



OBSERVATORY OF
RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
IN LATIN AMERICA

The limitations on religious activities in Cuba and Nicaragua and its impact on human development

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The conference theme "Human Development in the context of Current Global Challenges" invites us to reflect once again on what human development means.

Beyond technical definitions, what most institutions, economists, government authorities or others agree on is that this development necessarily implies that each person must have the opportunity to live a dignified life, in which economic growth is only a means to reach out different opportunities along the way. For this, the correlation between the social, economic, and environmental elements is also necessary. Hence, health, education, employment, political participation, healthy environment, among others, are essential elements not only for human beings to develop certain capacities but also to access those options that allow them to have a decent life.

It is also important to remember that when we talk about human development, it is inevitable to talk about respect for human rights and in that sense, freedom is fundamental for the development of capacities and the exercise of rights.

Unfortunately, in some Latin American countries - such as Cuba and Nicaragua, to name a few - fundamental rights and freedoms are frequently undermined. In Cuba, the many years of pervasive communism and in Nicaragua, the authoritarian tendency of the regime; have destroyed government structures and greatly weakened the rule of law to the point of being almost non-existent.

In both countries – as in many others with a similar socio-political context, religious groups/communities, or faith-based organization have become the few, if not only local institutions, most trusted by citizens. In such convulse contexts, these religious groups seek to contribute to transformative change and respond to the situation of discrimination, inequality, exclusion, and repression.

At this point, it is important to highlight that the role of religious groups is of utmost importance for human development and the fulfillment of many of the sustainable development goals, but not just for their work as social services providers, but also and especially for taking care of the spiritual part of the human being. Only religious groups and/or faith-based organizations care for interconnect spiritual and social work for sustainable development. The importance of this aspect relies on the fact that religion contributes among believers, to a greater resilience in the face of adversity. Some even have point out that religious convictions are a major source of motivation for many people to work for comprehensive, sustainable development.

In countries like Cuba and Nicaragua, the influence of these religious groups or communities and the positive impact they have on society is usually seen by government authorities as a disadvantage. Religion is considered as an authority in competition with the government, since it affirms an authority that transcends that of political leaders, and therefore question the blind loyalty to the principles and ideologies of the regime.

As a consequence, communist governments or those with authoritarian tendencies identify in religion or in religious groups - as long as they do not adhere to the interests of the party - a sector that represents a danger to their legitimacy, stability and perpetuation in power. That is the reason why authorities seek to hinder religious activities and prevent the influence of religion. To achieve this, authorities in both Cuba and Nicaragua have resorted to smear campaigns, to label religious leaders - especially Christians - as terrorists or coup plotters, and to arrests and other arbitrary sanctions. This has also led to multiple attacks against churches, death threats and even physical assaults.

In the COVID-19 context, the immobilization, quarantine, or social distancing decrees, as well as the clinical epidemiological surveillance strategies have become additional instruments of repression, especially against those considered to be "traitors" or "enemies", religious leaders vocal against the government and those denouncing state corruption and human rights violations have being included in this group. Beyond the clear violations of the right to religious freedom, the repressive attitudes have significantly affected religious groups and faith-based organizations in their role in benefit of human development.

As a consequence of the economic crisis, many families had to subsist on donations and aid from civil society organizations and churches; however goods were seized or permits were not granted for the withdrawal of donations, making in some cases impossible or extremely difficult to help the neediest populations. Both in Cuba and Nicaragua, Covid-19 education, delivery of food,

medicine, or the management of foreign donations by religious leaders or faith-based organizations aligned or related to the opposition were prohibited or sanctioned, impeding the creation of conditions for human development.

We need to stress that religious groups and faith-based organizations have direct access to the territory and a closer relationship with the population. (individuals, families, communities, and organizations). These groups know the real challenges and are the ones who have the best chance of involving the population in projects that eventually can allow them to overcome hardship. Therefore, the limitations on religious activities do not affect only religious communities, but also those communities that - especially in times of crisis - depend on them - even non-believers. Most religious groups and religious activities have played a critical role in addressing the needs of those left behind by trying to end poverty, hunger, inequality, by making available education and health and by teaching peace and justice.

Hence, to restrict religious activities and their humanitarian and spiritual assistance means slowing down - if not completely prevent - the development of society as a whole, especially in those countries where the government itself not only does not provide the necessary basic services to survive but instead seeks to indoctrinate and break the spirit of the population, making the human development of its citizens increasingly unviable.