

KEY FINDINGS

In 2022, religious freedom conditions in Cuba worsened. Throughout the year, the Cuban government tightly controlled religious activity through surveillance, harassment of religious leaders and laypeople, forced exile, fines, and ill treatment of religious prisoners of conscience. Religious leaders and groups that are unregistered or conducted unsanctioned religious activity—as well as journalistic reporting on religious freedom conditions—faced relentless oppression from the Office of Religious Affairs (ORA) and state security forces.

The Cuban government regularly targeted members of religious communities who refused to abide by strict regulations set out by the ORA. Authorities subjected pastors to detention, interrogation, threats of prison sentences on false charges, and confiscation of property. In February, authorities [detained](#) Reverend Yordanys Díaz Arteaga, the president of the Christian Reformed Church of Cuba, after an extensive search of his home and the confiscation of technology belonging to his church. He was later interrogated and threatened with criminal charges at an unknown location and held incommunicado under effective house arrest. Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) [reported](#) that Reverend Díaz became a target of the government after his denomination withdrew from the regime-aligned Cuban Council of Churches. He reportedly arrived in the United States in August. In April, evangelical couple Pastors Mario Jorge Travieso and Velmis Adriana Medina Mariño planned an April 29–30 prayer event called “Breaking the Chains” to focus on the wives and mothers of political prisoners. The regime made repeated [threats](#) to Pastors Travieso and Medina and several members of their church who planned to participate. Authorities arbitrarily detained the pastors, interrogated them for six hours, and threatened them with imprisonment. The organizers canceled the event due to the regime’s various threats.

USCIRF received reports indicating that Cuban authorities detained and interrogated citizens who traveled or planned to

travel to the United States in 2022, including Catholic layman Dagoberto Valdés and his son Javier Valdés Delgado as well as Mildrey Betancourt Rodríguez, a member of the Alliance of Non-Registered Churches. Similarly, in October the Office of the Directorate of Identification, Immigration, and Foreigners of Cuba arbitrarily [barred](#) Imam Abu Duyanah, imam of the Cuban Association for the Dissemination of Islam, from traveling to Mecca for “reasons of public interest” without any specifications.

Additionally, threats and persecution by the government caused several religious leaders to leave Cuba in 2022. In March, Pastor Enrique de Jesús Fundora Pérez of the Apostolic Movement fled the country to seek asylum in Switzerland after state security officials [threatened](#) him with up to 30 years in prison for “sedition” and “incitement to commit a crime.” He drew the ire of authorities when he gave monetary and spiritual aid to families of political prisoners from the July 11, 2021 (J11) protests. Pastor Alain Toledano, a prominent Cuban religious leader of the unregistered Emmanuel Church of the Apostolic Ministry, has [experienced](#) severe harassment from the Cuban government for over 20 years. In June, Cuban state security presented Toledano with an ultimatum: leave the country within 30 days or face imprisonment. The United States [granted](#) him and his family emergency parole in July. In September, Father David Pantaleon, head of Cuba’s Jesuit Order and president of the Conference of Religious Men and Women in Cuba, had to leave the country after the government [refused to renew his residence permit](#). During an interview in his native Dominican Republic, Father Pantaleon [reported](#) that the ORA cited his support for political prisoners and the Jesuits’ critical position toward the regime as the main reasons for his expulsion.

The Cuban government continued to [target](#) independent journalists who report on religious freedom by threatening criminal charges and fines, often under [Decree Law 370](#), and imposing travel restrictions. Cuban authorities twice [interrogated](#) and [fined](#) young Catholic layman and journalist Adrián Martínez Cádiz this year.

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);
 - Encourage Cuban authorities to extend an official invitation for unrestricted visits by 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 Caridad Diego, head of the ORA—by freezing those individuals’ assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Raise human rights and democracy concerns in Cuba and highlight the situation facing religious leaders and organizations persecuted by the Cuban government, among others.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Cuba](#)
- **Report:** [Constitutional Reform and Religious Freedom in Cuba](#)
- **Event:** [Constitutional Reform and Religious Freedom in Cuba](#)

Background

While there are no independent sources on Cuba's religious demographics, a reported 60–70 percent of Cuba's [estimated](#) population of 11.1 million self-identify as Catholic. Approximately 25–30 percent identify as unaffiliated or another religion, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Methodists, Seventh-day Adventists, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, Quakers, Moravians, and members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. An [estimated](#) 70 percent of Cubans engage in one or more practices associated with [Santería](#), a syncretic religion born out of the Yoruba tradition mixed with elements of Catholicism.

Cuba is a one-party system under the ruling Cuban Communist Party, with no independent judiciary. The state regulates and controls religious institutions through the ORA of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party. The Law of Associations requires religious organizations to apply to the Ministry of Justice, where the ORA is housed, for registration. However, the Ministry of Justice continues to deny registration for religious groups and leaves long-standing requests for registration unanswered. Unregistered religious groups are particularly vulnerable, as membership or association with an unregistered religious group is a crime. The ORA exercises direct and arbitrary control over the affairs of registered religious organizations, requiring permission for virtually any activity other than regular worship services.

The Ladies in White

The [Ladies in White](#) (*Damas de Blanco*) 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 January, Soler and her husband Ángel Moya announced a campaign seeking the release of all political prisoners from the J11 protests. Subsequently, authorities subjected Soler and Moya to [repeated](#) arbitrary detentions. These detentions often [included](#) interrogations at police stations and [fines](#). Such offenses occurred on 15 consecutive Sundays between January and May. In September, Soler detailed that government agents parked a large container in front of her house, reportedly to [obscure](#) when authorities arrest her or her husband when they leave their home.

In September, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights [issued](#) follow-up precautionary measures to its 2013 decision in favor of the Ladies in White, appealing to the Cuban government to maintain "necessary measures to protect the rights to life and personal integrity of the members of the Ladies in White." The decision also [documents](#) numerous cases of harassment, detentions, and fines up to September 2022.

Religious Prisoners of Conscience

Several religious leaders and laypeople remained in prison at the end of 2022 for their participation in the [J11 protests](#). Select cases are

included in USCIRF's [Freedom of Religion or Belief \(FoRB\) Victims List](#), including Christian pastors and Santería practitioners.

[Pastor Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo](#) of the Monte de Sion Independent Church participated in the J11 protests and was detained that day. The government claims that Pastor Rosales Fajardo was involved in perpetrating a violent attack during the protest, despite [evidence](#) to the contrary. The Cuban government tried him in December 2021 on charges of "disrespect," "assault," "criminal incitement," and "public disorder" and sought to [impose](#) a 10-year sentence. Pastor Rosales Fajardo was sentenced to eight years in prison in April, but the government [reduced](#) his sentence to seven years in May. In June, a court upheld his revised sentence. [According](#) to CSW, only the prosecution was allowed to provide evidence, which included testimony from at least 12 policemen.

President of the unregistered Free Yoruba Association of Cuba (*Asociación de Yorubas Libres de Cuba*, or "Free Yorubas") [Donaida Pérez Paseiro](#) and her husband, the community's vice president [Loreto Hernández García](#), were charged with "public disorder," "disobedience," "spreading the epidemic," and "incitement" and eventually sentenced to eight years in prison. Pérez Paseiro experienced multiple medical emergencies while in prison and authorities reportedly tried to force her to renounce her faith. Hernández García reportedly suffers from several health conditions, including asthma, hypertension, diabetes, and other cardiac issues. Prison authorities also reportedly tried to force him to renounce his faith. In May, Radio Televisión Martí reported that Hernández García's health has severely deteriorated in prison, as authorities fail to provide him food that takes into consideration his diabetes. He received medical treatment in a hospital, but state security [forced](#) him back into prison in June.

Key U.S. Policy

The U.S. government continued to place robust sanctions on Cuban officials. In January, the U.S. Department of State [imposed](#) visa restrictions on eight officials "implicated in attempts to silence the voices of the Cuban people through repression, unjust detentions, and harsh prison sentences" of J11 protesters. Further rounds of visa restrictions came in [June](#) and [July](#) when the State Department imposed restrictions on an additional 33 individuals for "unfair trials and unjust sentencing and imprisonment" of J11 protesters, plus media and communications officials who "formulate and implement policies that restrict Cubans' ability to freely access and share information and who engage in the spread of disinformation."

In September, the U.S. Embassy in Havana [announced](#) the resumption of immigrant visa processing and consular services for the first time since 2017.

On November 30, the State Department for the first time [designated](#) Cuba as a CPC under IRFA and imposed as the relevant president action the existing ongoing restrictions referenced in [31 CFR 515.201](#) and the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity (LIBERTAD) Act of 1996 (Helms-Burton Act), pursuant to section 402(c) (5) of the Act. Cuba previously had been on the State Department's Special Watch List since 2019.