

Identity

LGBTQ People : How American Evangelicals Helped Stop Same-Sex Marriage in Cuba

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The Evangelical church has gained a huge amount of political power in Cuba, and LGBTQ people are dealing with the consequences.

Earlier this year, Cuban psychologist Dachelys Valdés Moreno and her American-born wife, Hope, welcomed their baby boy into the world. Although they live in Havana, they opted to give birth—as well as, nine months earlier, undergo the process of IVF—in the U.S. They couldn't do it at home : The Cuban government still doesn't recognize same-sex marriage.

A year ago, most LGBTQ Cubans would have been eagerly anticipating the expected legalization of same-sex marriage. In July 2018, the Cuban National Assembly proposed a new constitution that included amended language (Article 68) that would make same-sex marriage legal. But that December, the government withdrew the amendment from the draft, largely because of strong backlash from evangelical churches. This means, along with marriage, that assisted reproduction is still only available to heterosexual couples in Cuba ; single women are excluded as well.

So, if both Valdés Moreno and her wife wanted to be legally recognized on their child's birth certificate, they had no choice but to give birth in the states. Once they return to Havana later this year, however, they'll be faced with another dilemma : Because Hope, the child's biological mother (whose last name has been withheld for privacy), is not a Cuban citizen, the couple will have to convince the government to recognize Valdés Moreno as the baby's second mother in order for him to be eligible for Cuban citizenship.

"The issue of citizenship for a hetero couple is very easy because you can obtain Cuban citizenship being born in Cuba or being a child of Cubans." But Valdés Moreno fears that it won't be so easy for them : "They automatically expect mother and father, and our birth certificate says that Hope is the mother and I am a parent."

Over the last decade, discrimination against LGBTQ people in Cuba has been waning and there have been tangible gains in the area of LGBTQ rights, led largely by Mariela Castro, Raúl Castro's daughter and longtime director of CENESEX (the National Center for Sex Education). In 2008, the government made gender confirmation surgery free under the national healthcare system, and in 2013, it banned workplace discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. But that was before the recent uptick in evangelism in Cuba, partly aided by financial and ideological support from the U.S.

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Cuba's shift from officially atheist to secular—which indicates more tolerance of organized religion—has also given rise to a growing evangelicalism on the island spurred on by American

churches, whose ideologies have long been spreading throughout the Americas. In fact, millions of dollars from American evangelical organizations funneled into Cuba's conservative, religious communities are funding a groundswell of action meant to dial back a decade of progress made by LGBTQ Cubans.

"Both the moral and financial support of U.S. Evangelical denominations and agencies has been crucial to backing Cuban Evangelicals in their campaign to oppose gay marriage on the island," said Andrew Chesnut, Professor of Religious Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University. Cuban evangelical churches have also received funding from religious groups in Mexico, Colombia, Chile, and Brazil.

The most prominent example to date has been the backlash to Article 68, in which evangelical churches effectively pressured the Cuban government to revoke it from the draft constitution. Methodist, Baptist, and Pentecostal churches organized a petition against it that gathered 178,000 signatures. The campaign not only involved organizing among the church communities, but outreach in the form of posters and door-to-door visits in which members of church groups would, as Havana-based social psychologist and LGBTQ rights pioneer Norma Guillard Limonta experienced it [1], argue that "the world would end if marriage were redefined as not between a man and a woman and for the purposes of procreation." Valdés Moreno saw it for herself : In community meetings leading up to the vote to approve the new constitution, she said she was taken aback by the level of preparation by evangelical Christians, who seemed to have coordinated messaging against same-sex marriage.

"Those were, at least for me, frightening months, because I never could have seen this final result coming ; it really shocked and saddened me," said Valdés Moreno. "What scares me the most is the organizing capacity that [they] have and the fact that suddenly in a country like Cuba the Church could be a force of political pressure that could threaten to vote no to the referendum, to sabotage the [constitutional] project."

Following their successful effort to have Article 68 removed, evangelical churches set their sights on the Conga Against Homophobia and Transphobia—Cuba's version of a pride parade. In May, the 12th annual conga was cancelled by the government, citing "international and regional tensions." One of the organizers of the event told el Nuevo Herald that the celebration was actually cancelled "to avoid confrontations with Christian groups," who organizers feared would counter-protest and start a street riot. In response, activists held a non-sponsored march on May 11 and several were arrested after being warned by government officials not to carry it out [2].

While Cuba has never been a majority-Protestant country, many Cubans consider themselves to be *creyentes* ("believers"). Before the 1959 Revolution, the country was predominantly Catholic, with a substantial portion of the Black and mixed-race population practicing one or more Afro-Cuban religions. But once Fidel Castro aligned himself with Soviet-style communism in the early 1960s, Cuba officially became atheist. Religious practice was marginalized—even criminalized—and members of the Cuban Communist Party were forced to renounce their faith.

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When the Soviet Union, which had been subsidizing Cuba's economy, fell in the early 1990s, many Cubans turned to faith for refuge from the devastating economic crisis. This coincided with a shift in the Castro regime's stance on religion : the wording was changed in the 1992 constitution from an "atheist" to a "secular" country, indicating more official tolerance.

Today, religions of all types are booming in Cuba. An estimated seven to 10 percent of Cubans are

Protestant or evangelical. The recent surge in evangelicalism coincides with the threat of another economic crisis, as Cuba's fortunes are tied to those of Venezuela [3].

But while many Cubans are suffering from the economic downturn, churches are often less vulnerable : Most Cuban evangelical churches have a "sister church" in the U.S. [4] that supports them financially and, as Cuban LGBTQ rights activist and Baptist seminary student Adiel González Maimó emphasized, "That money comes with ideological conditions." [5]

And, while homophobia is nothing new in Cuba, the organized opposition to LGBTQ rights and pressure on the Cuban government to roll them back in the past year echoes methods of fundamentalist groups in the U.S. that are uncommon in Cuba [6], where public space is tightly controlled—and perhaps even more effective there because of it.

Recently, journalist Tracey Eaton's Cuba Money Project published a list of the Cuba-related projects that have received the most government funding since Trump took office [7]. Number five on the list is Evangelical Christian Humanitarian Outreach for Cuba (ECHO Cuba), with just over \$1 million. This group received roughly \$2.3 million from the U.S. government from 2009 to 2017 [8]. ECHO Cuba leads missionary trips to Cuba, provides resources and training to Cuban churches, and "fights biblical poverty" on the island [9].

But the group may not only be exporting religious ideology. Its founder, Miami-based Teo Babún comes from a family of Cuban exiles and, according to an article published in *Granma* (Cuba's state newspaper) [10], supported the anti-communist Bay of Pigs invasion in 1971. "As a good mercenary, Teo Babún today has extended his activity via a few Protestant denominations," reads the *Granma* article, "which complement Trump's goals, outlined in June of 2018, to perfect the subversive U.S. policy toward Cuba and the manipulation of Protestant denominations with a view toward a 'transition' in Cuba."

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In another move that signals an organized evangelical opposition to the status quo, just a month ago, a group of seven evangelical churches broke off from the Cuban Council of Churches (CIC) [11] and established their own splinter group, the Alliance of Cuban Evangelical Churches. Leaders of the new group maintain that the CIC doesn't represent their beliefs, which include a "defense of Biblical values" and the view that marriage should be defined as a union between a man and a woman.

"The creation of this Alliance fosters a space of unity, from which the whole economic, spiritual, religious, and political force of the Christian fundamentalist churches will be deployed," wrote Elaine Saralegui Caraballo, a lesbian pastor and founder of a Cuban division of the Metropolitan Community Church, following the news. She added that the Alliance's goal was to promote "Christian supremacy" with the guidance of the U.S. far right, in a similar manner as has occurred in other Latin American countries.

The new evangelical alliance is gearing up for a renewed fight against marriage equality : In 2020, the government will reconsider the "Family Code" within the constitution [12]. González Maimó feels confident that marriage equality will be a reality by 2021, when the Family Code would go into effect. He based his hunch on a 2016 survey that found 49 percent of the Cuban population was in favor of marriage equality, and on his belief that the political will of the government leans toward extending this right to LGBTQ people. But he also stressed that fundamentalist churches are cognizant of these facts—and are organizing against it.

Valdés Moreno was notably more worried about the looming "very ugly war" over the Family Code

and the future of her family's rights. "Optimism went out the window for me with Article 68," she said. She felt that by removing it from the recent constitution, after being the one to propose it in the first place, the Cuban state was saying to conservative religious groups : "You were right." If evangelical groups were able to organize so well in only a few months against Article 68, she added, they have two whole years to do the same thing with the Family Code. And if same-sex marriage isn't legalized soon in Cuba, the future for Valdés Moreno and her family remains fraught and unclear.

"That battle cannot be lost," said Valdés Moreno, "because if the Family Code is rewritten without [marriage equality], we will go 30 or 50 years before the issue is revisited."

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P.-S.

• Vice. Aug 20 2019, 5:12pm :

https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/qvg8pw/how-american-evangelicals-helped-stop-same-sex-marriage-in-cuba

Notes

[1] <http://www.afrocubaweb.com/norma-guillard.html>

[2] https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/lgbt-arrests-gay-pride-march-conga-cuba-havana-police-a8910221.html?utm_medium=Social&utm_source=Facebook&fbclid=IwAR0oNXotnmb3cy0CWzO4B6Am8u7_u5ewRBfKpMNnipXGgrKeSyhu1m-Bsoc#Echobox=1557725544

[3] <https://www.miamiherald.com/latest-news/article225988720.html>

[4] <https://www.flumc.org/newsdetail/cuban-methodist-church-sees-massive-growth-12783698>

[5] <http://www.urbanlab.org/articles/Mahler%20and%20Hansing%202005.pdf>

[6] <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cuba-constitution/in-rare-campaign-for-cuba-churches-advocate-against-gay-marriage-idUSKCN1MQ2N7>

[7] <http://cubamoneyproject.com/2019/06/17/trump/>

[8] <http://cubamoneyproject.com/2018/11/20/god-usaid-and-cuba/>

[9] <http://www.echocuba.org/12BiblicalPoverty/>

[10] <http://en.granma.cu/cuba/2019-02-21/who-is-teo-babun-and-why-is-he-going-after-cuba>

[11] http://evangelicalfocus.com/world/4528/Evangelical_churches_of_Cuba_establish_their_own_Alliance

[12] <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/cuba/article230129504.htm>