

Cuban churches feel pressure from government to stifle dissent

A Cuban pastor went on trial this week for alleged immigrant smuggling, but activists say it highlights a curb on religious freedom.

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Carlos Lamelas, a Cuban evangelical pastor who spoke up about religious freedom on the island, first found himself booted from his church, and then jailed.

But the former Church of God president does not stand accused of political dissent or other counter-revolutionary activities. His alleged crime: human trafficking.

Lamelas went on trial this week for allegedly smuggling people out of the island, and if found guilty faces nine years in prison.

"Persecution of pastors is subtle," said Alexandri Sosa, a pastor who left Cuba this summer after having problems with the government. "The methods have changed. So if a wall collapses and you rebuild it, you go to jail for illegal construction."

WALKING A FINE LINE

Experts say the Lamelas case illustrates the pressure on religious leaders to cooperate with Cuba's Council of Churches, a coalition of Protestant denominations close to the government. It also underscores the tightrope pastors in Cuba walk in their quest to avoid politics and hold on to their congregations.

Christian activist groups have launched an Internet campaign publicizing Lamelas' case, highlighting it as an example of a wider move to restrict religious freedom in Cuba. While Cuba closes unlicensed churches nationwide, church groups say pastors are being singled out for harassment.

CURBS ON SPEECH

Last year, Pastor Manuel Jesús Rosado Arencibia, of Remanente de Dios church in Matanzas, was jailed after distributing evangelical leaflets.

A Roman Catholic Church layman, an agronomist who edits the religious magazine Vitral, which runs articles that criticize the government, lost his job as president of a state tobacco company when he refused a government plea to give up the magazine. He now spends eight hours a day in a shed, guarding palm tree stalks used to make cigar boxes, The Associated Press reported.

Pastors are by no means being targeted in a crackdown, and pastors acknowledge that the pressure they get is a far cry from the early days of Castro's revolution, when more than 100 priests were expelled from Cuba for allegedly working against the government. Other religious leaders were interned in work camps called UMAPs, Military Units to Help Production.

The Cuban government was officially atheist until 1992.

"Pastors are marginalized," said Rev. Efraín Reyes, who moved to South Florida after his release from the UMAP. "Everyone tries to keep his mouth shut. They can get into big problems. You never know who is listening."

Lamelas resisted government interference in church affairs, and refused to sign a pledge to the government since he became president of his denomination's general assembly in 2004, said a spokeswoman for Christian Solidarity Network, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to not jeopardize future trips to the island.

After two detentions, Lamelas was arrested in February after police searched his home, confiscating his computer and office equipment. He spent four months in jail, and is now awaiting the outcome of his trial at home.

PASTOR: NO EVIDENCE

In a brief telephone interview, Lamelas said his trial went well and that even the prosecutor told the judge there was no evidence to support the charges that he helped people flee Cuba.

Churches sometimes provide "invitation letters" for its members to travel abroad, and fakes have been known to circulate on the black market. But Lamelas denied involvement.

"I had nothing to do with that," he said, declining to discuss his case further. "It's not very easy to talk on the phone."

Pastors say the Cuban government is cautious of religious leaders because of their ability to congregate with -- and preach to -- so many people each week. The church is among the few entities not directly controlled by the communist government, so officials try to monitor members of the clergy.

WARY OF U.S. TIES

The government is also suspicious of the close ties the ministers often have with Protestant churches in the United States. While those relationships often bring much-needed aid to Cuba, the government is wary of more conservative churches' influence on their Cuban counterparts.

The Cuban government wields tremendous leverage over the pastors, as they must turn to the government to get much-needed, but rarely given, permission to build churches.

Sosa, now in Europe, said the Cuban government generally avoids creating martyrs by jailing pastors. When he was having run-ins with the government for speaking out on mundane issues, he started getting warning notes in his weekly offerings basket.

"The pastor is a person who speaks to 150 people every Sunday," he said in a telephone interview. "The government has to control that."