

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2019, religious freedom conditions in Cuba trended negatively. The new constitution adopted in April changed religious freedom protections, and the government aggressively targeted religious leaders who opposed these changes. While gathering information on religious freedom conditions in Cuba remains a challenge, a non-governmental organization documented 260 cases of violations of freedom of religion or belief in Cuba in 2019, including harassments, arrests, and travel bans, up from 151 in 2018. Religious leaders who [raised concern](#) that the new constitution weakened religious freedom protections [faced severe hostility](#) and pressure leading up to the constitutional referendum in February. Tactics used to pressure religious leaders included repeated police summons and interrogations, threats of detention, and labeling religious leaders as “[counterrevolutionaries](#).” Yoruba Priest Alexei Mora Montalvo went on a 15-day [hunger strike](#) to protest the harassment he and his family were experiencing leading up to the constitutional referendum.

The [Office of Religious Affairs \(ORA\)](#), an entity within the Cuban Communist Party (CCP) operating out of the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), continued to control religious activity tightly. The ORA requires religious organizations to apply to the MOJ for official registration. Membership or association with an unregistered religious group is a crime. The ORA exercises direct and arbitrary control over the affairs of religious organizations, requiring permission for virtually any activity other than regular worship services. High-level CCP officials utilize the permit system to meddle in the affairs of religious groups and coerce cooperation with government officials.

Beyond the constitutional process, the Cuban government employed persistent harassment and intimidation campaigns against religious leaders throughout 2019. Common tactics included threats, short-term detentions, travel restrictions, and violence against some religious leaders. Cuban authorities [manipulated](#) the laws to charge or threaten religious leaders with criminal

and civil violations for peaceful religious activity and social work. During the reporting period, Pastor Alain Toledano Valiente of the Apostolic Movement was consistently [summoned](#) to the police station, [accused](#) of the crime of “disobedience,” and threatened with detention and confiscation of church property. The harassment was connected to his religious activities, including hosting events on the role of [women](#) and [youth](#) in society. After homeschooling their children based on a concern regarding Cuban schools’ promotion of socialism and atheism, Pastor Ramón Rigal and his wife Adya Expósito Leyva were [convicted](#) in April for “illicit association”—as their church is unregistered—and other charges, including acts against the normal development of their children. Expósito was [released](#) after the reporting period in March 2020. In December, the authorities [threatened](#) similar legal charges against parents Olainis Tejeda Beltrán and Lescaille Prebal, members of the Sephardic Bnei Anusim community, following harassment and physical assaults of their children at school that led to a [ban on kippahs](#). There are an [estimated](#) 1,200 Jews in Cuba. As of November 2019, roughly 20 [religious leaders](#) had been arbitrarily prevented from leaving Cuba during the year. The ORA is effectively cutting off religious communities by increasingly blocking foreign visitors from visiting their coreligionists, while at the same time stopping [religious leaders](#) from leaving the island. Seven denominations broke off from the Cuban Council of Churches to form the Cuban Evangelical Alliance (CEA). CEA members were [aggressively targeted](#) during the constitutional process and continued to experience [sustained harassment](#) in reprisal for their constitutional advocacy and organization, including the denial of foreign visitors. Notably, Cuban authorities [stopped](#) four members of the CEA, along with another religious leader, from traveling to the United States for the [Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom](#) hosted by the U.S. Department of State in July.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Maintain Cuba on the State Department’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;
- Ensure that programs that support independent journalism in Cuba are responsive in aiding journalists who face increased harassment as a result of reporting on religious freedom conditions; and
- Enable the processing of visas in Havana for religious leaders, along with activists and journalists who advocate for religious freedom protections, to facilitate their travel to the United States without requiring travel to a third country.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Policy Update:** [Religious Freedom in Cuba in 2019](#)
- **Press Statement:** [Cuba Preventing Religious Leaders from Attending International Religious Freedom Meeting](#)
- **Press Statement:** [Condemning Cuban Authorities’ Crackdown on Homeschooling Pastor and Wife](#)

## Background

While there are no independent sources on religious demographics in Cuba, a [reported](#) 60–70 percent of Cuba’s population of an estimated 11.1 million self-identify as Catholic, while Protestants account for 5 percent. Approximately 25–30 percent identify as unaffiliated or another religion including syncretic religions (as well as Santería, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Methodists, Seventh-day Adventists, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Muslims, Jews, Quakers, Moravians, and members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints). Cuba is a one-party system with no independent judiciary and where the state tightly controls religious institutions. A new constitution was adopted in April 2019 following so-called “public consultations” and a referendum. The new [constitution maintains](#) the one-party Communist system and [changes](#) protections for the freedom of religion or belief by removing the prior specific references to freedom of conscience and to changing religious beliefs. USCIRF will closely monitor the implementation of these new constitutional provisions to assess their impact on religious freedom.

Alongside the constitution, the government uses a restrictive system of laws and policies, surveillance, and harassment to control religious groups and suppress the freedom of religion or belief. The ORA and other government authorities repressively enforce these restrictions to ensure tight control over religious leaders, members of religious communities, and others deemed threats to the Communist agenda due to their advocacy or support for religious freedom.

## Denial of Religious Freedom for Activists and Independent Journalists

The Cuban government frequently violated the religious freedom of prodemocracy and human rights activists during 2019. Independent journalists were targeted for documenting and reporting on religious freedom conditions. In the most severe cases, journalists, such as [Roberto Jesus Quinones Haces](#) and [Ricardo Fernandez Izaguirre](#), were arrested. Additional tactics employed to intimidate journalists and other religious freedom activists include interrogations, legal harassment, and travel restrictions. Cuban authorities also denied human rights activists and journalists their right to freedom of religion or belief, often by blocking their access to religious services, including [special religious events](#). Religious leaders faced [pressure](#) by government officials to expel members of their congregations involved in political activity or human rights advocacy, or labeled as “counterrevolutionaries.”

The most consistent and severe attempts to block activists from religious services were against the Ladies in White, the wives and relatives of dissidents imprisoned in 2003. Every Sunday during the reporting period, Cuban authorities [detained](#) Ladies in White on their way to Mass and other religious services. According to [reports](#), members of the Ladies in White were often informed that they were being detained because they were not allowed to attend religious services.

## Restrictions on Religious Buildings

In Cuba, it is illegal to hold religious activities in buildings not dedicated for religious use. Religious organizations must receive

permission from the ORA—which is rarely granted—for any renovation or construction of religious buildings. These restrictions, coupled with the growth in faith communities, have severely limited the right of many Cubans to worship in a community.

The Cuban government also used a 2005 law regulating house churches to impose complicated and repressive requirements on the estimated 2,000–10,000 private residences used as Protestant places of worship in Cuba. This [law](#) includes mandating registration according to strict procedures, such as the requirement that there cannot be two house churches of the same registered religious group within two kilometers of each other. The law also empowers authorities to supervise and control the religious activities of these groups. There were reports of frequent visits by state security agents to house churches. Unregistered religious groups could not apply to legalize the buildings used for religious services, and risked penalties for congregating in unauthorized buildings.

In positive developments, in January the Catholic Church [opened](#) the first of three new churches to be built since the 1959 socialist revolution. After the ORA [arbitrarily revoked](#) the Maranatha Baptist Church’s permit to build a new church in April, the highest administrative and governing body of the CCP reversed the ORA’s decision in October. While this case demonstrates the high-level control the CCP exerts on the affairs of religious communities, it is positive that construction of the church is allowed to proceed.

## Key U.S. Policy

The Trump administration’s policy toward Cuba is guided by the [National Security Presidential Memorandum](#) entitled “Strengthening the Policy of the United States toward Cuba,” issued in November 2017. This policy focuses on the need for human rights, democracy, and free enterprise in Cuba. In 2019, the Trump administration imposed a [series of sanctions](#) against Cuba for its poor human rights record and its support of the Maduro government in Venezuela, including placing visa restrictions on former [president and first secretary of the CCP Raúl Castro](#) in September. Also, in September, the State Department [issued](#) a statement condemning violations of religious freedom in Cuba. Following unexplained health issues for U.S. diplomats and their families between 2016 and 2018, the U.S. Embassy in Havana began to operate with a permanently reduced staff and [limited embassy operations](#), including the processing of visas. The State Department [announced](#) in March 2019 that it was eliminating the five-year multi-entry visa for Cubans and replacing it with a three-month single-entry visa. Most nonimmigrant visa applicants, including religious leaders traveling to the United States to meet with coreligionists or attend meetings on freedom of religion or belief, must now travel to a third country to obtain a visa, which is often prohibitively expensive, and in some cases particularly burdensome due to travel restrictions. On December 18, the State Department for the first time [placed](#) Cuba on its Special Watch List for severe violators of religious freedom.

**INDIVIDUAL VIEWS OF  
COMMISSIONER JOHNNIE MOORE**

In my estimation, Cuba should not be recommended by USCIRF for the State Department's Special Watch List. It should be recommended for designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC. Its actions continue to be ongoing, systematic, and egregious.