

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2022

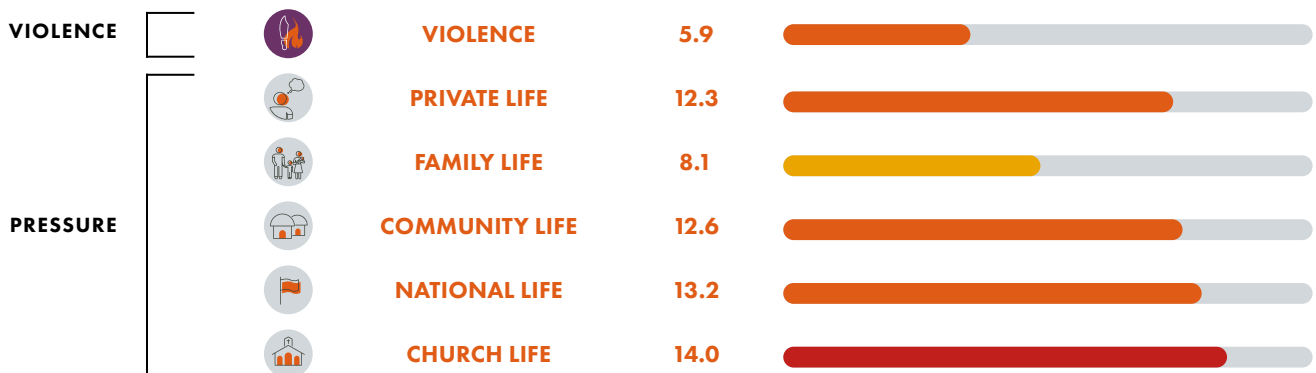
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**37**

## 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).<sup>1</sup> Red = extreme level, orange = very high, yellow = high

## Key findings

Since 1959, Cuba has been governed by a single party, the Communist Party of Cuba, which seeks to control the social life and the Church according to its totalitarian Communist ideology. In this scenario, the government reacts harshly against anyone that could represent an opposition voice, especially against demonstrators. When church leaders or Christian activists criticize the regime, they face hostility, arrest, prison sentences, death threats and/or continuous harassment by the government and its sympathizers,

<sup>1</sup>World Watch Research measures pressure across all spheres of life as well as violence (full methodology [here](#) – password: freedom).

whose also act as local vigilantes. With the aim of controlling and reducing the Church's influence, it is usual to deny the registration of new churches. This forces many churches to operate illegally, which ends up in the imposition of penalties such as the complete refusal to issue licenses, the imposition of fines, confiscation of property, attacks, demolition and closure of churches (including house churches).

## Quick facts

### LEADER

President Miguel Diaz-Canel

### POPULATION

11,500,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

7,127,000 (62.0%)<sup>2</sup>

### MAIN RELIGION

Christianity

### GOVERNMENT

Communist State



## Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	7,127,000	62.0
Atheists	450,000	3.9
Agnostics	1,940,000	16.9
Others	1,940,000	16.9

*OTHERS include Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian. Source<sup>3</sup>*

In 2018, 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 embargos. Current US President, Joe Biden, has yet to take action to alter any of the previous administration's policies concerning Cuba.

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

<sup>2</sup>Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021)

<sup>3</sup>Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021)

of human rights as a legitimate activity and denies legal status to local human rights groups. According to the CIA Factbook, 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 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, 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 2022 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 consist of 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 content material or preaching opposing Communist ideology is discovered and when they support demonstrators, especially the 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 or cannot count on the support of the Council of Churches of Cuba if members or leaders are known opposers of the regime. 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. 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 gain the same civil rights as other churches with state recognition. Due to this impediment, these congregations and their leaders face higher levels of repression and harassment, since they are forced to act outside the law. Most of the time they do not have any choice other than to gather secretly in house churches. They live in constant fear of being discovered by the regime and Party militants.



## Main sources of persecution and discrimination

### Communist and post-Communist oppression:

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. 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, even for religious bodies, to submit to Communist party ideology. In this scenario, anyone not adhering to the core values of the ruling party is targeted and repressed. Christians wishing to act in accordance to their beliefs are seen as enemies or rebels (of the revolution).

Apart from the virtual idolization of Fidel Castro and the Communist Party, religion is not seen as playing a key role in society. Actions of churches 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 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. In this respect, the crisis caused by COVID-19 was a convenient opportunity for the regime to increase the levels of repression against Christians who, based on the faith they profess, do not align with the interests of the government and contradict it openly.

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 a 0% rate of births with deformities). Female activists who speak out against the government are typically fired from their job, 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.

- 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. They face beatings, arrests, confiscation of Christian literature, destruction of property and death threats. Within the context of 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. Permission to undertake alternative forms of social service is rarely granted.

- Denied access to Christian religious materials
- Discrimination/harassment via education
- Economic harassment via work/job/business

- 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 score out of 100
2022	37	66.05
2021	51	62.10
2020	61	52.04
2019	59	48.55
2018	56	49.00

*The situation for Christians in Cuba has deteriorated due to increased levels of state repression in an attempt to quell dissident voices that are influencing all spheres of life. The dictatorial regime takes harsh measures against all those who represent an independent voice and stand firm against Communist principles, such as Christian leaders and human-rights activists. This became especially notable after demonstrations in July 2021. Stricter measures including arbitrary fines, close surveillance, denials of licenses and religious visas, caused not just a considerable increase of pressure but also more violent incidents such as detentions and physical/mental abuse.*



# Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **In February 2021**, Pastor David Álvarez was [called to the police station](#) by state security, after bringing cement and bricks to his house. A neighbor informed the municipal police.
- **In July 2021**, various church leaders were [arrested](#) for participating in peaceful demonstrations. One priest was temporarily held in custody, where he suffered a blow to the head with a baseball bat.
- **In March 2021**, numerous stones thrown by regime sympathizers hit the roof of the pastoral house and the Missionary Church in Cuba. The pastor is a well-known detractor of the Cuban socialist regime and belongs to the Apostolic Movement, a network of evangelical churches that the state refuses to legalize.

WWL Year	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians detained	Christians imprisoned or punished by the government	Christians physically or mentally abused
2022	7	44	4	18
2021	5	13	4	12

*This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - see [here](#) for full results. 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 during the COVID-19 crisis, resulting in bans on internet access and travel. In practice, all Cubans assume that 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. Christian human rights activists and those who constantly question and challenge the regime face arbitrary arrest and house arrest, which cause separation from Christian fellowship and families. Sometimes Christians must remain in their homes without contacting anyone, 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 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 cannot raise their children according to their own convictions and beliefs, because they have no legal means to oppose the regime's 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 Christian activities. Christians who have expressed faith-based opinions or participated in strikes against the regime are considered dissidents and are targeted for surveillance, as are those known to belong to churches who 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 of 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 in universities. If they try to oppose such forced indoctrination, they are threatened with being banned from continuing their education. On many occasions, public officials ask for money from pastors in order to allow them to perform their church activities. The request for money is a 'private and arbitrary arrangement' and has no legal backing. In a COVID-19 context, money has even been demanded when religious services follow biosecurity measures.

### **National life**

The government does not guarantee freedom of expression for anyone in the country, particularly recently, 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 government's inefficiency in containing the COVID-19 pandemic, the need to abandon the Communist model, or even scandals regarding the Castro family, face violations. These include 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 their 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 of avoiding foreign interventionism, international monitoring is not allowed.

### **Church life**

Almost all churches in Cuba with legal recognition 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). Therefore, many churches are considered illegal because registration has been denied. These non-registered churches are considered 'rebels' and face penalties ranging from fines to closure of their organizations and confiscation of property. Any permission or authorization required by a Church or religious leaders considered as 'enemy of the revolution' will be arbitrarily denied. Nowadays, health measures to avoid the spread of COVID-19 have been a big excuse to give an appearance of legitimacy to retaliation against those churches.



# 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 2021](#) Cuba report, several 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, threatened, and surveilled Free Yoruba leaders, including detaining two high-ranking Free Yorubas in March and declaring that 'there is only one god, Fidel Castro'. In May, state security reportedly broke up a religious meeting of an unregistered Islamic group studying the Quran. Participants were summoned to the police station the next day and threatened with criminal charges.





# Open Doors in Cuba

Open Doors strengthens the persecuted church in Cuba, offering the following support:

- 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



©Unsplash

#### 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: © 2021 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2022 reporting period was 01 October 2020 - 30 September 2021.
- 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 2022 ranking and reports, can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

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

---