

USCIRF-RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, religious freedom in Cuba remained highly restricted. The Cuban government continued to use surveillance, [harassment](#), and ad hoc interpretations of legislation to suppress religious freedom and persecute religious freedom advocates. During 2021, the Cuban government's crackdown on widespread protests severely impacted religious communities.

On July 11, Cubans all over the country held unprecedented, large-scale [protests](#), initially in response to the deepening economic and COVID crises and eventually encompassing criticisms of the Cuban government's rule and crackdown on human rights. In the largest demonstrations in decades, protesters rallied for liberty and freedom, chanting "*Patria y Vida*" ("homeland and life"). The Cuban authorities responded by detaining, often violently, an [estimated](#) 700 demonstrators and activists. Those detained included several [religious leaders](#) and members of religious communities. For example, Pastor José Álvarez Devesa was [beaten](#) by police in Camaguey and released the following day. At the end of the year, an unknown number of protesters, including religious leaders and members of religious communities, remained detained, [disappeared](#), and under house arrest. Others were released during 2021 but [continued](#) to face ongoing harassment. Many were held [incommunicado](#) without access to family or legal support. Cuban authorities have charged some of the detained individuals with [crimes](#) such as inciting unrest and disobedience and held mass "trials" that lack any semblance of [due process](#). Some faced criminal charges, including "disrespect" and "public disorder," while others were placed under [house arrest](#) or fined.

Four months later, a group of artists and activists known as Archipiélago planned another country-wide protest for November 15. In the weeks preceding the protest, the nongovernmental organization Christian Solidarity Worldwide [received](#) over 30 reports of authorities targeting religious leaders and religious freedom advocates. Police issued summons and interrogated religious leaders about their connection to the planned protest or warned them not

to participate in the protest under threat of [arrest](#). Others were placed under house arrest in the weeks leading up to the protest. As a result of the government's repression of religious and lay community leaders before November 15, the protests did not take place as planned.

Additionally, 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.

A month after the July protests, the Cuban government [enacted](#) a new telecommunications law that severely [restricts](#) freedom of expression online and threatens religious freedom. Under [Decree-Law 35](#), telecommunications providers must interrupt, suspend, or terminate their services when a user disseminates "fake" information or affects "public morality" and the "respect of public order." This effectively [criminalizes](#) online criticism of the government and incitement to "[public disturbances](#)," which is the same term the government used to describe the peaceful July 11 protests.

The government [continued](#) to [target independent](#) journalist Yoel Suárez and his family for his reporting on religious freedom issues. This ongoing harassment prompted the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) to [request](#) that the Cuban government protect the rights to life and personal integrity of Suárez and his family and allow him to "carry out his activities as an independent journalist without being subjected to acts of violence, intimidation, harassment and detention."

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; and
- Encourage Cuban authorities to extend an official invitation for unrestricted visits by USCIRF, the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, and the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Support legislation to require sanctions against Cuban officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- Podcast: [Protests in Cuba Impact Religious Freedom](#)
- Factsheet: [Protests in Cuba and Religious Freedom](#)
- Podcast: [Santería in Cuba](#)
- Factsheet: [Santería in Cuba](#)

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 percent 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.

Cuba is a one-party system under the ruling Cuban Communist Party, with no independent judiciary. The state tightly controls religious institutions. A new [constitution](#) adopted in April 2019 [protects](#) the freedom of religion or belief and prohibits religious discrimination, but [provisions in the penal and administrative codes contravene](#) these protections, such as Decree-Law 35. 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.

Detention of Religious Leaders following July 11 Protests

USCIRF received reports of a number of religious leaders and members of religious communities detained during and following the July 11 protests. Select cases are included in USCIRF's [Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List](#), including Christian pastors and Santería practitioners.

[Reverend Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo](#) of the independent Monte de Sion Independent Church participated in the July 11 protests and was detained that day. In the months since his detention, Rosales Fajardo endured beatings, degrading treatment by prison guards, and the denial of [familial contact](#). The government sought to impose a 10-year sentence and tried him in December on charges of "disrespect," "assault," "criminal incitement," and "public disorder." He was told he would be sentenced in January 2022, but the process has been repeatedly delayed.

In the Santería community, at least [five](#) members of the independent and unregistered Free Yoruba Association of Cuba (Asociación de Yorubas Libres de Cuba or "Free Yorubas") were detained for their participation in the protests, while others were [fined](#). [Donaida Pérez Paseiro](#), President of the Free Yorubas, and [Loreto Hernández García](#), the community's vice president, were detained and charged with "public disorder," "disobedience," "spreading the epidemic," and "incitement." USCIRF received reports in January 2022 indicating that Paseiro and Hernández García were on trial at that time. Prosecutors were reportedly seeking eight years imprisonment for both of them.

Harassment of Religious Communities and Leaders

During 2021, Cuban authorities harassed and intimidated certain religious communities and their leaders. The Cuban government

continued to harass Pastor Alain Toledano Valiente, leader of the Emanuel Church in Santiago de Cuba and member of the Apostolic Movement, an unregistered religious group. Pastor Toledano received [several](#) police summons falsely accusing him and his church of holding services allegedly in contravention of COVID protocols, which banned such gatherings. However, Pastor Toledano produced written permission from the MOJ that [guaranteed](#) his right to hold services with proper health protocols starting in August and testified that his congregation observed all such protocols. Yet, in August, police arbitrarily detained Pastor Toledano in his home for holding a service and [threatened](#) to charge him with the crime of "spreading the epidemic." Followers of Pastor Toledano also [suffered threats](#) and [intimidation](#) from police.

Police searched the residence of Pastor Karel Parra Rosabal, leader of the unregistered Fuego y Dinámica Apostolic Church in Jobabo and owner of a small bicycle repair shop. In January, police conducted a search of the pastor's home, informed him that he was under arrest for the crime of "hoarding" due to the number of tools he owns for the bicycle repair shop, and confiscated nearly \$2,000 USD (50,000 Cuban pesos) worth of his equipment. Pastor Parra Rosabal was [detained](#) for 10 days.

Key U.S. Policy

Upon taking office, the Biden administration [considered](#) taking a review of the United States' policy toward Cuba. The administration [indicated](#) that the forthcoming policy would put democracy and human rights at its center and empower the Cuban people to determine their own future. Following the July 11 protests, the administration and members of Congress declared their support for the Cuban people and denounced the detentions and violence by Cuban authorities. President Joseph R. Biden [expressed](#) solidarity with Cuban protesters asserting their fundamental rights and later [reiterated](#) his support and unequivocally condemned the arrests and sham trials. Congress drew attention to the situation and expressed solidarity with the Cuban people, including by holding a [hearing](#) on the protests and resulting crackdown and introducing legislation and resolutions such as [Senate Res. 310](#) and [H.Res.760](#), which condemn the Cuban regime's acts of repression and call for the release of arbitrarily detained Cuban citizens.

The U.S. government continued to impose robust sanctions against Cuban officials. The Biden administration took steps to hold accountable those responsible for repression in the wake of the July 11 protests, including issuing sanctions under the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act on Cuban security forces on [July 22](#), [July 30](#), [August 13](#), and [August 19](#). Among those sanctioned were Cuba's Policia Nacional Revolucionaria, responsible for the assault on Father Álvarez. Additionally, on [November 30](#), the administration imposed visa restrictions on Cuban officials responsible for repression in advance of the planned November 15 protests. On November 15, the State Department again [placed](#) Cuba on its Special Watch List for severe violations of religious freedom.