

KEY FINDINGS

During 2018, religious freedom conditions in Cuba trended the same, although some of the tactics employed by the Cuban government to repress religious freedom changed. Cuba continues to be a one-party system with no independent judicial bodies and where the state tightly controls religious institutions. After Fidel Castro's death and Raúl Castro's resignation as president, the Cuban Communist Party in April 2018 appointed Miguel Díaz-Canel to the presidency without an election. The change in leadership did not result in increased religious freedom. A new constitution, which was ratified after the reporting period, weakened protections for freedom of religion or belief. The Cuban government engaged in harassment campaigns targeting religious leaders and activists who advocated for stronger religious freedom protections. Gathering detailed information on religious freedom conditions in Cuba remains a challenge, but open and flagrant attacks on religious leaders and property appear to have decreased since 2017. Because the Cuban government is concerned about international public opinion, it has changed some of its tactics, including by subtly increasing its harassment of religious leaders and activists countrywide in ways that are difficult to track. The new forms of harassment include the issuance, as a scare tactic, of pre-arrest warrants to religious leaders and believers and charging them with criminal and civil code

violations to disguise religious repression. The government continued to use a restrictive system of laws and policies, surveillance, and harassment to control religious groups. The Office of Religious Affairs (ORA), an entity within the Cuban Communist Party, arbitrarily controls all religious activity. The ORA requires religious organizations to register, which, in theory, allows communities to receive foreign visitors, import religious materials, meet in approved houses of worship, and apply to travel abroad. However, the ORA can still arbitrarily interfere in any church matters—whether the church is registered or not. The Cuban government publicized the building of a Catholic Church in Sandino, which is the first new religious building that the government has allowed to be constructed in six decades. While this is overall a positive step, other religious groups have not been allowed to construct new religious buildings. Almost every Sunday in 2018, the government violently prevented members of the Ladies in White and other activists from attending Mass.

Based on these concerns, in 2019 USCIRF again places Cuba on its Tier 2 for engaging in or tolerating religious freedom violations that meet at least one of the elements of the “systematic, ongoing, egregious” standard for designation as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA).

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Highlight religious freedom violations in specific prisoner of conscience initiatives, such as the U.S. Mission to the United Nations’ [“Jailed for What?”](#) campaign and the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission’s [Defending Freedoms Project](#);
- Prioritize adequate coverage of religious freedom issues as well as access to consular services for religious leaders in Cuba to obtain visas given gaps in personnel at the U.S. Embassy;
- Press the Cuban government to include in the new constitution legal protections for religious associations and institutions;
- Facilitate multi-entry visas for both registered and unregistered Cuban religious leaders to travel to and interact with coreligionists in the United States; and
- Encourage key countries, particularly those in Latin America, to ensure that violations of freedom of religion or belief are part of all multilateral or bilateral discussions with or about Cuba.

COUNTRY FACTS

FULL NAME

Republic of Cuba

GOVERNMENT

Communist State

POPULATION

11,116,369

GOVERNMENT RECOGNIZED RELIGIONS/FAITHS

Religious groups may be granted registration; a reported number of at least 58 officially registered denominations in Cuba existed at the end of 2018

RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY*

60–70% Roman Catholic**

5% Protestant

25–30% Unaffiliated or Other (includes Jehovah's Witnesses, Methodists, Seventh-day Adventists, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Jews, Muslims, Quakers, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Buddhists, and Baha'is)

*Estimates compiled from the U.S. Department of State and CIA World Factbook

**Self-identified Catholics also include followers of syncretic religions

BACKGROUND

In April 2018 the Cuban Communist Party named Miguel Díaz-Canel the president of Cuba after six decades of rule by Fidel and Raúl Castro. After the transfer of power, the Cuban Communist Party remained the only constitutionally recognized party and continued to rule with absolute authority. During the reporting period, the transfer of power did not appear to have resulted in meaningful change for religious groups in Cuba.

President Díaz-Canel launched a process to adopt a new constitution. From August to November 2018, the government held “public consultations” to debate a draft constitution and convened thousands of public assemblies. Religious leaders and activists reported being excluded from the constitutional process and pressured to support the new constitution. Following the consultation period, the Constitutional Commission, chaired by former president Raúl Castro, produced a final constitution that the National Assembly approved in December 2018.

The new constitution weakens protections for freedom of religion or belief. While article 15 asserts that “the State recognizes, respects and guarantees religious freedom,” the right of freedom of conscience was removed from that article. And while the new

constitution stipulates that different beliefs and religions enjoy equal treatment and religious institutions are separate from the state, it does not eliminate or reform the Office of Religious Affairs (ORA). The ORA is an entity of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party and maintains direct authority over religious groups and activities.

During the public consultation period, a cross-denominational group of Christians, initiated by the leaders of the Methodist Church of Cuba and Assemblies of God, put forth a petition appealing for greater protections of religious freedom. These leaders expressed alarm regarding the omission of the words “freedom of conscience” and the failure of the draft to comply with international standards. Catholic bishops also called for more comprehensive protection, while Protestant church leaders asked for language that prohibits the Cuban government from interfering with the internal life of religious associations. Rather than respond to this unprecedented call for stronger freedom of religion protections, the Cuban government pressured many religious leaders to cease their opposition and publicly support the new constitution.

The government restricts religious practice by denying independent religious communities’ access to state media, limiting religious organizations

from conducting religious education and providing humanitarian support, requiring the registration of publications, limiting the entry of foreign religious workers, and restricting certain religious texts from entering the country. In March 2018, the Cuban government blocked 17,000 copies of the New International Version of the Bible from entering the country on the basis that only older translations of the Bible are permitted.

In 2018, the Cuban government continued to closely monitor internet use and communication. Access to the internet is hindered by the lack of infrastructure (and the government's continued refusal to build the necessary infrastructure), the high and inaccessible costs of using the internet, extremely slow internet connections, and the narrow limits placed on where the internet can be accessed.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS 2018

Office of Religious Affairs

The Cuban government controls all religious activities through the ORA, which operates out of the Ministry of Justice (MOJ). The government requires religious communities to apply to the MOJ for official registration. Despite existing criteria for registration, decisions are arbitrary and often politically motivated. Registered religious associations have to request permission from local Cuban Communist Party officials for virtually any activities other than regular worship services, including holding a public event or procession outside religious buildings, owning a vehicle, and repairing a building. As the ORA has final authority over all decisions and is accountable only to the Party, it holds broad, largely unchecked power over religious practice in Cuba. The ORA also controls the religious activities of unregistered religious organizations, who are particularly vulnerable as their operation is considered illegal. Membership or association with an unregistered religious group is a crime, with potential punishments ranging from a fine to imprisonment.

The harassment of religious leaders intensified with the launch of the constitutional campaign in August.

Detention and Harassment of Religious Leaders and Activists

Throughout 2018, the Cuban government engaged in harassment campaigns against religious leaders who advocate for religious freedom, especially after the launch of the public consultations on the constitution in August 2018. To increase pressure, the government also targeted family members of religious leaders. As a result of the intensifying harassment, activists reported that more religious leaders fled to seek asylum abroad. Most who have fled are long term religious leaders from both registered and nonregistered denominations.

In January 2018, three Catholic priests (Father Castor José Álvarez Devesa, Father José Conrado Rodríguez, and Father Roque Nelvis Morales Fonseca) published an open letter to then President Raúl Castro calling for religious freedom. In a February meeting with USCIRF, Fr. Álvarez expressed concern about potential backlash for releasing the letter. Nevertheless, he was able to travel to the Vatican to present the letter and return to Cuba later in February.

In January 2018, Yoruba priest Alexei Mora Montalvo was arrested along with Guillermo del Sol Pérez, an independent journalist who reports on religion. During Montalvo's detention, state security agents tried to coerce him into joining the government-controlled Yoruba Cultural Association of Cuba. His arrest is believed to be due to his questioning the religious authority of Yoruba Cultural Association of Cuba's right to publish annual predictions. He was arrested, beaten, and interrogated multiple times in 2018. At the end of the reporting period, he was not detained.

In February 2018, authorities arrested and detained for two days without charge Leonardo Rodríguez

Alonso, the regional coordinator for the Patmos Institute, an independent civil society organization that promotes freedom of religion or belief. He was arrested on his way home to Villa Clara after

meeting with human rights activists.

The harassment of religious leaders intensified with the launch of the constitutional campaign in August. During 2018, state security agents frequently visited and threatened pastors involved in calls for

stronger religious freedom protections at the national and local levels. In addition, several religious leaders were arrested due to their engagement in public consultations. In September, Pastor Alain Toledano of the Emmanuel Church of the Apostolic Ministry received a warrant for his arrest allegedly related to a noise complaint received during church services. During his arrest, authorities interrogated Pastor Toledano about his views of the constitution and threatened to prosecute him or confiscate church property if he did not offer his public support for the draft. Pastor Manuel Alberto Morejón Soler was similarly summoned by authorities and questioned on his views of the constitution several times. Other activists and religious leaders briefly detained for speaking out against the constitution and its religious provisions include Alexei Mora Montalvo, Irenaldo Sosa Báez, Guillermo del Sol Pérez, and Gabriel Barrenechea Chávez.

To mask religious repression, the Cuban government charges religious leaders and community members through criminal and civil code violations. While it is difficult to track these cases, one organization reported that 194 individuals were imprisoned or detained because of

their religious beliefs and activities between July 2017 and April 2018. Even when not charged, religious leaders are frequently threatened with criminal proceedings through the use of pre-arrest warrants (*actas de*

advertencia) that are used to justify arrests and more severe penalties for future alleged crimes. For example, a pastor of an unregistered church in Camagüey reported that the police served him with two pre-arrest warrants in 2018 as part of a larger pattern of hostility and intimidation by state officials. Religious leaders report that government security agents routinely attend, monitor, and record religious services. Local government officials and police encourage an environment of harassment against pastors and their churches and interruption in services and religious celebrations.

During 2018, the Cuban government continued to restrict Cuban religious leaders and activists from

international travel. In 2018, the Patmos Institute recorded 121 instances in which individuals—including several religious leaders—were prevented from traveling abroad, including to attend meetings on freedom of religion or belief, including Leonardo Rodríguez Alonso and Alexei Mora Montalvo. Dr. Óscar Elías Biscet, recipient of the 2007 Presidential Medal of Freedom and former prisoner of conscience, was also blocked from leaving Cuba. In 2016, USCIRF met with Dr. Biscet and his wife Elsa Morejón.

Some activists and their family members in detention were denied access to religious materials, practices, or visits by religious leaders. For example, Eduardo Cardet, national coordinator of an organization that advocates for democracy called the Christian Liberation Movement and who is currently serving a three-year prison sentence, was not allowed to receive visits from religious leaders and his Bible was confiscated.

Threats to Churches

While there were no new reports of property confiscation in 2018, officials used Legal Decree 322, which the Cuban government announced in 2015 to purportedly

regulate private properties and zoning laws, to threaten confiscation or demolition of multiple churches.

Religious organizations reported that the ORA granted authorization for construction, renovations, and repairs

on existing religious structures more frequently in 2018, although the resources needed for such building improvements remain scarce and the government limits access to construction materials. In March 2018, government officials in Santiago banned members of the Apostolic Movement network of churches from buying the materials needed to rebuild their church that was arbitrarily demolished in early 2016. At the end of the reporting period, the congregation continued to meet under a makeshift tent.

The Cuban government permitted the Catholic Church to build its first new church in six decades. The congregation, which had previously been operating as

To mask religious repression, the Cuban government charges religious leaders and community members through criminal and civil code violations.

an illegal house church in Sandino, held its inaugural mass in January 2019, just after the end of the reporting period. The Cuban government has permitted construction of two other Catholic churches in Havana and Santiago. While this is a positive step, other religious groups continue to be denied permission to construct new religious buildings.

Other Religious Groups

Non-Christian groups are subject to similar levels of restrictions, including practitioners of the syncretic tradition of Santería, which draws upon the Yoruba religion and is among the most popular traditions in Cuba. The government intensified its attempts to coopt this tradition throughout 2018, including through its targeting of Alexei Mora Montalvo as described above. The Bnei Anusim and Messianic Jewish communities, which are unregistered in Cuba, also reported harassment and interruptions in religious services during 2018.

In 2005, the Cuban government implemented a law to regulate house churches, which are commonly used by Protestant denominations due to government restrictions on new building construction. According to the State Department, there are an estimated 2,000–10,000 Protestant house churches in Cuba. The law requires all house churches to register and submit to the government detailed information on their membership, the house church’s inhabitants, and the schedule of services. The law further requires that house churches of the same denomination must be at least two kilometers apart. Once registration is granted, the law empowers the authorities to supervise religious meetings, limit the number of services that are held each week, and set the maximum number of attendees. The law also explicitly prohibits foreigners from participating in religious services without official permission.

Denial of Religious Freedom for Democracy and Human Rights Activists

In 2018, the Cuban government denied some prodemocracy and human rights activists their right to freedom

of religion or belief. Activists detained on their way to religious services, usually Catholic Mass, were frequently beaten and held without charge, sometimes for more than 24 hours. In attempts to keep the religious and political spheres separate, government officials routinely pressured religious leaders to expel or shun such activists and threatened to close their churches if they did not comply.

Almost every Sunday, the government prevented more than 60 activists from attending religious services. Most blocked were members of the Ladies in White—wives and relatives of dissidents imprisoned in 2003—but also increasingly included other activists acting in solidarity. Every week, Ladies in White wear white

Almost every Sunday, the government prevented more than 60 activists from attending religious services.

clothing and march to Sunday Mass to increase attention to the imprisonment of their families. They are often detained on their way to Mass or other religious services and released hours later. Detainees report that

arrests are often violent; law enforcement officials and state security agents dressed as civilians beat them, release them in remote areas far from their homes, and subject them to arbitrary fines. Some Ladies in White were charged with fabricated petty crimes, such as failing to pay penalties and contempt. In 2018, those held on such charges include Marta Sánchez, Nieves Matamoros, Aimara Nieto, Yolanda Santana, Xiomara Cruz, Daysi Artilles, and Micaela Roll Gibert.

Ladies in White leader Berta Soler Fernández is often targeted for violent arrest by security forces. The Cuban government also blocked Soler from leaving the island to raise awareness about the Ladies in White. The government prohibited her from traveling to the United States to receive the Cato Institute’s Milton Friedman Prize for Advancing Liberty in May and refused to renew her passport in November.

U.S. POLICY

U.S.-Cuban relations remained tense in 2018. The Trump administration policy toward Cuba continued to be guided by the [National Security Presidential Memorandum](#) entitled “Strengthening the Policy of the United

States Towards Cuba,” issued in November 2017. This policy focuses on the need for human rights, democracy, and free enterprise in Cuba. It further instructed the secretary of state to provide a report to the president on the degree to which the Cuban government has fulfilled the requirements of a transition government, as outlined in the [Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity \(LIBERTAD\) Act of 1996](#).

In 2017, the United States pulled most of its embassy staff from Cuba. In March 2018, staffing numbers were permanently reduced from around 50 to 18. In June 2018, Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo established the interagency [Health Incidents Response Task Force](#) to investigate the 2017 health attacks on 26 U.S. diplomats and family members, but the cause and source of the attacks remain unknown. The State Department’s [Integrated Country Strategy](#) noted that the staff reduction has resulted in the suspension of most visa processing and a decrease in bilateral engagement. A congressional memorandum concluded that the United States’ ability to monitor Cuba and defend human rights is being undermined by the staff reduction.

The State Department convened the [Cuba Internet Task Force](#) in January 2018, which is mandated by the policy memo to “examine the technological challenges and opportunities for expanding internet access in Cuba.” The Task Force is expected to release in May 2019

its final report with recommendations to support media, freedom of information, and internet access.

During a November 2018 [speech](#), National Security Advisor John R. Bolton dubbed Cuba, as well as Venezuela and Nicaragua, the “Troika of Tyranny.” He accused the three countries of being “the cause of immense human suffering, the impetus of enormous regional instability, and the genesis of a sordid cradle of communism in the western hemisphere” and emphasized that the United States “is taking direct action” against these regimes to defend the rule of law, liberty, and basic human decency. Following his speech, the State Department added [26 tourist attractions to the Cuba Restricted List](#), which forbids doing business with dozens of entities that have links to Cuba’s military, intelligence, and security agencies.

In 2018, the U.S. Mission to the United Nations launched a campaign called “Jailed for What?” to highlight the plight of the estimated 130 prisoners of conscience in Cuba. While Cuban diplomats attempted to disrupt the October [launch](#) event, the commotion brought more attention to repression in Cuba. In addition, Secretary Pompeo in December published an [open letter](#) urging the Cuban government to provide more information on the charges against political prisoners, including Eduardo Cardet Concepción, national coordinator of the Christian Liberation Movement, and Martha Sánchez, a member of the Ladies in White.