

Freedoms, like privileges, prevail or are imperiled together. You cannot harm or strive to achieve one without harming or furthering all.

Jose Marti

Executive Summary

2022 saw the continuation of the government crackdown that began in 2021 following the 11 July protests alongside the adoption of increasingly repressive legislation and a historic wave of emigration. It is against this backdrop that CSW documented 657 violations of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in 2022, a staggering jump from 272 in the previous year.¹ The Cuban government continues to view religious groups, which together comprise the largest sector of independent civil society, with suspicion and some fear especially because of their potential to mobilise large groups of people.

2022 was characterised by continued repression of independent civil society, particularly individuals who were critical of the government's record on human rights and those who have expressed support for political prisoners. Religious associations of all types, including Roman Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Afro-Cuban, and Muslim groups, registered and unregistered groups, including some that belong to the Cuba Council of Churches (CCC), all reported experiencing FoRB violations. The government was particularly focused on targeting religious leaders and individuals who offered spiritual or material support to families of political prisoners. Religious leaders who attempted to respond to humanitarian disasters, including following the fuel tank explosions and fire in Matanzas and Hurricane Ian, were directly reprimanded, and threatened with fines and imprisonment by State Security officers if they continued to do so. Those considered by the government to be dissidents, were repeatedly and systematically blocked from attending religious services, usually through short term arbitrary detention. A significant number of religious leaders and FoRB defenders went into exile after being informed by State Security that, if they did not leave Cuba, they would be imprisoned and the government would take custody of their children.

Despite these negative developments, religious leaders, from registered and unregistered groups alike, continued to speak publicly about FoRB and other human rights violations and were openly critical of proposed laws in the form of a new criminal and family codes. It is notable that many Cubans who reported experiencing FoRB violations, in many cases many severe, voiced their intention to resist government pressure. Said one Christian who was threatened after their church collected and distributed humanitarian aid to the needy in their community:

I told [the State Security officer] that all we did was

provide spiritual support to the community and give our own provisions to those most affected... [I told him that] solidarity cannot be considered a crime and we will continue to provide spiritual support to the community, despite the threats.

In a similar vein, a Jewish individual who was fired from his job because of his religious beliefs said:

I don't care if, because of my religion, they decide to erase the work that I do with dedication and responsibility, I will always choose my religion before any recognition or title that men can give me.

The government appears to be counting on a strategy of harsh oppression and a new slate of even more repressive laws to bring the population back under as much of its control as possible. It has made it clear that there will be no political or social reform. In many ways the country appears to be regressing to the 1980s. 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

¹ The dramatic increase in number of documented FoRB violations took place in the context of increased government repression and an unprecedented wave of emigration. CSW's work documenting FoRB violations was adversely affected by this with all our documenters receiving threats and going into exile over the course of the year, making the sharp rise in numbers of documented cases all the more noteworthy.

reform it to operate transparently within defined legal parameters and with recourse for appeal;

- Ensure equal, transparent and non-discriminatory access to permits for renovations and building projects, religious visas, vehicle licences; 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;
- 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:

- 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 the European Parliament in its resolutions of 16 September and 16 December 2021;
- 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 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 should request an invitation to visit Cuba with unhindered access to all parts of the country and leaders of both registered and unregistered religious groups;
- The State Department should continue to closely monitor FoRB in Cuba and maintain Cuba as a CPC. All FoRB reporting should fully reflect the views of marginalized churches and faith leaders, rather than positions of religious groups that are close to the government or state officials and offices;
- The US Commission for International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) should request an invitation to visit Cuba with unhindered access to all parts of the country. It should also continue to closely monitor FoRB in the country

and elevate Cuba to Tier 1 status in line with the serious deterioration of FoRB developments in 2022.

To the United Nations:

- As Cuba continues to play a role in the UN 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 invitations to 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;
- Encourage UN Member States to raise FoRB related recommendations during Cuba's upcoming Universal Periodic Review in November 2023;
- 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 recognition and developments

In March 2022, the government announced the creation of the new government Department for Attention to Religious Institutions and Fraternal Groups. In practice, however, religious leaders have told CSW that all business is still conducted by the ORA of the Central Committee of the CCP. The ORA, directed by Caridad del Rosario Diego Bello and her deputies Sonia García García, and Rober Noa Frómeta, maintains a consistently antagonistic relationship with religious groups. All requests for authorisation, including for something as minor as making repairs to a building to something as major as holding a public event, are still 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.

All 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 apparatchiks. 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. Most religious groups that existed prior to the 1959 Revolution maintained their official registration and as such have legal recognition. However, the registered status of some groups, like the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Berean Baptists, was arbitrarily rescinded in the 1970s. 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. Most groups that were not present prior to 1959 but have a significant presence on the island, notably churches affiliated with the Apostolic Movement, have been refused the right to register.² While all religious groups experience FoRB violations, unregistered groups are most vulnerable and suffer some of the most egregious violations, as their unregistered 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 is likely to deteriorate following the adoption of a new criminal code which came into force on 1 December 2022. Groups [within](#) and [outside](#) of Cuba have criticised the code which maintains many of the problematic content of the previous code, but increases the minimum sentencing for numerous offences. 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 six months to one year prison sentence or a heavy fine as punishment. 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 new criminal code will amplify 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,³ effectively nullifies constitutional guarantees for freedom of conscience.

In addition to the criminal code, a new family code which goes into force in 2023 also has the potential to strengthen 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 instil in their children 'love for the Homeland, respect of its symbols, and respect for the authorities'. In 2022 CSW noted a significant increase in

² It should be noted that while their attempts to register in the past were rejected, some Apostolic Movement leaders now hold a position similar to that of the Free Yorubas and reject the concept of registration altogether.

³ Conscientious objection may not be invoked with the intention of evading compliance with the law or impeding another from the exercise of their rights.

reported FoRB cases which included government threats to remove custodial rights from parents.

Harassment of religious leaders

As in previous years, one of the most common FoRB violations documented in 2022 was that of harassment of religious leaders and FoRB defenders. The forms of harassment were various and included anonymous phone calls, repeated summons to appear at police stations or state security unit, interrogations, and fines. This type of FoRB violations 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. A number of Roman Catholic Churches across the country, where priests who the government considers to be critical of its policies work, reported repeated acts of vandalism with no response from government officials responsible for investigating such crimes.

Many religious leaders across the country reported being summoned by State Security for questioning, in some cases multiple times, in connection with the debates around and run up to the referendum on the new Family Code. In one example, on 10 February, Pastor Karel Lezcay Matos, leader of the missionary group Cubans to the Nations, was summoned and questioned about opinions, based in his religious faith, that he had shared on social media regarding the Family Code. He was warned that if he continued to voice such opinions, he could face criminal prosecution. The pastor later also expressed fear for his physical safety. In a similar case, on 18 March, Pastor Ismael Riverón Betancourt, an Apostolic Movement pastor in Macareño, Santa Cruz del Sur in Camagüey Province, was summoned by Police First Lieutenant Aliesky Basulto Rosabal to appear at the local police station. He was met by State Security Captain 'José Luis' and two counterintelligence officers who questioned him about his position on the Family Code. They accused the pastor of encouraging Cubans to oppose the proposed code and told him that they had noted that members of his church had, in popular consultations, expressed disagreement with the legislation. When the pastor explained that he could not force members of his church to do anything, and that, as citizens, they have the right to disagree, the officials threatened him with a 30-year prison sentence for acts of sedition including pastoring an 'illegal church' and 'inciting its members against government policies'. The officials presented him with an *Acta de Advertencia*⁴ but the pastor refused to sign the document, telling them that he planned to continue in his pastoral work regardless of the consequences.

Even after the Family Code was adopted on 25 September, harassment of religious leaders who had expressed concerns about the content continued. On 30 September

at 11am, Pastor Jorge Mario Travieso was returning to his home in Las Tunas when he was intercepted by two police officers who ordered him into a patrol car, driven by a third person dressed in civilian clothes. The pastor was taken to a 'Provincial Instruction' office where he was issued a formal warning based on the fact that he has held worship meetings in public areas and 'places not allowed, for having met with the relatives of political prisoners, and for having spoken out against the Family Code.' The officers threatened the pastor with imprisonment and told him that this was his final warning.

One leader of a registered church reported a series of incidents which occurred through the course of the year and demonstrate how the intelligence services use a combination of soft and hard tactics in an attempt to create a sense of insecurity and paranoia. From January to December, the leader was contacted at least once a week, receiving regular messages sent via WhatsApp and SMS from a number associated with a State Security officer who communicated frequently with the leader, but who always used a pseudonym.⁵ The messages often appeared to be benign, for example, wishing the leader a happy Easter or Valentine's Day, but which also contained details that made it clear that State Security was monitoring their movements and with whom the leader was spending time. The leader was regularly summoned, never through official channels but always via text message, to interrogations with the same State Security officer and a rotating cast of the agent's colleagues and superiors, who used pseudonyms as well. None of the interrogations took place in police stations or other government facilities, but in public locations such as a café or sports centre.⁶ During these interrogations the leader was repeatedly pressured to act as an informant in their larger religious group and to report on the head of the religious group. On every occasion the leader refused to accept this role, nonetheless, the State Security officers continued to question them aggressively about the opinions and activities of other leaders in and the head of the religious group.

Leaders of non-registered religious groups continue to experience regular harassment. On the morning of 13 March, an official who identified himself as being from the municipal Ministry of Justice but refused to present their credentials, visited the home of a person who hosts a house church in Pinar Del Rio and threatened them with the confiscation of their home if the person persisted in allowing it to be used as an 'illegal house of worship' and warned them that the person and their spouse could be prosecuted for gathering people together without the proper permits. The person responded that the easiest way to resolve the 'illegality' would be for the Ministry of Justice to respond to their religious leader's repeated requests to register the

4 An *Acta de Advertencia* serves as a kind of pre-arrest warrant. Government officials regularly demand that individuals sign them to justify a later arrest for future crimes.

5 Based on CSW's documentation, the uses of pseudonyms is standard procedure in all cases involving Department of State Security interactions with religious leaders and groups.

6 The leader believes that the interrogations were intentionally held in public locations so that they would be seen by others, with the aim of provoking suspicion on the part of the leader's neighbors and colleagues that the leader is collaborating with the intelligence services and thereby discrediting the leader.

church and told the officials that they planned to continue 'serving God with all [their] possessions'.

The host of a wedding in Nuevitas, Camagüey, was the target of harassment when on 13 February they hosted a Jewish wedding ceremony in their home. As the guests began to arrive at the ceremony, a neighbour who belongs to the neighbourhood Committee for the Defence of the Revolution (CDR), repeatedly came to the house under various pretexts. Although the neighbour did not specifically ask what was happening, it was clear to those present that she was visiting and attempting to ascertain who was present in order to inform State Security. The host began to receive phone calls from blocked numbers, which they did not answer because they were busy with the wedding. The following day the calls from hidden numbers continued, but the person did not accept them, believing them to be from State Security.

Leaders of legally recognised religious groups were not exempt for increased harassment. This took different forms, including repeated phone calls and texts from State Security, visits to their homes and surveillance, for example, individuals in civilian clothes parking outside their home or place of worship, monitoring their movements and taking photos. In some cases, the harassment appeared to be carried out by civilians but with the tacit approval of the government.

At least two Roman Catholic churches reported that their complaints to the authorities about the illegal dumping of refuse next to the walls of their churches went unanswered. In February, Father Alberto Sola, parish priest of the San Judas y San Nicolás Roman Catholic Parish in Havana sent a formal complaint to the government regarding the continued illegal dumping of garbage next to the parish walls. He received no response. Similarly, in November, Father Kenny Fernandez Delgado made a complaint to the Ministry of Health regarding the illegal dumping of refuse at the entrance of the Nuestra Señora de Regla y San Luis Roman Catholic Church in Mayabeque. Father Fernandez Delgado pointed out that the waste not only obstructs the passage of people attempting to attend religious services, but also gives off a strong odour that permeates the church and which he considers to be a health hazard. Rather than taking action to stop people from using the churches as a dumping site, the Ministry of Health fined the San Judas y San Nicolás Roman Catholic Parish for the accumulation of wastewater, due to the excess garbage causing a sewage back up. On the rare occasion that the government has sent workers to clean up the site, Father Sola noted that they did so with heavy machinery and in a way that damaged the walls of the church. Both priests have indicated that they believe this is an indirect form of harassment because they have offered spiritual support to the families of political prisoners and have been critical of government policies.

In some cases, the harassment of religious leaders, FoRB defenders and communities of faith became violent. On two occasions in February and in August, members of the Rapid Response Brigades threw stones at those attending religious services at an unregistered church in Camagüey.

One of the attacks left an elderly church member with cuts and a bruise when one of the stones hit him in the forehead. Although police responded to a call for assistance and took statements, according to the pastor, they took no action to search for those responsible for the attack.

One of the most disturbing cases took place in June when unknown individuals kidnapped and tortured the family pet, a cat, of a prominent FoRB defender. That cat returned home with her left eye gouged out and a dislocated jaw. The following day, the FoRB defender received a text message from a blocked number that said, 'If you stay [in Cuba], we will do to you and your family what we did to your cat.'

Travel restrictions and forced exile

Travel restrictions

The Cuban government continued to threaten and impose travel restrictions on specific individuals. This included restrictions imposed on those attempting to travel abroad, those attempting to enter Cuba, and those attempting to travel freely within the country.

Travel abroad

In November a leader of an unregistered Protestant group was detained, ordered into a police car, and taken to the outskirts of their city where they were interrogated by a State Security officer. The State Security officer threatened the leader with a travel ban if they participated in a new religious alliance. The leader was also threatened with the loss of additional 'privileges and freedoms' if they continued in a friendship with another religious leader who has been a long-time target of the government. A few days earlier, on 31 October, Abu Duyanah who leads the Cuban Association for the Dissemination of Islam, was preparing to board a flight to make pilgrimage to Mecca. Before boarding, an officer from the Directorate of Identification, Immigration, and Foreigners (DIEE) notified him that he was under a travel ban (regulado) and would not be allowed to board his flight. When Abu Duyanah asked why he was under a travel ban, the officer informed him that he is a person of 'public interest' and a threat to national security.

Travel to Cuba

In an example of the second type of travel restriction, the leader of a large independent Protestant ministry in Las Tunas who has been a frequent target of the government over the past decade because of his leadership of an unregistered religious group and especially over the past year and a half because he has offered spiritual support to the families of political prisoners, was warned by State Security officers that his daughters who are in exile would not be permitted to re-enter Cuba to visit him and his wife.

Travel inside Cuba

Finally, the pastor of a registered church which belongs to the Cuban Council of Churches was stopped by State Security while returning home. They had been traveling in the eastern part of the country where they were collecting

donations from local churches to give to those affected by the August fuel tank explosions in Matanzas. State Security officers told the pastor that the pastor was not authorised to collect humanitarian aid of any kind in the eastern regions and that the donations would be confiscated. They went on to inform the pastor that the pastor was being targeted because of their comments to the international media about the health crisis in the country and their position supporting the release of political prisoners linked to the 11 July 2021 protests. The officers imposed a ban on the pastor's religious activities in four eastern provinces and ordered the pastor to return to their home city within six hours.

Forced Exile

2022 saw the continuation of a historic wave of emigration from Cuba. While it is impossible to know how many Cubans left the island under threat, CSW noted that many religious leaders and FoRB defenders were forced to leave the country following ultimatums by State Security. In one example, in March, security agents in two police cars forced a pastor who is also a FoRB defender, off the highway. The pastor and person driving the car he was in were escorted to a government checkpoint where the officials warned them 'to be careful, because anything could happen to you on the road.' The government agents gave the pastor, who oversees an independent network of churches, an ultimatum to leave Cuba within the week or face a 30-year prison sentence for crimes of 'disrespect, disobedience, public disorder, counter-revolutionism, and terrorism' and warned him that his wife could also face charges as the accomplice of a counter-revolutionary. A friend of the pastor who is a lawyer, subsequently confirmed to him that a criminal case against him had been opened in the provincial prosecutor's office. The pastor went into hiding until he was able to secure the funds to flee the country and seek asylum abroad. His wife and children followed a few months later.

In July, Ricardo Fernández Izaguirre, one of the most well-known FoRB defenders in Cuba, was summoned to the DICE. A State Security officer met him, demanded his identity documents, and informed him that he was under arrest, before taking him to the police station. There, a woman who identified herself as a State Security major but who did not give her name confirmed to Mr. Fernández Izaguirre that the passports for his children and mother-in-law had been issued and showed him photos. She went on to inform him that the travel documents would not be released unless he signed a document renouncing his Cuban citizenship, making him stateless. After he signed the document, the major spent three hours detailing the extent of the 'damage' that Mr. Fernández Izaguirre has caused the Revolution by documenting FoRB violations and sharing them with the international community over the past three years. A few days later, the passports for his family members were released. Mr. Fernández Izaguirre and his family left Cuba and received asylum abroad.

In some cases, Cubans who had been under a travel ban, some for years, were informed that the ban would be lifted to allow them to travel as long as they did not return. Independent journalist and FoRB defender, Yoel Suarez

and prominent Apostolic Movement leader Alain Toledano Valiente, both went into forced exile with their families in 2022 after being informed by State Security that they would be permitted to travel outside of Cuba only on the condition that they did not come back. In the case of Pastor Toledano Valiente, he was also given a deadline to leave and warned that if he did not leave by the set date, he would be given a lengthy prison sentence.

The government also attempted to use the threat of forced expulsion or an entry ban to pressure religious leaders and visitors holding foreign passports. In two such cases, foreign national Roman Catholic religious leaders were threatened with the annulment or non-renewal of their religious visas if they continued to provide spiritual support to the families of those imprisoned following the 11 July 2021 protests. In a third case, the Superior of the Order of Jesuits on the island, Father David Pantaleón, left Cuba after the government refused to renew his residency visa. The refusal was reportedly in retaliation for Father Pantaleón's verbal support for members of the San Isidro Movement and his refusal to agree to government demands to 'control the political discourse' of Jesuits on the island. In a final example, a group of Americans, Canadians and Israelis applied for religious visas to visit an unregistered Jewish community on the island but were denied. They subsequently travelled to Cuba on a tourist visa and while visiting the unregistered Jewish group were briefly detained by State Security officers and threatened with deportation and a ban on re-entry into Cuba. The officers warned the foreign visitors that if they visited any Jewish community in Cuba without a religious visa, they risked arrest and prosecution.

Prevented from attending religious services or activities

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

In one example which took place in May, three individuals, one of whom who has been harassed in the past because of his relationship with an exiled human rights defender, were stopped from attending a Sunday morning service at the local Baptist church. A State Security officer ordered them to remain in their home, stating that there were concerns that one of the individuals might create a 'disturbance' at the annual obligatory March of the Proletariat. The officer refused to allow them to continue despite their explanation that their only intention was to attend services at their church that morning.

The government continued particularly to target members of the Ladies in White, consistently stopping them from attending Mass on Sundays. Many cases involved the women being detained as they left their homes and held by the police or State Security in various locations until Mass had ended. Many cases, however, involved more extreme treatment. On Sunday morning, 13 February, Mayra García Alvares was detained by State Security officers dressed in civilian

clothes. The agents, who did not identify themselves, forced her into a vehicle with private (non-government) plates. She was taken to the psychiatric hospital in Colón where she was confined in an office and threatened that if she continued to attempt to attend Mass, she would be forcibly committed and subjected to electroshock therapy, until she was 'in a vegetative state'. The officers claimed that they would justify the procedure by saying that she had had a nervous breakdown and then took her through the hospital to show her various patients in a catatonic state, before releasing her that afternoon, after Mass had ended.

In Santiago de Cuba on 20 February, Reyna Rodríguez Cañada was detained by uniformed police officers, led by State Security, at around 8am as she was on her way to her church to attend Mass. After handcuffing her, they put her in a patrol car and took her to a part of the city that she did not recognise, where a police van was waiting. Another Lady in White, Yraisi Clavel Masía, who had been arrested in a different part of Santiago de Cuba was already inside. The two women were taken in the van down the Central Highway to a remote and unshaded location where it was parked until after 5pm. These vehicles are poorly ventilated and the temperature inside the van was extremely high. The women were given no water and were not permitted to leave the van to use the bathroom. At around 5pm, a State Security officer arrived by motorcycle and ordered the door to be opened. From outside the bus, the officer threatened to forcibly disappear the two women, threatening that their bodies would never be found, if they did not stop trying to attend church. As a final punishment, the officer ordered that they be released separately on different sections of the highway more than 40km from Santiago de Cuba. Ms. Rodríguez Cañada was released on the outskirts of the San Luis Municipality and arrived home at approximately 9pm. Ms. Clavel Masía was released on the outskirts of Alto Songo, but a truck driver who was heading to Santiago de Cuba was kind enough to pick her up and she arrived at her home at around 6pm.

Family members of political prisoners were also frequently targeted as part of the policy of social isolation. On 24 November, Mirka Ibañez, whose son is a political prisoner, travelled by bicycle to attend early morning Mass at the Nuestra Señora de la Candelaria Roman Catholic Church in Camagüey and arrived at 6:55am. She was accompanied by her three-year old grandson. The church was not yet open, and Ms. Ibañez greeted a friend who was also waiting outside. Almost immediately, two officers exited a police car parked outside the church and asked the women for their identify cards and phone numbers. The two women and the child were put in the patrol car. An officer, who did not give his name, made a call and mentioned that Ms. Ibañez had a child with her. Shortly thereafter, the officer ordered Ms. Ibañez to get out of the car with the child and to walk with the officer to the police station on Avenida Republica. The friend was taken in the patrol car to the Second Police Station.

Ms. Ibañez and the child were kept at the station for fifteen hours until 10pm when an officer who identified himself as 'Kevin' arrived. He began to interrogate Ms. Ibañez on the sidewalk,⁷ asking if she and other women in the church had made calls to plot against the Revolution. Ms. Ibañez replied that they had no such intention, that they had only gone to the church to pray for her children and that she had planned to ask for a personal blessing on an image of San Judas Tadeo which she had brought with her. Officer 'Kevin' then played an audio recording in which another woman is heard asking someone to attend Mass to pray for her relatives. Ms. Ibañez repeated to Officer Kevin that it was true that they were all going to Mass that morning to pray for their imprisoned relatives. At this point, an officer who identified herself as 'Claudia', accused Ms. Ibañez of 'instrumentalising...[and] manipulating the child.' Before allowing them to return home, 'Kevin' told Ms. Ibañez, 'you were saved because you brought the child, otherwise, you'd [still] be at the police station.'

Finally, on Christmas Eve, Ailex Marcano Fabelo was summoned to the First Police Station in Camagüey where she was warned that she should cease visiting the Nuestra Señora de la Candelaria Roman Catholic Church to lead 'subversive groups'. Ms. Marcano Fabelo clarified to the officers that she and other mothers whose children were imprisoned following the events of 11 July 2021, have no subversive intentions but meet only to pray for them. The State Security officers then threatened her with imprisonment for unlawful assembly.

Interference with religious activities

The government continued to monitor and actively interfere in religious activities. In one of the highest profile cases, State Security officers detained, interrogated and threatened a number of religious leaders associated with Pastor Jorge Mario Travieso in order to halt plans to hold a special prayer service for the families of political prisoners in April, including imprisoned pastor, Reverend Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo. In one example and a few weeks before the event was to take place, the pastor of an unregistered church was summoned by State Security for what they termed 'a cordial talk'. When the pastor presented himself at the police station, he was interrogated and threatened with imprisonment and additional unspecified 'consequences' if he followed through on his plans to attend the prayer event. The pastor was told to 'advise' Pastor Travieso to suspend the event. A few days later another pastor was visited at his home by a State Security officer who told the pastor that Pastor Mario Jorge Travieso was a counterrevolutionary leading a group of 'opponents' of the government. The officer warned him to advise Pastor Travieso to suspend the prayer event and warned the pastor that for his 'own good', he should join a different religious community. The following week a third pastor was visited at his home by two State Security officers who told the pastor that it was his duty to persuade Pastor Travieso to cancel the activity. If he did not, they warned, all the leaders associated with the event would be charged

⁷ While at the station, Ms. Ibañez was permitted to go outside at various points because the child was very frightened.

with ‘disobedience’ and ‘acts against national security’ and imprisoned. On 11 April, Pastor Travieso was arbitrarily detained while walking to meet his wife for lunch and was taken to the Provincial Centre for Criminal Instruction. Counter-intelligence officers interrogated and threatened the pastor for six hours with imprisonment if he did not cancel the event. In the end, the pastor took the decision to postpone the event, largely because of the pressure on and threats against the other pastors and the potential repercussions for those planning to attend.

In some cases, the authorities made it difficult or impossible for religious groups to hold religious activities by withholding required permits. In one high profile example, the government failed to provide the El Calvario Baptist Church in Old Havana with the obligatory permits to repair and rebuild the historic building after it sustained severe structural damage in a gas explosion on 6 May that destroyed the adjacent Saratoga Hotel and other nearby residences and buildings.⁸ Requests for permits from the church leadership have been met with silence on the part of the government. In the weeks following the explosion, the government allowed the congregation, which is part of the legally recognised Baptist Convention of Western Cuba, to meet for religious activities in a public space outside the church, but a few weeks later, verbally communicated to church leadership that that permission had been rescinded. Unable to use the building and with no alternatives belonging to the same denomination relatively nearby, the congregation has continued to meet in the public space without permission, making them and their leadership vulnerable to accusations of illegal assembly.

Non-Christian communities also experienced harassment from the government with the aim of preventing them from holding regular religious services. Police and State Security officers repeatedly interrupted religious services held by a Jewish congregation that the government has refused to allow to register. In one example, on a Saturday morning in November, the Sector Chief of the National Revolutionary Police together with the president of the local CDR forcibly entered a home where morning prayers were being held and informed those gathered that they were not allowed to gather in the house to pray. The Police Sector Chief went on to tell those present that that because the group is unregistered, the authorities considered the meeting to be a conspiracy against the government and as such, a criminal act. After one of the leaders explained to the Police Sector Chief that they had attempted to register but had been refused by the government, the officer proceeded to light a cigarette, provoking outrage from those gathered there who adhere to the belief that it is forbidden to light a fire on the Sabbath.

Use of informants

The government has a long-term policy of recruiting and planting informants in all religious groups. Informants are tasked with monitoring and reporting content of sermons,

homilies, and prayers, for example. By their presence, they also act as a way to pressure religious leaders to practice self-censorship. In many cases, the government targets men and women who are already members of a given religious organisation and pressures them, often through threats and blackmail, to become an informant.

In one example, in February, a member of the Emmanuel Church in Santiago de Cuba was pulled out of a queue in which they were waiting to receive government rations for their family. They were taken by State Security officers and police to a nearby police station where they were stripped of their belongings and put in solitary confinement. After a few hours they were taken to an interrogation room where a State Security officer told them that their detention was a ‘lesson’ but that they could ‘make things better’ for themselves by agreeing to act as an informant in the Emmanuel Church. When the member refused, the officer threatened to open a criminal case against them for the crime of ‘spreading disease’ and to imprison them for three years. The member refused again and was returned to solitary confinement where they were held until their release the following morning.

Similarly, in November, Freyser Martínez, a FoRB defender and regular attendee of the Santa Ana Roman Catholic Church in Camagüey obeyed a summons to present himself at a State Security interrogation facility. He was interrogated over the course of a few hours and towards the end, the State Security officers carrying out the questioning told Mr. Martínez that it would be very helpful to the government if he would consent to monitor and report on Father Castor Álvarez Devesa. Mr. Martínez refused the request, stating that he considers the priest to be a spiritual father. The officers became angry and warned Mr. Martínez that this was not the last time he would be summoned to convince him to agree to their request. The officers then fined Mr. Martínez \$3000 Cuban pesos for having ‘liked’ several Facebook posts in which Father Álvarez Devesa had shared information about other priests and harassment they had experienced at the hands of the government.

Arbitrary detention

In 2022, CSW documented 510 cases which involved arbitrary detention. 495 of the documented cases involved members of the Ladies in White to whom, each week, the government continues to devote significant resources to stop from attending Mass and other religious activities. In an example that is typical of many of the cases involving the Ladies in White, Julia Silvia González Fundora was detained on 6 February while on her way to church to attend Mass. Uniformed police officers surrounded her, handcuffed her, and forced her into a police patrol car. She was taken to the Unión de Reyes Police Station where a State Security officer was awaiting her. The officer subjected Ms. González Fundora to an almost six-hour long interrogation during which she was repeatedly threatened. Before releasing her after 2pm, the officer informed her that because of her involvement

⁸ The Cuban government controls gas utilities, and the military owns the hotel where the explosion occurred, however, unsurprisingly, the government has not assumed responsibility for the damages incurred or provided restitution to those affected.

with Ladies in White, she has lost the right to ever attend any church again and warned her that if she attempts to do so, she will be violently arrested, and her family will 'suffer the consequences of her attitude'.

In some cases, members of the Ladies in White were able to evade the authorities and attend religious services only to be arbitrarily detained afterwards. On 23 January Gladis Capote Roque was arrested after attending morning Mass and was taken to the 11th Police Station, which is more than 40km from her home, in a police patrol car. She was held in a cell until after 8pm, when she was taken to an interrogation room and informed that she was being fined 2000 pesos for 'violating the security cordon' by going to church before she was released. Because of the location of the police station, she did not arrive home until almost midnight. A week later Ms. Capote Roque was detained by State Security officer as she left the Santa Bárbara Roman Catholic Church, which, in order to avoid State Security and police officers, she had attended that day instead of her regular church, Santa Rita de Cassia. She was handcuffed and forced into a vehicle with private (non-government) licence plates and taken her to the Capri Police Station. She was informed that if she gets through the security cordon and manages to enter any church again, she will be fined and imprisoned because she is prohibited from attending religious services. Ms. Capote Roque was then put back into a police patrol car and dropped off alone at the Calabazar bridge, about 20km from her home.

Although members of the Ladies in White and others that the government considers to be dissidents accounted for a high number of the documented cases of arbitrary detention, others were also targeted. On the evening of 2 February, the home of Reverend Yordany Díaz Arteaga, president of the Reformed Christian Church of Cuba, a legally registered, historic denomination, was raided and searched by police and State Security. The pastor was taken to Villa Marista, a State Security interrogation facility where he was detained for six hours until he was released at 2am. After his release, the pastor was told he was under criminal investigation and ordered not to leave his home for 48 hours. His mobile and landline services were shut off for days, cutting off his ability to communicate. In March, Reverend Díaz Arteaga was summoned to Villa Marista again. Not long after, he and his family left Cuba and went into exile.⁹

In another case, on 12 March, Roman Catholic pre-novice Amed Acosta Hernández was arrested on a public road by three people who forced him into the back of a car, despite failing to produce any identification or an arrest warrant. Mr. Acosta Hernández was interrogated about his relationship with Friar Lester Rafael Zayas, the rector of the Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Centre at the San Juan de Letrán Convent in Havana and questioned about his commitment to the Dominican Order. His belongings, including some work documents were taken and reviewed before being returned to him. In an interview with Radio Marti on 14 March, Mr. Acosta Hernández said: 'They questioned me:

What relationship did I have with [Father Zayas]? What did [Friar Zayas] say in the parish? How does [Friar Zayas] get around? Have I met with strange people? What did [Friar Zayas] argue in the homilies? Do you agree with what [Friar Zayas] says?' Mr. Acosta Hernández added that the San Juan de Letrán Convent is under constant government surveillance.

Political prisoners and FoRB

A number of religious leaders imprisoned on and following the 11 July 2021 protests remain in prison. These include protestant pastor Reverend Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo, Roman Catholic lay leader Angel Mesa, and Afro-Cuban religious leaders Loreto Hernández García and Donaida Perez Paseiro. All reported consistent violations of FoRB in the prison, in contravention of the Nelson Mandela Rules, in particular the right to receive religious visits despite, in some cases, repeated and specific requests.

Loreto Hernández García, Donaida Perez Paseiro and two other members of the Association of Free Yorubas, an Afro-Cuban religious group, are serving prison sentences in connection with their participation in the 11 July protests. The group has a long history of being targeted by the government, in part because of their decision to remain independent of Afro-Cuban religious groups with links to the government. Over the past year, Mr. Hernández García has been repeatedly humiliated and ridiculed by prison officials because of his religious beliefs, his brother Jorge Luis García Perez, also known as Antunez, told CSW.

In June courts upheld the sentence against imprisoned Protestant pastor Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo, who has been targeted by the government for over a decade because of his leadership of an unregistered church in the city of Palma Soriano, and 14 others, who had appealed their convictions on charges relating to their participation in unprecedented nationwide protests on 11 July 2021. During the trial which took place between 22 and 23 June, only the prosecutor's side was permitted to give evidence, and included the testimonies of at least 12 policemen. Reverend Rosales Fajardo was violently [arrested](#) after participating in peaceful protests that took place across the island on 11 July 2021. He was imprisoned in Boniato Maximum Security Prison from August 2021 until 24 December 2022 and was tried and convicted of charges of 'disrespect', 'assault', 'criminal incitement' and 'public disorder' on 20 and 21 December 2021. In May 2022 he and his family were [informed](#) that he had been sentenced to seven years in prison, one year less than the eight-year sentence that was initially [communicated](#) in a document sent from the Permanent Mission of Cuba in Geneva to the United Nations (UN).

Over the course of the year the pastor experienced regular violations of the Nelson Mandela Rules in regard to FoRB. He was repeatedly blocked from attending religious services held in the prison and his wife was prevented on multiple

⁹ Reverend Díaz Arteaga led his denomination for a number of years during which time the denomination formally left the CCC. During the process of leaving the CCC and in the following years, the pastor was a frequent target of threats and harassment by the ORA and State Security.

occasions from giving him religious literature. In January, the pastor was threatened with solitary confinement if he was caught sharing his faith or even approaching other prisoners. Just before Easter, these threats were followed through when the pastor was put in solitary confinement for five days after asking why he was being blocked from attending religious services. The pastor was also subjected to discrimination, a scheduled conjugal visit with his wife was arbitrarily cancelled and a transfer to a minimum-security prison nearer to the family's home, ordered over the summer, was repeatedly postponed without explanation until it finally took place on Christmas Eve.

Threats

Almost all of the FoRB violations documented in 2022 included some kind of threat. These included threats of imprisonment or the loss of custody of their children if the targets did not comply with the demands of the government as communicated by State Security. Members of the Ladies in White were threatened weekly with imprisonment or other unspecified 'consequences' if they continued to attempt to attend church.

In one particularly concerning case, the pastor of an unregistered church was repeatedly threatened with the removal of his two sons, both minors, and their placement in facilities for juvenile delinquents. In April the pastor was summoned by telephone to appear at his older son's school. The school director reprimanded him because of his son's refusal to participate in Afro-Cuban religious rituals, for example presenting offerings to statues, which were part of the school curriculum. The director also pointed out the boy's failure to join the communist Federación de Estudiantes de la Enseñanza Media (FEEM) political organization, which is openly hostile to religion. The director warned the pastor that if the boy did not join the political organisations and participate in the religious rituals, he would be considered a 'political problem' and would be barred from university. The boy's file would be given to the Ministry of the Interior's juvenile police division.

One week later, a woman identifying herself as the new 'psycho-pedagogue' at their younger son's school, but who refused to give her name, visited the pastor's wife unannounced at the family's home. The woman informed the pastor's wife that their support for their son's decision to decline to join the José Martí Pioneer Organization (OPJM) and his failure to participate in political activities at school would no longer be tolerated. The woman told the pastor's wife that the child's case would be turned over to the MININT Department of Attention to Minors because, in her view, the pastor and his wife were teaching their children to rebel against the Cuban Revolution. The children could be taken into state custody, according to the woman, in order to 'save them from ending up as anti-social individuals.'

Two days later, the pastor received another telephone summons to appear at his older son's school. There he was met by the school director and a uniformed officer who did not give his name but identified himself as from the MININT Department of Attention to Minors. The officer threatened

the pastor with the removal of his rights as a parent if he did not stop educating his son in beliefs 'against the Revolution' and warned that if the pastor did not shut down his 'illegal church' the government would send his son to a facility for minors who have committed serious crimes. The officer then made the pastor sign an 'Act of Responsibility', agreeing to be accountable for any actions carried out by his son at school.

Finally, one month later, a State Security officer and the regional Chief of Police arrived unannounced at the pastor's home. The State Security officer informed the pastor and his wife that the cases of their two sons were already in the hands of the MININT Department of Attention to Minors, and that if the pastor did not shut down his church before September, the children would be taken to different 'conduct' schools where they would remain imprisoned until they reached majority because of their parents' decision to lead an 'illegal' church. By the end of 2022, the threats had not been carried out, but the family expressed concern about the provisions in the new family code which strengthen the government's ability to arbitrarily remove children from households where it finds that the parents demonstrate insufficient levels of patriotism and 'respect for the authorities'.

A similar case involved a Jewish family. On the morning of 10 November, Olainis Tejeda, a member of the Bnei Anusim Jewish Community in Camagüey received a summons from a police officer who did not identify himself. The summons was addressed to Mr. Tejeda's wife, Yeliney Lescaille Prebal. The police officer stated that he did not know the cause of this summons, but that the couple was ordered to appear at the prosecutor's office where they would be informed of a trial that would take place against them on 19 December. The following day Mr. Tejeda went to the municipal prosecutor's office to inquire about the accusation. A State Security officer who did not identify himself met him there and informed him that the couple was to be put on trial for 'raising their children in a religion that is in opposition to revolutionary ethics and principles'. He warned Mr. Tejeda that the prosecution planned to demand the maximum prison sentence because of their failure 'to fulfil their parental duties' and told him that their children would be taken into the care of the government which would immediately begin to 're-educate' them. The family, which has been consistently targeted by the government over the past few years, subsequently fled into exile.

Religious leaders and groups that independently collected and distributed humanitarian aid to those in need were a frequent target of government threats. One such example has already been described in the section on travel restrictions. In another example in September, after Hurricane Ian passed over the western part of the island, members of a local church met to distribute humanitarian aid that they had collected from within their community to deliver it to those had been most affected by the storm. After they had finished and most of the members had gone home, a State Security officer arrived at the home of one of the church leaders and informed them that what the church had done was illegal and considered to be a counter-revolutionary act because 'only government institutions are authorized

to provide humanitarian aid in cases of natural disasters.’ The officer informed the leader that he regretted that they had not found out about the church activity in time to stop them and threatened that if they were caught in the future they would be prosecuted for ‘illegal economic activity’ and imprisoned. The home of the leader was then put under surveillance for several days.

As also mentioned in the section on travel restrictions, the threat of the non-issuance or non-renewal of religious visas to religious leaders and visitors was a common threat usually targeting those the government hoped to pressure in some way. Over the summer a Roman Catholic mendicant was visited by the local mayor who showed the mendicant papers revoking previously obtained permission to make vital repairs to the church. The mayor stated that the church is ‘a centre of ideological penetration, contrary to communist values’. Over the year, the mendicant was also repeatedly reminded by government officials of the possibility that their religious visa would not be renewed because of their practice of providing support to the relatives of several political prisoners.

General discrimination on the basis of religion

Members of religious groups routinely experience discrimination in various forms. These are most commonly seen in educational institutions and places of employment. Individuals can be passed over for promotion, excluded from important meetings and activities, or demoted or transferred to undesirable locations because their religious affiliation makes them ‘untrustworthy’.

In one such case, a surprise audit was carried out in September at the workplace of a member of an unregistered Jewish group. The Jewish man received an ‘excellent’ rating and one of the auditors privately congratulated him on his work. Several hours later, after all the members of the company had gathered in a meeting room, another auditor informed the assembly that the Jewish employee’s ‘excellent’ rating was being withdrawn. The auditor explained that the man’s Jewish religious beliefs make him a potential spy and stated that as his congregation is not recognized by the government, they are considered to be counterrevolutionaries. Two months later, the same man was ordered to appear before the company board of directors. He was informed that he had received a sanction from the Ministry of Labour and Social Security which not only meant that he would no longer be employed by the company effective immediately but would also be put on a blacklist and barred from working for any other government company or institution. The man was shown documents which explained that he had been found to be ‘ideologically unreliable’ due to his religious beliefs which make him ‘incompatible with the revolutionary process’. The board of directors refused to provide the man with a copy of the document and he, in return, refused to sign the redundancy notice. He was informed that there was no possibility to appeal the decision.

Workplace discrimination was also reported by both Protestants and Roman Catholics. In May, a woman who

is a member of an unregistered Protestant church and the mother-in-law of a high-profile FoRB defender was notified by telephone that her employment was being terminated effective immediately on the orders of State Security because of her religious affiliation. Later in the year, on 6 December, a licensed teacher was fired from her job at the school where she had worked for more than eleven years because she had ‘embraced an ideology that is religious and different from that promoted by the Revolution’.

Educational institutions were also responsible for FoRB violations. In one case, the daughter of a pastor of an unregistered church was informed that she would not be able to carry on with her degree because of the ‘inconsistency of her attitude and that of her family with the revolutionary process’. She received a written notification which stated that she was considered to be a ‘promoter’ of a religion classified as illegal and an enemy of the Cuban state.

Some cases of discrimination involved the withholding of emergency services. In one example on the afternoon of 6 June, Ricardo Fernández Izaguirre, a FoRB defender, went to the emergency room of the Martín Chang Puga Hospital in Nuevitas to request medical attention for an asthma attack that had begun several days earlier. As a police officer stationed at the hospital reception was reviewing Mr. Fernández Izaguirre’s documents, he made a phone call to a State Security officer who asked to be put on speakerphone. The State Security officer stated: ‘You will not receive medical care because you are an enemy of the Revolution and you have spent years discrediting us around the world. Ask that god of yours to take away your asthma or die. We are not responsible for you’. Mr. Fernández Izaguirre left the hospital and was later able to receive treatment at home from a member of his faith community who works in the medical profession and was able to obtain the medication needed to manage the attack.

Confiscation of goods and property

Acute and chronic shortages of all kinds of goods and byzantine regulations around the ability to import or buy and sell goods puts most Cubans in the position of having to interact in some way with the black market. This means that individuals are always vulnerable to government charges of illegal activity and government officials often use this as a tactic to pressure or punish those viewed as unsupportive of the government. Even when Cubans attempt to obtain goods through legal means, they can still find themselves targeted by the government.

In one such case on 21 July, Father Domingo García, a Jesuit Priest, was summoned to a police station in Santiago de Cuba, regarding an investigation into several items that had been stolen from the parish earlier that month. Father García was interviewed by an officer who identified himself as Major ‘Alberto’, and who told him that the items, one HP laptop, one Apple PC and one digital camera had all been recovered. The officer informed Father García, however, that the items would not be returned to the church, because they contained images and videos of the 11 July protests and of the police officers involved in the arrests of protesters. Father

García's expressed his disagreement with the decision to confiscate the items, pointing out that the images are evidence that could inform the courts responsible for judging the detainees. The officer then went on to tell Father García that he would be prohibited from carrying out a procession in honour of the feast of San Ignacio de Loyola on 31 July and threatened him with the closure of the Loyola Faith and Culture Centre.

Later in the summer, the leader of a religious centre affiliated with a registered Protestant denomination was summoned to the territorial delegation of the General Customs of the Republic of Cuba. They were questioned by a State Security officer who asked them about a number of items that had been shipped to the centre. When they explained that the items were for cultural exchanges carried out at the centre, the officer responded that the items would be confiscated because several of the young people who attend activities at the centre had been arrested because of their involvement in the 11 July 2021 protests. The officer then verbally threatened the leader and stated, 'I am going to shut you down and then we will see what you will do'.

Church properties also came under threat. In May, Velmis Adriana Medina Mariño, the wife of Pastor Mario Jorge Travieso was notified by the Ministry of Housing, that a house in Las Tunas, that has belonged to her for over 22 years, and which was used mostly for Sunday school and other House of Restoration Church of the Mighty Wind Ministry activities, had been confiscated by the government. In a second case in July, sixteen pastors from Camagüey Province attended a meeting to launch a new ministry at the rental home of Anabel Rodríguez García. As the meeting was starting, the CDR president and two State Security officers arrived and informed Ms. Rodríguez García that she had to cancel the meeting because the churches involved were 'illegal and counter-revolutionary'. Ms. Rodríguez García responded the sole purpose of the meeting was 'to talk about the gospel and pray for the nation'. The officers and CDR president warned her that there would be consequences for her refusal and left. Approximately 30 minutes later, an officer from the electric company arrived and turned off the electricity supply to the property and left without explanation. Shortly thereafter, the CDR and State Security officers returned to the house, accompanied by police and ORA officials, and announced the seizure of the premises and ordered those present to leave without resisting.

In at least one case, the government responded to public pressure, if not entirely positively at least with more flexibility. In November, Pastor Osmany Lovaina, the leader of an Assemblies of God church in La Palma, Arroyo Naranjo, Havana Province was summoned to the Housing Directorate Municipal Office for Havana where he was met by the Director of Housing and a MININT lieutenant colonel who handed him a formal order for the immediate confiscation of the church property. When the officials showed the pastor the file, he saw that the order had been signed by Caridad del Rosario Diego Bello. The pastor was not given a copy of the order nor was he permitted to photograph it.

The Superintendent of the Assemblies of God, a registered

denomination, published a declaration on social media protesting the government action. He pointed out that the church had just celebrated its 30th anniversary and that the property had been donated by the previous owner after they went into exile. After domestic and international media reported on the case, the government quickly contacted the Assemblies of God leaders, stating that the order for confiscation, while not rescinded, would no longer be immediate and that they would 'open a space for dialogue'.

Attacks on social media

CSW noted an increase in attacks on social media platforms as well as anonymous phone calls or text messages targeting FoRB defenders and religious leaders, especially those critical of the regime or its policies. While it is impossible to prove that the government was responsible for these incidents, in the case of the social media attacks, many were originally posted and then shared by accounts that either appear to be fake or belong to people with ties to the government. Threatening or obscene phone calls and text messages almost always came from blocked numbers or numbers that falsely appeared to be that of someone known to the recipient which caused the targeted individuals to believe that State Security was responsible. Even though the cases were not included in the total number of documented FoRB violation because of the challenges in proving that government agents were responsible CSW believes that is important to include this in our annual report as well, given the increase in the number of such attacks and the often threatening and defamatory content.

Adrián Martínez Cádiz a practicing Roman Catholic who works closely with a number of priests critical of the government was regularly targeted over the year in attacks on social media. Mr. Martínez Cádiz was called a terrorist, a mercenary, and a supporter of Cuba's annexation by the United States. Posts on Facebook called him a hypocrite, a 'false Catholic' and an 'extension of the US Embassy in Havana'. Posts repeatedly made defamatory comments about priests with whom he works, about the church he attends and about the youth ministry in which he is involved.

Similarly On 17 November, FoRB defender Freyser Martínez was accused in a post by a Facebook account he did not recognise of being a 'false Catholic' along with the priest of his church, Father Álvarez Devesa. The same poster accused Mr. Martínez of selling goods that Father Álvarez Devesa had stolen. In the following weeks, Mr. Martínez and his wife received threats via direct messages from persons unknown to them, and public Facebook posts began to include implicit death threats.

On 14 December Freyser Martínez and his family traveled to Holguín from Camagüey. The following day at 6:30am, Mr. Martínez received a direct message from a Facebook profile under the name of Yadixon Salguero Guerras saying: 'Hello Freyser, did you run away from Camagüey? You should have taken Father Castor [Álvarez Devesa], Father Rolando [Montes de Oca] and Father Alberto [Reyes] with you. I saw you riding in a car full of little suitcases. Did you move or were you scared of us? Look carefully, we have long

tentacles; wherever you go, if you mess with the Revolution we will find you. Did you hear? to you and your family’.

In November and December Mr. Martinez was the subject of social media posts that he interpreted as death threats. The first called for people like him and the priests with whom he has a relationship to be shot. The second, published under the Jessica Mendoza Facebook account announced his death accompanied by a photo of him with a black ribbon.

Around the same time, a Protestant pastor who has been a target of the government for decades since the government stripped his denomination, the Berean Baptists, of their legal status in the 1970s was subjected to similar threats. On 10 November an account under the name of Gerardo Perez, which has a history of pro-government posts, published a photo of Reverend Daniel Josué Pérez Naranjo and his wife and announced that they had been killed that morning in a car accident. Members of his family and Christian groups across the island immediately responded to reject the information and the pastor’s adult son, declared that he held the local head of the political police responsible.

Conclusion

2022 saw increased repression in almost every area and FoRB was no exception. Government tactics grew more crude with increased short- and long-term arbitrary detention, repeated summons, interrogations, and threats of imprisonment and loss of parental rights targeting religious leaders and human rights defenders including FoRB defenders. The content of new civil, administrative, and penal codes are a clear indication that the government is returning to a policy of tight social control reminiscent of the 1970s or 1980s. This combination has sent a clear message to the population that they can expect no political or social reform and any dissent or perceived criticism of the Cuban Communist Party and its policies will be met with a heavy hand. While many Cubans have continued to find ways to resist and have not refrained from criticising government policies or actions with which they disagree, upwards of 200,000 have concluded they have no future in Cuba and have fled the island to seek sanctuary elsewhere, almost always via routes that imply great physical risk and expense.¹⁰ The government has tolerated or facilitated mass emigration in the past, almost always during or following a period of social unrest but the wave beginning in the latter half of 2021 up to today is occurring on a scale unseen in Cuba’s history.

Under the leadership of President Miguel Díaz-Canel y Bermúdez, the CCP and government of Cuba are constructing

a new version of its repressive past. They have aggressively solicited, apparently successfully, the support of similarly repressive governments in China and Russia.¹¹ 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 coordinate with each other and engage with other governments, especially those 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. 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.

¹⁰ Most Cuban fleeing the island do so by sea on makeshift or rickety vessels or by land, traveling by air to Nicaragua which removed the visa requirement for Cubans in November 2021, in what many observers suspect was an agreement with the Cuban government, and continuing their journey by land to the United States, often paying human trafficking networks considerable sums to get them to the border.

¹¹ [China’s Xi pledges support for Cuba on ‘core interests’](#), Associated Press, 25 November 2022



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