

CSW expresses gratitude to the Cubans who, despite great risk, carried out the firsthand documentation on which this report is based, in coordination with freedom of religion or belief defenders who have been forced into exile.

Executive summary

The Cuban government has continued to use oppressive measures to exert control over the population in a crackdown that has been ongoing since 2021. In 2024, CSW documented 624 separate cases involving attacks on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), almost all of which involved multiple types of FoRB violations. The total number of violations recorded was 1,898. The government continued its systematic violations of the Nelson Mandela Rules in regard to political prisoners in the form of the consistent refusal of religious visits or the right to receive religious materials. Religious leaders were threatened and pressured to expel the family members of political prisoners from their congregations as part of a policy of social isolation. Children were subjected to physical and verbal abuse at school because of their religious beliefs. Leaders of unregistered religious groups were repeatedly harassed and threatened, while leaders of registered religious groups were targeted with intrusive surveillance, repeat interrogations and other pressure tactics. CSW noted an uptick in the application of fines on religious leaders, generally for leading unauthorised religious activities, holding religious activities in locations not approved for religious use, or both.

Religious groups of all types, including Afro-Cuban groups, Jehovah's Witnesses, Protestants and Roman Catholics, registered and unregistered associations, including some that belong to the Cuban Council of Churches (CCC),¹ all reported FoRB violations. The government appeared especially intent on targeting religious leaders and individuals who offered spiritual or material support to families of political prisoners. Religious leaders and their congregations who attempted to respond to humanitarian needs, which became even more acute in many parts of the island in 2024, were harassed and fined. In many cases, the aid they were attempting to distribute was confiscated. Those considered by the government to be dissidents were repeatedly and systematically blocked from attending religious services, usually through short-term arbitrary detention.

Despite the efforts of the government to silence independent or critical voices, religious leaders from registered and unregistered groups alike continued to report and speak publicly about FoRB and other human rights violations and to be openly critical of legislation and government positions. The government has made it clear that it rejects the idea of any political or social reform. While some Cubans, no doubt, are more cautious and many have seen no other option than to go into exile, there remain many who, even in the face of threats, harassment and the possibility of imprisonment, continue to speak out against injustice and up for those in their communities who are suffering.

Recommendations

To the government of Cuba:

- Amend constitution and civil, administrative and criminal codes to include strengthened provisions for FoRB and other human rights in line with international law and norms on FoRB, including Article 18 of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and the San José Pact;
- Ratify the ICCPR and the ICECSR and ensure that authorities on every level, including Cuba Communist Party (CCP) officials, understand the provisions included in the ICCPR and the ICECSR, and ensure that they are implemented nationally, regionally and locally;
- As a member of the Human Rights Council, uphold the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights, including those relating to FoRB;
- Issue a standing invitation to UN Special Procedures, including inviting the UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB, as well as other thematic UN rapporteurs, to visit Cuba with unhindered access to all parts of the country;
- Eliminate the requirement for religious groups to register or bring registration procedures and requirements into line with international best practice for non-discriminatory registration;
- Eliminate the Office for Religious Affairs (ORA) of the Central Committee of the CCP as it currently exists, or reform it to operate transparently within defined legal parameters and with recourse for appeal. If the latter, a reformed ORA should:
 - Ensure equal, transparent and non-discriminatory access to permits for renovations and building projects, religious visas, vehicle licenses; and ensure legacies are handled fairly, protecting the right of individuals to leave their property to the church or denomination of their choice;
 - Streamline and reform procedures concerning the registration of church buildings, and the building and renovation of churches and other buildings for religious use, to ensure that these are applied fairly and transparently;
 - Reform procedures for the return of confiscated properties to ensure that these processes are conducted fairly and transparently;
 - Allow religious institutions, including seminaries, to operate independently and without government interference, including by protecting their right to seek accreditation and establish formal relationships with counterparts and accreditation bodies outside of Cuba;

¹ Members of the CCC generally hold a mutually supportive relationship with the Cuban government.

- Allow religious associations and umbrella groups or networks to operate autonomously without pressure or interference from government or CCP officials;
- Guarantee freedom for religious leaders to carry out their work without harassment, threats or other government pressure targeting them or their families;
- Safeguard the freedom of all Cubans to assemble and worship according to their professed religion or belief;
- End the harassment, threats and imprisonment of human rights defenders, including FoRB defenders;
- Guarantee protection from discrimination on the basis of one's religion in the workplace, educational institutions and all other social and political spheres;
- Allow all religious groups to independently engage in social and humanitarian work and to hold peaceful public events free from interference and intimidation;
- End the use of government informants in religious associations and seminaries;
- Bring an end to government support of any religious group over other religious groups, ensuring that all groups are equally able to import or produce religious materials and literature; and ensure equal access for all groups to the media;
- Guarantee all prisoners, whether criminal or political, their basic human rights, including FoRB as defined in the Nelson Mandela Rules.

To the European Union and Member States:

- Under the 'agreed actions on cooperation in the field of human rights' announced in the EU's press release following the EU-Cuba human rights dialogue on 24 November 2023, ensure that FoRB and related freedom of assembly violations are addressed therein. Now that a precedent has been set on concluding 'agreed actions', ensure that this practice continues in subsequent human rights dialogues.
- Demand an urgent meeting with the Cuban government under Article 85(3) of the EU-Cuba Political Dialogue and Cooperation Agreement (PDCA), to formally investigate and review its compliance with PDCA human rights obligations – as called for by multiple recent European Parliament resolutions;
- Introduce Magnitsky sanctions on individuals responsible for human rights violations, as called for by the European Parliament in its resolutions of 16 September and 16 December 2021. This should include State Security officers and senior Office of Religious Affairs officials responsible for serious FoRB violations;
- As part of the EEAS' consultations ahead of any EU-Cuba Human Rights Dialogue, the EU should also ensure and facilitate input from Cuban independent civil society organisations;
- The EU Delegation to Cuba and embassies of member states should maintain an open dialogue with religious leaders from all denominations and religious groups, while taking into consideration the political sensitivities

under which many religious leaders must work. It should also continue to establish and maintain contact with the families of political prisoners and raise its concerns regarding continued violations of prisoners' rights, including denial of religious rights, with the Cuban authorities;

- The EU Special Rapporteur for Human Rights, and the EU Special Envoy for the promotion of FoRB outside the EU, should request an invitation to visit Cuba with unhindered access to all parts of the country, and to leaders of both registered and unregistered religious groups.

To the government of the United States of America:

- Raise FoRB at every opportunity, in public and in private, in any dialogue with the Cuban government, including the Office of Religious Affairs; and encourage the government to act on the recommendations listed above;
- The US Embassy in Cuba should maintain an open dialogue with religious leaders from all denominations, religious groups, and regions of the country, while taking into consideration the political sensitivities under which many religious leaders must work;
- Continue to seek ways of engaging with members of Cuban independent civil society, offering support when appropriate;
- Continue to establish and maintain contact with the families of political prisoners, and raise its concerns regarding continued violations of prisoners' rights, including denial of religious rights, with the Cuban authorities;
- The Ambassador for International Religious Freedom and the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) should request an invitation to visit Cuba with unhindered access to all parts of the country, and to leaders of both registered and unregistered religious groups;
- The State Department should continue to closely monitor FoRB in Cuba and maintain Cuba as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC). All FoRB reporting should fully reflect Cuba's diverse religious panorama, including the views of marginalised groups and leaders, and not only the positions of religious groups that are close to the government or state officials and offices;
- USCIRF should continue to closely monitor FoRB in the country and maintain Cuba on its list of CPCs.

To the United Nations and Member States:

- As Cuba continues its role as an elected member of the Human Rights Council, the UN must urge Cuba to ratify and fully implement the treaties it has signed, including the ICCPR and ICESCR;
- Urge Cuba to amend provisions for FoRB and freedom of conscience in the constitution in line with international standards, and bring civil, administrative and penal law

and regulations into line with both international law and the San José Pact;

- Urge Cuba to issue a standing invitation to UN Special Procedures, including the thematic special rapporteurs with mandates on FoRB, human rights defenders, torture, independence of the judiciary, and arbitrary detention, to visit Cuba with unhindered;
- Encourage staff and independent experts to continue raising violations of FoRB during bilateral meetings, as well as during treaty body reviews;
- Continue to seek ways of engaging with members of Cuban independent civil society, offering support when appropriate, and swiftly condemn all acts of intimidation or reprisal against members of civil society for cooperating with the UN.

Legal framework and oversight bodies

In practice, all religious business continues to be overseen by the Office of Religious Affairs (ORA) of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party (CCP), despite the 2022 announcement of a government Department for Attention to Religious Institutions and Fraternal Groups. Religious groups must be registered with the Ministry of Justice to operate legally: the ORA receives the request for the registration and the government then makes the decision, with input from CCP officers. While there are some criteria for registration, for example that the association must have more than 30 members, decisions are made on an arbitrary basis in line with political considerations and are only rarely approved. All requests for authorisation, from making repairs to a building to holding a public event, are decided by the ORA, an entity operating outside of any defined legal framework. The ORA habitually denies or simply fails to respond to many of these requests and there is no recourse for appeal. It awards permits, including the right to invite visitors on a required religious visa, according to the inviting religious association's perceived level of support for or cooperation with the government.

Most religious groups that existed legally prior to the 1959 Revolution maintained their official registration and as such have legal recognition. However, the registered status of some groups, like the Berean Baptists and the Jehovah's Witnesses, was arbitrarily rescinded in the 1970s and they have not been permitted to re-register, thus making them illegal. Others, such as the Afro-Cuban Free Yoruba Association, are not registered because they wish to remain independent of government influence or control. More generally, the autonomous and localised nature of many Afro-Cuban religious groups, which have been present on the island for centuries, means that the majority are not registered. The majority of groups that were not present prior to 1959 but have a significant presence on the island, including churches affiliated with the Apostolic Movement, have been refused the right to register. While all religious groups experience FoRB violations, unregistered groups

are most vulnerable and suffer some of the most egregious violations, as their lack of legal status means that their very existence, as well as anything they attempt to do as a religious group, is illegal.

The situation for both registered and unregistered groups deteriorated following the adoption of a new criminal code which came into force on 1 December 2022, maintaining much of the problematic content of the previous code but increasing the minimum sentencing for numerous offenses. The criminal code covers the 'abuse of the freedom of worship' in Article 272 and criminalises anyone who, because of their religious beliefs, 'opposes the objectives of education, or the duty to work, defend the Homeland through the armed struggle when no other resources is available, to revere [Cuba's] symbols or anything else established by the Constitution of the Republic of Cuba', stipulating a prison sentence of six months to one year or a heavy fine as punishment.

Under the new criminal code, penalties for leading or belonging to an unauthorised association were increased from a few months' imprisonment to a minimum of six months and a maximum of two years for a leader and one year for a member. The same sentences are applied for leading or participating in an unauthorised meeting. The code amplifies the government's ability to crack down on religious leaders, especially those associated with unregistered groups, and together with the limits on conscientious objection in the 2019 constitution,² effectively nullifies constitutional guarantees for freedom of conscience.

In addition to the criminal code, a revised family code entered into force in 2023, strengthening the ability of the government to force religious leaders and others into compliance. Article 191 gives the government the right to remove children from their homes if their parents fail to fulfil a list of responsibilities detailed in Article 138 (ñ). These include the duties to instill in their children 'love for the Homeland, respect of its symbols, and respect for the authorities'. While neither the criminal code nor the family code have been applied uniformly to religious leaders or groups across the island, religious leaders consistently reported being threatened with enforcement of provisions contained in either or both.

In May 2023 the Cuban government adopted the Law on Social Communication which bans independent, non-state media and aims to control how all Cubans express themselves on and offline, establishing that such expression must meet a detailed list of vaguely defined requirements including being linked 'to ethics and responsibility', 'promoting peace, inclusion, decency and social coexistence', and 'protecting honour, identity and individual and family privacy'. The law prohibits the creation and dissemination of any content that aims to 'subvert the constitutional order and destabilise the socialist state of law and social justice' or to 'defame, slander or insult the persons, organs, agencies and entities

² Conscientious objection may not be invoked with the intention of evading compliance with the law or impeding another from the exercise of their rights.

of the State, political, mass and social organisations of the country’ and bans ‘the use of content elaborated from existing images, texts, audios and videos, to create false realities for any purpose or purpose’ (Article 51(i)).

Harassment of religious leaders

As in previous years, one of the most common FoRB violations documented in 2024 was that of harassment of religious leaders and FoRB defenders. The forms of harassment varied and included anonymous phone calls, repeated summons to appear at National Revolutionary Police (PNR) or Department of State Security (DSE) stations, interrogations and fines. This type of FoRB violation was also manifested in actions, in some cases violent, carried out by paramilitary groups or supposed civilians, which the government took no action to investigate or stop.

Leaders of non-registered religious groups continue to experience regular harassment. Afro-Cuban religious groups remain particularly vulnerable, with 55 such cases spanning ten provinces documented. In each reported case, the behaviour of government officials was consistent, including derogatory personal insults and racist accusations that the groups were participating or encouraging criminal delinquency in their communities. Groups across the country, which have been denied permission to register a designated location for their activities and are forced to operate out of private homes, repeatedly reported officers entering their homes during religious worship, sacred rituals and celebrations, in some cases violently, and ordering that they stop their activities.

As in previous years, a number of cases involving independent Yoruba groups across the country as the groups were preparing to celebrate the consecutive feast days of Yemaya and Oshún over 7 and 8 September were recorded.³ In each case, high ranking local PNR officers entered private homes and ordered those present to stop their celebrations, noting that the houses where the groups were gathered were not authorised for religious use. In each case, the babalawo⁴ responded that they are forced to hold their rites in their homes as the government has refused to allow them to register a designated location for their activities.

At 11am on 7 September Babalawo Reinerio Fuentes was holding a celebration for Yemaya and Oshún in his house in Ciego de Avila City, Ciego de Avila, when the Committee for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR) zone chief, Rogelio Montes de Oca, arrived and ordered that the activity be halted immediately, threatening those present with arrest. Mr Montes de Oca went on to claim that neighbours had complained about the number of people present, expressing concern that ‘they might incite counter-revolution and [commit] robbery’. Even after the babalawo explained that all those present were known to him personally, and that

none of them was a counter-revolutionary or a thief, Mr Montes de Oca called the police, who were quick to arrive. The religious group stopped their activity and left in order to avoid ‘bigger problems’.

That night Babalawo Aliesky Romero was holding a celebration in honour of Yemaya at his home in Camagüey City, Camagüey, when CDR president Jorge Garcia arrived and told the group that PNR officers could arrive at any moment due to the fact that their religious activities were not permitted because the home was unauthorised for religious use. Mr Garcia ordered those present to leave, but Babalawo Romero refused, noting that he thought ‘[the authorities] would never give permission to legally celebrate their faith, since [the authorities] had always refused permission in the past’. Mr Garcia took photos of the event and then attempted to find witnesses to sign an official warning, and finally left.

The following evening, on 8 September, Babalawo Leonardo Rodríguez was holding a celebration in his home which included songs, drumming and ‘spiritual cleansing’, when PNR officer Keylor Castellano arrived at the house and ordered the group to stop their activity. Babalawo Rodríguez tried to explain that this annual activity was extremely important to all Yorubas, but Officer Castellano called for police back-up. When the additional officers arrived, they forced those present to return to their homes.

The government also interfered with the act of worshipping alone in one’s home. At 11am on 12 April Babalawo Armando Taylor Jiménez was alone in his house in Colombia, Las Tunas, carrying out a religious ritual, when he was visited by Zone Delegate Lourdes Quezada. When Delegate Quezada noticed the presence of religious objects in the house, she reported the babalawo to the authorities. Shortly thereafter, Babalawo Taylor Jiménez was visited by two DSE agents who entered the home without requesting permission. One introduced himself as Carlos Martínez and the other did not identify himself. Officer Martínez called Babalawo Taylor Jiménez ‘a liar’ and ordered him ‘to distance himself’ from his religious beliefs and threatened the religious leaders with imprisonment for practicing his religion without permission from the authorities. After Babalawo Taylor Jiménez denied committing any crime the agents issued an *Acta de Advertencia*⁵ and warned him the next step would be prosecution for the crime of ‘contempt’. Babalawo Taylor Jiménez refused to sign the document and asked them to leave. They left, reiterating that he had been warned.

The government continued to monitor religious activities overtly and covertly through the use of informants, and harassed religious leaders based on their reports. At 10.30am on 18 February in central Cuba, a PNR inspector, who did not give his name, arrived at a registered church associated with a denomination that is a member of the CCC. The inspector told the church pastor that he had been

³ Oshún is linked to the Virgin of Caridad del Cobre, Cuba’s patron saint, whose feast day also falls on 8 September.

⁴ The religious title means ‘father of secrets’.

⁵ An *Acta de Advertencia* is a form of pre-arrest warrant which an individual is asked to sign to justify their future arrest should they commit crimes laid out in the document.

informed that the church had held a vigil the previous night at which those present had prayed for an end to the abuse and mistreatment of women, for the women of Cuba, and for the Cuban nation. The PNR inspector warned the pastor that the pastor was promoting ‘wrong ideas’, encouraging anti-government sentiment, and inciting the community to counter-revolution and ordered him not to hold any more vigils or to pray for any kind of change in Cuba. The pastor was fined 15,000 CUP and was threatened with imprisonment if he disobeyed the order.⁶

In May an ‘Accountability Assembly’, organised by local CDR officials, was held in front of the home of a pastor of an unregistered church in central Cuba. Neighbours were invited to participate in an organised ‘discussion’ about the dissolution of the pastor’s church. The pastor and his wife refused to go outside to participate but listened as the CDR officials urged members of the community to distance themselves from the pastor’s church and the network to which it belongs, claiming that they were counter-revolutionary and responsible for causing public disturbances. The CDR officials also spoke openly about government efforts to monitor and put a stop to ‘anti-government’ elements in the community, implying the pastor and his church were included in this category. The church subsequently shut down, and the pastor told CSW, ‘This was nothing more than a disguised act of repudiation. With these comments, the delegates tried to discredit the pastoral work we do by slandering us. We may never be able to open another congregation.’

Over the final months of the year, a pastoral couple in eastern Cuba were repeatedly visited by CDR representatives after they organised a religious event in their city. In December a local CDR delegate warned them that they were under surveillance, telling them that she gave weekly reports to DSE agents on the pastors’ behaviour and their movements. The couple was warned that if they attempt to organise any more events in the community, and they attract crowds, they will be charged with disrespect for the authorities.

Religious leaders from across the spectrum of religion or belief groups, including registered and unregistered associations, were repeatedly summoned to PNR and DSE facilities for interrogation. At 9am on 3 August, the pastor of an unregistered church in eastern Cuba obeyed a summons to appear at the local PNR station. A PNR officer expressed his ‘disappointment’ that the pastor was part of a movement that ‘goes against the principles and leadership of the Revolution’ and warned him that if he did not stop holding services and meetings, he would be charged with being a traitor to the nation. The pastor pointed out that the only reason that his church is illegal is because the ORA has failed to legalise it, and stated that he would try to avoid problems with the government but would not stop ‘preaching the word of God.’ He refused to sign an *Acta de Advertencia* presented to him by the officer and went home.

In June the worship leader of an unregistered Protestant church in eastern Cuba reported to the local DSE station in compliance with an earlier summons. He was accused by a DSE captain of public disorder and ‘provocation against the Revolution’. The previous day, the pastor had led several young people in religious song in a public plaza, and the group had used the opportunity to share their beliefs with those who approached them. The DSE agent told the pastor that he should have submitted a request, prior to the ‘event’, with the local ORA office. The pastor responded that he had unsuccessfully submitted such requests to ORA in the past, and noted that given that the ORA refused to legalise his church, it was unlikely they would grant permission to the church to hold activities. The DSE agent presented the pastor with a prepared *Acta de Advertencia*, signed by two witnesses, and warned him that should he attempt to do anything religious in a public space, or engage young people, he would be charged with the crimes of disobedience and disrespect. The pastor refused to sign the document and was asked to leave.

In a particularly concerning case, a man responsible for physically attacking a church leader during a religious service reportedly carried out the act with impunity. At 5pm on 7 July Bishop Jorge Luis Pérez, who is a leader in the Alliance of Christians of Cuba, an unregistered, cross-denominational network of religious leaders, was leading the congregation at the Ministerio Pentecostal Rehobot Church of the Orthodox Church of God, when a young man, who witnesses said appeared to be under the influence of narcotics and was holding a machete, approached the pulpit. The young man struck Bishop Pérez on his back with the blunt side of the weapon before members of the church subdued him and called the PNR. Despite taking testimony from those on the scene, the young man was released from police custody only a short while later. No charges were filed. Bishop Pérez told CSW:

It is difficult to describe the discomfort I felt when I saw how state security granted immunity to this young man who attacked me, without filing a single charge against him. This is discrimination against me, since a similar attack on any other citizen would have been severely punished. This incident sets a dangerous precedent, inviting criminals to intimidate our community of believers. I believe that this attack has to do with my membership in the Alliance of Christians of Cuba and with the social assistance projects we carry out. The message is clear: they will do nothing against those who commit acts of violence against us. I truly fear for my life and for that of our congregants.

Interference with religious services or activities

Cuban government officials continued to interfere with religious activities, in many cases blocking them from taking place altogether. In October, a pastoral couple who oversee an unregistered church in eastern Cuba requested a permit from the municipal House of Culture to hold an

⁶ According to Cuba’s National Office of Statistics and Information, the average monthly salary in Cuba was 4,648 CUP in 2023. Religious leaders do not receive a state wage and therefore are likely to earn less.

outdoor religious service in a local neighbourhood. Their request was summarily denied, based on the fact that unregistered religious organisations are prohibited from obtaining permits for public events. The pastors noted that they had attempted, also unsuccessfully, to register their church and expressed regret that their attempts to comply with the law were consistently rebuffed by the authorities. After they proceeded to hold the event without a permit, they were received a summons to the local PNR station for the following day.

In early July eight religious leaders from four provinces, La Habana, Las Tunas, Sancti Spiritus and Santiago de Cuba, reported receiving verbal orders from CDR, DSE and PNR agents to close the doors of their churches over 11 and 12 July, the third anniversary of unprecedented nationwide protests, and to cancel any religious activities planned for those days. In some of the cases the religious leaders were also ordered not to leave their homes on those dates, and, in one, the ‘stay at home’ order was extended to all of the members of the particular church. One religious leader reported that the CDR officers, who issued the verbal order not to hold any religious activities for those dates, stated that they were giving the same order to ‘all the small churches’ in the community. The pastor of an independent church in eastern Cuba, who defied the order to cancel religious activities, found an evening prayer service on 12 July interrupted by PNR officers who entered the church and shouted at those gathered there to stop, threatening the pastor with arrest. The pastor was forced to cancel the service and those gathered there all left.

‘Acts of repudiation’ – supposedly spontaneous popular protests, but almost always orchestrated by the government – were also used to interrupt religious services and intimidate those in attendance. Throughout the year, one unregistered church in central Cuba was subjected to weekly incidents, during religious services, by a local CCP militant who used a megaphone to insult the leader and members of the church and blast loud music from behind a wall adjoining the church. Despite repeated complaints, the PNR declined to take any action to stop this.

In the second half of the year, in a remote, rural community in eastern Cuba, a small church was surrounded by individuals that no one recognised as being local to the area, and who were wearing distinct shirts used by some members of CCP militant groups. The mob began to throw rocks at the tin roof and shout at those inside, who had gathered for a special service of thanksgiving, threatening to burn the wooden church down if the activity inside was not halted. The individuals inside the church panicked and cancelled the service, and the members of the mob went away. Those who reported the case to CSW said that they believed that the mob attack was organized because the service was specifically to give thanks for humanitarian aid that had been provided to them by an organization led by a pastor and outspoken human rights defender that has been a particular target of the Cuban government. They told CSW: ‘this was a warning to us to stop carrying out missionary

work and offering humanitarian aid through the [redacted] project, evangelising through [this type of] concrete action.’

Acute and chronic shortages across the island have led many religion or belief communities to respond by collecting and distributing humanitarian aid. In many cases government officers interrupted or attempted to stop such actions, claiming that they cast the state, which is unable or unwilling to do so, in a negative light. In the one such case, on the morning of 30 March, the pastor of a registered church associated with the denomination that is part of the CCC in central Cuba, was visited by two DSE agents who issued him a verbal summons to attend the ORA at 1pm the same day. When the pastor complied with the summons, he was received by an ORA representative, a politician who did not identify himself, and a Technical Research Department (DTI) agent. Initially, the three government officers appeared sympathetic to the pastor but expressed concern that humanitarian work with the unhoused population carried out by his church and the ‘images he was projecting abroad’ could be misinterpreted by the ‘enemies of the Revolution.’ The government agents asked the pastor, politely, to stop this work, claiming that it was the responsibility of the government and ‘the Revolution’, not the churches. When the pastor refused, the government agents became hostile and began to interrogate him, demanding to know why he had shared photos of unhoused people living on social media and who was financing the church’s humanitarian work. The ORA representative threatened the pastor with the cancellation of his religious credentials. After explaining that the church receives no outside funds for its humanitarian work, the pastor said, ‘you who direct religious affairs in the city, you in the department of investigations, and you as a politician, do what you have to do, because I will continue to serve God and the church will continue to help the most helpless.’ The ORA officer produced a prepared *Acta de Advertencia* and ordered the pastor to sign it. The pastor refused and asked permission to leave, which was granted after he was warned, again, that there would be consequences for his actions.

Use of symbols and social media

Another noteworthy development in 2024 was an increase in documented cases involving the Cuban flag – seemingly in the enforcement of stipulations in the criminal and family codes mandating respect and reverence for national symbols. These cases were frequently combined with warnings about the use of social media, and in particular calls for prayer for the country that mentioned problems of any kind on the island. In March, a pastor of an unregistered church was questioned by a PNR officer, who arrived at her office without warning and questioned her about the use of the Cuban flag during church services. When the pastor explained that the use of the flags was to encourage prayer for blessings on the country during worship services and was not a political statement, the officer warned her that the use of the flag by an ‘illegal church’ and ‘counter-revolutionary’ ministry was strictly forbidden. He accused the pastor of attempting to discredit and damage the image of the Revolution, and

threatened her with a fine and the confiscation of the flags. A few days later, the youth pastor at the same church was summoned to a DSE station, where a DSE captain accused the pastor of leading a counter-revolutionary movement and encouraging young people to make poor decisions. Again, the official referenced the church's use of Cuban flags in its services and warned the pastor that by teaching young people to take part in the 'illegal' church's use of national symbols, he was committing an act of counter-revolution and terrorism. The youth pastor reiterated the statement of his colleague that the flags were solely used to encourage prayer for the country, but the officer issued him an *Acta de Advertencia* and warned that he could face criminal charges if he did not obey the government order.⁷

Similarly, and also in March, pastors of an unregistered church in central Cuba were repeatedly summoned and interrogated separately by DSE and PNR officers about their use of the Cuban flag during religious services. The lead pastor was warned that she would be issued an *Acta de Advertencia* and told that she had committed a number of offenses, including failing to remove Cuban patriotic symbols and the flags of other countries on display in the church, using a social media profile picture showing her with a Cuban flag, sharing photos of prayer services using the flag on social media, and requesting prayer for Cuba on social media and mentioning specific needs in the country. The pastor responded that:

My church is not a communist church, nor a revolutionary church, nor a counter-revolutionary church. It is the church of Jesus Christ, and national symbols are not used on behalf of communists or non-communists. The symbols used are those of my homeland, where God called me to pastor, build, pray, and intercede for my country.

She refused to sign the *Acta de Advertencia* and was permitted to leave. One week later, the leader of the church youth group was summoned and interrogated by the same PNR and DSE officers. The lead pastor accompanied her to the meeting but was not allowed inside. The youth leader was questioned about an event a few days earlier in which the lead pastor had encouraged young people to pray for Cuba by kneeling near and touching the flag. The PNR captain asked the youth leader if she was aware that she 'belongs to an illegal church and a counter-revolutionary ministry and could face serious consequences' if [she] continues on the same path.' He threatened her with an *Acta de Advertencia* and expressed anger that she and others had mentioned problems in Cuba on social media, 'discrediting and damaging the image of the Revolution in the eyes of the people'. The youth leader, like the lead pastor, refused to sign the *Acta de Advertencia* stating that:

I am not a counter-revolutionary, neither am I a communist. I have not done anything that violated Cuban law or the constitution, since all I have done was pastor the young people of my church, encouraging them to

pray and cry out on behalf of the Cuban nation – and that includes Captain [redacted] and his family.

On 23 March Pastor Orlando de la Fuente Lovaina of the Nuevo Pacto First Baptist Church, a registered church that is part of the legally recognized Baptist Convention of Eastern Cuba, in Ciego de Ávila City, Ciego de Ávila was visited by two government agents who did not identify themselves but ordered the pastor to accompany them to an immediate interview at the 1st PNR Station of Ciego de Ávila. He was interrogated by PNR Officer Osvaldo Morejón who mentioned social media posts calling for prayer for Cuba that the pastor had shared the previous day. Officer Morejón accused the pastor of 'using the pulpit to claim that there were problems in Cuba that the Church can solve, when only the Revolution and its political systems can solve people's problems.' When the pastor expressed his conviction that that God through the Church can help to bring solutions for the difficulties the country is facing, the officer told him that 'religious people' are strictly prohibited from using national symbols, which can only be used by revolutionaries, adding that the pastor's position sends a message to the people that the Revolution cannot solve the people's problems. The officer warned Pastor de la Fuente Lovaina that if his preaching encourages 'ideological divisionism' among the members of his congregation, he could face criminal charges and 'his family and members of the church will suffer the consequences'. The pastor was issued an *Acta de Advertencia* but refused to sign it.

Confiscation of goods or property

The authorities stepped up the targeting and confiscation of goods belonging to religious groups, in most cases confiscating items even after those affected showed evidence that they had been purchased legally. Items arbitrarily taken by the government included audio-visual technology, chairs, construction materials, food and even medicine. Those affected were given no opportunity to appeal the confiscations or to recover their items.

In March DSE agents who refused to identify themselves accompanied by a PNR officer and an official from the Ministry of Finances and Prices Office of Integrated Supervision (DIS), broke into the home of the pastor of an unregistered church in central Cuba. The government agents proceeded to confiscate two sets of audio equipment and a television screen used to show films at the church's weekly Sunday school. They went on to also confiscate the pastor's government-issued licences to sell food and the cart he used to carry out this work, before arbitrarily detaining him in the local PNR station for 72 hours. No documentation justifying the search of the pastor's house, the suspension of his work licences, the seizure of his belongings, or his detention was produced, although the pastor was provided with a list of all the items they had taken three days later.

⁷ On two occasions in 2024, leaders of the same church were accused of organising illegal demonstrations after so many people attempted to attend special religious services that they spilled out onto the surrounding streets.

Donated goods were no exception. In October a member of an unregistered church donated several beams he had removed from his home to the church, with the idea that they would be used in the construction of a new church building. As the pastor and several members of the congregation were removing the beams from the donor's home, a PNR sector chief and a housing inspector arrived and demanded that the pastor show them documentation proving that he had obtained the beams legally. Although the donor and the pastor explained that the beams were a donation, the government officers accused the pastor of 'conducting illegal business', handed him a detailed notice of confiscation and took most of the beams.

Within the context of the ongoing economic crisis, many religious leaders, especially those who lead smaller and independent groups, hold other forms of employment for income. The confiscation of goods not used for religious purposes, but owned by religious leaders, continued to be a target of the government. On 12 August Chaplain Georvanis Vidal was visited at his home in Palma Soriano, Santiago de Cuba by Ministry of Finance and Prices Office of Integrated Supervision (DIS) officer Karel Castillo López and PNR officer Kelvin Luis who explained that they were there to take audio equipment, including a microphone, and a television screen used in religious services at the Evangélica Pentecostal de Cuba Church, affiliated with the legally recognized Assemblies of God denomination. When Chaplain Vidal asked why the items were being confiscated, the officers told him that it was because of the chaplain's work with the families of political prisoners, warning him that his 'counter-revolutionary activities' could lead to his eviction from his house.

Not even personal, and potentially lifesaving, medicine was off limits. In December the pastor of an unregistered church in central Cuba was at his home awaiting the delivery of medication for his cardiovascular disease, sent from the US via a friend,⁸ having been refused the medicine by the local hospital in October. A hospital doctor told him that they were under orders not to give the pastor the medicine, 'because [he is] a pastor who does not belong to any registered organization or institution but is part of the [redacted] movement of [redacted] who is considered to be a counter-revolutionary'. A plainclothes PNR officer, who did not identify himself, intercepted the delivery and detained both the pastor and the person delivering the medication. Both men were interrogated, but while the other person was quickly released, the pastor was held for 12 hours. He responded to questions about the origins of the medication by explaining his medical history and offering to provide documentation, and that it was for personal use. The PNR officer accused the pastor of 'running an illegal church and trafficking medications'. Although the pastor was ultimately released, the PNR confiscated all of the medication.

In some cases, the confiscation of goods was so arbitrary as to hint at government corruption. At the end of December a babalawo and members of his religious group were travelling via truck in central Cuba to a remote area where they planned to hold a special service to mark the new year when they were stopped by a traffic inspector in a PNR vehicle. The passengers were requested to exit the truck for a routine inspection and, after finding nothing illegal, the inspector asked the group where they were planning to go and why they had drums, food, drinks and animals with them. When the babalawo explained the purpose of their travel and their destination, one of the officers ridiculed them, saying:

You are wasting your time travelling from one place to another, since no one believes in [your religion]. You are using [your religion] to deceive people and take their money. You are not allowed to spread your religion and beliefs in society and can be punished legally.

The babalawo responded that the activity they had planned was free for anyone who wished to participate, and that their spiritual celebrations were not a crime. He was told by the officers that the group was free to carry on with their journey but they 'did not want to see them in that area again, they would be arrested, and the vehicle impounded while further investigations were conducted'. They then confiscated all the animals and drinks in the possession of the religious group. The babalawo shared his suspicion with CSW 'that these animals and our drinks were used for the officers' New Year's celebration'.

Attending religious services or activities

The government continued to forcibly prevent individuals, mostly those it considers to be dissidents and their close family members, from attending religious activities. This is part of a long-standing policy of attempting to socially isolate those who are critical of the government.

The government continued particularly to target members of the Ladies in White movement, systematically stopping them from attending Mass on Sundays. This happened on a weekly basis and in towns and cities across the entire island. Most cases involved the women being detained as they left their homes and held by the PNR or DSE in various locations for a few hours until Mass had ended. In many instances, they were made to stay, sometimes handcuffed, in police vehicles parked in direct sunlight with the windows closed, and then dropped off in remote locations, forced to make their own way back to their homes.

Berta Soler Fernández and her husband Angel Moya were regularly singled out for more severe treatment. Their home, which also serves as the civil society organization's headquarters, was regularly surrounded by organized mobs, some holding signs with offensive and insulting messages and recording the couple's movements on mobile phones.

⁸ In Cuba, where shortages of all types of medication are acute, it has long been common for Cubans to use personal contacts, when they have them, to obtain necessary medication from abroad.

They were arbitrarily detained at around midday most Sundays, almost immediately after leaving their home to attend Mass, by PNR and DSE agents. In most cases, they were taken by DSE cars with private plates to a PNR station, sometimes separately, where they were ordered to undergo intrusive medical examinations, which they consistently refused. They were then taken to separate prisons where they were held until between 5.30am and noon the following day, when they were fined between 30 CUP and 150 CUP and released – most often taken in a patrol car to be dropped off near their home. They were sometimes presented with *Actas de Advertencia* to sign but refused to do so. Their treatment and the conditions in which they were held were inhumane. On the occasion when Ms Soler Fernández was provided with a mattress, it was infested with bedbugs. She was sometimes denied water and on one occasion was ordered to disrobe and squat in front of prison guards. Mr Moya was not allowed to wear anything on his feet, including flip-flops, exposing his skin to the highly unhygienic prison cell floor. On one occasion, a DSE officer ordered guards to knock him down onto the floor. One of the guards pushed his knee into Mr Moya's back, while another bent Mr Moya's right leg and twisted his ankle. His arms were pulled tight behind his back, causing lacerations and inflammation in his wrists.

Family members of political prisoners not affiliated with the Ladies in White and relatives of exiled dissidents were also targeted as part of the policy of social isolation. In many cases, this was done by threatening religious leaders with severe consequences for them or for their religious group if a specific individual was not blocked from attending their activities. In a typical case, in July, a woman in western Cuba was informed by a leader in her church that she would no longer be allowed to attend the church, nor would she be able to visit the leader in their home, due to her relationship with her son-in-law, a human rights defender in exile. The leader was sympathetic to the woman's insistence that she had no intention of creating problems but made it clear that the decision was a result of DSE pressure on the church's leaders.

Arbitrary detention

The number of cases involving arbitrary detention, mostly short term, remained high. As noted in the previous section, the act of preventing members of the Ladies in White from attending religious services almost always involved arbitrary detention. In some cases, those affiliated with the group were targeted after attending church services. This was the experience of Armando Cruz Álvares and his adult son, Otoniel Cruz, who were leaving Mass at 10.30am on 5 January when they were detained by a DSE agent, who ordered them into a PNR patrol car. Both were taken to the city police station, and locked in a cell, where they were detained for eight hours. Before their release, they were taken to an office where DSE Captain 'Luis' and First Lieutenant Camilo Escalona Morejón warned them they would face long-term imprisonment if they continued to associate with the Ladies in White and to try to attend Mass, saying 'if you go to church again, you will go to prison.'

Some cases of arbitrary detention were linked to the confiscation of goods. As mentioned above, in March a Protestant pastor was held for 72 hours in connection with the confiscation of church and personal items and the cancellation of his work permit. Two months later, in late May, two high ranking church leaders, both affiliated with a recognized Protestant denomination, who were returning from purchasing bags of cement from a state-accredited establishment were stopped at a PNR checkpoint in central Cuba and falsely accused of producing counterfeit invoices issued by the establishment that had sold them the cement. Witnesses noted that although theirs was one of many vehicles returning with bags of cement through the same checkpoint, all of the others were allowed to go on their way with their purchases. Both leaders were charged with fraud and prohibited from leaving the province. They were subjected to a police investigation that lasted a number of weeks, and put under house arrest during that time. The results of the investigation were not made public.

Religious leaders who resisted government orders to stop religious activities were frequently threatened with arrest and, in some cases, this was carried out. At 4pm on 14 May, Babalawo Raudel Cantero was celebrating a traditional Yoruba ceremony in his house in Camagüey City, Camagüey, accompanied by family and friends, when PNR officers broke into the home and ordered the group to stop the activity. The officers warned that prior authorization was required for such celebrations and that if he refused to stop, the babalawo would be charged with public disorder and the promotion of events that conflict with the principles of the government. When the babalawo indicated that he did not intend to comply with the order, the officers took him from his home by force, pushing him into a patrol car, and detained him. He was held overnight and was only released after his family borrowed money to pay a 20,000 CUP fine for 'disrespect for the authorities'.

Political prisoners and FoRB

Political prisoners experienced the routine denial of their rights under the Nelson Mandela Rules (the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners), especially in regard to the religious rights mentioned in the rules, including the right to access religious literature and the right to receive religious visits. On 7 September brothers Jorge and Nadir Martín Perdomo, who are serving seven-year sentences because of their participation in the 11 July 2021 protests, received a response from Captain Adonis Charchaval López of the general prosecutor's office to their requests for a religious visit, stating:

This document is in response to the letter received by political prisoners Jorge and Nadir Perdomo, requesting benefits, as well as religious and pastoral care, therefore, the response to this request was denied, as they have no rights, nor are they allowed any benefits, religious assistance, or visits from any religious leader.

Similarly, on the morning of 10 September, Maikel Puig Bergolla, a practitioner of the Yoruba faith, serving a 20-

year sentence in Agüica Prison in Colón, Matanzas, on false charges of sedition and public disorder because of his participation in the 11 July 2021 demonstrations, was refused the right to religious visits. Mr Puig Bergolla initially asked that his spiritual godfather be permitted to visit him, but expanded his request to any Protestant pastor, stating that he ‘just need[ed] someone to listen to and advise’ him. He and his wife, Saily Núñez, have made numerous requests for the right to a religious visit. She was told verbally that her husband is not permitted to receive any ‘benefits’, including the right to a religious visit.

In January 2025 Protestant pastor Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo and Yoruba leader Donaida Pérez Paseiro, both serving prison sentences in connection with their participation in the 11 July protests, were granted conditional release from prison as part of an agreement negotiated by the Vatican and the administration of United States (US) President Joe Biden. Both religious leaders have since been pressured by government officials to leave Cuba. Loreto Hernández García, a Yoruba leader and Ms Pérez Paseiro’s husband, remains in prison, however. Mr Hernández García’s brother, Jorge Luis García Perez, also known as Antúnez, confirmed to CSW that he continues to be denied critical medical treatment and is subjected to ridicule by prison officials because of his religious beliefs.

Threats

Almost all of the FoRB violations documented in 2024 included some kind of threat. These frequently included threats of imprisonment if the targets did not comply with the demands of the authorities. Members of the Ladies in White were threatened weekly with imprisonment or other unspecified ‘consequences’ if they continued to attempt to attend church. One, María Josefa Acon, was repeatedly reminded, while detained in Havana, that her child is approaching the age to complete obligatory military service. She was threatened that the child could be taken by force, even before they reached the designated age, while she would go to prison if she continued to try to attend Mass.

The number of documented cases involving an *Acta de Advertencia* remained high. Religious leaders of unregistered religious groups were often targeted in this way, with *Actas de Advertencia* warning of imprisonment, in line with the Criminal Code, of up to three years for leading an unauthorized association, however, more and more refused to sign the document. In one example, after obeying a summons, Pastor Osdeni Machado Echevarría was interrogated by DSE Lieutenant-Colonel ‘Alberto’ about why he had been visiting different houses and communities in the city and praying, and why he had permitted members of his unregistered church, Ministerio Restaurando Vidas, affiliated with the Apostolic Movement, to share their religious beliefs with others. The Lieutenant-Colonel went on to remind Pastor Machado Echevarría of his church’s lack of legal recognition, warned him that the Apostolic Movement is considered by the government to be a counter-revolutionary group, and presented him with an *Acta de*

Advertencia stating that if he continued with his religious work, he would face criminal prosecution. The pastor refused to sign the document, affirmed that he was aware of the government’s view of the Apostolic Movement and its lack of legal status, but maintained that his and his church members’ activities, including praying and sharing their faith, were in accordance with their religious beliefs and did not cause anyone harm.

Similarly, Babalawo Leandro Echevarría Lailu refused to sign an *Acta de Advertencia* drawn up by PNR Sector Chief Tomás González and CDR President Pedro Romero, on 12 September in Camagüey City, Camagüey, containing accusations of disturbing the peace and hoarding. Sector Chief González and Mr Romero had interrupted a celebratory lunch organised by the babalawo for his religious group as part of an annual celebration of their spiritual relationship with each other. Mr Romero demanded to know the reason for the lunch, claimed that they were annoying their neighbours, and criticised what he called ‘a significant expenditure on food for a single gathering’. Babalawo Echevarría Lailu responded that the group prepares financially each year in order to ensure they have enough for all of the celebrations required by their religion, and that he did not think that the amount spent on the lunch was the concern of the government. After the babalawo refused to sign the *Acta de Advertencia*, the sector chief and CDR president left, and the group continued with their celebration.

Social and humanitarian outreach by religious groups also provoked government ire. Dr Yadira Riera Pérez, an optometrist and active member of the registered Ministerio Palabra de Vida Sobre la Roca Church, affiliated with the Assemblies of God, complied with a PNR summons in Camagüey at 9am on 30 August after holding an event donating eye exams and glasses to those in need the previous day. PNR Officer Armín Estrada accused her of organizing a counter-revolutionary activity, providing medical services without authorization from the Department of Health, and working with an organization that has no legal status – referring to her participation in the Mas Que Palabras network, an inter-denominational group in Cuba that provides humanitarian aid to communities and individuals in need. Dr Riera Pérez reminded Officer Estrada that she holds the correct permits for her private optician’s shop and stated that she did not think that failing to charge for her services was a criminal offense. In response, Officer Estrada issued her an *Acta de Advertencia*, warning her that if she worked with the Mas Que Palabras network, or with any unrecognized church or group, they would revoke her status as a doctor and confiscate her goods and property. A second officer signed the document as a witness, but Dr Riera Pérez refused to put her name to it, stating that the accusations against her were untrue.

Discrimination on the basis of religion

Cases involving discrimination on the basis of religion were high. Individuals active in unregistered religious groups were particularly affected and reported being denied permits

for activities, buildings, renovations to existing buildings, and social and humanitarian work by the ORA and other government agencies, including the Ministry of Housing and the National Institute for Sports, Physical Education and Recreation (INDER). Some received arbitrary eviction orders from their places of residence from the government. One religious leader affiliated with an unregistered Protestant group, who is also a specialist medical doctor, was warned by a Ministry of Health Official that if he did not stop his work as a pastor, he would be ‘stripped of his professional title [as a doctor] and would never be licensed to practice his profession in Cuba again’. Another pastoral couple, affiliated with the same religious group and members of an interdenominational alliance of Christian leaders, reported in November that their bank accounts were frozen without warning or recourse, and that they were told it was because of their ties to these religious groups.

Even when permits were granted, they were sometimes rescinded or ignored in a discriminatory manner based on the religious affiliation of those holding the permits. In October, a DIS inspector arrived at property used by a church affiliated with an unregistered Protestant denomination and handed the pastor a 20,000 CUP fine and an order to demolish a wooden shed and greenhouse built by the church to cultivate food to eat and share with those in need. Although the pastor had been granted a permit by the authorities to use the land for this purpose, the DIS inspector told him that none of it could be considered legal, as long as the church was ‘illegal’. The pastor told CSW:

We built this project legally, with our church's own funds, and now that we have managed to build a greenhouse with vegetables to provide for several members of the community who lack resources, the state orders us to demolish and complete a project that allows the church to be a tangible testimony of love, evangelism and service. But unfortunately, even that is prohibited in the Cuban system, and they want the church to pay the consequences.

The pastor paid the fine to avoid doubling the debt, but ignored the demolition order.

Despite a 1991 change to CCP rules allowing non-atheists into its ranks, discrimination against individuals who openly professed religious beliefs was common. In one case, the pastor of a registered church, whose denomination is part of the CCC, and who also has held local positions of authority predating his work as a pastor, was told in the first half of the year by political leaders accompanied by a DSE agent that he would have to choose one or the other. One of the political leaders stated that, ‘Government positions can only be held by revolutionaries who cannot have any religious affiliation. Working as a pastor sets a bad example and could be misinterpreted by other public servants and CDR members’. The pastor’s response, that he would resign from his positions of authority and carry on as a pastor, was met with hostility from the group, who issued him with an *Acta de Advertencia*, and warned him that they would inform the

leader of his denomination, and that leaders and members of his church would be a target going forward. The pastor stated that he would not change his decision and refused to sign the document.

Acts of discrimination extended to access to basic goods, including fuel. On 28 April Pastor Yoelvis Yeras Valdés attempted to register a newly required gasoline powered electric generator, as required by law, at the Sputnik Petrol Station on Carretera Central Oeste and Gral near his home in Camagüey City, Camagüey. When he stated his profession as pastor of the Ministerio Tuama, affiliated with the Apostolic Movement, as part of the registration process, the manager informed him that he was ineligible to register his equipment and would not be permitted to purchase fuel. She referenced a government list, issued to all petrol stations, which strictly prohibited the sale of fuel to leaders of unregistered religious groups, and explained that the generator could not be registered because it might be used for ‘religious services of an illegal religious group’.

Children and young people also experienced discrimination at school because of their religious beliefs. In June, the pastor of a church linked to an unregistered Protestant denomination was called to her child’s primary school by the school principal, who expressed concern that the pastor’s child took their Bible with them to school and talked about their faith to their fellow students. The principal claimed that several parents had complained and said they did not want the children associating with anyone who held those beliefs. When questioned by the pastor, the principal admitted that the child did not take out their Bible during school hours and was fulfilling all of their academic responsibilities. In response, the pastor stated that she did not think her child’s choice to carry their Bible in their backpack was causing harm to anyone, nor did she think it’s wrong of the child to talk about their beliefs to their friends. The principal warned the pastor that if the child ‘continued to cause problems’ she would have ‘no choice but to take more severe measures, including the possible expulsion of the student’.

In another case, in October in Sancti Spíritus City, Sancti Spíritus, the teenage daughter of Yoruba Babalawo Leodan Puentes, was ordered by school principal Minerva Acosta to remove her *idde*, a colorful bracelet used as a protective amulet. When the girl refused, the principal ordered her to go home and summoned her parents, warning them that the girl would not be permitted to come to school as long as she was wearing the *idde*, and threatening them with her expulsion if she did so. The *babalawo* stated that he did not think the wearing of an *idde* was harmful to anyone else at the school and noted that his daughter was at the top of her class, but said that he would be willing to make a different type of amulet that his daughter could wear but would not be visible to others. The principal agreed to this compromise and the girl was allowed to return to school.

One child in central Cuba was threatened with being held back from graduating the eighth grade due to their refusal to participate in military exercises on National Defense

Day. The parent, a pastor affiliated with an unregistered Protestant denomination, explained to the child's teacher that the child's position was due to their pacifist beliefs, based in their religion, and asked that the child be given an alternative activity to help in the effort to defend the country in the event of war that were more aligned with their beliefs. The teacher declined to do so, stating that this was the decision of the Provincial Department of Education – and warned again, that if the child did not participate fully they would be blocked from completing the schoolwork necessary to pass the grade; however, although the child and parents did not obey the order, the threats were not carried out, and the child advanced to the next grade at the end of the school year.

Fines

CSW documented 75 cases in 2024 involving the application of a fine for various infractions. The amount of the fine ranged from 30 to 150 CUP in the case of an individual,⁹ to 6,000 to 50,000 CUP in the case of a religious association. The total amount of the fines documented was 1,148,080 CUP (approximately 47,600 USD or 35,700 GBP). This was a striking increase from previous years, with some Cuban ForB defenders speculating that the fines were a way for the government to generate income.

The majority of the fines targeting religious groups were in regard to unpermitted construction or renovations. In one example, in March, PNR Sector Chief Rolando Parrada, Physical Planning Inspector Moisés Traba, and two individuals who did not identify themselves visited Yoan Alberto Rojas Vázquez, pastor of the Ministerio Internacional Betel Church in Macabí, Holguín and issued a fine of 50,000 CUP alongside an order of demolition on the basis that the church building was illegal. The pastor responded that he had no desire to act outside the law, but every attempt to obtain the required permits had been refused by the authorities. In another case, in May, Physical Planning Inspector Norma Ramírez Perdomo issued a fine of 30,000 CUP and a stop work order to Jesús Cisneros Sifontes, pastor of the independent pastor of Jehovah Nissi Church in Camagüey City, Camagüey for unauthorized construction. The pastor showed her the property and explained that the only work he was doing, to expand the building, was all on his own property and affected no one else. The inspector responded that if he did not comply with the order and pay the fine within 24 hours, he would be evicted, and the fine would be doubled.

In many cases involving Yoruba groups, fines were applied for 'illegal' activities. In one case, in May, Babalawo Luis Alexander Brígido Cambra obeyed a summons to appear at a PNR Station in Camagüey City, Camagüey. PNR Officer Yúnior Tejeda warned Babalawo Brígido Cambra that the religious activities he was organizing in his home were illegal because he did not belong to the Yoruba Cultural Association, a registered religious group that is generally supportive of

the government, and stated that this failure was 'considered an act of rebellion against religious institutions and the government'. Officer Tejeda accused Babalawo Brígido Cambra of using 'illicit funds' for his religious celebrations and interrogated him about his finances. The babalawo responded that all materials used were purchased through legal channels, but the PNR officer fined him 15,000 CUP and warned that if he did not stop holding religious celebrations, he would be criminally prosecuted. Babalawo Brígido Cambra paid the fine.

Once again, humanitarian and social work carried out by religious associations was a target of the government. In the first half of the year, a pastor affiliated with an unregistered denomination, was accused of 'illegally helping the elderly' and fined 20,000 CUP. One week later, a housing inspector arrived at the pastor's home in eastern Cuba and demanded to search the place in order to ascertain whether an 'illegal' church met there and if the pastor was providing support to any elderly people. This time the pastor was fined 50,000 CUP for allowing meetings in their home with attendance exceeding the maximum number of people allowed to assemble in a private home. The pastor did not deny the charges but pointed out that the funds to pay the fine could have been used to provide food to the elderly in need. In response, the inspector threatened the pastor with the loss of their job, warning that then their 'own children would be left without food'.

Conclusion

2024 saw the Cuban government extend its repression in almost every area, including in relation to ForB. The government's tactics can be compared to those of the 1980s and 1990s, with aggressive attempts to socially isolate political prisoners and their families, harassment and threats of imprisonment, including the frequent use of *Actas de Advertencia* against the leaders of unregistered religious groups, repeated summons and interrogations, restrictions on movement, abuse of children and/or loss of employment because of the religious beliefs of the affected individuals. The revised civil, administrative and criminal codes were repeatedly referenced by government officials, which appears to confirm the government's attempt to return to a policy of tight social control.

Despite severe economic and infrastructure challenges, which have led to major shortages of food and medicine alongside regular, extended blackouts due to failures of the electrical grid, the Cuban people can expect no political or social reform under the leadership of President Miguel Díaz-Canel y Bermúdez and the CCP. President Díaz-Canel y Bermúdez has made it clear that dissent or perceived criticism of the government, the CCP, or its policies will be met with a heavy hand. While many Cubans have continued to find ways to resist and have not refrained from criticizing government policies or actions with which they disagree, hundreds of thousands have concluded they have no future

⁹ These cases all involved members of or associates of the Ladies in White and were applied because they attended or attempted to attend church services.

in Cuba and have fled the island in order to seek sanctuary elsewhere, almost always via routes that involve great physical risk and expense. The government has apparently at least tolerated, if not facilitated, mass emigration, as it has in the past, almost always during or following a period of social unrest. In the meantime, the Cuban government has aggressively solicited, apparently successfully, the support of similarly repressive governments in China and Russia. This should be of great concern to members of the international community who are committed to democracy and respect for fundamental human rights.

It is now even more vital that governments around the world, and especially Cuba's friends and neighbours in Latin America, emphatically voice concerns about Cuba's consistent violations of human rights, including FoRB, and seek ways to support independent civil society in Cuba, including religious groups. The European Union and the United States, for their part, must actively seek ways to support independent civil society in Cuba and coordinate with each other. Multi-lateral engagement, especially with governments in the Western Hemisphere, to ensure that demands that the Cuban government make long overdue reforms to ensure that the fundamental rights of all are protected and upheld are made consistently and in unison is critical. Ultimately, the future of Cuba lies with its people; those around the world who believe in the principles of democracy and fundamental human rights must stand with them in their peaceful pursuit of political and social change.

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