

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

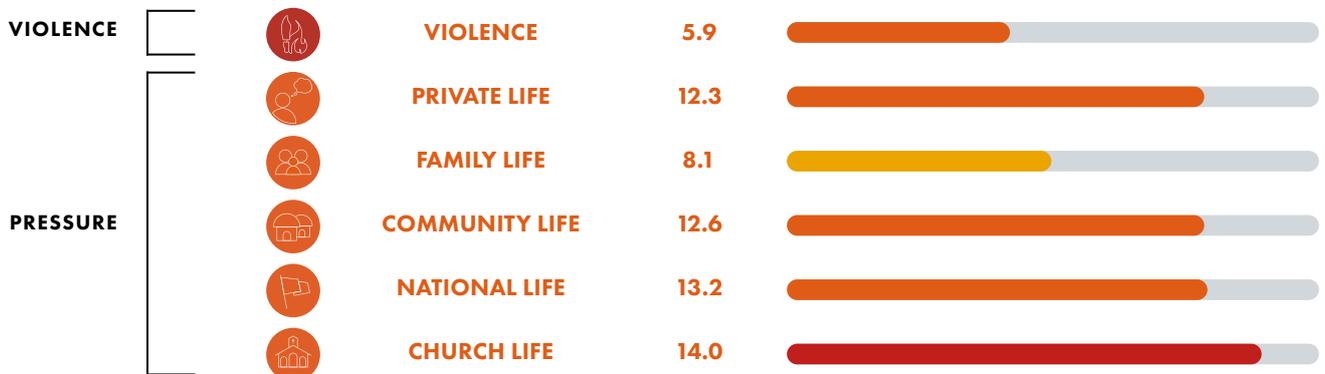
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**27**

## Cuba



### LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).

## Key findings

Since 1959, Cuba has been governed by a single party, the Communist Party of Cuba, which seeks to control the Church according to its Communist ideology. The government reacts harshly against opposition voices and demonstrators. When church leaders or Christian activists criticize the regime, they face arrest, smear campaigns, mobility restrictions, prison sentences, and/or harassment by the government and its sympathizers (usually through so-called “repudiation acts” which may include physical violence). Also, with the aim of controlling and reducing the Church’s influence, it is usual that the registration of new churches is denied, thus forcing many churches to operate illegally. The authorities will then impose penalties such as the complete refusal to issue licenses, fines, confiscation of property, demolition, and closure of churches (including house churches). The government also seeks to restrict Christian teaching defending a biblical model of marriage and family and represses those who contradict its ideology.

## Quick facts

### LEADER

President Miguel Diaz-Canel

### POPULATION

11,306,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

6,936,000<sup>1</sup>

### MAIN RELIGION

Christianity

### GOVERNMENT

Communist State



## Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	6,936,000	61.3
Others	1,954,650	17.3
Agnostics	1,898,000	16.8
Atheists	476,000	4.2

*OTHERS include Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.*

*Source<sup>2</sup>*

In 2019, the National Assembly unanimously chose Miguel Díaz Canel as President of the Council of State and the Council of Ministers. The position made him the political leader of the island and representative of the State, thus [ending](#) six decades of rule by the Castro family. In 2019, Cuba [introduced](#) a new Constitution, which changed some important [features](#) (such as the form of government and reinstating the offices of President and Vice-President of the Republic) but retained the single-party Socialist system. Additionally, in October 2019, the position of Prime Minister was re-introduced for the first time in 43 years, with Manuel Marrero Cruz being nominated as the [Prime Minister](#) in December 2019. Although Raul Castro resigned from the position of Cuban Communist Party Secretary in April 2021, the party leadership has stated that they will continue to consult Raul Castro on any strategic

planning for the nation. No change in the country's direction is expected with this new appointment.

Cuba has a volatile [relationship](#) with the USA. After the attempts of former US President, Barack Obama, to restore diplomatic relations with Cuba, former US President, Donald Trump, [imposed](#) new restrictive policies and maintained commercial, economic, and financial embargoes. The current US president, Joe Biden, [tightened](#) sanctions against Cuba in July 2021, after the crackdown by Cuban officials against demonstrators in anti-government protests that erupted in the country in response to the COVID-19 crisis, the severe commodity shortages and widespread violations of human rights (Los Angeles Times, 18 October 2021).

Human Rights Watch groups [report](#) that Cuba continues to suppress and punish dissent and public criticism. Punishments include short-term arbitrary arrests, smear campaigns, travel restrictions, raids on homes and offices, confiscation of working materials and poor prison conditions. Additionally, the Cuban government still refuses to recognize the monitoring of human rights as a legitimate activity and denies legal status to local human rights groups. According to the CIA Fact Book, national service is compulsory for men for two years. Evading military service on the grounds of conscience is rarely an option.

Christians lack protection, as do all persons with ideological interests contrary to those of the

<sup>1</sup> Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

<sup>2</sup> Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

Communist government. Government attitudes towards churches depend upon whether they submit to government orders and interests. Christian women and girls often experience pressures and hostilities in Cuban society when they defend their religious convictions about democracy, civil society participation, human rights, a biblical model of marriage and sanctity of life. Christian activists and leaders have also come under pressure and reportedly have been beaten, fined, confiscated and detained.

## How the situation varies by region

In the WWL 2023 reporting period, incidents of persecution against Christians have been registered throughout the country, but particularly in the eastern part and the capital.

## Who is affected?

### Communities of expatriate Christians

This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis.

### Historical Christian communities

Historical Christian communities include the Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church, and a growing Protestant community made up of Episcopal, Presbyterian, Lutheran, and Methodist churches. These churches are monitored and face state opposition if material or preaching opposing Communist ideology is discovered and when they support demonstrators, especially youth. They may also be criticized by leaders of politicized churches, ideological pressure groups, and harassed by regime sympathizers. Some churches belonging to this category are not officially recognized by the State and cannot count on the support of the Council of Churches of Cuba if their members or leaders are known critics of the regime or defy their interests. In such cases, they may suffer the same consequences as unregistered, non-traditional church groups.

### Converts to Christianity

This category includes cross-denominational converts from one church to another and converts from Santeria or the Communist Party. Converts are often rejected by government officials and subjected to reprisals when they belong to a church considered a regime opponent or when

the church's leaders are regarded as counter-revolutionaries. Thus, through intimidation and hostility, attempts are made to discourage conversion and prevent the growth of the Church.

### Non-traditional Christian communities

This category is made up mainly of Pentecostal and Evangelical groups and includes Baptist churches. As well as facing the same challenges as Historical Christian communities, it is almost impossible for these church groups to obtain registration and have for them and their members the same civil rights as other Churches with state recognition. Due to this impediment, congregations and their leaders face higher levels of repression and harassment. They are forced to act outside the law, and any of their activities is used as a pretext to fine or to prosecute them. Most of the time, they do not have other choice than to gather secretly in house-churches and live in constant fear of being discovered by the regime and Party militants.



# Main sources of persecution and discrimination

## Communist and post-Communist oppression blended with Secular intolerance:

After the Cuban revolution (1953-1958), the country was structured as a Communist state. Even though there have been adjustments to the original Communist postulates, the country is still ruled according to that political and economic model and the new Constitution has strengthened the Communist Party of Cuba, which is referred to as the leading force for both society and State. This means it is a constitutional requirement (for religious bodies too) to submit to Communist party ideology. In this scenario, anyone not adhering to the core values of the ruling party is targeted and repressed and Christians wishing to act in accordance to their beliefs are seen as enemies or rebels.

Apart from the virtual idolization of Fidel Castro and the Communist Party, religion is not seen as playing a key role in society and the actions of those churches that are considered regime-friendly are accepted, insofar as they do not affect the interests of the regime with respect to citizen control. The government welcomes ideologies that counter Christian values even in the private or family sphere, as promoted by some radical pressure groups.

## Dictatorial paranoia:

The manifestation of this engine is blended with Communist and post-Communist oppression. Given that the Communist Party is the only constitutionally recognized political party, anyone questioning the authority of its leaders – whether for reasons of faith or otherwise – is labeled an enemy of the regime. The new Constitution perpetuates the Cuban revolution as a political project and safeguards the need to maintain a system of total monitoring. Such totalitarian control has resulted in years of excessive repression and infringement of citizens' rights. Due to the restrictions on the religious freedom of Christians and church activities, Christians are at times forced to act against their beliefs not only to avoid being targeted by the regime but also simply to gain access to basic services.

Corruption and impunity are used as ways to maintain Communist party power. The government controls the state apparatus at all levels, and there is no independent authority to ensure respect for the rule of law. Christians from any denomination (including the Catholic Church) have no legitimate space to express themselves freely without fear of reprisals.



# How are men and women differently affected?

## WOMEN

Christian women are often insulted because of their more conservative sexual values, particularly if they speak out against abortion (which is obligatory in the case of genetic malformation, in line with the Cuban government’s ideal of maintaining 0% of births with deformities). Female activists who speak out against the government are typically fired, threatened, and monitored. Police continue to mistreat and beat the “Ladies in White” (a group founded by the relatives of political prisoners) on their way to and from church services. Domestic violence remains a challenge.

- Denied / restricted healthcare
- Imprisonment by the government
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – verbal

## MEN

Christian men, particularly male pastors, are more likely to be arrested or harassed as they often hold leadership positions and criticize government behavior based on their Christian beliefs. Detentions rose significantly following the 11 July protests, which many young men were affected by. Men face beatings, arrests, confiscation of Christian literature, destruction of property and death threats. Within compulsory national service, Christian men are additionally vulnerable if their faith is discovered. The level of discrimination and persecution depends on the attitude of the commanding officer.

- Denied access to Christian religious materials, teachings, and rites

- Denied inheritance or possessions
- Discrimination / harassment via education
- Economic harassment via work / job /business
- Forced to flee town / country
- Imprisonment by the government
- Military / militia conscription / service against conscience
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – verbal

## WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2023	27	70
2022	37	66
2021	51	62
2020	61	52
2019	59	49

*An increase in pressure in all spheres of life and violence caused the overall score to rise by four points. The dictatorial regime intensified its repressive tactics against all Christian leaders and activists opposing Communist principles. This is especially the case after the widespread demonstrations that occurred in July and November 2021 and against those who participated in other similar manifestations of disagreement with the Communist model. Government measures included arrests, abductions, arbitrary fines, close surveillance, denials of licenses and religious visas, and physical/mental abuse.*



## Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **January 2022:** Eggs were thrown at the house of Roman Catholic priest Rolando Montes de Oca in Camagüey. He is known for being critical of the government, and this was the second act of aggression against him (Aciprensa, 15 January 2022).
- **May 2022:** Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo, pastor and leader of the Monte de Sion Independent Church and a previous target of government repression, was arrested in August 2021 for his participation in the peaceful protests of July 2021, along with other members of his Church. After being harassed, psychologically tortured, and held incommunicado for most of his detention, in December 2021 he received a first sentence of eight years in prison accused of charges of disrespect, public disorder, incitement, and assault. In May 2022, Rosales Fajardo's sentence was reduced by a year to seven years in prison, and later his appeal was rejected. His wife also has been threatened with imprisonment herself if she continues to speak out publicly about her husband's case.
- **July 2022:** Raul Capote, a youth leader of the Calvario Baptist Church, after publishing a poem in his Facebook profile criticizing government repression and directly asking for God's help, was visited by a police agent in his house. He was beaten and then arrested, in front of his wife and children.

WWL Year	Christians detained	Christians imprisoned or punished by the government	Christians physically or mentally abused	Christians' private property damaged or confiscated
2023	80	12	18	3
2022	44	4	18	2

*This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - for full results see the violence section of the Full Country Dossier. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10\*, 100\* or 1000\*) is given which in reality could be significantly higher.*

### Private life

Expressions of faith in blogs and Facebook posts are closely monitored by the State. Censure has increased, especially after the COVID-19 global pandemic, resulting in Internet access and travel bans. In practice, all Cubans assume that all social media use and phone conversations are being monitored by the authorities. The main goal of this kind of harassment is to encourage self-censorship among citizens. Usually, Christian human rights activists and those who constantly question and challenge the regime face arbitrary arrest and house-arrest, which causes separation from family and church. Sometimes they must remain in their home without contacting anyone and under close police surveillance.

### Family life

The State is considered the main educator of all the children in the country, and its revolution ideology influences children from an early age. Communist education is mandatory in schools. Every morning before the start of classes, all pupils must swear



with their hand raised: “We will be like Che!” (Che Guevara is a Communist icon). Parents who distance their children from the state’s Communist values face prison sentences and loss of custody of their children, they can hardly raise their children according to their own convictions and beliefs, because they have no legal means to oppose against the regime’s intense indoctrination. Children of Christians known to be involved in the defense of human rights face intimidation and other difficulties by being regarded as children of “enemies of the revolution”. A Christian who opposes the government is sometimes forced to relocate to another part of the country to save his family from suffering unnecessarily. This means the family is separated for prolonged periods of time.



### **Community life**

Militants and sympathizers of the regime closely monitor the activities of Christians. Those who have expressed faith-based opinions or participated in strikes against the regime are considered dissidents and are targeted for surveillance and interrogation, as are those known to belong to churches that oppose the ruling party. The Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR) are the main government informants, and their aim is to eliminate the spread of subversive, anti-Communist ideas with the help of other citizens, militants from the Communist party, government officials and sometimes other family members. All students, including Christians, are forced to learn Marxist ideology as part of the compulsory state curriculum, even at universities. If they try to oppose such forced indoctrination, they are threatened with being banned from continuing their education. There is not a totally safe community

place for those Christians considered opponents of the regime. Occasionally, public officials ask for money from Christians, as way of harassment, in order to allow them to perform their activities with fewer restrictions, but this does not represent a significant reduction of risk. The request for money is a “private and arbitrary arrangement” and has no legal backing.

### **National life**

The government does not guarantee freedom of expression for anyone in the country, especially lately due to the increase in surveillance of ‘rebels’ and the application of Decree 370. Christians, Christian organizations, religious freedom advocates, or Christian human rights activists speaking out about the state violation of human and civil rights, the need to abandon the communist model, the sanctity of marriage (in the context of the “Family Code referendum”), or even scandals regarding the Castro family, for instance, face arrest, discrimination, smear campaigns, arbitrary detentions, fines, prosecution, travel limitations, censorship and more. Many Christians and their families facing such restrictions belong to non-registered churches, especially those related to the Evangelical Alliance in Cuba, which is openly critical of government injustices. The regime has total control over the judicial system and ruling will always be in the state’s favor, guaranteeing impunity. Thus, the rights to procedural guarantees for Christians will not be properly safeguarded, including the right to due process. In addition, under the pretext to avoid foreign interventionism, international monitoring is not allowed.

### **Church life**

Only a minority of churches in Cuba have legal recognition because they were registered before the Communist Revolution of 1959. Since then, in most cases, registration has been denied on the grounds that another local group has identical or similar objectives, or that the applicant’s activities could in any way harm the common good (i.e., goes against Communist Party ideology). As a consequence, many churches are considered illegal because their registration has been denied. These non-registered churches are considered ‘rebels’ and face penalties ranging from fines to closure of their organizations, prosecution of their Church leaders, and confiscation of their property. Any permission or authorization required by a church or religious leaders considered an “enemy of the revolution” will be arbitrarily denied. The constant risk of retaliations from the State does not allow to Churches to act in the public space, especially on politically contentious issues (as happened with the Family Code referendum promoted by the government), since preaching is constantly monitored and civil society influence is restricted by the Communist government.

# International obligations & rights violated

Cuba has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights in the following international treaties:

1. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)\*
2. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)
3. Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT)
4. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
5. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

*\*Cuba has only signed the ICCPR but not ratified it.*

Cuba is not fulfilling its international obligations by regularly violating or failing to protect the following rights of Christians:

- Christians are harassed in the workplace and face discrimination because of their faith (ICCPR Art. 26)
- Christians are arrested for speaking up for their rights (ICCPR Arts. 9 and 19)
- If arrested, Christians experience beatings and pressure to renounce their faith (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 10)
- Christian children are ostracized at school and pressured to abandon their faith (ICCPR Art. 18; CRC Arts. 14 and 24)

## Situation of other religious minorities

According to the [US State Department's IRF 2022 Cuba report](#), Santería religious leaders and practitioners, particularly members of the unregistered Free Yoruba Association of Cuba, were frequent targets of government harassment. State security reportedly detained at least five members for participating in the protests. Muslim community representatives are subject to discrimination (for example, denial of permission to travel), as are Jehovah's Witnesses, who are prevented from studying due to requirements for political involvement.



# Open Doors in Cuba

Open Doors strengthens the persecuted church in Cuba, offering:

- Biblical and Christian literature distribution
- Livelihood projects
- Biblical training
- Leadership development projects to strengthen the weakened church leadership;
- SED / resilience to increase self-reliability of the church and decrease dependence on foreign aid



#### About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the Full Country Dossier produced annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2023 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2023 reporting period was 01 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- The Full Country Dossier for this country can be accessed [here](#) (password: freedom). The latest update of WWL methodology - as well as the complete WWL 2023 ranking and reports - can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

*Many photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.*

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