

The State of Religious Freedom in: Cuba



Country Factsheet

Winter 2024

- In late 2023, the UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Religion or Belief issued a letter accusing Cuba of religious repression as verified by harsh persecution of Christians, Muslims and Afro-Caribbean sect members. The accusations align with the U.S. State Department's recent decision to extend Cuba's place as a Country of Particular Concern for religious freedom violations.
- Outreach Aid to the Americas and Prisoner Defenders' research for the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) found that Cuba's constitutions and laws fail to meet freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) standards based on international law. Of 36 UN FoRB indicators, Cuba fails to meet 34, and partially meets only two. (Other research findings follow, below, are from the USCIRF report Constitutional Reform and Religious Freedom in Cuba).
- Cuba's new constitution weakens FoRB guarantees from the previous constitution by omitting language that protected this right, including the term "freedom of conscience."
- Cuba's constitutionally established rights are not enforceable. The absence of a constitutional court, an appeals procedure for the judicial review of constitutional rights, and a Criminal Procedure Law, leave the Cuban constitution absent in criminal and civil processes.
- The constitution fails to meet international standards, its rights are not enforceable and it yields to laws that can conflict with constitutionally established rights. The removal of the sovereignty of the people, the explicit subordination to lower-level laws, the impossibility of reforming laws when unconstitutional due to the absence of a court of constitutional guarantees or a process of protection of these rights, and the definition of the Communist Party as the "superior" power of the State, all result in a constitution that falls short of internationally accepted standards.
- Rights complementary to FoRB, such as freedom of speech and assembly, cannot be defended as there are no protective mechanisms against discrimination or violence on religious grounds.



Pastor Mario Felix Lleonart is detained by Cuban state security while trying to distribute religious literature





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- Rights complementary to FoRB, such as freedom of speech and assembly, cannot be defended as there are no protective mechanisms against discrimination or violence on religious grounds.
- The primary vehicle of repression is the government's Office of Religious Affairs (ORA), which is responsible for regulating religious activity on the island. ORA is part of the Central Committee of the ruling Communist Party, with authority on all matters related to religious groups, including their registration, travel outside the country, and building and construction permits. ORA operates outside of any legislation and its decision making is frequently obscure, arbitrary, and punitive, targeting disfavored faith groups.
- The Cuban Communist Party's repression tactics include harassment, threats, physical attacks on faith leaders and parishioners; confiscation of property; police summons; defamation and accusations of illegal or immoral behavior; denial of rights of employment or education, including for family members; repudiation; use of "public opinion agents" to sow rumors; creation of enmity and division between faith groups; restrictions on movement; and fabrication of alleged crimes. In OAA's 2022 survey of Cuban faith leaders of various traditions, 56 leaders of diverse faiths, 21 say they suffer acts of state repression monthly or even weekly; 55 said that ORA limits FoRB rights without regard to constitutional guarantees; 52 said the state prevents the social actions of churches; all 56 said that the education system is based on atheist ideology.
- State-created and controlled proxy organizations supplant faith leadership and deliberately discourage interfaith unity. These state-run organizations claim to represent Cuba's religious communities but exclude independent groups that do not subordinate themselves to the state.
- These proxy organizations include the Cuban Council of Churches (CCC), the Yoruba Cultural Association, the Islamic League of Cuba, and Pastors for Peace. Many surveyed faith leaders believe they are run by state officials posing as faith leaders.
- FoRB repression is tailored to each faith group. This includes CCC members but is harsher for independent churches and other faith organizations. Catholic bishops are targeted and forced to ensure priests comply. Independent Protestant and Evangelical Protestant pastors are persecuted and forced to migrate, and their churches are denied legal personality and registration. Both Yorubas and Muslims are heavily repressed.



Pastor Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo being violently detained by state security during the mass demonstrations of July 11, 2021.

