

KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Cuba remained extremely poor. The government maintained an oppressive legal framework that severely restricted peaceful religious activity, regularly harassed religious leaders and worshipers, and continued to wrongfully imprison individuals for their peaceful religious activity.

In May 2023, the Cuban government approved the Social Communication Law, which [codifies](#) broad prohibitions on peaceful expression, including religious expression that is critical of the government. The legislation expands the government’s already extensive authority to target individuals freely expressing their religious convictions. For example, the amended Cuban Penal Code criminalizes “contempt,” “public disorder,” and “resistance,” each of which may be used to [punish](#) the activities of religious leaders and worshipers perceived to be critical of the government. In addition, Decree Law 370 threatens independent journalists reporting on religious freedom with criminal charges and fines.

Throughout 2023, the Office of Religious Affairs (ORA) [continued](#) to regulate and control religious institutions. The Law of Associations requires religious organizations to apply to the Ministry of Justice, where the ORA is housed, for registration. Membership or association with an unregistered religious group is a crime and, despite existing criteria, registration decisions are often arbitrary and discriminatory. The ORA also exercises arbitrary control over the affairs of registered religious organizations and requires permission for virtually any activity other than regular worship services. Religious leaders and groups that are unregistered or conduct unsanctioned religious activity are subject to interrogation, detention, threats of prison sentences on false charges, and confiscation of property.

The government draws on its vast domestic security and surveillance apparatus to harass and intimidate religious leaders and

worshipers, including through the Department of State Security, the National Revolutionary Police, and the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution. For example, Cuban authorities regularly and arbitrarily prevented individuals from peacefully gathering at religious sites and events. In January 2023, the government [prohibited](#) mothers of political prisoners from attending church to pray for their release. In March, police beat and [detained](#) a couple on their way to church after alleging that the couple was going to “take communion against communism.” In June, police [prevented](#) a journalist from attending the funeral mass of a priest whose remains had been transferred to the cathedral of Santiago de Cuba. In October, Cuban authorities [detained](#) two pastors who were scheduled to attend an event on the right to freedom of religion or belief. Additionally, authorities pressured individuals whose religious expressions ran afoul of government orthodoxy. In May, a professor [threatened](#) a university student with expulsion after the student refused to sign a document committing himself to Cuba’s governing ideology for reasons of religious conscience. And in September, police [interrogated](#) a young man who disseminated religiously inspired videos online and pressured him to refrain from speaking critically about the government.

Religious prisoners of conscience remain arbitrarily imprisoned for peacefully following their religious convictions. For example, [Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo](#), the pastor and leader of the Monte de Sion Independent Church, has been in prison since 2021 for his peaceful participation in the protests on July 11, 2021. Twins [Lisdani Rodríguez Isaac](#) and [Lisdiani Rodríguez Isaac](#), members of the Free Yorubas, an independent religious group, also remain imprisoned for their peaceful participation in the July 11 protests. The authorities denied the twins’ application for transfer to a lower-security prison.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Cuba as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
 - Urge Cuban authorities to extend an official invitation for unrestricted visits to USCIRF, the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, and the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief; and
 - Impose targeted sanctions on Cuban government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom—including the ORA, the Department of State Security, the National Revolutionary Police, and the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution—by freezing those individuals’ assets and/or barring their entry to the United States under human rights-related financial and visa authorities.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Highlight religious freedom concerns in Cuba through hearings and letters and by advocating for the release of religious prisoners of conscience such as Lisdiani Rodríguez Isaac, Lisdani Rodríguez Isaac, Donaida Pérez Paseiro, Loreto Hernández García, and Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Hearing:** [Deteriorating Religious Freedom Conditions in Cuba](#)
- **Special Report:** [Religious Freedom for Indigenous Communities in Latin America](#)
- **Event:** [USCIRF Conversation on Religious Freedom for Indigenous Communities in Latin America](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List:** [Cuba](#)

Background

While there are no independent sources on Cuba's religious demographics, [estimates](#) indicate that 60 percent of the country's population of 11 million identify as Catholic. Approximately 40 percent identify as unaffiliated or another religion, such as Anglican, Buddhist, Jehovah's Witness, Methodist, Moravian, Muslim, Quaker, Seventh-day Adventist, or members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. An estimated 70 percent of Cubans observe one or more [Santería](#) or other religious practices based in African tradition.

Cuba is a one-party system under the ruling Cuban Communist Party, with no independent judiciary. The state tightly controls religious institutions through the ORA. All religious organizations must apply for registration with the ORA. Association with or membership in an unregistered religious organization is a crime, and the ORA often arbitrarily denies applications for registration despite existing criteria. Even when the ORA approves a religious organization's application, it exercises arbitrary control over their affairs and requires permission for virtually any activity other than worship services. In December 2022, the [amended Cuban penal code](#) came into force. Article 272 of the penal code criminalizes any religiously inspired actions that oppose "the objectives of education" or the "duty" to "work," "defend the homeland," and "revere [Cuba's] symbols or anything else established by the constitution." In 2019, the government adopted a new constitution that changed the country's religious freedom protections. The constitution includes language that [purports](#) to protect the right to freedom of religion or belief, including through government recognition, respect, and guarantee of religious liberty. However, in reality the constitution allows for severe limitations on religious freedom. For example, the constitution's protections for the right to freedom of religion or belief may be overridden by any piece of legislation in force in Cuba.

Ladies in White

The [Ladies in White](#) is an organization of wives and relatives of dissidents imprisoned in 2003. Cuban authorities actively surveil and violently detain members of the Ladies in White and prevent them from attending religious services on Sundays.

The Cuban regime has aggressively targeted the leader of the movement, [Berta Soler](#). In May 2023, Soler and her husband Ángel Moya were [arrested](#) as they left the headquarters of the Ladies in White. Similar arrests of Soler and Moya occurred in [September](#) and [October](#). Throughout the year, the Cuban regime also detained and arrested members of the Ladies in White. In July, a police operation across several provinces in Cuba resulted in the [arrest](#) of 17 members of the Ladies in White. Another wave of detentions occurred in November when 12 members were [arrested](#) and prevented from attending religious services.

Adherents of Afro-Cuban Religions

Estimates indicate that approximately 70 percent of Cubans observe one or more religious practices based in an [African tradition](#). As Christian Solidarity Worldwide has [reported](#), Cuban authorities increasingly harassed and intimidated members of Afro-Cuban religious groups in 2023 as part of a broader crackdown on civil society. This harassment and intimidation often involved threatening practitioners with severe consequences if they peacefully practiced their religious beliefs. For example, in August, Cuban authorities interrogated an individual at his home regarding an Afro-Cuban religious ceremony he was planning to hold in honor of one of his children. The authorities warned the individual that continuing with the ceremony would result in him being summoned to the police station for a statement. Also in August, an individual planning to peacefully host an Afro-Cuban religious activity in his home was ordered to cancel it. The authorities expressed concern that the religious activity would encourage counter-revolutionary actions.

The Cuban government continued to arbitrarily hold Afro-Cuban religious leaders in prison. In 2023, President of the unregistered Free Yoruba Association of Cuba, [Donaida Pérez Paseiro](#), and her husband, [Loreto Hernández García](#), remained in prison after being charged with "public disorder," "disobedience," "spreading the epidemic," and "incitement." Hernández García suffers from several health conditions and in August 2023 reportedly experienced a heart attack. In addition to medical neglect, Hernández García has been held incommunicado and placed in a punishment cell. Prison officials have subjected family members visiting them to humiliating treatment, including forcing visitors to strip naked prior to exiting.

Key U.S. Policy

The U.S. government's strained [relations](#) with Cuba continued into 2023. Despite this, U.S. government officials continued to raise religious freedom concerns at intergovernmental forums. In April, the U.S. Ambassador to the Organization of American States delivered [remarks](#) at an [event](#) on violations of fundamental freedoms in Cuba. In July, U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken [called](#) for the release of all political prisoners in Cuba, some of whom are religious prisoners of conscience profiled in USCIRF's [Victims List](#) who continue to be persecuted for their role in peacefully expressing their views during the protests on July 11, 2021. In November, the U.S. government made a [statement](#) during Cuba's Universal Periodic Review recommending that the Cuban authorities cease arbitrarily detaining persons seeking to exercise their human rights and fundamental freedoms, including religious actors. In fiscal year 2023, the U.S. government [obligated](#) \$9.5 million for programs in Cuba.

On December 29, 2023, the U.S. Department of State [redesignated](#) Cuba as a CPC under IRFA for particularly severe violations of religious freedom and reimposed the ongoing restrictions referenced in [31 CFR 515.201](#) and the [Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act of 1996](#).