Religious Freedom. The Cuban State is secular [laico]. In the Republic of Cuba the religious institutions and fraternal associations are separate from the State and all have the same rights and responsibilities. The different beliefs and religions enjoy equal treatment."

[cuba](#) [Pastor Robert Veliz Torres](#) [Bernardo de Quesada](#) [Sandy Cancino](#)
[constitutional referendum](#)

Related

[CUBA](#)

[Government labels church leaders counter-revolutionaries](#)

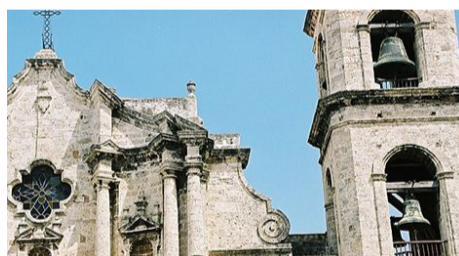
[22 Feb 2019](#)



[CUBA](#)

[Religious leaders pressured to support new constitution](#)

[15 Feb 2019](#)



[CUBA](#)

[Constitutional protections weakened despite high FoRB violations](#)

[14 Jan 2019](#)



Sign up for updates on the work of CSW

First Name *

Last Name *

Email address *