Cuba's New Normal

The Situation of Freedom of Religion or Belief Five Years After 11J

July 2026

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CSW everyone free to believe

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

On 11 July 2021 people took the streets of cities and towns across Cuba in spontaneous protests that grew in numbers as participants shared footage from the demonstrations on social media and messaging apps. At first it seemed that the protests were focused on shortages of food and medicine, exacerbated by the global COVID-19 pandemic, but, as their numbers swelled, there were clear calls for social and political reform. This demand for change left no room for misinterpretation as 'Patria y Vida', a song released earlier that year by a collaboration of Cuban hip hop artists on the island and in exile, became the anthem of the protests.

The title of the song, 'Homeland and Life' in English - a twist on the longtime slogan of the Cuban Communist Party, 'Homeland or Death' - was understood by the Cuban government as a direct attack on its legitimacy. President Miguel Diaz-Canel Bermúdez called 'revolutionaries' to the streets in a televised address and deployed security forces, including the Black Berets, a special internal rapid-response force trained by the Chinese, to put an end to the protests. Hundreds of people were imprisoned, including some who were held incommunicado for extended periods of time, thousands were physically attacked, and according to the non-governmental organisation Cuba Decide, five people were killed.[1]

The Cuban people have been subjected to an ongoing crackdown ever since. Between January 2025 and June 2026, CSW documented 667 separate cases involving attacks on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), almost of all of which involved multiple types of FoRB violations. The government systematically violates the Nelson Mandela Rules inside Cuba's prison system, including by arbitrarily refusing religious visits or the right to receive religious materials. Religious leaders are under constant pressure to expel the family members of political prisoners from their congregations as part of a policy of social isolation. Children are subjected to physical and verbal abuse at school because of their religious beliefs. Leaders of unregistered religious groups are repeatedly harassed and threatened, while leaders of registered religious groups are targeted with intrusive surveillance, repeat interrogations and other pressure tactics. During the period covered by the report, CSW noted an uptick in the use of Actas de Advertencia, a document that justifies charges and imprisonment in the future for crimes not yet committed, as a method to threaten and intimidate religious leaders.

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),[2] reported FoRB violations. The government appeared particularly concerned with stopping religious leaders from calling on people to pray for Cuba privately or in organised prayer vigils. Religious leaders and their congregations attempting to respond to humanitarian needs, which became even more acute in many parts of the island in 2025 and 2026, 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, to be openly critical of legislation and government positions, and to speak frankly about the humanitarian crisis in the country. The government has made it clear that it rejects the idea of any political or social reform. Despite the threats, harassment and the possibility of imprisonment, Cubans across the country, including many religious leaders, continue to speak out against injustice, and up for those in their communities who are suffering.

Recommendations

To the government of Cuba:

- Amend the 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 Cuban 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;

1 ABC, 'More than 100 missing, several dead and communications blackout in Cuba, according to NGOs', 13 July 2021 https://www.abc.es/internacional/abci-mas-100-desaparecidos-varios-muertos-y-bloqueo-comunicaciones-cuba-segun-ongs-202107131409_noticia.html

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

- 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;
- 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 of, threats against, 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 one 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 multiple recent European Parliament resolutions;
- Introduce Magnitsky sanctions on individuals responsible for human rights violations. This should include State Security officers and senior Office of Religious Affairs officials responsible for serious FoRB violations;
- The EU should maintain its current position of refusing to resume the human rights dialogue until Cuba takes demonstrable steps it has committed to in previous dialogues. In case the human rights dialogue is resumed, the EU should ensure and facilitate input from Cuban independent civil society organisations; list concrete "Agreed Actions" on which to work, which should be specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time bound; issue a unilateral press release after the dialogue and include individual cases therein per the practice with China.
- Continue to make public statements about individual cases, as the EUSR for Human Rights has done for example in the case of Jonathan Muir Burgos.
- 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 ORA; 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, once nominated and confirmed, 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 government of the United Kingdom:

- Raise FoRB and associated human rights violations in all bilateral engagements with Cuba and press for measurable progress on the recommendations outlined in this report, ensuring FoRB concerns are integrated into the UK's wider human rights engagement with Cuba, including discussions relating to civil society space, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, and the treatment of political prisoners;
- Work with international partners, including the European Union, United States, Canada and Latin American democracies, to coordinate diplomatic efforts aimed at ending the harassment, arbitrary detention and criminalisation of religious leaders, human rights defenders and independent civil society actors in Cuba;
- Publicly and privately raise concerns regarding the use of Actas de Advertencia, arbitrary detention, restrictions on peaceful religious activity, and the denial of religious rights to prisoners, and call for these practices to cease immediately;
- Instruct the British Embassy in Havana to systematically monitor and document violations of freedom of religion or belief, including violations affecting Afro-Cuban religious communities, Jehovah's Witnesses, Roman Catholics, Protestants, registered and unregistered religious groups, and to regularly engage with affected communities across the country;
- Consider the use of targeted sanctions under the UK Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime against individuals responsible for serious or systematic violations of freedom of religion or belief and related human rights abuses, where the evidential threshold is met;
- Support efforts at the United Nations Human Rights Council to increase scrutiny of Cuba's human rights record and encourage Cuba to cooperate fully with UN Special Procedures, including the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief;
- Raise individual cases of concern, including cases involving imprisoned religious leaders, FoRB defenders and family members of political prisoners, and seek regular updates from Cuban authorities regarding their welfare and treatment;
- Encourage the Cuban government to permit religious organisations to carry out humanitarian, educational and social assistance programmes independently and without state interference, particularly in response to the country's ongoing humanitarian and economic crisis;
- Ensure that UK-funded human rights and democracy programmes include support for independent Cuban civil society organisations, including those documenting FoRB violations and providing assistance to victims of religious persecution.

To the United Nations and Member States:

- As Cuba continues its role as an elected member of the Human Rights Council in 2026, urge Cuba to fully implement the treaties it has already ratified, and to ratify outstanding treaties 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;
- Urge the OHCHR and all relevant UN mechanisms, including the UN Special Procedures and Treaty Bodies, to include the right to freedom of religion or belief in their reporting on Cuba, addressing the specific vulnerabilities and violations faced by religion or belief communities and those seeking to defend them;
- 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 ORA of the Central Committee of the 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.

It is important to note that individual places of worship are legally required to have two types of legal registration: official recognition of the larger religious group to which they are affiliated, as well as for the specific, physical place where religious activities are held. The refusal of the government to facilitate the registration of the vast majority of non-historic places of worship,[3] even as their numbers grew exponentially in the early 2000s, has led to three larger groupings: individual religious communities who both belong to a recognised religious association and whose place of worship is also registered, those who belong to a recognised religious association but whose place of worship lacks registration, and finally those which do not have any legal recognition at all, both for their denomination or association and for their place of worship.

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, those that lack registration – whether an entire denomination or association, or an individual place of worship - 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,[4] 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 instil 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 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, harassment of religious leaders was a clear component of the majority of documented FoRB

3 Historic places of worship are those that were in existence prior to 1959.
4 Conscientious objection may not be invoked with the intention of evading compliance with the law or impeding another from the exercise of their rights.

cases, appearing as a specific violation in 640 of the 667 cases recorded. Practitioners of Afro-Cuban religions were the most affected, reporting 28.7% of the total documented cases of harassment, and unregistered Protestants accounted for the second highest proportion at 21%. The forms of harassment varied and included unannounced visits to individuals' homes, anonymous phone calls, repeated summons to appear at National Revolutionary Police (PNR) or Department of State Security (DSE) stations, interrogations and fines. The government continued to monitor religious activities overtly and covertly through the use of informants, and harassed religious leaders based on their reports. Harassment was also manifested in violent actions, carried out by paramilitary groups or CCP militants, which the government took no action to investigate or stop.

Leaders of unregistered religious groups continue to experience regular harassment. Afro-Cuban religious groups remain particularly vulnerable, with 184 such cases across the country documented. In each reported case, the behaviour of government officials was similar and included 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.

On the morning of 12 November 2025 a Palo Mayombe leader,[5] or palero, in Cienfuegos Province was on his way to an agricultural market when he was stopped by a man in civilian clothes who greeted the religious leader by name. The palero returned the greeting, assuming that the man was someone who had attended one of his religious activities at some point. The man then introduced himself as the new DSE regional agent tasked with 'dealing with' religious affairs and told him that he had orders to dismantle the 'counter-revolutionary' activity taking place at the palero's home. When the palero protested that his activities were religious with no political component, the DSE agent accused him of using religion as a pretext to gather people in his house, stating 'we know you have provided your services to many opponents of the Revolution'. The palero again tried to explain that as a religious leader he receives anyone who shares his religious beliefs and has spiritual needs, but the officer interrupted the palero and told him they could hold their next meeting in a prison cell and that he was prepared to initiate criminal procedures against him, not allowing the palero to respond again before the officer walked away.

In January 2026 a PNR sector chief accompanied by four Committee for the Defence of the Revolution (CDR) members burst into the home of a palero in La Habana Province without permission, proceeding to enter a closed room at the back where the palero was conducting sacred religious rituals in private for members of the religious community. The PNR officer ordered the palero to stop what he was doing and began to denigrate the faith of those in attendance, referring to the religion as a 'sham' and accusing the palero of taking advantage of those present, calling him a 'fraud'. The palero, who told CSW that he was deeply offended and felt humiliated by the officer, experienced a stress related health episode and was taken to a health clinic for treatment. Notably, the clinic refused to provide him with paperwork recording the incident.

As in previous years, a number of cases were recorded 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.[6] 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 babalawo[7] 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.

On 7 September Babalawo Adán Freire Martínez was conducting a ritual with his godchildren in honour of Yemayá and Oshún at his home in Las Tunas City. At 10am, PNR Sector Chief Tomás Federico appeared at the house and loudly those present to stop immediately. The officer accused them of disturbing the peace, threatened to call other PNR officers to the scene to arrest them all, and warned them that they would no longer be permitted to hold such religious activities at the location because they might incite counter-revolutionary activity and encourage thievery. The babalawo replied that he knew everyone present and none were counter-revolutionaries or thieves, but rather hardworking, honest men. The sector chief called the police station for back up and, when the other officers arrived, they forced the group to end the ceremony abruptly, although they did not arrest anyone.

The following morning, in Camagüey Province, a santera, a female Yoruba religious leader, was preparing for a vigil at her home in honour of the Virgin of Charity of El Cobre when she was interrupted by an inspector from the Ministry of Interior (MININT)'s Directorate of Comprehensive Supervision (DIS). The inspector demanded to see the santera's permits allowing her to conduct religious rituals and to sell items related to her religious practice from her home. The santera responded that as it was a sacred day, she was not selling anything, she was not working, and requested that the officer come back another day to complete her inspection. The inspector refused to leave and ordered the santera to lock her doors. The santera refused, explaining that her doors were open to anyone who wished to celebrate a vigil in honour of the Virgin of Charity of El Cobre. Before leaving,

5 Palo Mayombe is one of various branches of Palo, also known as Las Reglas de Congo, a syncrestistic Afro-Cuban religion with ties to the Kongo religion of Central Africa.

6 Oshun is linked to the Virgin of Caridad del Cobre, Cuba's patron saint, whose feast day also falls on 8 September.

7 Babalawo is a religious title that means 'father of secrets'.

the inspector warned the santera that she planned to return in 24 hours and that she would fine the santera if she found anyone at the home, or the commercial space open for business.

Religious leaders regularly reported being harassed by government officials as or after they engaged in social outreach, including the provision of food to members of their communities. On 3 July 2025 Armando Arredondo, a PNR sector chief in Colón, Matanzas, arrived at the home of Elio Batista Gómez, pastor of the Dwelling Place of Zion Church, affiliated with the Council of Pentecostal Congregational Churches, to hand-deliver an order issued by the Matanzas Provincial Directorate of Justice prohibiting the pastor from holding worship services, organising religious activities, and providing social assistance and humanitarian aid to the community. When Pastor Batista Gómez protested the order, asking what harm he was causing, Sector Chief Arredondo responded that the order was binding and if the pastor did not comply, the DSE would take action against him.

Government harassment of those engaged in efforts to address the humanitarian crisis on the local level was not limited to religious leaders, but also members of religious groups. On 19 May 2025 Rafaela Beltrán and Rodolfo Gutiérrez, both members of the Spring of Love Christian Church, obeyed a summons to appear at the First Police Station in Havana, La Habana Province. The pair were reprimanded by Captain Alejandro Torres for having, on the previous day, distributed food to those in need on the streets of the capital city, for which he said they had not received permission. Captain Torres accused them of engaging in food distribution in order to 'undermine the government's credibility' and 'reminded them' that they belong to an illegal church, the aim of which is to destabilise the country. Ms Beltrán and Mr Gutiérrez stated that their church is only illegal because the government has denied its attempts to register and attempted to explain that their work distributing food to those in need was an outward expression of their religious beliefs. In response, the captain threatened to issue them both Actas de Advertencia should they be found engaging in such activities again and ordered them to leave the station.

The use of social media to share religious messages was also used as a pretext by the government to harass religious leaders. On the morning of 18 October 2025 DSE agent Yoan Martínez arrived at the home of Jonathan Herrera, the pastor of the Church of the Nazarene in La Pesquera, Manzanillo, Granma Province, and informed Pastor Herrera that he was there to discuss the pastor's use of social media to share information about evangelistic and prayer events at the church. Martínez accused the pastor of 'attention seeking' and warned him that, under the Criminal Code, his actions met the criteria to be classified as the crime of 'social dangerousness' and 'inciting public unrest'. In an explicit threat, the agent told Pastor Herrera that he could be immediately imprisoned as a counter-revolutionary should there be a formal accusation declaring his ministry a danger to society. The pastor asked the DSE agent why he was treated as if he was a criminal and a counter-revolutionary, pointing out that his social media posts never included any mention of political issues, and were simply a way to share his religious beliefs. The DSE agent declined to respond and, before, leaving the pastor's home, told him that the pastor 'now knew the consequences he could face'.

Among the FoRB cases involving harassment between January 2025 and June 2026 were some involving violence with no intervention on the part of the police, leading those affected to believe the harassment had been instigated by the government. At 3pm on 22 March 2026 Pastor Yoennis Cala, his wife Dayana Gómez, their two children ages seven and three, a five-year old girl and two 15-year-olds arrived at the pastor's home in Guanabacoa Municipality, La Habana Province. Immediately upon their arrival, a neighbour employed by the La Habana court system and his wife began to hurl stones and concrete blocks onto the pastor's patio while shouting profanities and death threats and breaking some of the roof tiles on Pastor Cala's house. The neighbours' actions formed part of an ongoing pattern of harassment which the family believes is linked to Pastor Cala's community outreach work. When the pastor called the police, he was informed that the matter was none of their concern and they refused to take any action to protect the family or to address the violence, the threats or the damage to the property, leaving Pastor Cala and his wife with the understanding that the neighbours' actions were carried out with government tolerance at best and support at worst.

Actas de Advertencia

Over the past five years, CSW has documented increasing use of Actas de Advertencia on the part of the government to intimidate and pressure religious leaders. These documents serve as a justification for a future arrest based on 'crimes' yet to be committed and have been used for years to threaten human rights and democracy activists. 94 of the cases documented between January 2025 and June 2026 included the victim being presented with an Acta de Advertencia by police or DSE officers and pressured to sign. Of those, 26 of the documented targets of Actas de Advertencia were from Afro-Cuban religious groups, 32 were from unregistered Protestant religious groups, four were from registered Protestant groups, and 32 were Roman Catholics.

The government was particularly sensitive about the use of what it refers to as 'patriotic symbols' including the Cuban flag, by religious groups. In February 2025 the pastor of an unregistered Protestant church in Camagüey Province was visited in her home by a PNR captain accompanied by a CDR president. The two men told the pastor that she had 24 hours to remove the Cuban flag hanging at the entrance to her church, claiming that that the flag 'and other national symbols were reserved only for revolutionaries' and accused the pastor of being a counter-revolutionary because of the church's unregistered status. The presented her with an Acta de Advertencia, which they signed and called on neighbours to sign as witnesses. The pastor refused to sign the document.

Similarly, in May 2025 in Artemisa Province, the pastor of an unregistered church was summoned to the MININT Technical Investigations Department (DTS) and warned by a DSE captain that as an illegal church, they were not permitted to display the flag during worship services. When the pastor explained that the use of the flag was meant to encourage worshippers to pray for God to bless Cuba, the captain accused of him 'provocation and indecency', handed him a 20,000 CUP fine, and unsuccessfully attempted to force him to sign an Acta de Advertencia.

In multiple cases, the act of prayer was perceived as a political threat. In October 2025 the leader of a registered Protestant church affiliated with denomination that forms part of the CCC was visited by his home by a DSE officer from MININT's DTI, who informed the church leader that he was strictly forbidden from convening prayer vigils on any subject. The DSE officer shared the official view that prayer vigils attracted too much attention from the surrounding community and had the potential to 'incite counter-revolutionary acts or improper behaviour' and warned the church leader that if they learned of another prayer event, he could be 'sent straight to prison'. When the church leader protested that neither he nor his church had 'any involvement in politics' and expressed his intention to continue to pray for his country and for the people in it, the DSE officer presented him with a signed Acta de Advertencia and informed the leader that he could expect a monthly visit from the DTI through the following year.

In January 2026 the pastor of an unregistered Protestant church obeyed a summons to her local PNR station in Holguin Province. She was taken into an interrogation room where the air conditioning had been set to uncomfortably cold temperatures with a DSE and PNR officer both present. The DSE officer presented himself as the official responsible for attending to religious affairs in the area and informed the pastor that her church's activities, specifically referencing prayer vigils, were considered to be counter-revolutionary acts, financed and organised by 'external enemies of the Cuban government' and, as such, she had been identified as 'an agent serving a foreign power' and would be treated as an enemy of the state. While the PNR officer prepared an Acta de Advertencia for her to sign, the DSE officer warned her that she could face trial and a prison sentence of up to 20 years and her property and belongings could be confiscated by the government. When the pastor protested that she was doing nothing more than exercising her right to FoRB and that she was not committing any crime, the officer expanded his threats to include anyone who might attend or participate in future prayer activities, warning that they too could be detained and investigated by the DSE and criminally prosecuted.

The same month, a Roman Catholic priest in Camagüey Province was stopped early in the morning on his way from his home to his church by a DSE officer, who warned the priest that the prayer vigils he had been convening were considered by the government to be non-religious and political in nature. The officer warned the priest that he should immediately cancel all future prayer activities or face criminal prosecution, imprisonment, and the confiscation of all of his belongings, and ordered the priest to sign an Acta de Advertencia. The priest refused, stating that he has every right to continue to pray and to encourage others to do so as part of the expression of their religious beliefs. In response, the DSE officer told the priest that he and the members of his congregations would be put under surveillance and, if the authorities learned of any prayer vigils, the police would arrest all participants and bring criminal charges against them. Since January 2026, the priest reports that he is constantly followed whenever he leaves his home.

Community outreach by religious group also drew negative reactions from the authorities, including the use of Actas de Advertencia. In September 2025 the leader of an unregistered church in La Habana Province, obeyed a PNR summons and was subsequently interrogated by a PNR captain. The officer focused on the church's social work, specifically providing food and spiritual support to the unhoused, asking the church leader to provide information on which organisations supported the work financially or in other ways. He accused the church leader of running an illegal ministry that was 'fostering inequality among citizens' and which 'implied that religious groups offer citizens more support than the Revolution itself does'. The church leader admitted that her church and other organisations of a religious nature to which she is involved are not registered but pointed out that the government has refused to grant them legal status, forcing them to operate outside the law. The PNR officer presented her with an Acta de Advertencia, which she refused to sign. Before leaving the station, the church leader was warned that she could face 'drastic consequences' should she and her church persist in their social work.

In the run up to and on significant dates, Actas de Advertencia were used in an attempt to force compliance with government orders or to punish a failure to comply. On the afternoon of 1 May 2026 a Protestant pastor in Guantánamo Province was visited at his home by a PNR officer, who asked the pastor about a religious service that had been held at their church earlier in the day, in violation of a government order meant to ensure full civilian participation in countrywide marches in observance of International Workers' Day. The pastor explained that the activity at the church had not been a formal service, but a gathering of several church members for morning prayer which had been planned several weeks before. The PNR officer drafted an Acta de Advertencia accusing the pastor of 'political absenteeism' and of abusing his spiritual leadership to discourage members of his church from participating in the official parades. The pastor refused to sign the document.

Three days before the fourth anniversary of the 11 July protests, the pastor of a registered church in Granma Province, part of a legally recognised Protestant denomination, was summoned to the local police station where he was chastised for having posted information about his church's activities on social media. A police officer accused him of sharing messages, including prayers, with 'double

meanings' and which gave the impression that a 'religious life [was] superior'. Despite the pastor's attempt to explain that his posts carried no ulterior political messages, the officer attempted to force him to sign an Acta de Advertencia which stipulated that the pastor could be accused of inciting a counter-revolution if he posted anything on or around 11 July that was interpreted by the government as 'suspicious'.

The use of Actas de Advertencia to pressure or threaten religious leaders between January 2025 and June 2026 went beyond the targeting of activities or expression that the government interpreted as 'political' to crack down on all unauthorised religious activity. In mid-July 2025 a Roman Catholic lay leader was visited at his home in Cienfuegos Province by a PNR sector chief. The officer warned the lay leader that he was facing fines and possible criminal prosecution for refusing to demolish an 'illegal' construction on his property, used for religious gatherings. The lay leader responded that he did not believe he was doing anything illegal by hosting religious services and meetings and he did not intend to stop. Before leaving, the PNR chief ordered the lay leader to sign a prepared Acta de Advertencia, which the lay leader did.

In early December 2025 a Palo Mayombe leader was in the midst of conducting a morning religious ritual with members of his family, including children, at his home in Ciego de Ávila Province, when two men in civilian clothes entered his house without requesting permission to do so. The men said they were DSE agents but did not show any identification, and accused the palero of practicing his religion without authorisation and warned him that they could 'throw him in prison whenever they felt like it'. They showed the palero a prepared Acta de Advertencia which they did not allow him to read, signed it in front of him, and then told him to sign it as well. When he refused, they claimed that it could still be used to criminally prosecute him 'at the right time'.

Later the same month, the leader of an unregistered Protestant church in La Habana Province was visited at his home by an official from the Municipal Housing Directorate, who told the pastor that he would not be permitted to use a generator, which the pastor had intended to legally register, for any religious purpose. The official warned the pastor that if he attempted to use the generator for religious activities, he would be prohibited from holding religious services altogether and would be criminally prosecuted for disrespect and public disturbance. Before the pastor could respond, the official presented him with a signed Acta de Advertencia and ordered the pastor to sign it as well. The pastor refused, noting that the use of the generator by the church allows it to provide a safe space to the vulnerable including children and the elderly.

Fines

The Cuban government continued to use the application of fines to target religious leaders. The amount of the fine ranged from 30 to 150 CUP in the case of an individual,[8] to 6,000 to 50,000 CUP in the case of a religious group. According to the National Office of Statistics and Information (ONEI), the average monthly salary in 2025 in Cuba was 6930 CUP – the equivalent of around £12 GBP.[9] Payment of the fines in full was often due within days, and if payment was not made, the fines were automatically doubled. The high number of cases involving fines over the past five years has led to speculation that they are a way for the government to generate income.

The most common justification for the fines was unauthorised religious activities or construction or repairs to buildings. One church in Camalote, Camagüey Province was subjected to fines for both, within days of each other. On 20 August 2025 PNR Officer Orlando Porro Vera met with Pastor Dizzis Ramos, of the House of Prayer Church, affiliated with the legally recognised Assemblies of God denomination, along with Genoveva Polanco, Julio José Hernández and Rachel Fernández, also leaders in the church. The group was fined a cumulative 120,000 CUP (30,000 CUP each) for holding an unauthorised religious event which attracted around 1,000 people two days earlier. They were required to make the full payment within 24 hours or see the fine doubled. Three days later, PNR Officer Yanquiel Moreno fined bricklayers Adrián Abreu López, Aramis Monteagudo Montes de Oca, Manuel Betancourt Reyes, Daniel Palmero Rodríguez, Yoandris Romero Garces, all members of the House of Prayer in Camalote, 20,000 CUP for unauthorised work on a project to build homes for the elderly, but added that it was also because they belong to the House of Prayer Church, and warned that they would be kept under surveillance. Members of the church contributed to pay the fine by the deadline so that it was not doubled.

In another case in January 2026 in eastern Cuba a MININT DIS inspector arrived at the home of a pastoral couple affiliated with the Apostolic Movement. The inspector warned the couple that the religious activities that took place in their home were 'illegal and counterrevolutionary' and ordered them to stop holding prayer vigils and making or receiving phone calls of a religious nature, claiming that such calls came from 'enemies of the Cuban State'. The inspector then demanded that the pastors hand over information on the people who attend their church along with the amount of their financial contributions. The pastor refused to comply, expressing concern that such information was private and could be used by the government to target those listed. The inspector accused the pastoral couple of engaging in 'illicit economic activity' a crime in Cuba, since, as a non-registered church and religious association, they were prohibited from receiving donations and from functioning as a religious or

8 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.

9 Cuban National Office of Statistics and Information, Average Salary in Figures. Cuba 2025 https://www.onei.gob.cu/salario-medio-en-cifras-cuba-2025

humanitarian organisation. The inspector handed them a 10,000 CUP fine, with a warning that this was the first step in a longer criminal process, 'because there were already orders from above to act against them' and that if they did not comply with the inspector's orders to stop, they would be criminally prosecuted and could go to prison.

One month later, the same MININT DIS inspector returned to the couple's home to inform them that they were ordered to stop repairs on their home, which also acts as a church, to address damage resulting from a series of hurricanes and especially from the Category 3 Hurricane Melissa which hit Cuba in October 2025. The couple were told that they could not continue the repair work without authorisation from the government. The inspector accused them of having received resources from organisations opposed to the Cuban government to carry out the work and refused to listen to the couple's attempts to explain why the work was necessary. The inspector handed them a 50,000 CUP fine and warned them that if they continued with the repairs, they could face more serious consequences, including the confiscation of the materials and property, the closure or demolition of the church, and the opening of criminal proceedings against them. The couple were told that if an order for demolition was made, they would be forced to pay for the operation and clean up.

Afro-Cuban religious leaders were also targeted. On 10am on 9 April 2025 the local CDR president, Hernán Plácido, arrived at the home of Yoruba babalawo Diosnel Gómez Area in Ciego de Ávila City, Ciego de Ávila Province, interrupting a religious ritual that the babalawo was conducting. Mr Plácido, who was accompanied by a DSE agent and a Physical Planning inspector, ordered the babalawo to stop the religious activity, stating that they needed to speak to him alone. They then informed him that he is prohibited from carrying out any religious work from his home, claiming that having visitors to his house could 'incite the population to counter-revolution'. Babalawo Gómez Area explained that he does not have access to a location registered for religious use, and as long as the government refuses to facilitate this, he will be forced to carry out his religious work from his home. After he accused the officials of attempting to force him to stop practicing his religion, they responded by fining him 16,000 CUP for providing spiritual services without authorisation. One month later, in the same city, Yoruba Babalawo Alex Awo was providing spiritual consultations at his home when he was visited by Physical Planning Inspector Dorkis Araujo who immediately handed the babalawo a 25,000 CUP fine. Inspector Araujo then told Bablawo Awo that he had no authorisation to provide religious services, and all his activities were illegal.

Interference with Religious Services or Activities

Cuban government officials continued to interfere with religious activities conducted both in private and in public, in many cases stopping them from taking place altogether. On the morning of 23 April 2026 a Jehovah's Witness missionary in Camagüey Province led 12 members in a religious study at her home with the intention of then distributing tracts in the neighbourhood. Before they finished the study, however, the group study was interrupted by a local CDR delegate who entered the missionary's home without permission and accused the missionary of causing 'public unrest and agitation'. The CDR delegate claimed that the topic of the study and the tracts the group intended to share, 'Is a World Without War Possible?', was 'unacceptable, given [Cuba's] complex socio-political situation'. When the missionary protested this characterisation of her work, stating that her objective was to spread peace and to promote consensus and social unity, the CDR delegate shouted at her and threatened 'to call the authorities to deal with her, just as they had done with others who sought to disrupt public order'. At this point the missionary and the group agreed to halt their activities and the members of the group left the missionary's house.

Cuban officials frequently interrupted and stopped Afro-Cuban religious activities which are often held in the homes of the respective spiritual leaders. On the morning of 14 January 2026, a Yoruba babalawo was performing a religious ceremony at their home where 37 people had gathered. At 10.40am, a PNR sector chief entered the home without permission, interrupting the activity, and told those present that the meeting was 'not authorised' and as such they were ordered to stop. When the babalawo attempted to explain that the ceremony was traditional and peaceful, the sector chief asked if 'they were looking for a problem' and threatened the babalawo with arrest and criminal charges. The babalawo and the group disbanded out of concern that the PNR officer would follow through with his threats.

Religious leaders across the country reported receiving orders from CDR, DSE and PNR agents that religious activities of any kind planned for 11 July 2025 were to be cancelled. On the morning of 5 July Edelza del Toro, a santera, was visited at her home in Havana, La Habana Province, by the local CDR sector chief, Mario Linier, who threatened to report her to the DSE if she held any religious gathering in her home or uploaded videos to social media on 11 July, warning her that if she failed to follow his orders, she would be imprisoned without bail. A few days later, on 9 July, Yoruba Babalawo Evelop López was eating dinner with a group of fellow Yoruba practitioners at his home in Camagüey following the conclusion of a spiritual cleansing ritual, when the local PNR sector chief Raúl González and CDR president Adrián Naranjo interrupted them. The officials accused the group of disturbing the peace and produced an Acta de Advertencia prepared for Babalawo López. González warned the babalawo that if he was involved in any religious activities on 11 July he would immediately be arrested and prosecuted for 'counter-revolutionary activity'. Both officials signed the document, but the babalawo declined to do so, requesting that they leave his home.

On 8 July Pastor Jonathan Herrera, who is mentioned in the previous section, obeyed a PNR summons are reported to the PNR station at 9am. He was chastised for 'showing off'

by posting about his church's outreach and prayer activities and PNR Officer Brayan Leonci warned the pastor that on 11 July he was strictly forbidden from posting about his activities and from posting content with a 'double meaning... intended to make the public think that his religious life is superior'. Officer Leonci threatened the pastor that if he did anything 'suspicious' and posted about it on social media, he would be immediately arrested and charged with disturbing the peace and inciting counter-revolution. When the pastor expressed confusion at these accusations, pointing out that his social media posts are apolitical, the officer interrupted and presented him with a signed Acta de Advertencia. Pastor Herrera refused to sign the document and stated that he had no plans to make any changes to his church's schedule.

The following day – 9 July – in Havana, La Habana Province, a PNR officer arrived at the home of a Jehovah's Witness whose role within his group is to distribute religious literature in his community, to tell the man that 'he did not want to see him out on the streets preaching, causing a disturbance, or handing out flyers' and claimed that the Jehovah's Witness's activities promoted involvement in counter-revolutionary activities. The Jehovah's Witness was warned that if he left his house on 11 July to distribute religious materials, he would be arrested and imprisoned for at least three years on charges of disrespect for the authorities.

Officials continued to threaten and harass individuals who did not follow the order to cease religious activities, either intentionally or out of ignorance of the prohibition. A member of a local Jehovah's Witnesses group in Las Tunas City, Las Tunas Province, was distributing fliers in his neighbourhood on 11 July, sharing information about a religious service planned for that evening when a PNR Sector Chief approached him, took all of his fliers and accused him of handing out 'counter-revolutionary propaganda in an attempt to stir up unrest [that night]... doing so with the full knowledge that any religious gathering or event involving a congregation of people was strictly prohibited in order to prevent potential disturbances or breaches of public order' and warned the Jehovah's Witness that if his group attempted to meet that evening, they would be arrested.

On 12 July Yoruba babalawo Hipólito Rodríguez presented himself at a PNR station in Las Tunas City, Las Tunas Province, at 9am in compliance with a summons he had received. PNR Officer Roberto Llanes told the babalawo that he was under orders to immediately put a stop to all religious activities in his home, claiming that they disturbed the peace of the neighbourhood and pointing out that they are unauthorised. Officer Llanes castigated Babalawo Rodríguez for having allowed his community to gather in his home on 11 July to perform rituals including drumming, animal sacrifices and the sharing of a meal, in violation of the ban on gatherings. The babalawo explained that the ritual they had held was an annual event and had not led to any negative consequences or unrest. The PNR officer became irate and ordered the babalawo to leave, threatening him with police action to break up future gatherings and arrest the participants, after Babalawo Rodriguez told Llanes that rather than attempting to punish religious groups for their peaceful activities the authorities should focus on addressing the root causes of public discontent '... seeing the country slowly deteriorate due to its poor leadership ... that while citizens lacked electricity, the authorities lived as if nothing were wrong'.

Confiscation of Goods or Property

The authorities routinely confiscated goods belonging to religious groups and leaders, in many 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 many of the cases, religious leaders saw valuable materials arbitrarily confiscated when they attempted to carry out repairs or building construction on their property. In all of the cases, the religious leader had either been denied a building permit or had been given a permit that did not include permission for work on anything that might be used for religious purposes. The confiscated materials tend to be expensive and difficult to obtain in Cuba, leading to speculation that the materials were being channelled to government linked entities or individuals for their own use or for sale at a profit. In one such case in January 2026, the pastor of an unregistered church was visited at his home in Holguín Province by a PNR sector chief and a Physical Planning inspector who claimed that they were enforcing a confiscation order but produced no document to confirm this. When the pastor protested, he was warned by the PNR officer that he if he failed to remain calm, he would be arrested and 'no one would get him out of [prison]'. The officials summoned a truck that had apparently been waiting nearby and loaded it with the church's materials, including 10 wooden stakes, three tarps, 10 bags of structural cement, five wooden benches, and 10 wooden chairs. No inventory or other record was drawn up of the confiscated items and the pastor was not able to ascertain where they were taken or to appeal the confiscation.

Afro-Cuban religious leaders who often subsist on income from selling religious items to their followers were a frequent target. On 15 April 2025 Yoruba Babalawo Erislandy Rodríguez was in the process of opening up his home in Camagüey City, Camagüey Province, to sell religious items, when at 9am MININT DIS Inspector Jorge Luis Leoncio arrived and demanded to see the babalawo's permit authorising the sale of religious items from his home. Babalawo Rodríguez explained that his applications for authorisation had been denied. Inspector Leoncio confiscated all of the religious items, including 50 clay pots, 100 idé bracelets[10] and 300 candles, and warned the babalawo that if he continued to

10 Santería practitioners believe that idé bracelets provide spiritual protection. The colour pattern on each bracelet represents the specific deity, or Orisha, to which the practitioner is spiritually linked.

sell items from his home, he would be fined 25,000 CUP and his house could be confiscated. Similarly, on 11 July and also in Camagüey City, Babalawo George Puentes was selling Santería items from his home when PNR Officer Leonardo Gainza, demanded that he produce the permit authorising him to sell items from his home. Like Babalawo Rodriguez, Babalawo Puentes explained he had been unsuccessful in his attempts to obtain a permit. Officer Gainza confiscated 60 necklaces, 130 idé bracelets, 100 pieces of ritual chalk and 300 candles, and warned that if the babalawo did not stop selling religious items his house would be at risk of confiscation. The quantity of goods confiscated in both cases represented a significant financial blow to both babalawos.

Government officials continued to demonstrate no compunction in the confiscation of humanitarian aid. On 3 March 2025 Bishop Jorge Luis Pérez, leader of the Rehobot Pentecostal Church, and members of his congregation in El Cristo Municipality, Santiago de Cuba Province, were preparing food to distribute to around 300 people in an especially impoverished neighbourhood when MINIT DIS Inspector Daneilis Rivero arrived, surveyed the prepared food and issued the pastor a summons to appear on 5 March before PNR Officer Reinaldo Puentes. Bishop Pérez showed the inspector the receipts showing that all the food had been purchased legally at government stores, however she responded that she had orders to confiscate everything. Among the items seized were five 20kg boxes of chicken and two 20kg boxes of minced meat.

In another case, in Camalote, Camagüey Province, Pastor Dizzis Ramos, who leads the House of Prayer Evangelical Church in Camalote and is a denominational leader for the registered Assemblies of God denomination in the province, was overseeing the construction of seven small homes using donations from a non-profit organisation outside of Cuba which were meant to house elderly members of his church's congregation. On the morning of 24 August 2025 Physical Planning Inspector Niovis Fernández arrived at the site, accompanied by several other inspectors and PNR officers and asked the pastor to produce the documentation and permits for the buildings. Pastor Ramos explained to the inspector that the purpose of the buildings was to provide housing for elderly individuals living in precarious conditions and showed her the receipts confirming that all of the materials had been purchased legally. A PNR officer then asked the pastor about the source of the funding for the project, and the pastor responded that funds had come from a foreign non-profit. Inspector Fernández claimed that as the project was under the auspices of a religious group, it required additional permissions that the church had not received and issued an order for the confiscation of 30 sacks of cement. The pastor again protested, reiterating that he had demonstrated that everything was purchased legally, but there was no response and he was given no opportunity to appeal.

Freedom of Conscience

The government regularly violated the right to freedom of conscience. On 1 May 2026 a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses was driving a vehicle with six other members of his religious group in eastern Cuba when they were stopped by PNR officers. A PNR officer castigated the Jehovah's Witness for driving instead of participating in the mandatory parades in recognition of International Workers' Day. When the Jehovah's Witness attempted to explain that his religious beliefs prohibit him from taking part in state sponsored political demonstrations, the officers ordered the passengers out of the car and told the Jehovah's Witness to drive to the nearest PNR station. The Jehovah's Witness was arbitrarily detained for 48 hours and his car was impounded, depriving him of his means of transport to and from his place of employment. He was not provided with any documentation, including an official record of his arrest or a receipt for the impounded vehicle.

In mid-April 2026 in central Cuba four religious leaders in three provinces reported being threatened with criminal charges by DSE agents because they declined to add their names to a national campaign called 'My Signature for the Homeland', an initiative meant to demonstrate unanimous public support for the government and its policies to the international community. One Protestant pastor reported receiving a visit at his home by a DSE agent who told him that the government was concerned about the pastor's refusal to participate in the initiative. The pastor was informed that his name was now on a MININT list maintained of individuals identified as 'disaffected' or enemies of the state. The pastor explained that he had not signed the petition because there was no legal obligation to do so, and he could not add his name to a campaign with which he disagreed. In response, the agent told the pastor that he would be permanently labelled as an opponent of the government. Since then, the pastor's home and church have been under constant surveillance.

In May 2025 the teenage son a pastoral couple working with a registered denomination was imprisoned at a maximum-security prison for adults after he ran away, having been taken by force to perform the military service required of all Cuban males at the age of 18. The young man's attempts to claim status as a conscientious objector were ignored, as were diagnosed physical and psychological conditions that should have qualified him for a medical exemption. When his parents referenced their religious beliefs at a military tribunal, they were charged with disrespect and disobeying the authorities. While the charges were never dropped, the government did not pursue them. The young man was released from prison in spring 2026 and was listed as having received a 'total pardon' in the Ministry of Justice's Official Gazette published on 25 May 2026.[11]

11 Cuban Ministry of Justice, Official Gazette No. 11 Extraordinary Special of 2026, 25 May 2026 https://www.gacetaoficial.gob.cu/es/gaceta-oficial-no-11-extraordinaria-especial-de-2026

In March 2026 officials in Palma Soriano, Santiago de Cuba, attempted to force the adult son of the pastors of an unregistered church to complete military service, in rejection of his request to be exempt due to his conscientious objection to taking up arms based on his religious beliefs. According to the pastor, who has experienced years of threats and harassment due to their church's lack of legal status, the family received a phone call in which his son, who is married and has two children, was ordered to report for military service. The official who made the call threatened the entire family with severe consequences if he did not comply. The phone call was followed by a visit to the family by the local PNR chief, who threatened to take the pastor's son away '...whether he wants it or not… at nighttime, at dawn, whatever'. Since then, the young man has remained on the family's property, out of concern that he is at risk of abduction and forced conscription should he leave the house.

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 services or participating in 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.[12] 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.

The leader of the movement, 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 organisation's headquarters, was regularly surrounded by organised mobs, some holding signs with offensive and insulting messages and recording the couple's movements on mobile phones. When either of the pair attempted to attend Mass they were arbitrarily detained by PNR and DSE agents almost immediately after leaving their home. 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.

Arbitrary Detention

The number of cases involving arbitrary detention, mostly short term, remained high, with 222 such cases documented. As noted in the previous section, the act of preventing members of the Ladies in White from attending religious services almost always involved short-term arbitrary detention, however, leaders of other religious groups were also targeted. In the vast majority of cases, criminal charges were not filed.

Short-Term Arbitrary Detention

On the morning of 5 October 2025 Rosendo Olivera, a Jehovah's Witness, was visited at his home in Holguín City, Holguín Province, by PNR Inspector Gabriel Álvarez. The officer, who has a long history of harassing Mr Olivera ,claimed that he had an order to confiscate a cart used by Mr Olivera when he goes out to share his religious beliefs with others. Mr Olivera refused to allow him to take his cart after Inspector Álvarez was unable to produce a written copy of the confiscation order. In response, Mr Olivera was taken by force to the police station where he was detained for 48 hours without being charged. In May 2026 another Jehovah's Witness was sharing his religious beliefs on the street when he was detained and interrogated for three hours in Havana, La Habana Province

The same month in a city in central Cuba, the pastor of an unregistered church and a group of men from his congregation were distributing food to unhoused people sleeping on the street when they were interrupted and detained for about an hour by a PNR officer who refused to identify himself. The PNR officer gave a convoluted justification for the detention, claiming that they were '… creating false expectations that would in the long term create problems, because when the day came that [the church] could not provide food to the homeless, it could provoke a revolt and incite people to counter-revolution'. The pastor protested that their actions were not illegal, however, the PNR officer confiscated all the food that remained to be distributed before releasing them.

In another case in January 2026, a Yoruba babalawo from eastern Cuba was visiting Havana, La Habana Province, when he was detained by PNR agents and sent to a notorious maximum-security prison. The babalawo was initially questioned about his religious dress, and he explained that he was making a religious pilgrimage and visiting local Yoruba groups. The PNR agents claimed that he was on a 'wanted' list but did not give any reason for this. From the maximum- security prison, the religious leader was put on a prisoner transport bus, with shackles around his wrists, ankles and waist, and taken back to his home city over 700km away. Upon arriving at his home city, he was then detained for another day at the PNR station. Before his release, he

12 The overall number of cases involving the Ladies in White dropped in 2025 and 2026 as compared to previous years due to the fact that many did not attempt to attend Sunday Mass or other services because of concerns about outbreaks of infectious disease across the island.

was given an Acta de Advertencia, which he refused to sign, banning him from returning to Havana for any reason.

On 15 March 2026 an independent Protestant pastor was arrested and detained for three hours by political police in Matanzas after recording himself giving a Bible lesson and uploading it to his YouTube channel. Pastor Rolando Pérez Lora was arrested in a park in Peñas Altas, Matanzas, one of only two locations in the area with access to public wifi, almost immediately after he had finished uploading the clip. The pastor told CSW that this was a weekly practice. While he recorded, people often gathered to listen and some requested prayer, which his wife, Gelayne Rodríguez Ávila, provided. Ms Rodríguez Ávila uploaded footage of his arrest to social media, in which two police officers could be seen forcing the pastor into a patrol car as the cries of his young children can be heard. Dozens of internet users quickly shared the video on other Facebook accounts, causing it to garner over 300,000 views in less than 24 hours and sparking demands to know the pastor's whereabouts and condition. The pastor was taken to the Playa Police Station and held there for three hours before being released. He and his family were subsequently evicted from their home.

Pastor Rolando Pérez Lora and his wife Gelayne Rodríguez Ávila.

Religious leaders who resisted government orders to stop religious activities were frequently threatened with arrest and, in some cases, this was carried out. In April 2026 a PNR sector chief forced his way into the home of a Yoruba babalawo as a traditional ceremony was taking place with 22 people, all adults, participating. The officer ordered them to stop, stating that government discourages such religious practices due to the 'uproar' caused by the singing, use of drums and ritual dances. The babalawo refused to stop the ceremony, telling the officer that the ceremonies were sacred and an important part of their cultural identify. The officer began to threaten the babalawo and used his radio to call for police back up. When additional police arrived, the babalawo was forced into a patrol car and those gathered at the home were ordered to leave immediately or face criminal charges. The babalawo was taken the local PNR station where he was held in an overcrowded punishment cell overnight. He was not permitted to contact anyone, including a lawyer, to let them know what had happened to him. The following morning he was interrogated by PNR officers who 'suggested' that he stop practicing his religion and attempted to force him to sign an Acta de Advertencia. The babalawo refused and was released later that morning but was not provided with any documentation regarding his arrest and detention.

Long-Term Arbitrary Detention

Afro-Cuban religious leaders Loreto Hernández García and Donaida Pérez Paseiro continue to serve lengthy prison sentences. Ms Pérez Paseiro and Mr Hernández García, a couple who are both leaders of the Association of Free Yorubas, were detained on 16 July 2021 as part of a government crackdown following the events of 11 July 2021, and were sentenced to eight and seven years in prison respectively.

Ms Pérez Paseiro was released as part of a general amnesty in January 2025, however on 11 June 2025 she travelled to the prison where her husband is detained, having been led to believe that he was to be released. Instead, she was warned that if she continued to make public statements critical of the government, she would be re-imprisoned as well. Ms Pérez Paseiro stated her intention to stay and was subsequently arrested.

Loreto Hernández García (L) and Donaida Pérez Paseiro (R).

According to a post on the official Facebook account of the Provincial People's Court of Villa Clara,[13] a judge responsible for overseeing individuals on conditional release in the Placetas Municipality ordered that Ms Pérez Paseiro be returned to prison for alleged failures to comply with the terms of her release, and declared that she must complete the original eight-year prison sentence for the crimes of 'disrespect', 'assault' and 'public disorder'. Before she was detained again in June, Ms Pérez Paseiro told CSW that while she was in prison her religious beliefs were ridiculed and she was prohibited from having religious materials, including bracelets and necklaces that are a core part of the Yoruba religious practice.

13 Facebook, The Provincial People's Court of Villa Clara, 11 June 2025 https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1Hy78htAsP/

Mr Hernández García continues to serve a seven-year sentence in Guajamal Prison in Villa Clara on charges of disrespect and public disorder. While in prison Mr Hernández García has been subjected to humiliating treatment by prison officials and repeatedly ridiculed because of his religion. He has also reported being beaten. The US Commission on International Religious Freedom considers Mr Hernández García to have been 'imprisoned for his religious identity, religious activity, and religious leadership role.'[14]

In another case, on 16 March 2026, a pastor and his 16-year-old son were detained in Morón, Ciego de Ávila Province within a context of civil unrest, with protests spreading across the island following seven consecutive nights of blackouts and extreme shortages of food and medicine in many parts of the country. These included protests in Morón, during which in the early hours of 14 March some protesters sacked and then set on fire the CCP offices in the city. One protester was reportedly shot. The government shut off the internet to the city and surrounding areas, in an apparent effort to stop news of the protests from spreading.

While Pastor Elier Muir Ávila, who leads the Tiempo de Cosecha Independent Church, was released at 5.30pm on the same day he was detained, his son Jonathan Muir Burgos was charged with sabotage and sent to Canaleta Maximum Security Prison, where he is being held alongside adults. There are concerns for his well-being; he suffers from a serious skin condition that requires prescription medication, and the authorities have limited his ability to make phone calls to his parents and have arbitrarily cancelled some family visits. These concerns were heightened in early May when a social media account linked to the DSE published photos of the boy, some of which were clearly digitally manipulated. Jonathan appeared in one set of photos smiling and playing a keyboard in prison, while a second set referred to him finding a 'romantic partner' in prison and showed him embracing and being held by an older, much larger man. The second set of photos was removed within a day of being posted.

Jonathan Muir Burgos.

On 24 June 2026 Jonathan was conditionally released. While the government has not publicly clarified the boy's legal situation, he is reportedly under restrictions amounting to house arrest and it is unclear whether the charges against him have been dropped or changed. Jonathan's father has a documented history of being targeted by the government because of his leadership of an independent, unregistered church. Pastor Muir Ávila was visited on multiple occasions in 2024 by religious leaders acting on the request of the ORA, and by local government officials who warned him, according to the Patmos Institute '…only churches that the CCP accepts exist, and only pastors who the CCP recognises can minister, and so, neither he, nor his church were authorised to exist'.

In a third case of arbitrary detention, Pastor Alexis Padrón Lorenzo, leader of the Communion in Faith Church, part of the Brethren of Faith denomination, was detained on 10 June 2026 in Regla Municipality, La Habana Province. The pastor was arrested after he complied with a verbal summons from the PNR. He was accused of public disorder, interrogated, and subjected to physical abuse before being transferred to the Vivac Detention Centre, where, at the time this report was published, he remains and has been held incommunicado.

Similar to the April detentions of Pastor Muir Ávila and his son, the arrest of Pastor Padrón Lorenzo appears to be linked to civil unrest in the face of the ongoing shortages across the island. Witnesses told CSW that Pastor Padrón Lorenzo challenged what he believed to be misleading information provided by government officials to the local population regarding prolonged interruptions to basic services, including several days without electricity or water. On 9 June 2026 the pastor was physically assaulted after he took part in a peaceful demonstration in the municipality where he spoke out about the 'suffering of the people' and criticised the CCP. After he returned to his church, he was subjected to an Act of Repudiation.

Pastor Alexis Padrón Lorenzo and his wife Roselin Benítez Cruz.

Pastor Padrón Lorenzo, who has worked alongside his wife in Christian ministry for over 23 years, has been targeted by the government for many years, because of his outspokenness regarding social injustices, his willingness to express criticism of government policies, and his public defence of the rights of vulnerable populations. Their church, which they founded, is well known in the community for its social work throughout Regla, an impoverished and predominantly Afro-Cuban municipality in La Habana separated from Old

14 USCIRF, Religious Prisoners of Conscience: Loreto Hernández García https://www.uscirf.gov/religious-prisoners-conscience/forb-victims-database/loreto-hernandez-garcia

Havana, which has received significant investment on the part of the government to benefit the tourism sector, by the Havana Bay.

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). In one case, on 16 June 2025 Pastor William Jimenez Rodríguez, who leads the Restorers of the Truth Church, affiliated with the Apostolic Movement, complied with a police summons to appear at a police station in San José de las Lajas, Mayabeque Province. He was interrogated by PNR Officer Rommel García who claimed that the pastor had held an illegal religious activity in the municipal stadium. Pastor Jimenez Rodríguez pointed out that he had documentation to show that he had submitted a formal request and paid for the use of the stadium like any other citizen was required to do. The officer accused him of 'standing against the principles of the Revolution' and informed the pastor that going forward he and members of his church are prohibited from the use of any government owned property.

Many cases of discrimination also involved the right to work. Hanry Días Martínez, a professional comedian and a leader in a church affiliated with the Apostolic Movement, was prohibited from working as a comedian after his conversion to Christianity. In July 2025 Mr Días Martínez went to the Ministry of Labor in Sancti Spiritus City, Sancti Spiritus Province, to request help finding employment. The director, Damir Valdez, explained that he was unable to help stating that 'other people, like [Mr Días Martínez] have come to apply for work but I have to reject them because I have been warned that religious people who congregate in illegal churches will always be frowned upon in [Cuba]'.

Children and young people also experienced discrimination at school because of their religious beliefs. In one case, three primary school girls, sisters whose family is Jehovah's Witness, were repeatedly subjected to verbal abuse, discrimination and even physical assault in eastern Cuba due to the fact that they do not sing the national anthem, pay tribute to national symbols, or wear school uniforms because of their religious beliefs. After the girls' mother filed a complaint with the PNR, the case was summarily closed with no explanation. A subsequent attempt on the part of the mother to file a separate complaint with the Attorney General's office was rejected. She was told by an official that 'that no effective judicial mechanisms existed to address complaints related to religious freedom within this specific context' and she was later warned by a man who claimed to work for the Attorney General's office, but refused to identify himself, to stop pursuing the case.

The systematic denial of legal status to physical places of worship, including those which are part of a large legally recognised religious groups, is the main factor in discriminatory treatment experienced by the members of those groups. In Autumn 2025 CSW conducted a survey of the leaders of 300 churches across Cuba who form part of a legally recognised Protestant Christian denomination. All 300 reported that their attempts to register their place of worship had been repeatedly and arbitrarily denied, with no explanation provided and no recourse for appeal. Their lack of legal status means that they are unable to open a bank account, to invite foreign coreligionists to visit, to receive donations, or to request permission to hold an event. All those surveyed agreed that because of their unregistered status, their activities are always carried out under threat, with constant interruptions by state officials, including from the PNR, CDR, DSE and other government ministries.

Some religious leaders who attempted to join legally recognised religious bodies reported that they were arbitrarily refused. A Yoruba babalawo in eastern Cuba was repeatedly harassed by government officials who forced him to stop the religious ceremonies he was leading because of his lack of legal status. On more than one occasion, he and those gathered for religious activities have been threatened with criminal charges. When he attempted to join the government recognised Yoruba Cultural Association, however, he said he was rejected on the ground that he does not belong to the CCP and does not meet the 'requirements of impeccable conduct required for membership'.

Conclusion

Over the past five years, since the protests of 11 July 2021, the Cuban government has steadily hardened its repression of all human rights, including 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, and abuse of children or loss of employment because of the religious beliefs of the affected individuals. The revised civil, administrative and criminal codes are repeatedly referenced by government officials, confirming 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 Diaz-Canel Bermúdez and the CCP. The president has made it clear that dissent or perceived criticism of the government, the CCP, or its policies will be met with a heavy hand. In addition, 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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T +44 (0)20 8329 0010
/CSWUK
csw.org.uk

PO Box 99, New Malden
Surrey, KT3 3YF
United Kingdom

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