

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, religious freedom conditions in Cuba remained dismal. The government supplemented its oppressive legal framework with legislation further restricting freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), harassed religious leaders and congregations, and wrongfully imprisoned individuals for their peaceful religious activity.

In July, the Cuban Parliament approved the Citizenship Law, which empowers the government to strip Cuban citizenship from individuals if they reside abroad and engage in acts “contrary to the political, economic, or social interests” of the country. The provision’s broad language places individuals at risk of denationalization if the government perceives their peaceful religious activity as conflicting with national interests. In October, the Social Communication Law came into force, which tightly restricts the right to freedom of opinion and expression—including by prohibiting religious expression that the government perceives as untruthful or out of step with its ideology. These new laws supplement Decree Law 370 and the Cuban Penal Code that, respectively, threaten independent journalists reporting on religious freedom conditions with fines and property confiscation and criminalize “public disorder” and “resistance,” each of which may punish worshippers perceived as critical of the government.

The Law of Associations requires religious organizations to apply to the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), where the Office of Religious Affairs (ORA) is housed, for legal registration. Registration decisions are often arbitrary and discriminatory, and membership or association with an unregistered religious group is a crime. As a result, members of unregistered religious groups, such as the Free Yoruba Association, regularly face interrogation, detention,

threats of prison sentences on false charges, and confiscation of property. Even if a religious organization is legally registered, the ORA exercises arbitrary control and requires permission for virtually any activity beyond regular worship services.

Throughout the year, the government drew on its vast domestic security and surveillance apparatus to harass religious leaders and worshippers. The Department of State Security, the National Revolutionary Police, and the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, among others, shared in this harassment. In March, prison authorities denied a political prisoner access to religious materials and prevented a priest from providing pastoral care to an ill hospital patient. In March and April, local officials arbitrarily prohibited Holy Week and Easter processions in various parts of the country. In May, authorities prohibited a Catholic priest from ringing church bells during a blackout to protest the Cuban government’s human rights violations. Throughout the year, the Cuban authorities prevented members of the Ladies in White, a peaceful protest group, from attending religious services on Sundays through harassment and arbitrary detentions.

FoRB prisoners remained arbitrarily imprisoned and subject to harsh treatment. [Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo](#), pastor of the independent Monte de Sion Church, remained imprisoned on a seven-year sentence for peacefully participating in July 2021 [protests](#) for greater freedom. In February, the United Nations (UN) Working Group on Arbitrary Detention [found](#) Pastor Rosales Fajardo’s imprisonment arbitrary and in violation of numerous articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

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);
- Impose Section 7031(c) visa bans against Cuban government officials who have engaged in gross human rights violations against the Ladies in White, unregistered religious groups such as the Free Yoruba Association, and FoRB prisoners profiled in USCIRF’s [Victims List](#) and publicly identify those sanctioned; and
- Convene a side event at the UN Human Rights Council on Cuba’s human rights violations against FoRB prisoners and unregistered religious groups to include following up on the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention’s [finding](#) about Pastor Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo’s wrongful imprisonment.

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 Cuban government violations against individuals engaging in peaceful religious activities, unregistered religious groups, and FoRB prisoners, with a focus on how U.S. policy should address these violations; and

- Hold biannual public calls through the bipartisan Cuba Democracy Caucus to explain how Section 7031(c) may be used to hold religious freedom violators in Cuba accountable and to solicit information that could lead to the imposition of visa bans.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Cuba](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief** [Victims List](#) and [Appendix 2](#)

Background

While there are no independent sources on Cuba's religious demographics, [estimates](#) indicate that 60 percent of the country's population of 11 million identify as Roman Catholic. Estimates also indicate that Cuba is home to a variety of religious minorities that include Jehovah's Witnesses, Methodists, Seventh-day Adventists, Presbyterians, Anglicans, Episcopalians, Anabaptists, Quakers, Moravians, Muslims, Buddhists, Baha'is, Jews, Rastafarians, and members of the Greek Orthodox and Russian Orthodox churches. An [estimated](#) 70 percent of Cubans observe Santería or other religious practices based in African tradition.

Cuba is a one-party system under the ruling Cuban Communist Party, with no independent judiciary. The constitution includes language that purports to protect FoRB, including through government recognition, respect, and guarantee of religious freedom. However, the same constitution allows any piece of legislation that is in force to override those same protections. The state tightly controls religious institutions through the ORA, including through registration requirements. The Cuban government also maintains close and cooperative ties with repressive regimes, including Russia and China. In 2024, the Cuban government announced that its police force will receive training in Russia; the police forces in both countries engage in particularly severe religious freedom violations.

Ladies in White

Cuban authorities used arbitrary detentions and other tactics to regularly prevent the Ladies in White, an organization of wives and relatives of dissidents imprisoned in 2003, from attending religious services on Sundays. During such detentions, police subjected members of the group to beatings and unsanitary conditions in cells that lack necessities such as drinking water. In January, Cuban authorities arrested 20 members of the Ladies in White as they tried to peacefully attend church services, and they threatened to imprison Berta Soler, the group's leader. In February, police arbitrarily detained 16 members of the Ladies in White and more in March, including at least one whom they held for 18 hours and later fined. Such incidents continued with regular frequency throughout the year.

Harassment of Members of Unregistered Religious Groups

As Christian Solidarity Worldwide has reported, Cuban government officials harassed, intimidated, and fined members of unregistered religious groups. The ORA regularly and arbitrarily denied or failed

to respond to registration applications from religious groups. The government then used a lack of registration as a pretext to target unregistered religious groups. In March, authorities interrogated an Afro-Cuban religious leader because he conducted "illegal" religious activities in his home. They later fined him 10,000 pesos (\$415) for "providing spiritual services without the relevant permits." In another case, the pastor of an unregistered church received a fine of 30,000 pesos (\$1,245) for leading an "illegal, unregistered church."

FoRB Prisoners

The Cuban government continues to arbitrarily incarcerate FoRB prisoners, including worshipers who peacefully participated in the July 2021 protests for greater freedom and for relief from the country's economic crisis. Among those prisoners are [Donaida Pérez Paseiro](#), president of the unregistered Free Yoruba Association, and her husband [Loreto Hernández García](#), both of whom remained arbitrarily imprisoned at the end of the reporting period for their peaceful participation in those 2021 protests. Throughout García's confinement, prison authorities have denied him medical treatment he needs to manage several serious conditions. Family members seeking to visit other FoRB prisoners have also been subject to mistreatment, including interrogations and forced nudity. Twins [Lisdani Rodríguez Isaac](#) and [Lisdiani Rodríguez Isaac](#), both members of the Free Yoruba Association of Cuba, were arrested and sentenced to eight years' imprisonment after their peaceful participation in the 2021 protests. However, Cuban authorities provided the former with a temporary release after she was diagnosed with a pregnancy-related medical condition.

Key U.S. Policy

The U.S. government's relationship with Cuba remains strained over human rights issues, although U.S. public efforts to promote religious freedom in the country were limited. In June, the U.S. government joined a multicountry [statement](#) through the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance on the arbitrary arrest, wrongful imprisonment, and violence against Pastor Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo. In July, the U.S. Department of State [commemorated](#) the July 2021 protests and called for the release of all those wrongfully imprisoned for their peaceful participation in the protests, some of whom are FoRB prisoners profiled in USCIRF's [Victims List](#). In December, the House Foreign Affairs Committee held a [hearing](#) on Cuba's human rights violations.

On December 29, 2023, the State Department last [redesignated](#) Cuba as a CPC under IRFA for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.