

KEY FINDINGS

In 2020, religious freedom conditions in Cuba remained challenging. The Cuban government used a system of laws and policies, surveillance, and harassment to control and suppress religious groups and others for their advocacy or support of religious freedom.

The Cuban government, through the [Office of Religious Affairs \(ORA\)](#) continued its repressive enforcement of religious restrictions. The Law of Associations requires religious organizations to apply to the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), where the ORA is housed, for registration. Despite existing criteria, registration decisions are often arbitrary and discriminatory. Unregistered religious groups are particularly vulnerable, as membership or association with an unregistered religious group is a crime. The ORA exercises direct and arbitrary control over the affairs of registered religious organizations, requiring permission for virtually any activity other than regular worship services.

During 2020, the Cuban government harassed and intimidated certain religious communities and their leaders. Common tactics included threats, short-term detentions and interrogations, surveillance, and travel restrictions. The Apostolic Movement, an unregistered network of Protestant churches, [reported](#) an increase in arrests, threats, and fines of pastors and parishioners. Pastor Alain Toledano Valiente of the Apostolic Movement, his family, and his congregation were [frequent targets](#) of the regime's [harassment](#). In May, several United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteurs, including the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, [issued](#) a communication to Cuba regarding the ongoing harassment of Pastor Toledano and the Apostolic Movement, noting their concern that the group's lack of legal registration prevents it from operating freely. An unregistered church in Victoria de las Tunas [reported](#) ongoing harassment, including stoning of worshippers, denial of permits to worship, and threats of criminal charges against the pastor. According to the pastor, security services encouraged the stoning and warned that the attacks would stop only if he

ceased calling for religious freedom during his sermons. Several Santería religious leaders and practitioners, particularly members of the unregistered Free Yoruba Association of Cuba, were also 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 Qur’an, summoned participants to the police station the next day, and threatened them with criminal charges.

The government used its penal code against individuals whose religious beliefs conflict with the political teachings and practices in schools and education. The children of Olainis Tejeda Beltrán and Lescaille Prebal, members of the Jewish Sephardic Bnei Anusim community, endured violent bullying for wearing kippahs at school. Instead of protecting the children, authorities responded by [threatening](#) the parents with criminal penalties and loss of guardianship if the children continued to wear the religious symbols. The parents agreed in January that their children would attend school without kippahs. However, they continued to denounce their children's treatment in independent online media, which resulted in authorities threatening charges under [Decree Law 370](#). This law regulates the use of the internet and is applied to [criminalize critical expression](#). Other religious leaders were [threatened](#) with charges under this law for “subversive posts on social media.” Pastor Ramón Rigal and his wife Adya Expósito Leyva were [released](#) from prison in [July](#) and [March](#) respectively. After homeschooling their children based on a concern regarding Cuban schools' promotion of socialism and atheism, the couple was [convicted](#) in April 2019 for “illicit association”—as their church is unregistered—and other charges, including acts against the normal development of their children. While USCIRF welcomed their release, concerns about conflicts between religious beliefs and practice and schooling persist.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Maintain Cuba on the U.S. Department of State's Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Impose targeted sanctions on Cuban government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom—including Caridad Diego, head of the ORA—by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations;
- Publicly denounce violations of religious freedom and related human rights in Cuba and convey that any changes in other areas of U.S. policy toward and engagement with Cuba do not diminish the Cuban government's need to improve religious freedom conditions on the island;
- Encourage Cuban authorities to extend an official invitation for an unrestricted visits by USCIRF and the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief; and
- Increase opportunities for Cuban religious leaders from both registered and unregistered religious communities to engage with, exchange aid and materials with, and interact with coreligionists in the United States and globally.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Factsheet:** [Santería Tradition in Cuba](#)
- **Press Statement:** [Release of Pastor Ramón Rigal](#)
- **Press Statement:** [Release of Adya Expósito](#)

Background

While there are no independent sources on Cuba's religious demographics, a [reported](#) 60–70 percent of Cuba's estimated population of 11.1 million self-identify as Catholic. Approximately 25–30 percent identify as unaffiliated or another religion, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Methodists, Seventh-day Adventists, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, Quakers, Moravians, and members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. An [estimated](#) 70% of Cubans engage in one or more practices associated with Santería, a syncretic religion borne out of the Yoruba tradition mixed with elements of Catholicism, or another Afro-Cuban religion.

Cuba is a one-party system under the ruling Cuban Communist Party, with no independent judiciary and where the state tightly controls religious institutions. A new [constitution](#) adopted in April 2019 [protects](#) the freedom of religion or belief and prohibits religious discrimination. A [timetable](#) was set to review and amend corresponding legislation to codify the constitutional changes, including the Law of Associations. However, this process has been [delayed](#), [resulting](#) in some constitutional rights existing only on paper.

Restrictions on Religious Property

The right to establish and maintain places of worship is severely limited in Cuba. It is illegal to hold religious activities in buildings not dedicated for religious use. The ORA rarely grants permission for new religious buildings and seldomly [approves](#) any renovation or construction of designated religious buildings. In a positive development, in October the Catholic Church [opened](#) the last of three new churches built since the 1959 socialist revolution.

Threats to demolish unregistered religious buildings [reportedly](#) increased, and even registered religious buildings were targeted. Cuban authorities, with permission from the ORA, [demolished](#) an Assemblies of God church in Santiago de Cuba in October. This church was one of the few Protestant churches with legal status, as it had been registered since 1959. Pastor Toledano, who lives in the neighborhood, was violently [detained](#) while broadcasting the demolition on social media. Authorities later [detained](#) the church's pastor and superintendent.

Many, if not most, Cubans' place of worship is private residences. The Cuban government imposes complicated and repressive requirements on private residences used as places of worship, limiting the ability of Cubans to worship in community.

Conscientious Objectors

There are no legal provisions exempting [conscientious objectors](#) from mandatory military service. In December, [Oscar Kendri Fial Echavarría](#), who believes carrying and using weapons goes against his Christian beliefs, was detained and later prosecuted for disobedience because he did not enlist. In October, activist Osmel Rubio Santos was [detained](#) for several hours after refusing military service.

Targeting of Independent Journalists Who Report on Religious Freedom

The Cuban government frequently targeted independent journalists for reporting on religious freedom conditions. After serving

over a year in a labor camp for disobedience and resistance for covering the trials of Pastors Rigal and Expósito, independent journalist [Roberto Jesus Quiñones Haces](#) was [released](#) in September. Cuban authorities also harassed other independent journalists who report on religious freedom, including [Yoe Suárez](#), by threatening criminal charges and fines, often under [Decree Law 370](#), and imposing travel [restrictions](#).

Denial of Religious Freedom for Activists and Protesters

Cuban authorities also violated the religious freedom of human rights activists and protesters, often by blocking their access to religious services. The Ladies in White, the wives and relatives of dissidents imprisoned in 2003, [suspended](#) their weekly attendance at Mass and protest marches due to coronavirus. However, the group was [denied](#) access to religious services and arbitrarily detained when marches occurred at the beginning of the year and after restrictions were relaxed. In December, Lady in White Martha Sánchez González was [released](#) early on parole from prison, where she was serving a four-year sentence that began in 2018 for disobedience.

In November, a [crackdown](#) on the San Isidro Movement (MSI), a civil society group opposed to restrictions on artistic expression, sparked [rare protests](#) calling for greater [freedom of expression](#). Cuban authorities harassed, [surveilled](#), and stopped some protesters from leaving their homes, including preventing individuals from attending [religious services](#). Catholic officials were [reportedly](#) blocked from visiting protesters. One [priest](#) who attempted to visit and attend to the protesters' religious needs was fined for "enemy propaganda" and told he required a permit from the ORA to access protesters.

Key U.S. Policy

The Trump administration's policy toward Cuba was guided by the November 2017 [National Security Presidential Memorandum](#) entitled *Strengthening the Policy of the United States toward Cuba*, which focused on the need for human rights, democracy, and free enterprise in Cuba. In 2020, the Trump administration imposed a [range of sanctions](#) that [aimed](#) to deny the Cuban regime funds used to support Venezuela while strengthening Cuba's civil society and private sector. Since 2018, the U.S. Embassy in Havana has operated with a permanently reduced staff and limited embassy operations.

High-level government officials raised concern regarding Cuba's poor human rights record, including then Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo, who [welcomed](#) the release of Roberto Quiñones and [condemned](#) the crackdown on MSI. Then U.S. Agency for International Development Acting Administrator John Barsa [noted](#) the importance of religious freedom in Cuba during a webinar in September. Chargé d'Affaires of the U.S. Embassy in Havana Timothy Zuniga-Brown condemned religious freedom abuses in Cuba, including the [demolition](#) of the church in October. On December 2, the State Department again [placed](#) Cuba on its Special Watch List for severe violations of religious freedom.

Individual Views of Commissioner Johnnie Moore

In my estimation, Cuba should not be recommended by USCIRF for the U.S. Department of State's Special Watch List. It should be recommended for designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC. Cuba's ongoing, systematic, and egregious actions are not isolated to the country alone, but rather are characterized by transparent efforts to aid and abet the agendas of other hostile actors from around the world in the Western Hemisphere.