



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

COUNTRY UPDATE: CUBA

September 2024

Stephen Schneck
Chair

Eric Ueland
Vice Chair

Commissioners

Mohamed Elsanousi

Maureen Ferguson

Susie Gelman

Vicky Hartzler

Asif Mahmood

Meir Soloveichik

Erin D. Singshinsuk
Executive Director

USCIRF's Mission

To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.

By Luke Wilson, International Legal Specialist

Religious Freedom Conditions in Cuba

Introduction

Throughout 2024, religious freedom conditions in Cuba have remained extremely poor. Cuba is a one-party system under the ruling Cuban Communist Party, with no independent judiciary. The state uses its repressive legal framework to tightly control religious institutions and criminalize religious activities and expressions that the government perceives to be out of step with its ideology. In addition, the Cuban government persecutes worshipers through surveillance, harassment and threats, fines, and ill treatment of religious prisoners of conscience.

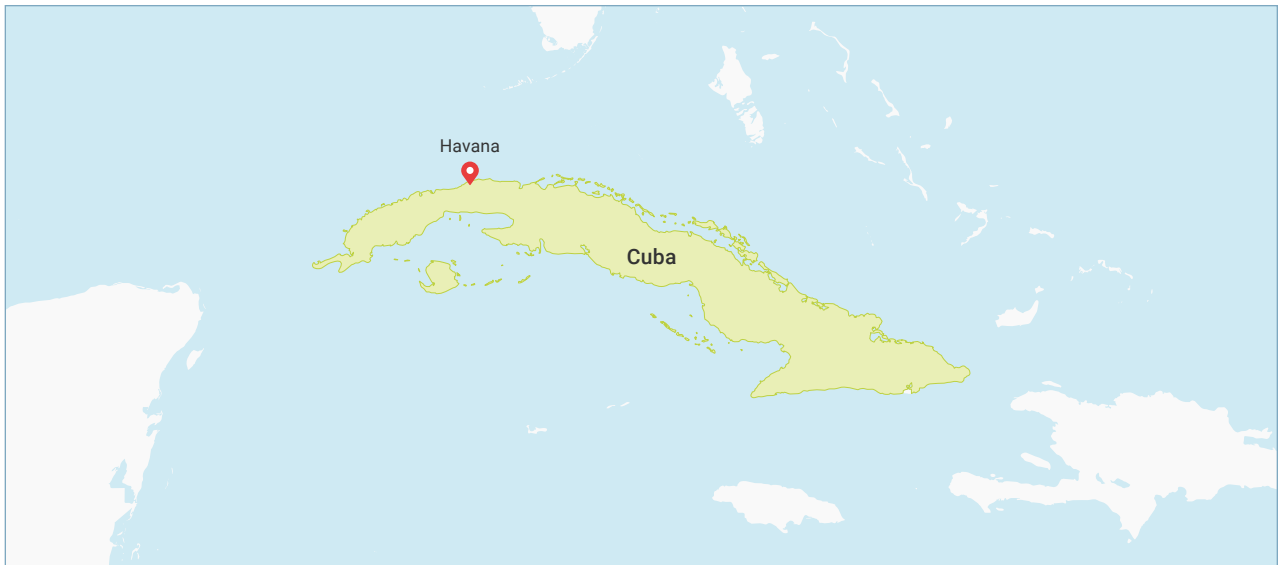
This country update covers religious freedom violations in Cuba in 2024. Specifically, it summarizes Cuba's repressive legal framework, documents the government's ongoing harassment of worshipers, and provides an update on religious prisoners of conscience. The U.S. government should continue to signal the importance it places on religious freedom conditions in Cuba, including by pressing the Cuban government to extend official invitations 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.

Cuba's Legal Framework

Cuba's government uses its repressive legal framework to prohibit religious organizations from obtaining legal registration. It also threatens and punishes worshipers expressing ideas or engaging in any religious activity it perceives to be critical.

Cuba has no legislation providing guidance on how religious organizations can register for legal status. As USCIRF has previously [reported](#), the absence of legislation and a complete lack of political will has resulted in "not a single independent religious group being registered since 1959." The [Law of Associations](#), which governs the registration of organizations in Cuba, states that "ecclesiastical or religious associations" are not covered by its provisions. The legislation's "transitional" provisions state further that the Ministry of Justice is charged with "legal questions related to ecclesiastical or religious institutions."

Pursuant to these provisions, any religious organization seeking to legally register must apply to the Office of Religious Affairs. Then, the Office of Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Justice review the applications. Their registration decisions are



often arbitrary and discriminatory, and membership or association with an unregistered religious group is a crime. Even if a religious organization is legally registered, the Office of Religious Affairs exercises arbitrary control over them and requires permission for virtually any activity other than regular worship services. Members of religious groups that are unregistered or conduct unsanctioned religious activities are subject to interrogation, detention, threats of prison sentences on false charges, and confiscation of property. Concerningly, USCIRF has received reports that recently the Ministry of Justice has denied that there is a Cuban government entity in charge of processing legal registrations for religious organizations.

The Cuban government also restricts peaceful religious activity through its Social Communication Law, which the Cuban National Assembly approved in May 2023. In June 2023, the special rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression for the Organization of American States [raised](#) concerns that the legislation wrongfully prohibits expression—including religious expression—that the government perceives to be untruthful or out of step with its ideology. The prohibition extends to religious expression. In June 2024, the Cuban government officially [signed](#) a slightly amended version of the Social Communication Law and its accompanying regulations. The legislation, although slightly different from the draft approved by the Cuban National Assembly, still prohibits disfavored religious expression and punishes violations with fines. Decree Law 370 and the Cuban Penal Code supplement the Social Communication Law. The former threatens independent journalists reporting

on religious freedom conditions with criminal charges. The latter criminalizes “contempt,” “public disorder,” and “resistance,” each of which may punish worshipers perceived to be critical of the government.

Harassment of Religious Leaders and Worshipers

The Cuban government draws on its vast domestic security and surveillance apparatus to harass worshipers such as the Ladies in White. The Department of State Security, the National Revolutionary Police, and the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, among others, are responsible for this harassment.

The [Ladies in White](#) is an organization of wives and relatives of dissidents imprisoned in 2003. Cuban authorities regularly prevent the Ladies in White from attending religious services on Sundays, including through arbitrary detentions. In January 2024, the authorities arrested 20 Ladies in White across the island as they attempted to attend Mass. During the wave of arrests, the authorities threatened one of the leaders of the Ladies in White, Berta Soler, and her husband, Angel Moya, with beatings and further arrests. Later the same month, the authorities again arrested a group of Ladies in White attempting to attend Mass. Additional waves of arrests occurred throughout 2024.

The Cuban government’s harassment of worshipers is not limited to the Ladies in White. In March 2024, the authorities [denied](#) a political prisoner access to religious materials and prevented a priest from providing pastoral care to a dying patient at a hospital. In March and April, the authorities arbitrarily prohibited Holy Week and Easter

processions in [various parts](#) of the country. In May, the authorities prohibited a Catholic priest from ringing church bells during a blackout in protest of the Cuban government's human rights violations. In June, the authorities arbitrarily placed a pastor under house arrest. Also in June, the government arbitrarily prevented the father of a political prisoner from meeting with a bishop. In July, the authorities withheld humanitarian aid that a religious organization based in the United Kingdom sent for the Cuban people. In August, the Cuban government interrogated a priest who invited worshipers to pray in a public park and denied another prisoner religious assistance.

In July 2024, the Cuban parliament approved a new [Citizenship Law](#). The law contains a provision empowering the authorities to strip Cubans of their citizenship if they engage in acts "contrary to the political, economic, or social interest" of Cuba. Reports indicate that the Cuban government may have drawn inspiration for the provision from the Nicaraguan government, which routinely and arbitrarily [strips](#) citizenship from exiled religious leaders and worshipers who have advocated for religious freedom and human rights.

Religious Prisoners of Conscience

As USCIRF has previously [reported](#), on July 11, 2021, thousands of Cubans protested for greater freedom and for relief from the country's economic and COVID-19 crises. Many religious leaders and worshipers peacefully participated in these demonstrations, known as the J11 protests. In retaliation, the authorities arbitrarily arrested and imprisoned them.

Pastor [Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo](#) is the leader of the Monte de Sion Independent Church in Palma Soriano. He peacefully participated in the J11 protests. Following his participation, the authorities arrested Fajardo and sentenced him to eight years' imprisonment. Fajardo has experienced torture in detention. On one occasion, prison authorities beat Fajardo so severely that he lost a tooth. They then urinated on him. In February 2024, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention [found](#) that the Cuban government had arbitrarily arrested and imprisoned Fajardo. He remains imprisoned.

[Donaida Pérez Paseiro](#) is the president of the Free Yoruba Association of Cuba, an independent community of Santería practitioners. [Santería](#) is a syncretic religion based significantly in the traditions of the Yoruba and incorporating elements of Catholicism. Estimates indicate that roughly 70 percent of Cubans observe one or more Santería or other religious practices based in

African tradition. Paseiro peacefully participated in the J11 protests. After Paseiro's peaceful participation, the authorities issued an arrest warrant for her on spurious charges of public disorder, disobedience, and assault. She formally surrendered to the police and the authorities sentenced her to eight years' imprisonment. Reportedly, prison authorities have attempted to force Paseiro to renounce her faith. Cuban officials have also targeted [Loreto Hernández García](#), vice president of the Free Yoruba Association of Cuba. Authorities arrested García following his peaceful participation in the J11 protests and sentenced him to seven years' imprisonment. Throughout his confinement, prison authorities have denied García the medical treatment he needs to manage his diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease diagnoses. As a result, García has experienced significant weight loss, frequent fainting, and blood in his urine and feces. Prison authorities have also held García incommunicado and placed him in a punishment cell. In addition, prison officials have subjected family members visiting Paseiro and García to humiliating treatment, including forcing visitors to strip naked prior to exiting the prison facility. Twins [Lisdani Rodríguez Isaac](#) and [Lisdiani Rodríguez Isaac](#), both members of the Free Yoruba Association of Cuba, were arrested and imprisoned after their peaceful participation in the J11 protests. Both are sentenced to eight years' imprisonment. However, the Cuban authorities provided Lisdani with a temporary release after she was diagnosed with a pregnancy-related medical condition that can cause profuse bleeding.

Conclusion

The Cuban government's religious freedom violations have remained particularly severe throughout 2024. The government uses its repressive legal framework to tightly control religious associations and criminalize religious activities and expression. In addition, the Cuban government harasses worshipers and continues to mistreat religious prisoners of conscience.

In its 2024 Annual Report [chapter](#) on Cuba, USCIRF recommended that the U.S. Department of State redesignate Cuba as a country of particular concern under the International Religious Freedom Act. The chapter also outlines a number of steps the U.S. government can take to address religious freedom issues in Cuba, including imposing sanctions on Cuban government officials within the Office of Religious Affairs, the Department of State Security, and the National Revolutionary Police.



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Professional Staff

Michael Ardovino

Policy Analyst

Susan Bishai

Senior Policy Analyst

Mollie Blum

Policy Analyst

Guillermo Cantor

Director of Research and Policy

Elizabeth K. Cassidy

Senior Strategic Advisor

Mingzhi Chen

Supervisory Policy Advisor

Patrick Greenwalt

Policy Analyst

Sema Hasan

Senior Policy Analyst

Thomas Kraemer

Chief Administrative Officer

Veronica McCarthy

Public Affairs Associate

Hilary Miller

Policy Analyst

Nora Morton

Operations Specialist

Dylan Schexnaydre

Policy Analyst

Scott Weiner

Supervisory Policy Analyst

Luke Wilson

International Legal Specialist

Kurt Werthmuller

Deputy Director of Research and Policy

Nathan Wineinger

Chief of Public Affairs

Jean Wu

Policy Analyst

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.

www.USCIRF.gov

@USCIRF

Media@USCIRF.gov

732 N. Capitol Street, NW, Suite #A714

Washington, DC 20401

202-523-3240