



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

USCIRF HEARING SUMMARY:

August 2023

DETERIORATING RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS IN CUBA

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Vice Chair

Commissioners

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Stephen Schneck

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USCIRF's Mission

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

On June 28, 2023, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) held an in-person hearing at the American Museum of the Cuban Diaspora in Miami, FL, on *Deteriorating Religious Freedom Conditions in Cuba*. The hearing, led by USCIRF's Vice Chair Fred Davie, convened an array of witnesses who spoke about current religious freedom conditions in Cuba, and provided policy recommendations to the U.S. government.

Vice Chair [Frederick Davie](#) opened the hearing by explaining that USCIRF held the hearing in Miami in order to speak directly with Cubans and members of the Cuban diaspora about the increasingly repressive situation that Cuba's religious communities face. He also discussed specific religious freedom conditions in Cuba in 2022—such as surveillance, harassment of religious leaders and laypeople, forced exile, fines, and ill treatment of religious prisoners of conscience—and highlighted the reasons why USCIRF recommends Cuba's designation as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC).

Commissioner [Frank Wolf](#) provided an analysis of the Office of Religious Affairs, a Ministry of Justice entity in Cuba that exercises direct and arbitrary control over the affairs of registered religious organizations, such as requiring official registration of religious groups and permission for virtually any activity other than regular worship services. Commissioner Wolf explained that government authorities subject pastors to detention, interrogation, threats of prison sentences on false charges, and confiscation of property if they participate in unsanctioned religious activity.

Commissioner [Steve Schneck](#) introduced USCIRF's Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) Victim's List, saying that currently eight Cubans are on the list. He highlighted the case of Reverend Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo, leader of the Monte de Sion Independent Church, who participated in the July 11, 2021 protests and was subsequently detained. Commissioner Schneck finished by inviting the public to submit information on individuals who have been targeted due to their faith-based activity or advocacy in Cuba.

[Rosa María Payá Acevedo](#), Director of Cuba Decide, provided an overview of the Cuban Communist Party's repression of human, civil, and political rights, as well as a discussion on constitutional reforms and the possibility of a plebiscite. She stressed that the international community should hold the Cuban Communist Party accountable for its rights abuses by utilizing the Global Magnitsky Act to apply targeted sanctions against top officials and individuals involved in human rights abuses in Cuba, and by requiring companies conducting business with the Cuban regime to adhere to the Global Sullivan Principles, which promote respect for human rights and discourage enriching the rulers.



[Teo Babun](#), President and CEO of Outreach Aid to the Americas, delivered testimony that gave a detailed summary of the Cuban government's history of religious freedom violations, including recent changes to the Cuban constitution that diluted FoRB protections, such as omitting language that had been in the last constitution, from 1992, such as the term "freedom of conscience." He also prescribed several recommendations to the U.S. government, including providing support to human rights advocacy training programs for multi-faith stakeholders and encouraging other international governments to apply sanctions to officials orchestrating FoRB repression.

[Pastor Alain Toledano Valiente](#), Pastor of the Emanuel Church of the Apostolic Ministry and faith-based dissident, told the story of his life in Cuba as the leader of an unregistered church. Cuban government authorities subjected Toledano and his family to 20 years of harassment, including surveillance, travel bans, interrogations, and fines. He eventually made the decision to leave Cuba rather than face imprisonment.

[Jorge Luis "Antúnez" García Pérez](#), Afro-Cuban human rights activist and Yoruba advocate, delivered testimony about the imprisonment and ill treatment of his brother, Loreto Hernández García, and sister-in-law, Donaida Pérez Paseiro. Donaida and Loreto are the president and vice-president, respectively, of the *Asociación de Yorubas Libres de Cuba*, or "Free Yorubas," an independent and unregistered Santería community.

[Father Rolando Montes de Oca](#), a Catholic priest from Camagüey, Cuba was unable to attend the hearing in-person, but provided written remarks that touched on the unique ways that the Cuban government represses the Catholic Church and its followers in the country. One example is by coercing parishioners to serve as "infiltrators" to spy on clergy and laymen and denounce the church on social media.

Vice Chair Davie concluded by thanking the witnesses for their testimonies.

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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.