



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

FACTSHEET: CUBA

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USCIRF's Mission

To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.

Protests in Cuba and Religious Freedom

By Kirsten Lavery, Supervisory Policy Analyst

Introduction

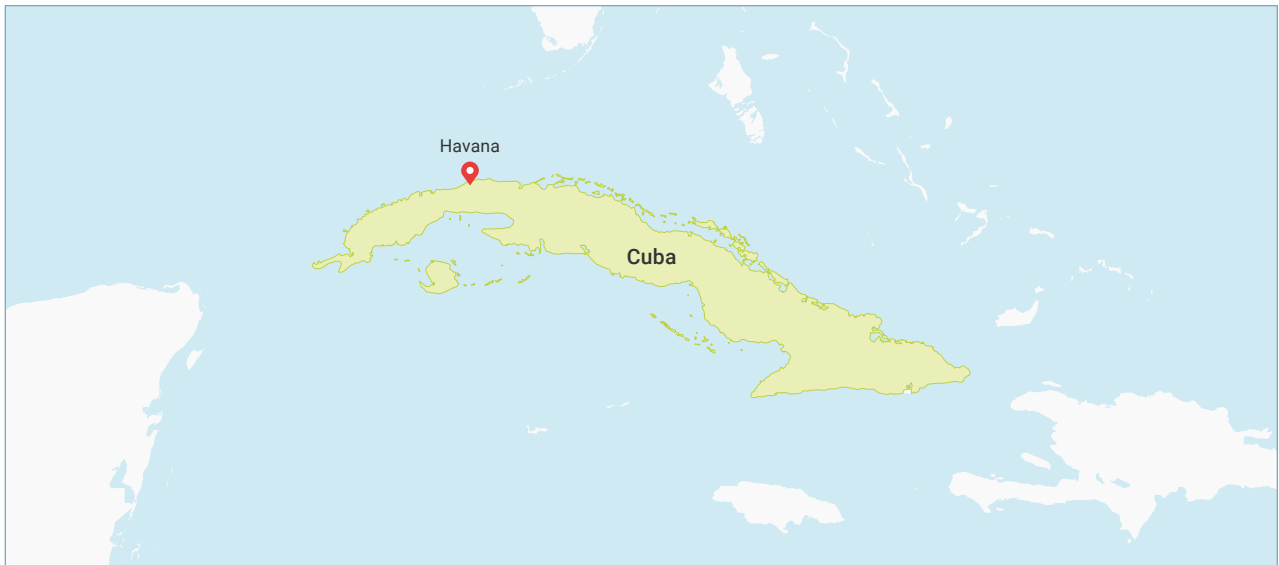
On July 11, 2021, *thousands* of Cubans took to the streets nationwide to call for greater freedom and relief from the country's economic and COVID-19 crises. In the largest *demonstrations* in decades, protesters rallied for liberty and freedom – chanting *Patria y Vida* (“homeland and life”). The Cuban authorities responded by detaining, often violently, an *estimated* 700 demonstrators and activists. With the protesters using *social media* to mobilize and broadcast their calls for freedom internationally, the government cut off internet service on the island, making it difficult to share information about the evolving situation.

Since the July 11 protests (“11J”), *an unknown number of protesters* remain *detained*, *disappeared*, and under house arrest. Many are being 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*. The government has also issued new *restrictions* on online speech. This crackdown has *cultivated* fear among protesters and human rights activists that the government's repression will continue. Diverse religious communities in Cuba have *spoken* in *support* of the protesters and greater freedom of expression, emphasizing the fundamental rights to peaceful demonstrations and freedom of expression or opinion.

Those detained included several *religious leaders* and members of religious communities. This factsheet highlights some of these individuals and provides insight into the impact of the protests and resulting crackdown on the freedom of religion or belief. Further, it outlines the U.S. government's support of Cubans' calls for greater freedom by advancing religious freedom on the island.

Background on Religious Freedom Conditions in Cuba

As documented in the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's (USCIRF) *2021 Annual Report*, religious freedom conditions in Cuba are poor. The Cuban government *uses* 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 Office of Religious Affairs (ORA) *repressively* enforces religious restrictions, particularly against independent and unregistered religious communities.



Cuban authorities also violate the religious freedom of human rights activists and independent journalists, often by blocking their access to religious services and materials.

Denial of Religious Support for Protesters Leading up to 11J

In November 2020, a [crackdown](#) on the San Isidro Movement (MSI), a civil society group opposed to restrictions on artistic expression, sparked [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. MSI members were involved in the production of the anti-government song "[Patria y Vida](#)" ("Homeland and Life"), which was released in February 2021 and later became the rallying cry for the 11J protests. In response to the song, the government [intensified](#) the [crackdown](#) against MSI members. Among other human rights violations, Cuban authorities [continued](#) to block these individuals and other political prisoners access to religious support, including by routinely [denying](#) pastoral visits and confiscating Bibles and other religious items.

11J Protests and Religious Freedom

When the 11J protests erupted across Cuba, hundreds of individuals were detained, including religious leaders and members of religious communities. While some of these cases are highlighted below, USCIRF has received reports of additional detentions, including of religious leaders and members of independent religious communities. Several of these individuals face health concerns, making the calls for their release particularly urgent in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Pastor Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo

[Pastor Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo](#), a member of the Apostolic Movement, was detained in Santiago de Cuba by state security while peacefully protesting on July 11, along with his 17-year-old son. The Apostolic Movement is an [unregistered](#) network of Protestant churches that experiences [ongoing](#) harassment by Cuban authorities. According to [reports](#), Pastor Rosales Fajardo was placed in a chokehold and repeatedly kicked during his arrest. He was separated from his son, who was later released on bail after being held incommunicado for nearly a week. Pastor Rosales Fajardo was held [incommunicado](#) and without any proof of life for weeks after the protests. Although his wife was eventually able to [locate](#) him, authorities have only permitted Pastor Rosales Fajardo limited contact with his wife and lawyer. On August 2, Cuban authorities denied his lawyer's request for habeas corpus, which would have required that Pastor Rosales Fajardo be present in court and be provided with a reason for his arrest. On August 7, Pastor Rosales Fajardo was [transferred](#) to a maximum-security prison.

Donaida Pérez Paseiro, Loreto Hernández García, Elizabeth Cintra García, and Lisdiani and Lisdani Rodríguez Isak

The Free Yoruba Association of Cuba (Asociación de Yorubas Libres de Cuba or “Free Yorubas”) is an independent and unregistered Santería community in Cuba that is [frequently](#) targeted by the Cuban state. USCIRF received [reports](#) that several members of this community, including [Donaida Pérez Paseiro](#), President of the Free Yorubas, and [Loreto Hernández García](#), the community’s vice president, were detained and charged for peacefully protesting following the 11J protests. Mr. Hernández and Ms. Perez, who are husband and wife, remained detained and were together charged with public disorder, disobedience, spreading the epidemic, and incitement. Mr. Hernández suffers from several pre-existing [conditions](#) and his health has reportedly deteriorated while imprisoned. [Elizabeth Cintra García](#), member of the Free Yorubas, was arrested on July 15 and released into house arrest on July 24 with pending criminal charges. Twin sisters [Lisdiani](#) and [Lisdani Rodríguez Isak](#), also Free Yorubas, were arrested on July 19 and remain in prison.

Pastors Yeremi Blanco Ramírez and Yarian Sierra Madrigal

Pastors [Yeremi Blanco Ramírez](#) and [Yarian Sierra Madrigal](#), two pastors from the Berean Baptist Mission in Matanza, were arrested on July 11 while peacefully protesting. According to [reports](#), Pastors Blanco and Sierra were initially held incommunicado in a maximum security prison and told they would be in custody for at least two weeks. Pastor Blanco suffers from asthma and is particularly vulnerable to [COVID-19](#) given this underlying condition. Their families experienced retaliation for speaking out regarding the pastors’ imprisonment, including the eviction of Pastor Sierra’s family from their home. On July 24, the two pastors were [released](#) into house arrest and criminal charges remain pending. On September 1, Cuban authorities informed the pastors that they would be fined for participating in the protests, but would not face a prison sentence.

Father Castor José Álvarez Devesa

Father Castor José Álvarez Devesa attended the 11J protests in Camagüey, when authorities [reportedly](#) hit him with a bat. When he went to seek medical attention, he was arrested. Father Álvarez has long been a strong [critic](#) of the Cuban regime and [called](#) for greater religious freedom in Cuba, including in a 2018 open letter to then President Raúl Castro. Father Álvarez was released two days later.

Reverend Yusniel Pérez Montejo

Reverend Yusniel Pérez Montejo, a member of the Eastern Baptist Convention, was [detained](#) by state security on July 11, after carrying out pastoral visits amid the protests in Santiago. Reverend Pérez Montejo was released; however, he was interrogated by authorities on July 14 and accused of incitement.

Berta Soler

Berta Soler is the leader of the Ladies in White, the wives and relatives of dissidents imprisoned in 2003. Prior to coronavirus suspending the group’s weekly protest marches to attend Mass, Cuban authorities violently detained members of the Ladies in White and prevented them from attending religious services almost every Sunday. Soler has been briefly [detained](#) by authorities on multiple occasions since the protests, and her house has been continuously surveilled.

U.S. Policy Responses to Cuban Protests

Since taking office, the Biden Administration had been [undertaking](#) a review of the United States’ policy towards Cuba. The Administration had [indicated](#) that the forthcoming policy would put democracy and human rights at its center and empower the Cuban people to determine their own future.

Soon after the start of the 11J protests, the Administration and members of Congress declared their support for the Cuban people and denounced the detentions and violence by Cuban authorities. On July 12, President Joseph Biden [expressed](#) solidarity with Cuban protesters asserting their fundamental rights. On July 22, President Biden [reiterated](#) his support and unequivocally condemned the arrests and sham trials. The U.S. State Department highlighted the cases of specific Cuban prisoners on Twitter, including [Pastor Rosales Fajardo](#). 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](#), which condemns the Cuban regime’s acts of repression and was unanimously approved by the Senate on July 28.

In addition, the Administration has taken steps to hold accountable those responsible for the repression, 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. President Biden [stated](#) that more sanctions will be forthcoming.



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To maximize the impact of these accountability efforts, the Administration also is working to build international pressure on Cuba. On July 26, the United States [released](#) a [joint statement](#) with 20 other countries condemning the mass arrests and detentions, calling for the release of all prisoners, and urging the Cuban government to respect the universal freedoms of Cubans. The Administration is [working](#) with partners in Latin America, including through the Organization of American States (OAS), to pressure the Cuban regime to release detainees, restore internet access, and allow Cubans to enjoy their fundamental freedoms. The United States is also engaged in efforts to support the Cuban people. This [includes](#) considering ways to expand internet access for Cubans, reviewing the United States' humanitarian support to Cuba, and exploring restaffing the U.S. embassy in Havana. The Administration is working with Cuban American leaders and stakeholders to determine additional policy responses. As part of this process, on July 30, President Biden and members of Congress [met](#) with Cuban Americans, including representatives of religious communities.

Conclusion

The people of Cuba are calling for greater fundamental freedoms, including the right for all to freely practice religion. As the United States continues to respond to the protests in Cuba, putting human rights at the center, it should also push to advance religious freedom by drawing attention to the cases of religious leaders and members of religious communities and calling for accountability for Cuban officials for the violence and human rights violations committed against these individuals. As part of these efforts, the Biden Administration should further impose targeted sanctions on Cuban authorities and entities responsible for the detention of religious leaders and members of religious communities. To increase the impact of sanctions and further pressure Cuban authorities to release these detained individuals, the United States should continue to collaborate with international partners, including through the OAS.

To further advance religious freedom and related rights in Cuba, USCIRF also made recommendations to the U.S. government, which can be found in its [2021 Annual Report](#).

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.