

KEY FINDINGS

In 2025, religious freedom conditions in Cuba remained poor. The government maintained its comprehensive legal framework for oppressing freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), under which religious leaders and communities were continually harassed and threatened. Authorities reneged on limited relief that was briefly granted to wrongfully imprisoned [FoRB victims](#).

Cuba’s Law of Associations continues to require religious organizations to apply to the Ministry of Justice, which houses the Office of Religious Affairs (ORA), for registration. The ORA exercises direct and arbitrary control over registration decisions, frequently denying registration or failing to respond to long-pending applications. Although state-sanctioned religious communities face government threats and intimidation, membership in or association with an unregistered group is a crime. For unregistered groups, the lack of legal recognition becomes the basis for sustained and flagrant harassment. Criminalized religious organizations, such as the Free Yoruba Association of Cuba, face regular interrogation, detention, threatened prison sentences, and property confiscation.

The government leveraged domestic surveillance and security structures, including the Department of State Security, the National Revolutionary Police (PNR), and local Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR), to persecute religious leaders and worshipers. In July, a pastor was forcibly disappeared for 14 hours after delivering medication to the mother of two political prisoners incarcerated for joining the peaceful protests of July 2021 (the 11J protests) that called for greater freedom and economic relief. In April 2025, CDR and PNR officials threatened a *babalao* (a high priest in the Santería tradition) with prosecution for rituals performed in his home. In May, police placed a pastor under house arrest for buying cement they claimed was fraudulently purchased—charges not leveled against the seller or any other buyers. Authorities continually prevented the Ladies in White, a prominent

organization of wives and relatives of dissidents imprisoned in 2003, from attending Sunday Mass. Civil society reported hundreds of arbitrary detentions, fines, blocks on attending services, and official threats targeting religious communities throughout 2025 at even higher levels than documented in 2024.

Religious expression deemed critical of the government resulted in state reprisal, as in the case of a pastoral couple detained for five days for mentioning God during the trial of their son for allegedly evading mandatory military service in June. Authorities had indefinitely delayed their trial at the time of this report, and the couple could face eight years in prison. Leading up to the fourth anniversary of the 11J protests, religious leaders reported increased warnings not to hold large events or permit entrance by families of political prisoners. Religious leaders forced into exile, an ongoing strategy by the Cuban government to decapitate religious groups, continued to endure repression. Exiled Pastor Alain Toledano Valiente stated in May and again in October that Cuban officials twice prevented him from returning to Cuba to visit his ill daughter. Authorities also tolerated violence against religious leaders. In July, Bishop Jorge Luis Pérez, a leader in the unregistered Alliance of Christians of Cuba, was reportedly struck with a machete by a man whom authorities briefly detained before releasing with no charges.

Cuba continues to arbitrarily and wrongfully incarcerate FoRB victims, including religious individuals who peacefully participated in the 11J protests. The government released several FoRB victims in January, notably [Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo](#), [Lisdiani Rodríguez Isaac](#), and [Donaida Pérez Paseiro](#). After Pérez Paseiro continued to advocate for the freedom of her husband [Loreto Hernández García](#), who remains imprisoned for his leadership role in the Free Yoruba Association, she was rearrested and returned to prison in June. FoRB victims are reportedly subject to inhumane detention conditions, including cold, hunger, and medical neglect.

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);
 - Expand the use of targeted sanctions under 7031(c) and 212(a)(2)(G) authorities to place visa bans on Cuban officials—such as Caridad Diego Bello, head of the ORA—who have engaged in gross human rights violations against religious individuals or groups and/or severe violations of religious freedom, particularly those targeting FoRB victims, unregistered groups, and the Ladies in White; and
 - Fund foreign assistance programs that support Cuban civil society to document religious freedom violations and use that documentation to promote accountability.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Hold hearings through the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, House Foreign Affairs Committee, and Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission to highlight religious freedom violations by the Cuban government and opportunities for U.S. policy responses.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Spotlight Podcast:** [Cuba and Nicaragua’s Escalating Crackdown on Religious Communities](#)
- **Issue Update:** [Repression of Religious Freedom in Latin America’s Authoritarian Triad – Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief [Victims List](#) and [Appendix 2](#)**

Background

While independent data are limited on Cuba's religious demographics, 60 percent of the country's population of 11 million are [estimated](#) to identify as Roman Catholic. A majority of the population, and especially Afro-Cubans, observe traditions rooted in Africa, including the syncretic religion of [Santería](#). Cuba is also home to a variety of religious minorities, including Protestants, Muslims, Buddhists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Methodists, Seventh-day Adventists, Presbyterians, Anglicans, Episcopalians, Anabaptists, Quakers, Moravians, Baha'is, Jews, Rastafarians, and members of the Greek Orthodox and Russian Orthodox churches.

Cuba is a one-party authoritarian [state](#) under the ruling Cuban Communist Party with no independent judiciary. The 2019 constitution provides basic guarantees of religious freedom, but the Penal Code effectively nullifies these protections, including through the criminalization of unauthorized association or expression. Rights to assembly and association are purportedly constitutionally recognized but only when exercised with respect to public order and in compliance with the precepts established by law. The ORA tightly controls religious institutions through arbitrary registration decisions and approval requirements for virtually any activity other than regular worship services. Repressive legislation in Nicaragua is believed to have inspired Cuba's 2024 Citizenship Law, which allows the denationalization of Cubans residing abroad who undermine the nation's interests, including potentially through peaceful religious activity. Amid ongoing economic crisis and infrastructure collapse, religious organizations help meet the populace's humanitarian needs, often drawing additional harassment from Cuban authorities for indirectly highlighting government shortfalls.

Ladies in White

Cuban authorities employed arbitrary detention and surveillance to regularly prevent the Ladies in White from attending Catholic Mass on Sundays. In February 2025, state security agents arrested several members attempting to attend the funeral of a fellow Lady in White. In April, authorities placed organization leader Berta Soler Fernández and her husband under house arrest for 48 days, detaining them first for over 24 hours. The pair were detained after they attended Mass alongside the Chief of Mission of the U.S. Embassy in Havana Mike Hammer, a retaliation condemned by the U.S. Department of State as a further show of disregard for religious freedom. In August, the Cuban government exiled a Ladies in White member to the Dominican Republic after imprisoning her for more than eight years, demonstrating a forced exile strategy often deployed against religious leaders. Individual members and the group's headquarters (also Soler's home) were reported to be under unrelenting surveillance.

Harassment and Co-Optation through Registration

The Cuban government maintained its tiered system of religious groups, under which communities aligned with the state-recognized Cuban Council of Churches (CCC) enjoyed a relatively mutually supportive relationship with the government; non-CCC but registered groups were more heavily repressed, and unregistered groups were fully criminalized. The government leveraged the CCC as evidence

of its commitment to religious freedom while subjecting less favored groups to abject harassment. Even CCC members, however, were not immune from FoRB violations. For example, in February, a PNR inspector fined a CCC-affiliated pastor 15,000 Cuban pesos (\$625, a sum that eclipses the estimated median monthly income in Cuba) and threatened him with imprisonment for encouraging antigovernment sentiment by praying for Cuban women and the Cuban nation. The ORA regularly arbitrarily denied or failed to respond to registration applications, then used the denial of legal status as a pretext for targeting unregistered groups. Particularly targeting unregistered religious communities, the state extended its persecution by orchestrating or tolerating popular "acts of repudiation." These ostensibly spontaneous protests interrupted services and intimidated attendees, with one unregistered church in Cuba reportedly subject to weekly incidents in 2025 and the PNR declining to disrupt the harassment despite complaints.

FoRB Violations in Prisons

Systematic violations of FoRB in Cuban prisons continued throughout 2025. These violations included verbal and physical abuse on the basis of religious beliefs as well as routine and arbitrary bans on religious visits, literature, garb, and congregation for practice. Though withholding of FoRB rights had been documented as a psychological weapon against political prisoners in prior years, FoRB violations in 2025 occurred systematically across those in custody for a wide variety of alleged crimes. Common prisoners now reported even more consistent violations than political prisoners. Prison authorities appeared to consider religious freedom a penal benefit—not a right—that could be arbitrarily extended or revoked in conjunction with other benefits, such as phone calls.

Key U.S. Policy

The U.S. government's relationship with Cuba remains strained, especially over human rights issues. In 2025, the U.S. reversed several measures that had eased pressure on the Cuban government and returned Cuba to the U.S. [list](#) of state sponsors of terrorism. In Cuba, Chief of Mission Hammer met with pastors to discuss freedom of religion. In September, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio celebrated Berta Soler's receipt of the Polish Lech Wałęsa Solidarity Prize for promoting democracy and civil liberties. The United States also took significant action on the fourth anniversary of the 11J protests to [sanction](#) key regime leaders implicated in the response to the protests—specifically President Miguel Díaz-Canel Bermúdez, Minister of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Cuba Álvaro López Miera, Minister of the Interior Lázaro Alberto Álvarez Casas, and their immediate family members—under Section 7031(c) for involvement in gross violations of human rights, which included detaining and continuing to imprison [Donaida Pérez Paseiro](#) and [Loreto Hernández García](#).

The U.S. Department of State last [redesignated](#) Cuba as a CPC under IRFA for particularly severe violations of religious freedom on December 29, 2023. Any presidential action taken as a result of this designation terminates by the end of 2025 unless expressly reauthorized by law.