Freedom of religion or belief in Cuba's prisons

October 2025

For public use

CSW everyone free to believe



[The prison officials] say that because I am a political prisoner I cannot have any benefits… It is impossible [to practise my religion] because I can't go out of the prison and, here, they will not let me because [they say] the prison rules do not allow it… I am deeply affected because they don't want me to practise my faith. [They say] 'if you were a Christian, you would not be here…' [My faith] is the most important thing in my life… Since I was imprisoned, I have never been able to enjoy the experience [of a visit from religious leader]… All the charges against me are false, because all I did was go out into the streets to call for my rights as a citizen of this country… I am the sole provider for my family of four… [I ask God] to help me because I have not committed any crime that would put me in this martyrdom.

Female political prisoner four years into a 10-year sentence, Santiago de Cuba

Executive summary

Cuba's Ministry of the Interior (MININT), which includes the Departments of State Security (DSE) and Prisons and acts as the country's internal intelligence apparatus, has a long history of serious violations of human rights, including of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). Since the early days of the Revolution, the Cuban Communist Party (CCP) has viewed religious practice as something to be controlled as tightly as possible. The forced separation of people from religious communities has been used systematically by the government as a tactic to socially isolate individuals and their families. Inside prisons, where officials have direct power over every aspect of the lives of those incarcerated there, these tactics take even more extreme forms.

Over the past five years, harsh restrictions on FoRB in Cuba's prison system have increasingly become systematic and widespread, following some limited improvements in the early 2010s. This trend comes alongside a massive increase in the overall prison population, including a steep rise in the number of political prisoners. Penalties for all types of crimes have been made more severe in the criminal code that came into force in 2022, and a crackdown that accelerated in 2021 on anything perceived by the government as dissent is ongoing.

Cuba systematically violates the right to FoRB of all prisoners, both common and political. Detainees are routinely denied the right to be visited by a leader associated with their religious group or any religious group at all. Most are barred from keeping religious literature, including a Bible, with them. None of those for whom specific apparel is required by their religion are permitted to wear such items. Prisoners are not allowed to congregate with others of the same religious beliefs in order to practise their religion. Those who attempt to perform religious rituals or even to pray on their own report being threatened, verbally abused, and in some cases physically stopped from doing so.

Documents refusing requests for religious visits make it clear that in the view of MININT, FoRB is a 'benefit' not a right. As a benefit, FoRB can be extended or withdrawn arbitrarily. It is often misused as a pressure tactic to coerce prisoners into cooperating with the authorities in different ways. This contradicts the basic standards set out in the Nelson Mandela Rules, which establish a baseline for the human treatment of incarcerated persons and include detailed and basic protections for FoRB.

Recommendations

To the government of Cuba:

- Implement the Nelson Mandela Rules in all prisons in the country for all prisoners, regardless of the reason for their imprisonment.
- Ensure that MININT officers and all other employees working within the penitentiary system at any level and across the country are aware of and trained in the guidelines set out in the Nelson Mandela Rules.
- Ensure that the FoRB rights of all Cuban prisoners, regardless of the reason for their imprisonment, are upheld. This includes the right to keep a Bible and/or other religious literature, the right to access to a qualified representative of their religion, and the right to meet with other prisoners for worship, study and prayer, without fear of harassment.
- End the practice of arbitrarily denying the religious rights and confiscating religious materials of prisoners as a form of punishment.
- Ensure that religious visits are allowed to take place with respect for privacy and confidentiality and in appropriate circumstances for acts of worship for those of all faiths.
- Expand opportunities for religious leaders, including those from unregistered groups, to enter prisons in their official capacity by engaging with non-Christian religious groups to develop and implement their own training programmes.
- Allow the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) access to all Cuban prisons and to all prisoners, including political prisoners.
- Reform the criminal code by eliminating the criminalisation of fundamental rights including freedom of expression and freedom assembly.

To the United Nations and Member States:

- Urge Cuba to issue a standing invitation to UN Special Procedures to visit Cuba with unhindered access to all parts of the country, including its prisons, and ensure that families of prisoners can freely meet with them without reprisal.
- Urge the OHCHR and all relevant UN mechanisms, including the UN Special Procedures and Treaty Bodies,

to include right to freedom of religion or belief in their reporting on Cuba, and compliance with the Nelson Mandela Rules.

- Continue to seek ways of engaging with families of prisoners, offering support when appropriate, and swiftly condemn all acts of intimidation or reprisal against prisoners and their families for cooperating with the UN.
- Monitor reports of arbitrary detention and follow court proceedings, and call on Cuba to protect all persons from arbitrary detention, to guarantee the right to a fair trial and legal counsel of their own choosing, in accordance with Article 9 and 14 of the ICCPR, and to ensure all rights as defined by the Nelson Mandela Rules are upheld.
- Urge the government of Cuba, at every appropriate opportunity, to make the reforms highlighted in the recommendation section above 'To the government of Cuba'.

To the European Union and Member States:

- Under the 'agreed actions on cooperation in the field of human rights' announced in the EU's press release following the EU-Cuba human rights dialogue on 24 November 2023, ensure that FoRB violations, including in its prisons, are addressed therein. Now that a precedent has been set on concluding 'agreed actions', ensure that this practice continues in subsequent human rights dialogues.
- Demand an urgent meeting with the Cuban government under Article 85(3) of the EU-Cuba Political Dialogue and Cooperation Agreement (PDCA), to formally investigate and review its compliance with PDCA human rights obligations as called for by multiple recent European Parliament resolutions.
- Introduce Magnitsky sanctions on individuals responsible for human rights violations, as called for by numerous European Parliament resolutions. This should include MININT officers responsible for serious FoRB violations in Cuba's prisons.
- As part of the EEAS' consultations ahead of any EU-Cuba Human Rights Dialogue, the EU should also ensure and facilitate input from families of prisoners in Cuba.
- The EU Delegation to Cuba and embassies of member states should maintain a close dialogue with religious leaders from all denominations and religious groups, taking into consideration the political sensitivities under which many religious leaders must work, and including discussion of FoRB in Cuba's prisons.
- Urge the government of Cuba, at every appropriate opportunity, to make the reforms highlighted in the recommendation section above 'To the government of Cuba'.

To the government of the United Kingdom:

- Call for the Cuban government to stop arbitrary detentions and harassment of religious leaders, human rights defenders, and their families.
- Seek ways of engaging with families of prisoners, offering support when appropriate, and swiftly condemn all acts of intimidation or reprisal against prisoners and their families for sharing information about their treatment.
- Monitor reports of arbitrary detention and follow court proceedings and call on Cuba to protect all persons from arbitrary detention, to guarantee anyone detained the right to a fair trial and legal counsel of their own choosing, and to ensure all rights as defined by the Nelson Mandela Rules are upheld.
- Urge Cuba to issue standing invitations to UN Special Procedures and allow unhindered access, including to Cuba's prisons, for human rights monitoring.
- Instruct the British Embassy in Havana to proactively engage with both registered and unregistered religious groups, monitor FoRB violations, and advocate for the rights of all prisoners as defined under the Nelson Mandela Rules to be upheld.
- Use parliamentary channels, including the FCDO, oral questions, select committee hearings, and ministerial correspondence, to raise ongoing FoRB violations in Cuba's prisons and demand accountability from the Cuban government.
- Include Cuba into the FCDO Human Rights and Democracy Report, highlighting FoRB violations, and press for a regular review of the country's human rights situation, including in prisons.
- Work with the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief and other relevant parliamentary bodies to ensure cross-party engagement on Cuba's FoRB abuses and to coordinate diplomatic pressure through multilateral forums.
- Urge the government of Cuba, at every appropriate opportunity, to make the reforms highlighted in the recommendation section above 'To the government of Cuba'.

To the government of the United States:

- Maintain Cuba as a Country of Particular Concern in regard to FoRB and urge the government to uphold the Nelson Mandela Rules in its prisons.
- The Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom and US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) commissioners should request an invitation to visit Cuba with unhindered access to all parts of the country, including prisons, and the ability to freely meet with family members of prisoners.
- The US Congress and the State Department should provide support for efforts in Cuba to move towards democracy and establish rule of law with respect for fundamental human rights, including freedom of religion or belief.

- Diplomatic staff based in Havana should engage with representatives of diverse religious groups and family members of prisoners, including discussion of their experience of FoRB in Cuban prisons, to inform the annual report on religious freedom in Cuba.
- Refuse visas to MININT officials responsible for serious FoRB violations, including those associated with the Department of Prisons.
- Urge the government of Cuba, at every appropriate opportunity, to make the reforms highlighted in the recommendation section above 'To the government of Cuba'.

Context

In 2020, the last time Cuba released official statistics on the numbers of detained people, the number of prisoners had reached 90,000, up from 57,000 people in 2012. This number did not take into account those held in labour camps.[1] The current numbers are likely to be even higher, given the ongoing crackdown on dissent over the past five years and the updated criminal code which imposed tougher penalties for all types of crimes. In June 2025 the non-governmental organisation Prisoners Defenders put the number of political prisoners at 1,158.[2]

In 2008 CSW published the report 'Violations of Religious Freedom in Cuban Prisons', five years after Cuba's Black Spring, in which 75 members of independent civil society including pro-democracy and human rights activists, independent journalists and librarians, and other dissidents were detained and, for the most part, swiftly handed decades-long prison sentences. This groundbreaking report confirmed that religious rights, protected by the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules on the Treatment of Prisoners (now called the Nelson Mandela Rules), were systematically violated within the Cuban prison system which is run by MININT. The report found that severe restrictions on FoRB were most often imposed on political prisoners 'repeatedly and consistently … in high security prisons across the country, indicating that they are not simply a result of decisions made by local prison authorities, but rather, state policy instigated at the highest levels'.

In the months and years following the publication of the report, political prisoners reported some improvements in terms of FoRB. In 2010, the same year that most of the Black Spring political prisoners were released into exile, the Cuban government announced the implementation of reforms to the way religious rights were to be approached within the prison system. Among these changes was the creation of a process through which religious leaders could receive a license to provide religious support to prisoners of all types across the country.

The training side of the program was put under the authority of Reverend Francisco Rodés, a Baptist pastor associated with the Cuban Council of Churches (CCC), an ecumenical group that maintains a mutually supportive relationship with the government. In June 2011, 87 religious leaders from 26 different registered denominations, including both CCC and non-CCC Protestant groups,[3] and the Roman Catholic Church, composed the first group to graduate from a prison chaplaincy course facilitated by Reverend Rodés through the Ecumenical Seminary in Matanzas. The government, however, reserved the right to decide which participants would be recognised as prison chaplains; not all graduates of the program were permitted to officially engage in prison ministry.[4]

Over the following decade, generally, the system seems to have worked to an acceptable decree. Prisoners with whom CSW was in contact mostly reported that they were able to receive religious literature from family members, keep such literature, including Bibles, with them, and to meet with religious leaders on occasion to receive spiritual support. There were exceptions, especially when it came to those subjected to short-term detention (anywhere from a few hours to days) for political reasons, in which these rights were not upheld. In some cases, involving longer term imprisonment, the temporary removal of FoRB rights was sometimes used as a form of punishment. For the most part, however, the restrictions on FoRB in maximum security prisons across the country in place up until 2010 appeared to have eased significantly.

In the summer of 2021, all of this changed. The spontaneous and peaceful protests of 11 July 2021 that took place across the island were met with sweeping arrests and violence at the hands of security forces. The number of political prisoners skyrocketed into the thousands. While some of those detained were known to be political dissidents, the vast majority had no prior record of such activity. Despite this, all were treated as what the Cuban government refers to as 'counter-revolutionaries', subjected to summary trials, and given prison sentences, to be served in maximum-security prisons, ranging from a few years to decades.

The prison chaplaincy program under the leadership of Reverend Rodés remains in place for leaders from legally recognised religious associations. However, since July 2021, CSW has received consistent reports that indicate severe restrictions on FoRB within the prison system have been

1 https://www.prisonstudies.org/country/cuba
2 '8 nuevos presos politicos en Cuba elevan la cifra total a 1.158 a final de mayo', *Prisoners Defenders*, 12 June 2025 https://www.prisonersdefenders.org/2025/06/12/8-nuevos-presos-politicos-en-cuba-elevan-la-cifra-total-a-1-158-a-final-de-mayo/
3 Given that the majority of Cuban protestants are not affiliated with CCC member religious groups, the inclusion of non-CCC Protestants was an important, though limited, allowance for representative inclusivity. By default, leaders from any religious association not recognised by the government would be ineligible even should they be permitted to participate in the training course. As far as CSW is aware, no alternative training scheme was offered to leaders from non-Christian religious or humanist groups.
4 Some participants in the prison ministry training course who were denied a license by the Cuban government found ways around this, by entering prisons as visitors to specific prisoners and not identifying themselves to prison officials as religious leaders.

reinstated. In response, CSW carried out a new investigation as to the current state of FoRB in Cuban prisons.

Methodology

The research on which the findings of this report are based include interviews with 181 prisoners in Cuba. Of these, 102 were imprisoned for political reasons and 77 for common crimes. Two others reported that they were convicted of criminal infractions but believe the reason for their imprisonment to be political. All but one of those who consider themselves to be political prisoners said their detention was due to their participation in the protests of 11 July 2021. The charges for which the common prisoners were found guilty include possession of illicit drugs, prostitution and robbery. Fourteen of those imprisoned for non-political crimes were serving sentences of between five and 20 years for killing livestock (mostly cows and one chicken) for food.[5]

The 156 men and 25 women who participated in the study are serving sentences ranging from one to 23 years in prisons located in five different provinces. Participants had been in prison for as little as one year and as long as eight, and one had recently been released after serving a nine-year sentence. Those making up the study group were diverse in terms of their beliefs and were composed of Protestants from recognised and unrecognised religious associations, Roman Catholics, practitioners of Afro-Cuban religions, atheists and agnostics.

Legal framework

Cuban legislation formally recognises the right to FoRB within its penitentiary system under a restrictive, highly regulated framework with multiple legal gaps, limiting its effective exercise in practice. The sole mention of religion in the 2022 Penal Enforcement Law (Law 152)[6] can be found in Title V - Rights and Benefits of the Persons who Find Themselves in a Condition of Internment, Article 102 (p) which establishes that prisoners have the right to receive religious attention and services in individual or collective form. The combining of rights, which cannot be violated, and benefits, which can be removed or modified based on behaviour, in Title V creates ambiguity about which the right to receive religious attention and participate in religious services (along with the other 25 actions listed) is, allowing prison authorities to decide this arbitrarily for those under their supervision.

Discrimination based on, among other things, religious belief, is forbidden as stated in the annex of Law 152:

> The principles set forth in Article 3 of this Law are as follows:
>
> e) Equality: During the serving of a sanction, a security measure, a provisional imprisonment measure, or obligations related to conditional dismissal, discrimination based on sex, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, ethnic origin, skin color, religious belief, disability, national or territorial origin, or any other personal condition or circumstance that entails a distinction detrimental to human dignity is prohibited. The classification carried out in places of confinement for the purposes of penitentiary treatment is not considered discriminatory.

The Penitentiary System Regulations go into more detail in terms of FoRB, with Article 64 (p) repeating the right to receive individual or collective attention.[7]

The limits of such attention are explained in the regulations' Chapter IX -Religious Attention, Article 106 which mandates that such attention can only be channeled through:

1. Working relationships to ensure compliance with the policy for religious attention in penitentiary establishments … established directly by the Department of Educational Treatment of the DEP [Directorate for Penitentiary Establishments of the Ministry of the Interior], with the Cuban Catholic Bishops Conference, the Council of Churches of Cuba, and other authorised religious institutions.
2. At the provincial level, coordination for religious assistance is carried out by the Educational Treatment specialty, with the designated religious authority.

These clauses make it clear that the right to FoRB is subject to administrative approval processed through MININT, which has a long and documented history of hostility towards religion, and that the exercise of this right is limited exclusively to interactions with the designated Christian religious institutions and other unnamed associations officially recognised by the government. While the exclusion of unregistered religious groups is not explicitly stated, the restriction of religious activities to officially recognised entities effectively excludes such groups in practice.

Article 107 of the regulations specifies what activities are included under the term 'religious attention' which can be 'organized individually and collectively and includes confessions, private individual interviews, communion, Masses, worship services, and marriage ceremonies with purely religious content'. While there is no overt reference to Christianity, the terminology in the list of permitted activities, excluding marriage ceremonies and private individual interviews, would be understood by most Cubans to refer to Christian activities. The absence of any specific reference to Afro-Cuban religious groups or practices in

5 Cuba's revised Criminal Code, which came into force in December 2022, severely tightened restrictions on slaughtering 'large' livestock, without state authorisation and increased penalties for doing so. These restrictions come at a time of chronic and increasingly severe food shortages across the country and especially in rural areas.

6 'Ley de Ejecución Penal, Instrumento de Relevancia para Desarrollar el Articulo 60 de la Constitución de la Republica', Gaceta Oficial No. 94, 1 September 2022 https://www.parlamentocubano.gob.cu/sites/default/files/documento/2022-09/goc-2022-o94.pdf

7 Reglamento del Sistema Penitenciario, 1 December 2016 https://natlex.ilo.org/dyn/natlex2/natlex2/files/download/112591/ORDEN%207%20CUB.pdf

either the institutions permitted to work with MININT to provide religious attention, or the activities defined under the term, is noteworthy given that around 70% of Cubans are thought to engage in activities associated with one or more Afro-Cuban religious traditions.[8]

Cuban law does not provide explicit guarantees of access to religious literature, including a Bible or other sacred texts. The ambiguity of Penitentiary System Regulations Article 64's allowance for prisoners to 'possess authorised books' leaves ample space for prison officers to restrict such literature – religious or secular - arbitrarily. Article 64 also establishes the right of inmates to 'enjoy artistic, sport, cultural, and recreational activities' but omits collective religious activity from list.

The Nelson Mandela Rules

The Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners were adopted in 1955 by the First United Nations Congress on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders. In 1957 and 1977 they were approved by the Economic and Social Council by its resolutions 663 C (XXIV) and 2076 (LXII) respectively. (It is worth noting that Cuba was a member of the Economic and Social Council in 1977.[9]) In 2015, 'the Nelson Mandela Rules' was added to the name via resolution 70/175 which was adopted without a vote by the General Assembly in honour of Nelson Mandela. The rules are not legally binding but provide a detailed framework establishing a baseline for how detained individuals should be treated.

Discrimination and the right to practise one's religion

> **They don't allow us [to have religious materials] because they see us as counterrevolutionaries. [They say] 'until you separate yourself from your beliefs, you will not receive any benefits…' I know many [prisoners who share my beliefs] but they keep us apart to make sure that we don't discuss religious matters.**

Male political prisoner in year four of a 20-year prison sentence, Havana

Nelson Mandela Rules - Basic principles

Rule 2

> The present rules shall be applied impartially. There shall be no discrimination on the grounds of race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or any other status. The religious beliefs and moral precepts of prisoners shall be respected.

None of the participants in the study agreed that they are able to practise their faith inside prison without hindrance. The vast majority, 168, said they are never able to practise their faith – of the 168, 76 of those are being held for non-political crimes. Twelve political prisoners and one common prisoner said they are able to practise their faith sometimes.

Only one person, held for political crimes, said they are sometimes allowed to wear items required by their religion. The rest of the respondents referenced the obligatory use of prison uniforms in responding that they are never allowed to wear items required by their religion. This especially affects those who belong to Afro-Cuban religious groups for whom certain types of clothing and the use of amulets and other accessories are a core component of their beliefs. One Yoruba practitioner and political prisoner serving a 27-year sentence said that the inability to wear items required by his beliefs, 'affects me deeply because my clothes are everything to me'.

Seventy-one participants, only two of them common prisoners, said that they are sporadically subjected to mistreatment or discrimination on the basis of their religious beliefs, while 109 - 35 political and 74 common prisoners - said they experience such treatment regularly. Only one participant, a man serving an eight-year sentence for theft, stated that he has not experienced any mistreatment or discrimination because of his religion. All 181 respondents said that they had witnessed others being subjected to verbal or physical abuse because of their religious beliefs.

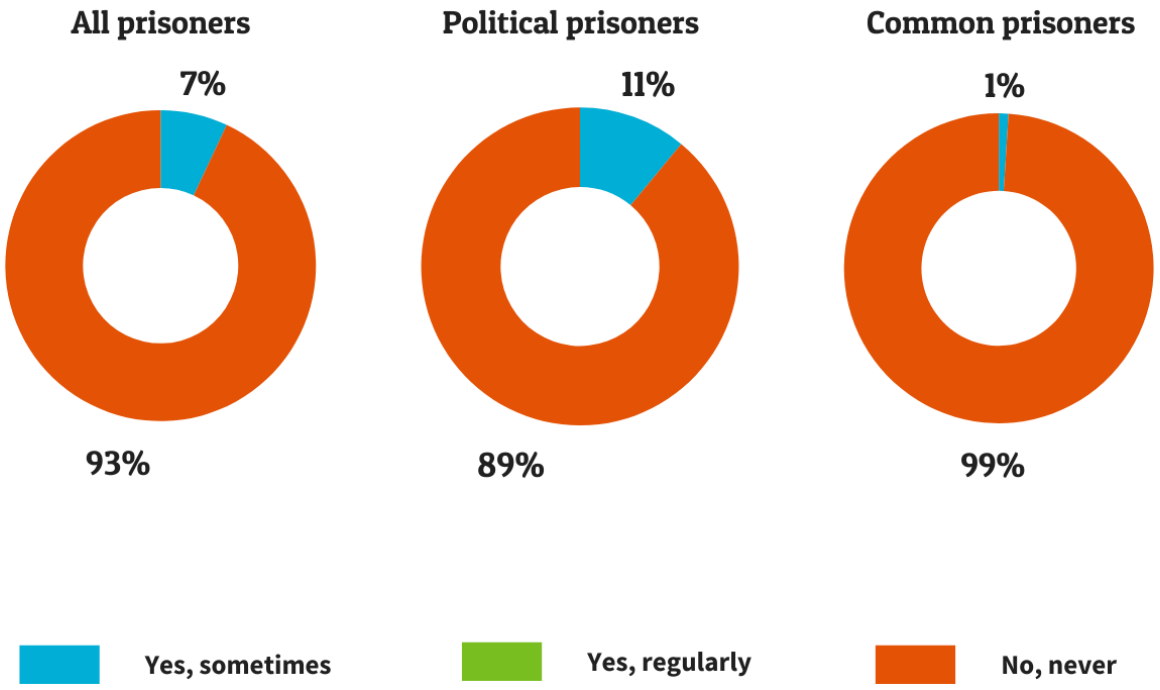
When asked to provide examples of mistreatment to which they or others they knew had been subjected, most participants cited ridicule and regular verbal insults on the part of prison guards. These included being called a 'religious worm', a 'parasite on society', and being accused of 'hiding counter-revolutionary activity behind religion'. 'There are so many stories,' said one political prisoner serving a seven-year sentence. 'In the prison system, the abuse of rights and humiliation are normal'.

Many prisoners said that they and others are regularly threatened by the guards with a loss of benefits, including the right to telephone calls and visits, or being placed in solitary confinement if they are caught praying or singing. One man who is six years into a 20-year sentence on what he says are false charges of disrespect for the authorities and attempted homicide, stated 'When I try to have privacy and pray, the guards come in and tell me that if I continue with my beliefs, they will put me in the punishment cell.' The same types of threats are made by prison guards warning prisoners not to share their religious beliefs with other prisoners. A man, four years through an 18-year sentence for what he says are false charges of aggravated robbery, shared 'Yes, [the guards] often tell me that if they see me talking about my beliefs with other inmates, they will suspend my visits or phone calls.'

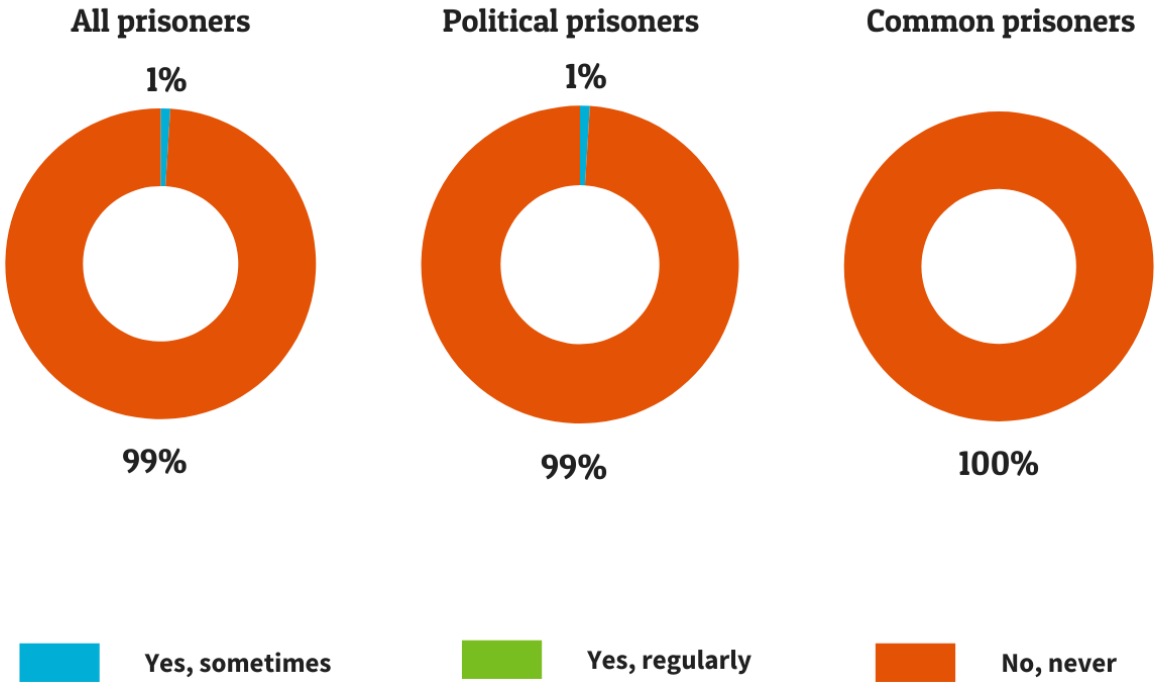
8 Lavery, Kirsten, 'Factsheet Santería in Cuba; The Santería Tradition in Cuba', *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom*, February 2021 https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2021%20Factsheet%20-%20Santeria%20in%20Cuba.pdf

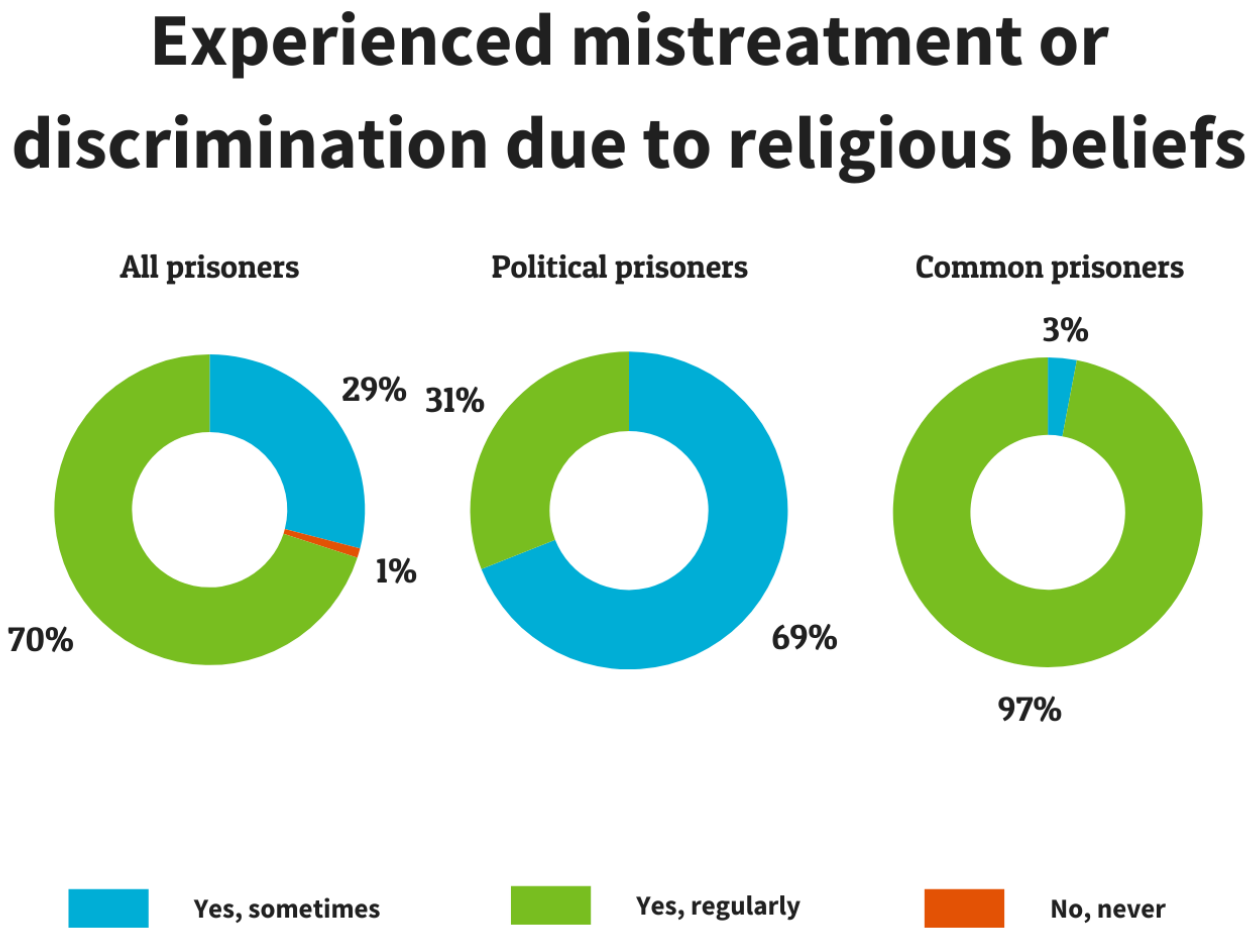
9 Yearbook of the United Nations, Volume 3, 1977 https://www.un-ilibrary.org/content/books/9789210601917/read

Able to practise one's religion



Allowed to wear items required by one's religion





Numerous prisoners reported being physically made to stop a religious activity. One man, a common prisoner who is a third of his way through a 17-year prison sentence on charges of 'disrespect for the authorities and interfering with tourism', said 'When I try to pray or practise my faith, they pick me up off the ground and bully me so I cannot.' Another man who has served over half of a twelve-year sentence on what he says are false charges of 'disrespect for the authorities and disturbing the public order' stated 'When I go to perform a religious ritual the guards enter and force me to stop.'

Prison chaplains and the right to pastoral visits

> **They do not allow priests or babalawos to come and visit us because they say they only come to obtain information and to attend to our needs. [They call me] a parasite on society.**

Male political prisoner in year four of a 27-year sentence, Havana

Nelson Mandela Rules - Religion

Rule 65

1. If the prison contains a sufficient number of prisoners of the same religion, a qualified representative of that religion shall be appointed or approved. If the number of prisoners justifies it and conditions permit, the arrangement should be on a full-time basis.
2. A qualified representative appointed or approved under paragraph 1 of this rule shall be allowed to hold regular services and to pay pastoral visits in private to prisoners of his or her religion at proper times.
3. Access to a qualified representative of any religion shall not be refused to any prisoner. On the other hand, if any prisoner should object to a visit of any religious representative, his or her attitude shall be fully respected.

Nelson Mandela Rules - Treatment

Rule 92

To these ends, all appropriate means shall be used, including religious care in the countries where this is possible, education, vocational guidance and training, social casework, employment counselling, physical development and strengthening of moral character, in accordance with the individual needs of each prisoner, taking account of his or her social and criminal history, physical and mental capacities and aptitudes, personal temperament, the length of his or her sentence and prospects after release.

Nelson Mandela Rules - Education and recreation

Rule 104

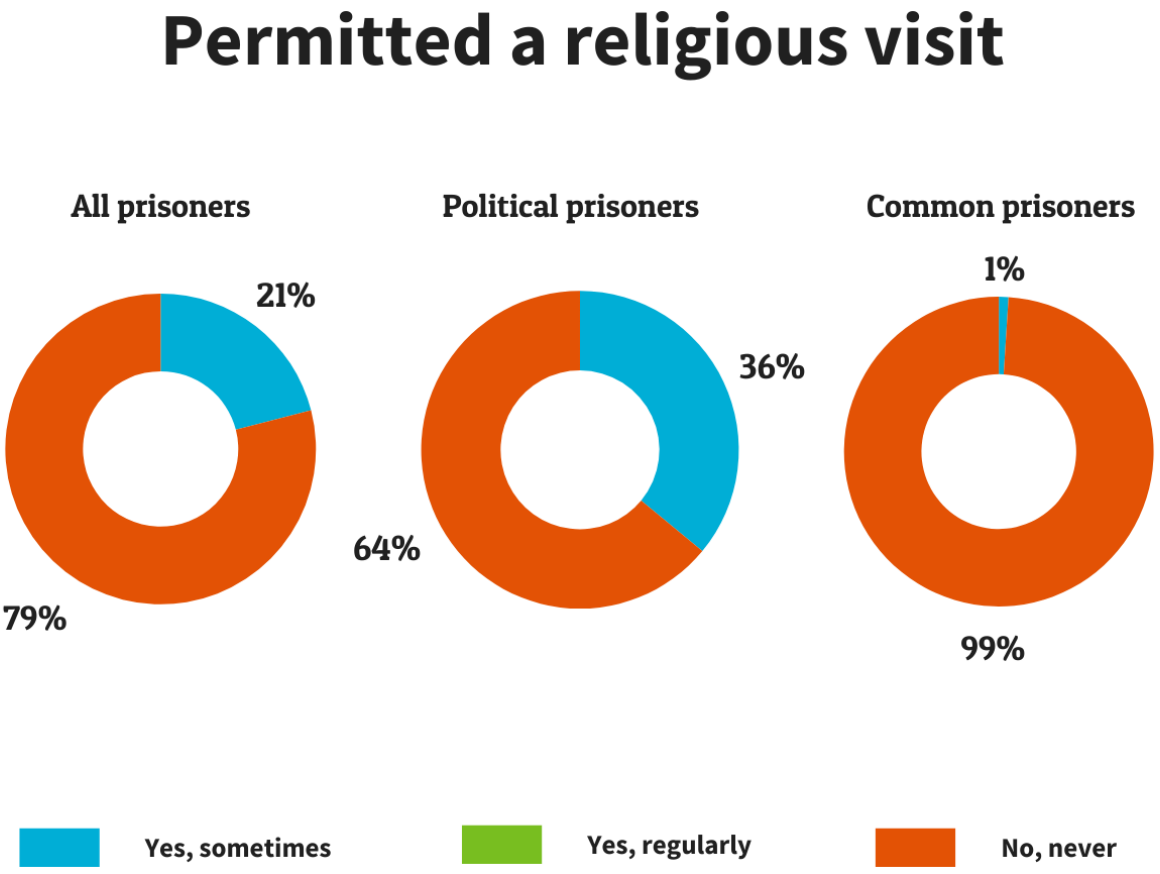
> Provision shall be made for the further education of all prisoners capable of profiting thereby, including religious instruction in the countries where this is possible. The education of illiterate prisoners and of young prisoners shall be compulsory and special attention shall be paid to it by the prison administration.

All respondents said they had submitted at least one formal request for a religious visit. One said he had made over ten requests and all were denied. Seventy-nine percent of the participants, including 76 common prisoners, said they have never been permitted to meet with a religious leader. One man serving a 15-year sentence for 'sedition' after participating peacefully in the 11 July 2021 protests said 'They have never given me religious visits because they say it is against the revolution'.

Two men, both imprisoned – on opposite sides of the country – because of their participation in the 11 July 2021 protests, lamented that they had had no contact with their religious group since their detention. One political prisoner serving a 20-year sentence said 'They do not allow my godfather to enter because they say he is my accomplice and something will happen… this affects me deeply because these are my orishas, they are my guides'.[10]

Fourteen political prisoners provided CSW with official documents refusing their requests for the right to meet with a religious leader. These documents referred to the basic right of access to a representative of any religion, as provided for under the Nelson Mandela Rules, as a 'benefit' which does not extend to prisoners convicted of 'crimes of sedition against the national security of the state'. Each refusal, printed on MININT letterhead and signed by the same man, using the name Adonis Charchaval Ramírez,[11] states twice that such prisoners may receive no 'benefits' at all.

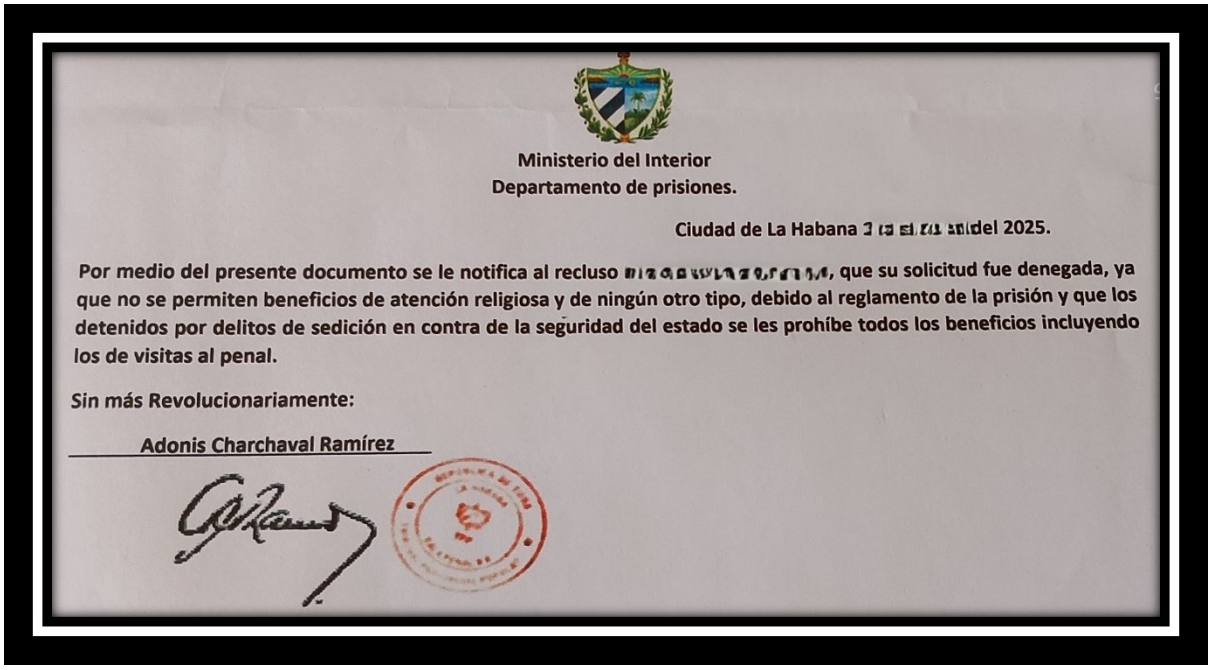
In seeming contradiction of this 'no benefits' policy, however, only nine participants – all political prisoners found guilty of sedition - said that they were never allowed to make phone calls.[12] Eighty-five political prisoners found guilty of the crime of sedition said their right to telephone calls had not been removed. Of those 85, 39 were, however, refused religious visits.



10 Godfathers in the Yoruba belief system are those who initiate others into the religion and subsequently provide their initiates with direct spiritual support and leadership.

11 CSW was unable to find additional information on anyone by this name, however, MININT officers routinely use pseudonyms in their official work to hide their real identity.

12 Two said that their lack of ability to make or receive telephone calls was due to the 'no benefits' policy, two said that this was to prevent them from telling their families about abuse they had experienced, and one said it was a pressure tactic to force him to cooperate with the prison authorities. Another said the guards said 'they didn't feel like' letting him make a phone call. The eighth prisoner said that he has been unable to make calls due to the telephone 'always being broken' in the prison in which he is held.



Ministerio del Interior
Departamento de prisiones.

Ciudad de La Habana [illegible] del 2025.

Por medio del presente documento se le notifica al recluso [illegible], que su solicitud fue denegada, ya que no se permiten beneficios de atención religiosa y de ningún otro tipo, debido al reglamento de la prisión y que los detenidos por delitos de sedición en contra de la seguridad del estado se les prohíbe todos los beneficios incluyendo los de visitas al penal.

Sin más Revolucionariamente:

Adonis Charchaval Ramírez

for spiritual support from a leader associated with their religious group, one clarified that this only took place after they were granted conditional release. 'In [maximum security] prison, there were never [any] pastors or chaplains, in conditional, there were pastors, chaplains and other members of my mother's local church [visiting]', said one prisoner conditionally released[13] halfway through a seven-year sentence for 'counter-revolution, assault and, sedition' because of his participation in the 11 July 2021 protests.

One respondent noted that they had seen others receive religious visits but only from leaders from religious groups that are members of the CCC Three who said they had been visited by a religious leader explained that they had gotten around the rules by coming to the prison on a 'family visit', not openly as clergy.

The right to religious literature

> **I have asked [to have a Bible] and they say no because those are the prison rules... Being here, I cannot go out to go to church, not even to a worship service, or any other place and they won't let me practise my faith here... they do not want us to grow spiritually. Imagine that they send you far from your family, they mistreat you, and they definitely do not allow me to practise my faith; it is like going crazy.**

Male political prisoner four years into a 26-year sentence, Havana

Nelson Mandela Rules – Religion

Rule 66

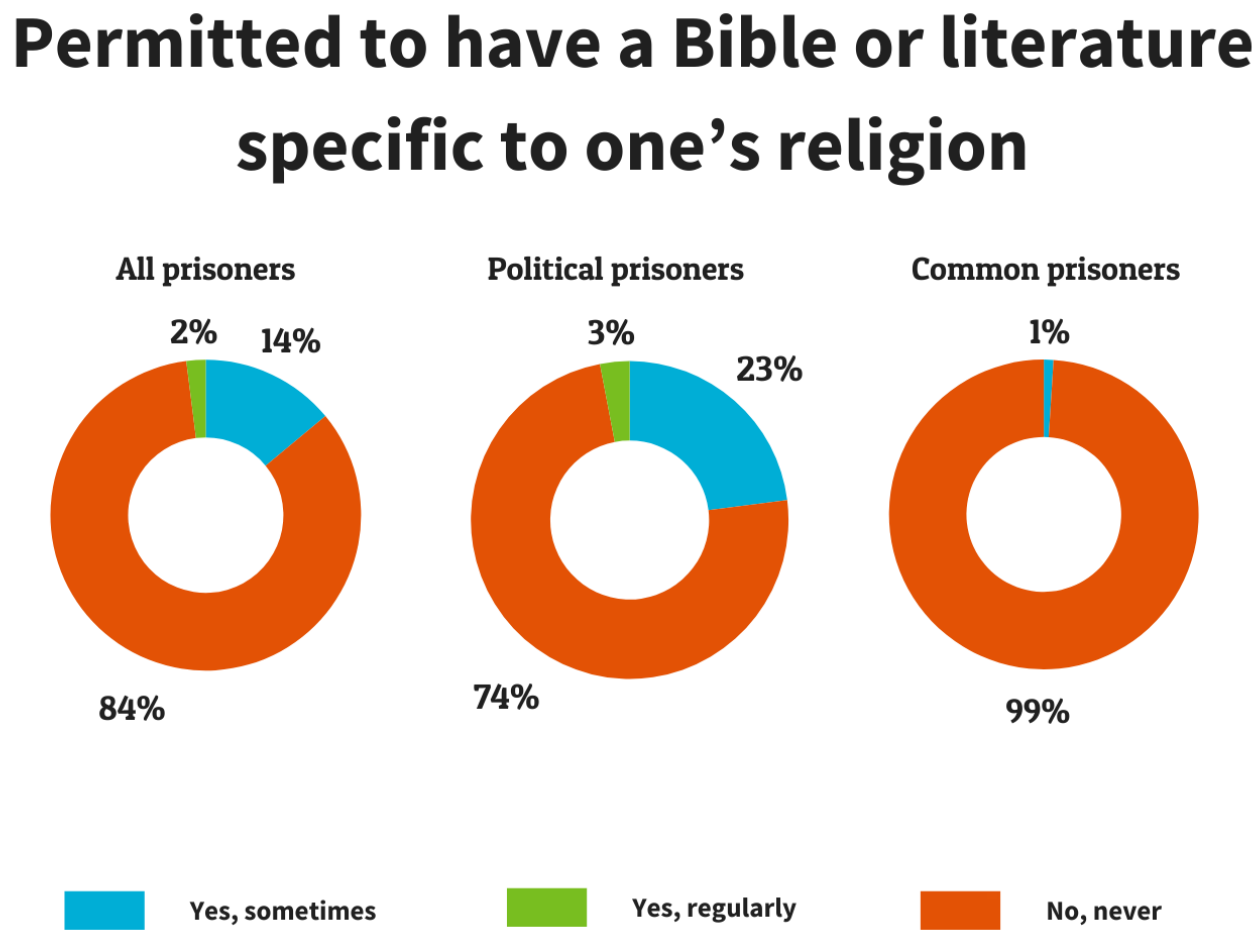
> So far as practicable, every prisoner shall be allowed to satisfy the needs of his or her religious life by attending the services provided in the prison and having in his or her possession the books of religious observance and instruction of his or her denomination.

Three political prisoners stated that they were permitted to receive and keep religious literature in their cell. One of the three said that although, at the time of the survey, he was able to have a Bible or other religious literature, this had not been the case for the first few months he was in prison.

Twenty-six prisoners, 23 of whom are political, said they are sometimes allowed to receive religious material, mostly depending on the guard on duty at the time. They expressed their understanding that religious literature, and the Bible in particular, should be allowed but stated that the rules are not followed consistently. One political prisoner, three years into a 12-year sentence for sedition and counter-revolution, explained that 'Although it is permitted, the decision to allow literature to pass through is in the hands of the guard and political prisoners are subject to arbitrary cohesive measures of pressure and blackmail, and that is one of them.'

The remaining 152 prisoners, half political and half common, said that they were not allowed possession of any type of religious literature. Most explained that this would also be considered a type of 'benefit' and, in the words of one man serving a 15-year sentence for sedition, 'they say that we [members of the] opposition don't have any kind of benefits'. Said another, 'They do not allow it because it is another way of harassing the inmate, since it prevents him from fulfilling

13 These conditions effectively amount to house arrest. Any violation of the conditions will mean a return to prison to complete the full sentence.



his beliefs.' One man on year four of a 19-year sentence for 'stealing' and slaughtering his own cow, said that religious literature is not permitted 'because they don't want any religious practice in prison because they see it as counter-revolutionary'.

Conclusion

It is clear from the results of this study that FoRB is not only systematically violated throughout Cuba's prison system but is weaponised and used as a coercion and punishment tactic on prisoners. CSW's 2008 report noted that the withholding of FoRB rights was mostly used against political prisoners as a psychological tactic. In contrast, in 2025, those held for both political and non-political alleged crimes generally experience FoRB violations in the same way. The Nelson Mandela Rules, guidelines meant to ensure the human treatment of all prisoners, are ignored by the Cuban government. The authorities deliberately and systematically fail to uphold the right to practise one's faith, to be visited by a leader of one's own religious group, and to keep religious literature.

Cuba's prisons do not sit in isolation. The country continues to experience severe economic hardship, including shortages of electricity, food and basic medical supplies in much of the country. In carrying out this survey, those with whom CSW spoke reiterated again and again that these conditions are exponentially worse inside the island's prisons. Reforms of all kind, and at every level, are urgent and necessary. The international community must continue to press the Cuban government to respond to the cry of its people and enact swift, effective and just change inside and outside its prisons.

CSW everyone free to believe

T +44 (0)20 8329 0010
@CSWAdvocacy
/CSWUK
csw.org.uk

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

© Copyright CSW 2025. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, photocopying, mechanical, recording and/or otherwise without the prior written permission of CSW.