

China's threat in Cuba goes beyond spying

Beijing interferes with religious freedom



China's threat in Cuba goes beyond spying. Illustration by Linas Garsys / The Washington Times.
[more >](#)

By Teo A. Babun - *Thursday, October 15, 2026*

OPINION:

China's growing intelligence presence in Cuba, just 90 miles from American shores, should alarm every American.

Yet the danger extends beyond military surveillance and intercepted communications.

Beijing's expanding influence raises another troubling question: Could China's authoritarian model help the regimes in Cuba and Nicaragua become more effective at curtailing religious freedom? Recent findings make this question increasingly urgent.

In June, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, or CSIS, published satellite imagery findings showing significant developments at suspected intelligence facilities in Cuba.

At Bejucal, near Havana, researchers identified a newly completed array of 32 antennas capable of intercepting and locating radio transmissions. CSIS concluded that the facility had very likely begun operating.

The findings build on CSIS research identifying four Cuban sites that may support Chinese signals intelligence activities: Bejucal, Wajay, Calabazar and El Salao, near Santiago de Cuba.

Although public evidence does not establish Chinese involvement at every facility, these developments raise serious national security concerns. They also highlight a broader danger: the convergence of authoritarian governments, advanced surveillance capabilities and increasingly close cooperation with Beijing.

I have worked for decades with churches and religious leaders throughout Latin America. Through Outreach Aid to the Americas, I have witnessed faith communities feed hungry families, distribute medicine, respond to disasters and sustain people living under oppressive governments.

That experience has taught me something important: When citizens lose confidence in government and other institutions, they often continue to trust their churches.

Authoritarian governments understand this. Independent religious institutions represent communities united by convictions and moral responsibilities that transcend political authority.

China has developed a sophisticated model for controlling precisely those institutions.

Under President Xi Jinping, the Chinese Communist Party has pursued policies designed to subordinate religious practice to state authority. Through its policy of “sinicization,” Beijing uses regulation, surveillance and political pressure to bring religious institutions into conformity with CCP priorities.

China did not invent religious persecution in Cuba or Nicaragua. Both governments have long histories of suppressing independent religious organizations. Nor is there established public evidence that Beijing directs religious persecution in either country.

Still, China offers something potentially more dangerous: a modern authoritarian model combining technology, surveillance and bureaucratic control to make repression more systematic and effective.

Consider Cuba. For decades, its State Security apparatus has monitored religious leaders, independent journalists and civic organizations through informants, intimidation and surveillance.

Pastors and worshippers have experienced harassment, detention and restrictions on religious activities.

Today, traditional repression can be reinforced by increasingly powerful digital technologies. Chinese companies, including Huawei, have helped develop Cuba’s telecommunications infrastructure.

This does not prove that Chinese technology is being used to persecute religious believers. Nor do the CSIS findings establish that suspected intelligence facilities monitor churches. Nevertheless, the combination of sophisticated surveillance capabilities and authoritarian governance deserves serious scrutiny.

My organization's research into Cuba's security apparatus has examined the relationships among police, parapolice organizations and political surveillance. Modern technology could transform repression from reactive to preventive, allowing authorities to identify relationships and communications before citizens can organize.

Nicaragua presents another warning.

Under co-Presidents Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo, the government has systematically dismantled independent civil society. Churches, clergy and religious organizations have faced harassment, surveillance, restrictions and loss of legal recognition.

China's governance model offers authoritarian governments an example of how technology and regulation can further weaken independent institutions without necessarily eliminating them.

Why should Americans care? Because churches in Cuba and Nicaragua are more than places of worship. They are networks of trust, humanitarian assistance, leadership and community resilience.

They distribute food and medicine, mobilize volunteers and preserve moral authority outside government control. In a future Cuban transition toward freedom, these networks could help rebuild civic responsibility, social trust and democratic institutions.

Weakening them would damage the human infrastructure necessary for national recovery.

Washington should therefore treat religious freedom as an essential component of its strategy to counter China's expanding influence in the Western Hemisphere.

Congress and the administration should investigate surveillance technologies that could facilitate repression, strengthen independent documentation of religious freedom violations, support secure communications for vulnerable civil society organizations and protect faith-based humanitarian networks.

These policies must rest on credible evidence, not assumptions that every Chinese investment is sinister or that Beijing directs every authoritarian abuse.

The strategic challenge is broader than espionage. It is about whether China's growing influence helps authoritarian governments control the remaining institutions that their citizens still trust.

Protecting those institutions is an American strategic interest.

Freedom of religion is not peripheral to a free society. It is one of the places where freedom begins.

• *Teo A. Babun is president and CEO of Outreach Aid to the Americas, a Miami-based nonprofit working with faith communities and civil society throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. A Cuban American, he has spent decades advancing humanitarian assistance, religious freedom and civil society development.*