



# Cuba: New names, but the same approach

## Changes after elections

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2 April 2018

[www.olire.org](http://www.olire.org)

### 1. Introduction

On March 11, 2018, nearly eight million Cubans went to the polls to renew the Parliament with candidates endorsed by the ruling party, a process that will end on April 19 when the National Assembly selects the replacement of Raúl Castro (86), who along with his older brother Fidel, have governed the island since 1959. Every five years the government organizes the elections to elect the delegates and deputies for the provincial and national assemblies as a demonstration of unity, this happens because of the high percentage of citizen participation, which on this occasion exceeded 82 percent.<sup>1</sup> If there are no last minute changes,<sup>2</sup> Castro will remain as head of the Communist Party and the first vice president Miguel Díaz-Canel (57), will become the new president of a country plagued by an economic crisis.

In this article we propose to give some guidelines to interpret the political changes that Cuba is going through, to describe its impact on the future of the communist regime and Cuban society in general, and on the situation of religious freedom specifically. Based on interviews with analysts, members of civil society (dissidents and human rights activists), religious ministers (pastors),

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<sup>1</sup> Voting is not obligatory in Cuba, but it constitutes an act of “revolutionary reaffirmation” and abstention is politically frowned upon.

<sup>2</sup> The daughter of Raul Castro, Mariela Castro, announced several times that she had no intention of succeeding her father. With an unquestionable public projection, she has devoted a large amount of her time to defending the rights of the homosexual community. “La promesa de Mariela Castro: Derechos LGBTI en Cuba llegarán tras reforma constitucional”, *Martí Noticias*, 03/30/2017. Retrieved from <https://www.martinoticias.com/a/cuba-promesa-mariela-castro-cubanos-derechos-lgtbi-reforma-constitucion/142023.html>.

information contained in the database of violent incidents of the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America, and some secondary sources (media and academic literature), we will describe in section 2 the broad social discontent in Cuba. In section 3 we will describe the evidence that points to a continuity of the communist regime. Section 4 describes the persistence of violations of religious freedom. Finally, in section 5 we describe the lack of evidence to anticipate any improvement in this area of religious freedom.

Despite the expectations generated by the change of power that is looming in Cuba next April, various political and religious actors see no signs for optimism about a change of direction. Although an increase in social protests can be observed, the Communist Party will maintain the repressive system that has been operating for 59 years. In other words, the change of the Presidency does not mean a political transition. Regarding religious freedom, no change is expected either. Among religious actors, uncertainty prevails over the future of the country.

## 2. A situation characterized by an increase in social protests

In 1958 the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of Cuba was the third highest in Latin America, second only to Venezuela and Uruguay. Nowadays it is below the average in the region and hardly surpasses the poorest countries.<sup>3</sup> In 2017, it hardly grew by 1.6 percent and the island needs more than 2 billion dollars a year of foreign investment for its economy to grow.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, blackouts programmed to save energy are frequent and Venezuela cannot maintain its oil supply to Cuba for much longer.<sup>5</sup>

The social crisis is not under control either, according to the opposition organization Patriotic Union of Cuba (UNPACU), which in March expressed concern about the increase in suicides and violence on the island.<sup>6</sup> José Daniel Ferrer, a member of UNPACU, referred to the case of an old man who hanged himself in the Santiago town of El Cristo; in that same town, which belongs to the municipality and the province of Santiago de Cuba, a student of a polytechnic institute was seriously injured in the middle of a brawl in the institution where he studied. These are not isolated incidents, but symptoms of tiredness that Cubans experience as a society, the organization explains.

José Antonio López Piña, a resident of El Cristo, explained that the man hanged himself because he lived in poor conditions and had had problems with his food supply, so he went into a depressive state. The incident occurred at nine in the morning, but the police did not arrive until five in the afternoon. At eight-thirty in the evening the hearse appeared. “It is not the first time that a person commits suicide in El Cristo and spends between eight and ten hours at the scene, in full view of the neighbors, due to the lack of efficiency of the police,” said López Piña.

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<sup>3</sup> “Producto Interno Bruto de 1900 a 1960”, *Foresight Cuba*, 08/10/2014. Retrieved from <http://foresightcuba.com/producto-interno-bruto-1900-a-1960/>.

<sup>4</sup> “Cuba se prepara para cambios: 2018 será el año del relevo de Raúl Castro”, *Clarín*, 12/23/2017. Retrieved from [https://www.clarin.com/mundo/cuba-prepara-cambios-2018-ano-relevo-raul-castro\\_0\\_S1ShBZ3fG.html](https://www.clarin.com/mundo/cuba-prepara-cambios-2018-ano-relevo-raul-castro_0_S1ShBZ3fG.html).

<sup>5</sup> “Venezuela recorta a la mitad el petróleo a Cuba”, *DW Noticias*, 07/14/2016. Retrieved from <http://www.dw.com/es/venezuela-recorta-a-la-mitad-el-petr%C3%B3leo-a-cuba/av-19401176>.

<sup>6</sup> “Suicidios y peleas en Cuba”, *UNPACU*, 03/01/2018. Retrieved from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fpur5kX\\_FlY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fpur5kX_FlY).

Social violence is already one of the biggest problems on the island and cases are happening more frequently every day. At the Vladimir Ilich Lenin School in El Cristo, a student was stabbed in the head, in the midst of a generalized brawl. In retaliation, the students themselves decided to burn the clothes of the aggressor, but the teachers prevented it. When searching the school they found numerous knives among the students' belongings.<sup>7</sup>

The Cuban artist Danilo Maldonado, known as El Sexto (The Sixth), denounced in his social networks the disappearance of his daughter Renata María Maldonado and Alexandra Sagaro Toms, both English citizens.<sup>8</sup> He made an emergency call to the institutions that protect children and human rights worldwide, since he suspects that both his daughter and Sagaro's daughter were kidnapped in Havana by the Government of Raúl Castro.

El Sexto, who won the Václav Havel International Prize for creative dissidence in 2015, has been arrested several times. His work *Rebellion in the Farm*, (a reference to the novel *Animal Farm* by British writer George Orwell), in which he wrote the words 'Raúl' and 'Fidel' on the backs of two living pigs, caused him to be accused of contempt and sent to prison without right to trial for ten months. In 2017 he also went to a maximum security prison on the outskirts of Havana, for painting "He's gone" on facades of buildings in the city after the death of Fidel Castro.

An anonymous source interviewed for this article concurs with the position of the UNPACU: "People in Cuba are desperate, not so much about the system, but for the growing economic difficulties. I anticipate an increase in this type of protest." When asked about the impact of this type of protest, our source said: "Protests will have no consequence. They will be violently repressed."<sup>9</sup>

The solution does not seem to be on the international level either. The arrival of the Republican Donald Trump to the White House meant a break in the policy of thaw encouraged by his predecessor, the Democrat Barack Obama. Although Trump did not break diplomatic relations, he decided to keep the operation of his embassy in Cuba limited, forcing the islanders to travel to other countries to apply for a visa. Also the Colombian Embassy temporarily closed its headquarters in Havana, which makes many Cubans feel desperate because they cannot emigrate.

For many analysts, Cuba is experiencing a historic moment, but it will hardly have a positive impact in the near future, which is why hope is running out. The suicide of Fidelito Castro Díaz-Balart, Fidel Castro's eldest son, may represent a summary of what is happening in Cuba after Fidel. The suicide has more political characteristics than personal drama, although the latter has been taken as an official explanation of the fact.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> "Reyertas en las escuelas y suicidios en Cuba: ¿dónde está la Policía?", *Cibercuba*, 03/03/2018. Retrieved from <https://www.cibercuba.com/videos/noticias/2018-03-03-u1-e192519-s27061-suicidios-y-reyertas-escuelas-cuba-donde-esta-policia>.

<sup>8</sup> "Denuncian desaparición de dos ciudadanas inglesas en Cuba", *Cibercuba*, 03/04/2018. Retrieved from <https://www.cibercuba.com/noticias/2018-03-04-u1-e20037-s27061-denuncian-desaparicion-dos-ciudadanas-inglesas-cuba>.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with an anonymous source living in Cuba, 03/22/2018.

<sup>10</sup> "Fidelito: el primer Castro suicida", *Cibercuba*, 02/02/2018. Retrieved from <https://www.cibercuba.com/noticias/2018-02-02-u191983-e42839-s27068-fidelito-primer-castro-suicida>.

### 3. With the Presidency of Diaz-Canel there will be continuity of the communist system

In 2013 Miguel Diaz-Canel became the first leader, born after the triumph of the Revolution, in reaching the position of first vice president while he was a member of the Bureau of the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC), the highest authority in the country. He was also first secretary of the Party in the provinces of Villa Clara and Holguín and Minister of Higher Education until 2012. That same year he became vice president of the Council of Ministers until 2013. Diaz-Canel is considered to be a generational continuity of the revolution. In November 2017 he made his position clear when he commented that “there will be a president in Cuba always defending the Revolution and there will be comrades who will come out from the village, people will choose them.”<sup>11</sup>

Diaz-Canel comes from a family in the center of the island, the son of a primary school teacher and a worker of a mechanical plant in Santa Clara. He graduated as an Electronic Engineer and began his working life in the Revolutionary Armed Forces. He worked as a lecturer at the Central University Marta Abreu, where he was also a leader of the Union of Young Communists until 1994 when he was appointed first secretary of the Central Committee in that province. During his tenure, Villa Clara underwent several transformations, one of the most significant being the creation of El Mejunje, one of the first places to host transvestism shows in Cuba.<sup>12</sup> In addition, the city became the epicenter of the rock movement.

The margin of maneuver of an eventual mandate of Diaz-Canel is extremely limited, considering that he will be all the time under the watchful eye of Raul Castro, explained the political scientist and specialist on island issues, Arturo López Levy: “Raúl will continue to be the natural leader of the Armed Forces, where he served for 49 years (1959-2008), so there will be a gradual transfer of power to the new generation.”<sup>13</sup>

In fact, if Díaz-Canel rises to the Presidency in April, it will be the first time that a civilian directs the Armed Forces in the history of Cuba. This does not promise any kind of opening, adds López Levy: “The current political elite is not going to commit political suicide and much less so under the hostile conditions that the US government maintains toward Cuba.”<sup>14</sup>

The Cuban dissident Antonio Rodiles expresses a similar opinion, considering that Díaz-Canel will not be more than a puppet similar to Osvaldo Dorticós (president of Cuba from 1959 to

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<sup>11</sup> “Cuba asoma el nuevo Gobierno: Los siguientes pasos de la Revolución”, *Telesur*, 12/02/2017. Retrieved from <https://www.telesurtv.net/news/Cuba-asoma-el-nuevo-Gobierno-Los-siguientes-pasos-de-la-Revolucion-20171201-0011.html>.

<sup>12</sup> “USA Today: Comunidad gay cubana sale del closet”, *Martí Noticias*, 06/10/2016. Retrieved from <https://www.martinoticias.com/a/cuba-comunidad-gay-discriminacion/125705.html>.

<sup>13</sup> “Cuatro claves del cambio presidencial en Cuba”, *esglobal*, 04/19/2018. Retrieved from <https://www.esglobal.org/cuatro-claves-del-cambio-presidencial-en-cuba/>.

<sup>14</sup> “Elecciones en Cuba; sucesión designada”, *Excelsior*, 03/11/2018. Retrieved from <http://www.excelsior.com.mx/global/2018/03/11/1225589>.

1976).<sup>15</sup> “The regime has not taken any steps forward and it is difficult to do so now. Any change that may occur in the political scenario has to be accompanied by a tremendous international pressure, as well as a very strong internal pressure.”<sup>16</sup>

The American newspaper *The New York Times*, with a clearly Democrat editorial line, also agrees that there will be no change: “Most of the signs point to the continuity of the status quo: the succession of someone who is not a Castro, yes, but not a transition to a freer regime. The Cuban regime continues to be relatively protected from national pressures to become more democratic, even though this could benefit the interests of the Cuban Communist Party itself in the long term.”<sup>17</sup> This has happened in China after the implementation of a mixed economy system allowing the entry of foreign capital.

For the newspaper, both Castro’s son and daughter will remain in powerful positions. However, beyond the family, the most important normative legacy of Raúl Castro - the military control of the economy - will remain. The Cuban Army, through its conglomerate Gaesa, owns the vast majority of companies operating in the commercial sector, from hotels and currency houses to ports. This gives the Army sufficient control of up to 60 percent of the flow of money to Cuba. Breaking a monopoly is difficult; even more so if it also has power over weapons and the intelligence service. “The Cuban Army is committed not only to the government of one party, but also, apparently, to an economy of a single company,” the newspaper explains. “Remittances, which perhaps average up to three billion dollars annually, are a crucial lifeline for the Cuban economy.”

It could be thought that by financing civil society, the newspaper continues, remittances help democracy in Cuba. However, since poverty is rampant and funding is scarce, most remittances are used for consumption in households or self-employed activities, so there is little left for the type of civic groups that are indispensable in the emergence of a democracy.

After the succession, the newspaper concludes, the regime in Cuba will remain controlled by the Castro family, the army and a regulatory system designed to restrict the growth of business and political organizations, which will minimize the pressure for democratization.<sup>18</sup> “Perhaps the only possible pressure for more democracy after the succession could come from a conflict between the party and the Army. They are separate entities, each with its own culture, resources and support

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<sup>15</sup> Second president of the Cuban revolution, a position that he assumed after the resignation of Daniel Urrutia. He held the presidency until 1976, when a reform of Cuban institutions made Fidel Castro, then prime minister, president of both the Council of State and the Council of Ministers. From that year on he kept his position in the Central Committee of the party, and later, in 1981, he was appointed Minister of Justice.

<sup>16</sup> “Antonio Rodiles: “Díaz-Canel va a ser un títere como lo fue Osvaldo Dorticós”, *Cibercuba*, 03/02/2018. Retrieved from <https://www.cibercuba.com/videos/noticias/2018-03-02-u1-e20037-s27061-antonio-rodiles-diaz-canel-ser-titire-lo-fue-osvaldo>.

<sup>17</sup> “Adiós, hermanos Castro; hola, Partido Comunista”, *The New York Times*, 02/27/2018. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/es/2018/02/27/opinion-corrales-loxton-cuba-castro-partido-comunista/>.

<sup>18</sup> “Raúl Castro cambiará la Constitución para aumentar el poder del Partido Comunista en la Isla”, *Cibercuba*, 03/28/2018. Retrieved from <https://www.cibercuba.com/noticias/2018-03-28-u1-e129488-s27061-raul-castro-pretende-atornillar-aun-poder-partido-comunista>.

base.”<sup>19</sup> However, this seems unlikely, considering that Raúl Castro continues to control both institutions.

For the political activist Antonio Rodiles, this generational change requires acceptance of new actors in the political scenario of the island. However this acceptance does not mean that the actors are vital for the system to continue as it has been until now. In fact, within the Communist Party the following phrase is frequently mentioned: “people die, but the Party is eternal.”<sup>20</sup>

In the first week of March 2018, the government ordered the restructuring of the *Comisión de Defensa y Seguridad Nacional, CDSN [National Defense and Security Commission]* without anyone knowing why until now. The CDSN is a body of control subordinated to the central power of the government.<sup>21</sup> Among the unofficial explanations given for the restructuring of the CDSN is that of erasing any traces of a possible concealment of everything related to the alleged sonic attacks suffered by US and Canadian diplomats in Cuba.<sup>22</sup>

The supposed acoustic aggression has generated a diplomatic crisis between Washington and Havana, and has resulted in the departure of 60 percent of US personnel from the embassy in Cuba for security reasons. Other explanations assert that Raul Castro ordered the modification of the CDSN, because he prefers a smaller group and wishes to focus on protecting his integrity after the transfer of power. Neither would he want to leave clues of the agencies that have been advising him so far. Something similar happened when Fidel Castro transferred power to Raúl and now it is happening again but with one difference: with Fidel it was made after he stepped aside but with Raúl a change in the Presidency is anticipated.

Recently, an article was published in a newspaper criticizing the opulence and continued travels of Fidel's youngest son, Antonio Castro.<sup>23</sup> Although this may suggest a distancing of Castroism by those who come to power, there are those who allege that everything that happened was staged with the complicity of Castroism to give the appearance of a transition, without a transition actually happening.<sup>24</sup>

But beyond any expectation, Diaz-Canel has publicly declared that he is not a reformer and that he will defend the ideals of the revolution.<sup>25</sup> This position has become clear when it comes to relations with Washington. He considers that the relations with Washington are totally asymmetric.

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<sup>19</sup> “Raúl Castro cambiará la Constitución para aumentar el poder del Partido Comunista en la Isla”, *Cibercuba*, 03/28/2018.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with an anonymous source living in Cuba, 03/22/2018.

<sup>21</sup> One of the most prominent figures of this organization was the son of Raúl Castro, Alejandro Castro Espín, something that annoyed the generals of the old guard, who have never been happy to be subordinated to a person of lower military rank.

<sup>22</sup> “Cuba: el enigma de los ‘ataques acústicos’ contra diplomáticos de EEUU”, *el Nuevo Herald*, 09/27/2017. Retrieved from <http://www.elnuevoherald.com/noticias/mundo/america-latina/cuba-es/article175633916.html>.

<sup>23</sup> “Cuba: el enigma de los ‘ataques acústicos’ contra diplomáticos de EEUU”, *el Nuevo Herald*, 09/27/2017.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with an anonymous source living in Cuba, 22/03/2018; “Habla desde el exilio el exjefe de gabinete de Raúl Castro: “Él nunca va a abandonar el poder””, *Cibercuba*, 03/28/2018. Retrieved from <https://www.cibercuba.com/noticias/2018-01-13-u73624-e73624-s27061-habla-exilio-exjefe-gabinete-raul-castro-nunca-abandonar>.

<sup>25</sup> “Respuesta a Miguel Diaz-Canel 2da parte”, *Estado de SATS*, 21/08/2017. Retrieved from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zNaw\\_Hj9f88](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zNaw_Hj9f88).

According to him the United States demands changes when what matters, he says, is that the Americans must demonstrate their intention to change their policies against the island.

#### **4. The persistence of restrictions on religious freedom: empirical evidence for 2017**

In 2017, the database of violent incidents of the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America reported in Cuba a total of 1,322 arrests, four sentences, 873 cases of physical or mental abuse, seven attacks on houses of religious ministers, and two cases of expulsions from houses.<sup>26</sup> Among the violations is the restriction on public religious events, as happened with the interruption of an inter-confessional event in eastern Cuba, despite the fact that the activity had received advanced permission from the authorities. The reported incidents involve entire churches, and dozens of parishioners in cases of arrests. Dozens of women linked to the Ladies in White and a large number of activists are arrested every week when they go to Sunday morning Mass, as well as other religious events.

Human rights activists linked to religious organizations have also suffered particular repression from the Government, which isolates them not only from society but also from their religious communities. One of the most pressing problems of various religious groups in Cuba is the lack of legal recognition. Some of them, like the Jehovah's Witnesses, have not been able to register with the Ministry of Justice, making them technically illegal.

The Apostolic Movement, for example, has been denied the right to register. The old Catholic Church have been waiting for an approval since 2007. However, with Muslim groups and those with Afro-Cuban beliefs, the religious authorities of the island, in contrast, show an evident flexibility in their guidelines.<sup>27</sup> The annual report of Christian Solidarity Worldwide [CSW], a confessional organization, points out that many Cuban churches have been waiting for more than two decades for a legal permit to officially exist, something that has forced many to meet illegally and, at the same time, become vulnerable to the confiscation or demolition of their places of worship.<sup>28</sup>

Although in general religious groups suffer violations of their rights, the unregistered groups are more vulnerable. The database of this Observatory contains cases of harassment of several

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<sup>26</sup> Violent Incidents Database, Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America, [www.violentincidents.com](http://www.violentincidents.com).

<sup>27</sup> The predominant religion in Cuba is Catholic Christianity, but different Protestant denominations such as Pentecostals, Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Methodists, Presbyterians, etc. are also tolerated. At the same time, Santería as a recognized religion has developed with the benevolence of the State. Also, the island is being increasingly populated by people of Muslim origin. The Islamic Organization for Latin America and the Caribbean, maintains that the number of Muslims coming from the Middle East already exceeds four million people. This situation has led to a number of islanders, particularly young people, to change their religion in recent years. More information in <http://barrioblogcubano.blogspot.com/2015/04/el-ifa-cubano-la-santeria-y-el-islam-en.html>

<sup>28</sup> Christian Solidarity Worldwide (2018), Cuba Freedom of Religion or Belief Annual Report. Retrieved from <http://www.csw.org.uk/2018/01/24/report/3827/article.htm>.

religious leaders, as well as the intrusion and suspension of Masses and other activities of the congregations.<sup>29</sup>

CSW denounced the harassment suffered by Cuban apostolic pastors Alain Toledano, in Santiago de Cuba, and Bernardo de Quesada, in Camaguey. In its annual report the CSW also warned of the arrest and threats against the Patmos Institute's activist, Leonardo Rodríguez. The report warns that government officials in Santiago de Cuba have prohibited Toledano, and members of his church from buying any construction materials to rebuild the *casa culto* (house church), demolished by the government in early 2016. The pastor said that they have everything ready for reconstruction, including licenses, but they have not been able to buy the materials for "absurd" reasons that the officials in charge of the sale have given him. As he explained, they are victims of discriminatory action, and pointed out that, unlike the religious people, the military, who live in the region, "can build quickly, without restrictions", because they are part of the regime.

In Camaguey the local authorities have interrupted Bible studies conducted in private homes and have tried to intimidate the house owners to stop the activities. The pastor Bernardo de Quesada also lives in Camaguey and carries out his ministry there. It is reported that the inspectors of the Department of Physical Planning tried to enter the property of the pastor's family, where the church meets, while he and his wife were out of the country.

The CSW report also criticized the actions of harassment and intimidation against the religious rights activist Leonardo Rodríguez Alonso, regional coordinator of the Patmos Institute,<sup>30</sup> an independent civil society organization that promotes interreligious dialogue on the island. The activist was arrested in Camajuaní on 28 February 2018 on his way home, when he returned from participating in meetings with human rights defenders. At the meeting they had been discussing the responses to a series of violations that affected the churches of the Apostolic Movement in the Center and East of Cuba.<sup>31</sup>

Rodríguez Alonso was taken to a police unit in Santa Clara, and when his family became involved in his situation, the captain of the State Security, named Aquino Yera, told them that the Government considers the Patmos Institute a counterrevolutionary organization, and that charges could be filed against the activists.

"Those who speak of greater openness have no idea of the situation in which we live day by day," explains Pastor Ricardo.<sup>32</sup> "There is more tolerance on some issues. Before we had to give the Ministry of Justice an updated list of all the members of our congregations so often; they no longer ask for it, but for each activity that we organize the Office of Attention of Religious Affairs of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba requires information of all the parishioners who will be present. If we have a person from another country we must present their curriculum vitae, say how long they will be on the island and say what they will do each day, as well as request

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<sup>29</sup> "Informe: Aumentan las violaciones a la libertad de culto en Cuba", *Cubanet*, 01/26/2018. Retrieved from <https://www.cubanet.org/noticias/informe-aumentan-las-violaciones-la-libertad-de-culto-en-cuba/>.

<sup>30</sup> Patmos Institute, <https://institutopatmos.wordpress.com/>.

<sup>31</sup> "Solidaridad Cristiana Mundial denuncia acoso a religiosos y defensores de libertad de culto en Cuba", *Martí Noticias*, 08/03/2018. Retrieved from <https://www.martinoticias.com/a/cuba-acoso-a-religiosos-activistas-defensores-libertad-de-culto/163719.html>.

<sup>32</sup> Fictitious name. The identity of this religious minister will remain anonymous for obvious reasons.



a religious visa from the Council of Churches of Cuba that costs one hundred dollars if we are willing to wait, however, if the visa is urgent it is much more expensive.”

Despite the requirements, as we have seen, there is no guarantee that they will be able to carry out the activity, since the authorities decide at the last minute whether or not to grant the corresponding permit. “Imagine what that means for us, we have to buy things and sometimes we keep everything because we are denied permission a few hours before we are due to start and the guest cannot do anything.”

Pastor Ricardo believes that the security of the State has raised its foot a little against the congregations. “They used to take you to an office where they threatened you with putting you in jail, but that does not happen that often anymore. What remains are the infiltrated agents who monitor each activity carried out by religious groups.” He commented that there are cases in which the agent remains in a congregation for years, often disavowing the pastors or generating internal conflicts. “They prepare them so well that they seem evangelical or Pentecostal, they speak and behave as such, even participating in the decisions of the church.” Consulted about other measures, the pastor recalled that a member of a church was intimidated into spying on his own congregation. “He passed information for some time, but when he made the decision to refuse, they threatened to put him and his family in prison. He ended up moving to another city, where he suffered a strange traffic accident from which he miraculously survived.”

## **5. No improvements are anticipated regarding religious freedom in the near future**

Díaz-Canel worried various social organizations, including churches, which receive money from abroad because he considers that they have become “subversive actors of the counterrevolution,” for which, he argues, he will insist on “stopping the money” that “finances those organizations” to end the counterrevolution.<sup>33</sup> With this type of threat and the increase in the violations of religious rights in Cuba in the last year it is difficult to expect an improvement in the short term, according to report sources close to Cuban churches.<sup>34</sup>

Pastor Ricardo is not expecting positive change in the future with the prospect of Díaz-Canel as head of the country. “Like others, if he falls into disgrace, he will quickly disappear from the political scene. However, we must recognize that he is a very intelligent man and, so far, no slip is known.” For Pastor Ricardo, his government will be no more than the continuation of the current repressive system. “In addition, it does not have the conditions to make a change. While the Party is under the direction of Raul Castro, this will remain the same.” However, he does not rule out that some concessions may be made. “Just as there were some changes in economic issues, many of which have already been pushed back, a door of hope may open for the various churches. I, in

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<sup>33</sup> “Respuesta a Miguel Diaz-Canel 2da parte”, *Estado de SATS*, 21/08/2017. Retrieved from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zNaw\\_Hj9f88](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zNaw_Hj9f88).

<sup>34</sup> Christian Solidarity Worldwide (2018), Cuba Freedom of Religion or Belief Annual Report. Retrieved from <http://www.csw.org.uk/2018/01/24/report/3827/article.htm>.

particular, do not expect a big change coming from the State, but I do expect change because God wants it.”

For now, Pastor Ricardo is more concerned about the uncertainty generated by political changes. Although everything points to a continuity in matters of religious policy, an intensification in the monitoring of the activities of the churches is perceptible. There is also concern about possible changes in directors of religious policy in Cuba. “There are two key positions for us that will most likely have a change under the new President: the direction of religious affairs and the presidency of the Council of Churches of Cuba”,<sup>35</sup> explains Pastor Ricardo. “These changes can be negative or positive for us. We will have to wait and see.”

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<sup>35</sup> The Council of Churches of Cuba is the association that federates 30 percent of the registered Protestant churches. Despite not being representative of the Protestant sector, it is considered by the government as its sole interlocutor. Most of the permits that churches must request for their activities must be processed through this institution. The Council of Churches of Cuba is under the control of the Communist Party.

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