

Jehovah's Witnesses in Cuba

Frank Calzon

The Cuban Government is engaged in a strong drive against the Jehovah's Witnesses in the island, particularly in regard to an estimated three hundred young men who have been imprisoned for refusing to serve in Cuba's armed forces. A statement released by the Watch Tower Society (the Witnesses' official name) at its central offices in New York charges that the sect has been under severe official attack during the last two years. According to the statement—contained in a memo sent to me by the Society this summer—the Government campaign is carried out “on all fronts: over the radio and TV, in newspapers and other publication, in worker centers, at factories, hospitals, and block by block.”

Of late the Witnesses have been the focus of the Committee for the Defense of the Revolution—the Government-sponsored neighborhood organizations that serve as watchdogs against political opposition in the island. The sect was banned and their churches closed by official decree on July 1, 1974. Since then “many have suffered beatings and have been put to work in the fields for long hours with poor food. As many as 300 young men have been imprisoned for refusing military service for three years each, and a thousand have gone to prison because their children did not salute the flag.”

The official campaign has developed swiftly since 1971, when, on the occasion of the First National Congress on Education and Culture, “the attitude of each Church, sect and religious group was thoroughly examined.” As reported in *Granma*, Cuba's official newspaper, the Congress approved a resolution stating that “the obscurantist and counter-revolutionary sects must be unmasked and fought.” The Witnesses were included among the major sects to be given “particular attention” due to their allegedly counterrevolutionary activities.

The Witnesses, however, maintain they merely observe “Christian neutrality when it comes to becoming involved in political matters.” They also continued to adhere to their long-established policy of not saluting the national flags of any nation or singing national anthems. Both men and women have been imprisoned because

their children refuse to get involved in “patriotic exercises” at school. “Many of those in prison,” the report says, “have suffered from poor health because of lack of good food and also because of poor treatment on the farms where many have been forced to work.”

They have posed a difficult problem for the Government because while in prison the Witnesses attempt to proselytize their fellow prisoners. As a result, special camps have been created for them. In the mid-sixties many were sent to the UMAP (Military Units to Aid Production). As Jose Yglesias reported in the *New York Review of Books* (June 3, 1971), the UMAP units were created “to include only young men of draft age whose moral outlook did not in the eye of the authorities make them fit for regular military duty. The units became a catchall for homosexuals and other undesirables and in fact functioned as prison camps.”

The official Government line was clearly established since 1971, when *Granma* reported that “any time such a group or sect [Jehovah's Witnesses, Evangelical Gideon's Band, or Seventh-Day Adventists] succeeds in penetrating and winning over a small sector of our population it is because, in that particular spot, the work of the political, administrative, mass and educational organizations has been poor.” In regard to the Catholic Church the official declaration stated a similar concern: “the Church's activities among children and its organization of sports events, festivals, etc. . . . results from our shortcomings in this field, from our failure to use the enormous potentials of the Revolution that are available to the political, mass and school organizations, and from our weakness in ideological and political practical activities.”

The answer, according to Cuba's official newspaper, lies in “programming of extracurricular activities, attention to organized and leisure time and recreation for children and young people as a policy to be followed.” As the official statements indicate, the Government's main concern is that the activities organized by these religious communities attract various sectors of Cuban society. *Granma* identified two areas of concern: peasants and young people.

Since the early years of the Revolution the Government has made an effort to control every organization in the island, including social, recreational, professional,

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and sports organizations. Thus, the activities sponsored independently by these religious groups (including sports and recreational events) are in a way a challenge to the Government's claim to a monopoly in organizational endeavors in the country.

The sects are running programs that are outside the Government's structures and as a result are perceived by the official guardians of governmental orthodoxy as a threat to the revolutionary process. Another result is that because of their persistence in spite of tremendous odds, the religious groups have gained the admiration of many individuals who otherwise would not have been attracted to their views; and many of those who do not feel integrated in the Revolution find that in the sects' activities there is an alternative to the official organizations with their compulsory attendance at meetings, congresses, and political seminars.

As late as July of this year, Cuban Adventists were having difficulties with the regime. A five-man delegation invited to attend the twenty-first quadrennial Inter-American Conference of Seventh-Day Adventists was denied Government permission to travel to Kingston, Jamaica, where the meeting was held. As reported by Kingston's *The Sunday Gleaner* (July 25, 1976), over three hundred delegates from Central and South America and the Caribbean attended. Originally scheduled to have taken place in Colombia, the conference was transferred to Kingston in expectation that the Cubans would be permitted to come because of Cuba's friendly ties with Jamaica. In spite of efforts by the Jamaican congregation and by several cabinet officers, including Jamaica's Minister of Foreign Affairs, permission was not obtained. The Cuban Adventists were also refused permission to attend the World Conference in Vienna last year.

Pastor H.S. Walters, president of the West Indies Union of the Seventh-Day Adventists, said that many Jamaican members of the congregation were concerned about "so many in religion in Jamaica saying that religious freedom exists in Cuba, when no such thing exists, as known in Jamaica."

"There is no need sending Cubans to Africa when they claim they are fighting for freedom of the black man,"

Walters said, "when their own people can't worship God according to the dictates of their own Conscience. It is time that the United Nations send an investigative team to Cuba to guarantee that people there enjoy religious freedom."

Walters added that "some Cuban leaders boast that in five years there will be no religion in Cuba," and noted that there are about twelve thousand members of the Seventh-Day Adventist faith in Cuba today.

The relations between the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Government began on a friendly footing after the revolutionary takeover. In 1961, 33,000 Witnesses met in Havana for a convention, and the Government granted a 50 per cent reduction on round-trip bus, train, and boat fares to the meeting site in Havana. By 1962, however, restrictions began to be enforced about receiving religious literature from abroad; and a year later, according to the Witnesses Yearbook, "hundreds of brothers had been arrested because of their preaching activity." Throughout the late sixties many were prosecuted, and their Kingdom Halls, or meeting places, were sometimes attacked by "mobs who threw stones, bricks and pieces of iron" trying to disrupt their services. The Government somehow could never prosecute the people involved.

A known camp went by the name of *Mangas Largas* (Long Sleeves). A 1968 report explains that it "gained its name from the mosquitoes in the area. They were so bad, long-sleeved shirts were required to be worn at all times, but Castro let the members of the religious sect live there half naked. By the time I got there the prisoners had been there for months and were being eaten alive. Their skins were red and puffy and all of them had wounds that had become infected. Their only food was sugar stalks and a little water....Their crime? They preached the Bible....As I left, I saw the Jehovah's Witnesses huddled together, praying, and I cried."

In mid-1975 the Cuban congregation wrote about some individual cases. A father was sentenced to six months in prison because his children did not salute the flag; a mother with three children was sentenced to six months in prison on a similar charge. A man was sentenced to fourteen months for refusing military service and was brutally beaten. Another, who had been sentenced to ten years and had been in "numberless prisons," was released after six years. Significantly, the Witnesses do not engage in opposition to the regime. They believe in "showing respect for rulers of all countries," but they get in trouble because of their refusal to salute the flag and their persistence in considering themselves "neutrals" in political matters. The Watch Tower Society refuses to give an exact estimate of their number in Cuba, but it points out that "there are thousands."

No Bible literature pertaining to the sect is permitted entry into the country, and a visitor to Cuba quoted in a recent statement by the international office of the Witnesses in New York said that "religions seem to be permitted, but just to a point as many of them are more or less social clubs and some churches are used for drying tobacco."