

WORLD WATCH LIST 2024

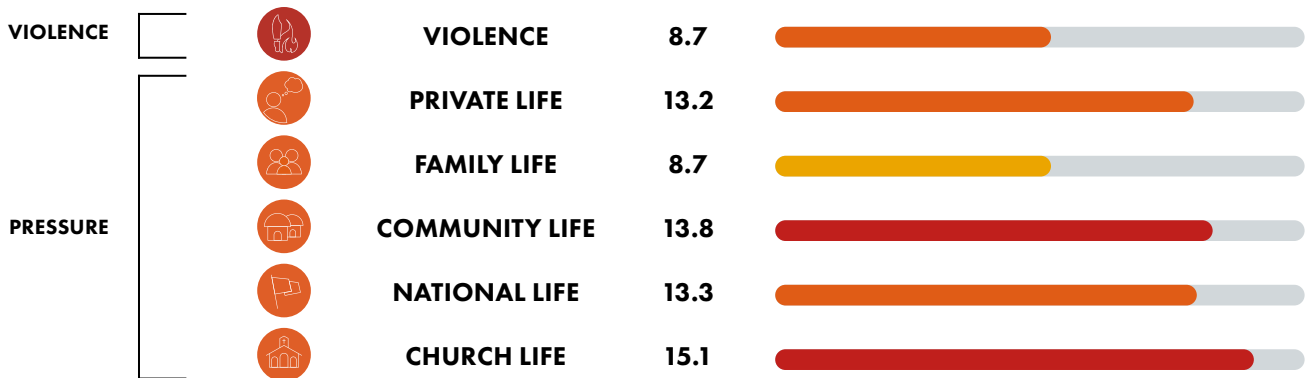
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
22

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 its Communist Party, which seeks to control the Church according to 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). Furthermore, 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).

Quick facts

LEADER

President Miguel Diaz-Canel

POPULATION

11,291,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

6,966,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Christianity

GOVERNMENT

Communist State



Context

Religious Context	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	6,966,000	61.7
Others	1,946,760	17.2
Agnostics	1,869,000	16.6
Atheists	467,000	4.1

Source²

In 2019, the National Assembly (which consists entirely of representatives of the Communist Party, the only legal party in Cuba) unanimously chose Miguel Díaz Canel as President of the Council of State and the Council of Ministers, [ending](#) six decades of rule by the Castro family. Despite this change, the Socialist/Communist grip on society has remained firmly in place. Cuba is considered a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) by the U.S. State Department.

In an attempt to give a certain appearance of legitimacy to its actions, in May 2022 a New Penal Code was approved by the government. According to Amnesty International (AI, 2 December 2022) [some “alarming aspects”](#) of this include provisions used to silence and imprison activists, penalties for anyone who “endangers the constitutional order and the normal functioning” of the government and severe limits to freedom of expression online. Despite this,

government opposition is growing due to policies that have caused the collapse of the health system, uncontrolled inflation, food and energy insecurity, and further problems.

According to WCD 2023 estimates, 88.7% of Cuban Christians are Catholics. However, other Christian denominations continue to have a visible presence and acceptance among the population, especially those linked to the Pentecostal Church.

The small amount of support that local churches receive through foreign donations are constantly monitored and can be a reason for being fined and harassed by the authorities. Reports from in-country sources have revealed that non-monetary donations made to churches have at times been confiscated and resold, even destroyed, by the government. Also, as a way of reprisal against Christian business owners (mostly pastors), their small businesses have been arbitrarily fined or closed down for supposedly being included in the [124 prohibited activities](#) for self-employed workers or as economic retaliation for their support of anti-government protesters.

Christian leaders who are vocal against government injustices are among those suffering from government repression. Several priests and pastors have faced [frequent summons to police stations](#), [death threats](#), arbitrary arrests, [physical attacks](#) by security officers (Marti Noticias, 11 February 2022), [torture](#) as political prisoners, home-searches and confiscation of goods, vandalism of church buildings and houses and even

¹ Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

² Others include Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian. Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

[forced displacement](#) (CSW, 3 March 2022). Not only church leaders, but also those who work with them or with Christian networks and those expressing criticism of the regime through social networks have also been [harassed](#) (Vida Cristiana, 4 November 2021).

Cuba has a volatile [relationship](#) with the USA. After the attempts of former US President, Barack Obama, to restore diplomatic relations, 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. However, in May 2022, the Biden administration [relaxed](#) some of its policies towards the island.

How the situation varies by region

In the WWL 2024 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 are not affiliated with the Council of Churches of Cuba, which is part of the regime's structure. In such cases, they may suffer the same consequences as unregistered, non-traditional church groups.

[Converts to Christianity](#)

This category includes cross-denominational converts 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 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 are used as a pretext to fine or prosecute them. Most of the time, they do not have any other choice than to gather secretly in house churches and live in 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. The country is still ruled according to that political and economic model, and the new Constitution has strengthened the Communist Party of Cuba. This means it is a constitutional requirement (for religious bodies too) to submit to Communist party ideology, and anyone not doing so is targeted and repressed. Additionally, with the implementation of the new Family Code, intolerance against the Church's teaching on the biblical model of the family has increased and may justify the criminalization of Christian parents if they do not conform to the ideological postulates promoted by the government.

Dictatorial paranoia

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. 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 total 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 challenged because of their more conservative sexual values, particularly in relation to abortion. 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.

Female typical pressure points:

- Denied/restricted healthcare
- Imprisonment by 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 July 2021 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.

Male typical pressure points:

- Denied access to Christian religious materials, teachings and rites
- Denied inheritance or possessions
- Economic harassment via business/job/work access
- Forced to flee town/country
- Imprisonment by 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
2024	22	73
2023	27	70
2022	37	66
2021	51	62
2020	61	52

Cuba rose 3 points overall due to increases in both pressure and violence. There were slight/very slight increases in all Spheres of life, and violence rose from 7.0 points in WWL 2023 to 8.7 points due to more church buildings and private properties of Christians being attacked. Repression against dissident voices is steadily increasing and becoming more notorious, especially where church leaders and activist Christians have highlighted government human rights abuses, provided support to protestors, or disagreed with the recently approved Family Code. Those speaking out risk being targeted for various forms of hostilities, including arbitrary arrest.



Examples of violence in the reporting period

- December 2022 – Santiago de Cuba:** The wife of pastor and human rights activist Lorenzo Rosales accused the authorities of harassing him in prison. He was given a seven-year sentence in Boniato prison in Santiago de Cuba. According to his spouse, he is constantly harassed by jail officials and state security agents (Ciber Cuba, 12 December 2022).
- April 2023 – Havana:** The Church of Jesús Obrero was targeted by vandals, who broke in and damaged some cables but did not take anything. The parish priest, Léster Rafael Zayas Díaz, is known to be an open critic of the Cuban regime (Cibercuba, 15 June 2023). The parish of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Havana, also under the care of Father Lester, was damaged in strange circumstances in the months of March (Cuba Cute, 08 March 2023), June (Cubanos por el mundo, 16 June 2023) and August (Ciber Cuba, 07 August 2023).
- April 2023 – Camaguey:** The Observatory of Academic Freedom reported the arrest of a 7-year-old girl during school hours and with the complicity of school staff. Her mother was detained too. In March 2022, her mother, the activist Marisol Peñas Cobas, was formally accused of committing “other acts against the normal development of the minor” for “not teaching her daughter to love the revolution.” She is currently awaiting trial, after paying bail of two thousand pesos.

WWL Year	Christians detained	Christians imprisoned or punished by the government	Christians physically or mentally abused	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed
2024	45	30	24	12
2023	80	12	18	7

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 restrictions and travel bans (obstacles to sharing the Christian faith with others). In practice, all Cubans assume that all social media use and phone conversations are being monitored by the authorities and self-censor. Christian human rights activists and those who 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 children, and Communist education is mandatory in schools. Every morning, all pupils must swear with their hand raised: "We will be like Che!" (Che Guevara is a Communist icon). According to the law, parents who distance their children from the state's Communist values and ideological postulates about the role of the family could face interrogation, threats, arrests, prison sentences and loss of custody of their children. Children of Christians known to be involved in the defense of human rights face intimidation and other difficulties such as interrogation and detention, 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, employment discrimination, restriction to health access and community subsidies managed by the State 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 anti-Communist ideas with the help of other citizens, militants from the Communist Party and government officials. 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. Occasionally, public officials ask for money from Christians, as a 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, especially lately due to the increase in surveillance of 'rebels' and the application of Decree 370 New Criminal Code and the New Family Code. 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, face arrest, discrimination, smear campaigns, arbitrary detentions, fines, prosecution, travel limitations, censorship, unfair treatment in court, and more. Many Christians and their families facing such restrictions belong to non-registered churches, especially those related to the Evangelical Alliance in Cuba and other new Christian associations, which are 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.

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 face penalties ranging from fines to the 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 retaliation from the State does not allow Churches (registered or not) to act in the public space, especially on politically contentious issues (as happened with the Family Code referendum and its application), support political prisoners, help the needy and call for solutions to the humanitarian and economic crisis since preaching is constantly monitored and civil society influence restricted by the Communist government.

International obligations & rights violated

Cuba has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights under 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 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

Santería religious leaders and practitioners, particularly members of the unregistered Free Yoruba Association of Cuba, have been frequent targets of government harassment. Muslim community representatives are subject to discrimination (for example, denial of permission to travel).



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 weakened church leadership
- Socio-economic development / resilience to increase self-reliability of the church and decrease dependence on foreign aid



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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: © 2024 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 01 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- All brief country profiles can be accessed under 'Advocacy resources' on the research pages of the Open Doors International website, along with the more detailed Full Country Dossiers and the latest update of [WWL Methodology](#). These are also available at the [Open Doors Analytical](#) website (password: freedom).

All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
