



## CUBA: Country Dossier

June 2018



**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research Unit

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# World Watch List 2018

		1. Private Life	2. Family Life	3. Community Life	4. National Life	5. Church Life	6. Violence	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2018	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2017	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2016	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2015	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2014
Rank	Country	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.6	94	92	92	92	90
2	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.0	93	89	88	81	78
3	Somalia	16.0	16.2	16.1	16.3	16.4	10.4	91	91	87	90	80
4	Sudan	14.2	14.5	14.3	15.6	16.0	12.0	87	87	84	80	73
5	Pakistan	14.4	13.5	13.8	15.0	13.1	16.7	86	88	87	79	77
6	Eritrea	15.2	14.5	15.8	16.1	15.2	9.4	86	82	89	79	72
7	Libya	15.2	15.3	14.2	15.7	15.5	10.4	86	78	79	76	71
8	Iraq	14.7	14.7	14.9	14.9	15.1	11.3	86	86	90	86	78
9	Yemen	16.7	16.6	16.4	16.5	16.7	2.6	85	85	78	73	74
10	Iran	14.0	14.1	14.5	15.8	16.4	10.0	85	85	83	80	77
11	India	12.6	12.7	13.2	14.7	12.9	14.4	81	73	68	62	55
12	Saudi Arabia	14.9	13.7	14.2	15.5	16.4	4.1	79	76	76	77	78
13	Maldives	15.2	15.5	13.5	15.8	16.7	1.1	78	76	76	78	77
14	Nigeria	11.8	11.5	13.1	12.1	12.1	16.5	77	78	78	78	70
15	Syria	14.4	14.3	14.1	14.5	14.7	3.7	76	86	87	83	79
16	Uzbekistan	15.5	12.1	13.0	13.1	16.0	3.5	73	71	70	69	68
17	Egypt	11.3	12.8	12.2	11.7	9.5	12.4	70	65	64	61	61
18	Vietnam	12.4	8.4	12.7	14.2	13.8	7.4	69	71	66	68	65
19	Turkmenistan	15.2	10.3	12.9	12.8	15.2	1.9	68	67	66	63	62
20	Laos	12.9	8.6	13.6	13.9	14.9	3.5	67	64	58	58	62
21	Jordan	13.2	13.3	11.5	10.9	13.0	4.3	66	63	59	56	56
22	Tajikistan	13.3	11.3	11.8	11.8	12.9	4.3	65	58	58	50	47
23	Malaysia	12.0	14.9	12.8	12.4	9.3	3.9	65	60	58	55	49
24	Myanmar	11.6	11.1	13.2	10.4	11.0	7.8	65	62	62	60	59
25	Nepal	12.6	11.9	10.7	11.5	12.4	4.6	64		(not in WWL)		
26	Brunei	14.3	14.2	10.7	10.2	13.5	0.9	64	64	61	58	57
27	Qatar	13.4	12.9	11.7	11.3	14.1	0.0	63	66	65	64	63
28	Kazakhstan	12.8	10.0	10.2	12.2	13.7	3.7	63	56	55	51	49
29	Ethiopia	9.8	10.0	10.8	10.9	10.5	10.4	62	64	67	61	65
30	Tunisia	11.9	13.2	10.6	10.7	12.0	3.9	62	61	58	55	55
31	Turkey	12.5	9.7	9.8	11.7	9.6	8.7	62	57	55	52	(not in WWL)
32	Kenya	12.0	10.9	10.0	7.9	11.7	9.4	62	68	68	63	48
33	Bhutan	11.9	11.6	12.4	11.4	13.1	1.1	62	61	56	56	54
34	Kuwait	13.4	12.6	11.6	10.9	12.3	0.4	61	57	56	49	50
35	Central African Republic	9.0	8.1	10.1	8.9	8.8	16.1	61	58	59	67	67
36	Palestinian Territories	12.1	12.8	10.7	10.5	12.6	1.1	60	64	62	58	53
37	Mali	11.4	9.6	11.2	8.1	9.2	9.6	59	59	55	52	54
38	Indonesia	10.3	11.0	11.5	10.0	9.3	6.9	59	55	55	50	46
39	Mexico	8.3	7.6	12.1	10.7	9.7	10.4	59	57	56	55	(not in WWL)
40	United Arab Emirates	13.6	12.2	10.0	10.4	11.8	0.2	58	55	55	49	51
41	Bangladesh	10.4	8.8	11.4	9.6	7.5	10.0	58	63	57	51	46
42	Algeria	12.3	13.1	7.5	10.4	12.4	2.0	58	58	56	55	54
43	China	9.2	7.2	8.0	10.7	13.3	9.1	57	57	57	57	51
44	Sri Lanka	11.1	7.6	10.5	11.3	10.1	6.9	57	55	(not in WWL)	51	55
45	Azerbaijan	13.1	9.1	9.3	11.1	12.4	2.4	57	(not in WWL)	57	50	(not in WWL)
46	Oman	12.1	12.2	9.9	9.4	12.6	1.1	57	53	53	55	56
47	Mauritania	11.5	11.3	11.1	12.2	11.0	0.0	57	55	(not in WWL)	50	51
48	Bahrain	12.9	13.1	10.2	9.9	10.3	0.2	57	54	54	(not in WWL)	48
49	Colombia	7.9	7.6	11.9	8.6	8.5	11.9	56	53	55	55	56
50	Djibouti	12.2	12.2	10.3	9.9	11.7	0.0	56	57	58	60	46

## WWL 2018 Persecution Watch Countries<sup>1</sup>

		1. Private Life	2. Family Life	3. Community Life	4. National Life	5. Church Life	6. Violence	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2018
Rank	Country	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score
51	Comoros	11.7	11.5	9.1	9.4	13.9	0.4	56
52	Kyrgyzstan	11.7	9.5	10.0	8.1	11.6	2.8	54
53	Tanzania	10.1	10.3	10.1	9.5	9.0	3.9	53
54	Russian Federation	11.1	8.4	10.1	8.9	10.7	2.0	51
55	Morocco	10.4	11.5	7.6	8.8	12.0	0.6	51
56	Cuba	8.5	4.9	10.7	10.4	12.2	2.4	49
57	Uganda	10.9	8.7	9.5	8.7	4.8	3.9	46
58	Niger	9.9	9.7	9.0	7.0	7.1	2.6	45

<sup>1</sup> These countries reached a score of 41 points or more but did not receive enough points to be included in the WWL Top 50.

# CUBA – Country Dossier (June 2018)

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## Introduction

This country report is a collation of documents based around [Open Doors World Watch List \(WWL\)](#)<sup>1</sup> including statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations, and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database ([WCD](#))<sup>2</sup>. Further news and analysis is supplied by [World Watch Monitor](#)<sup>3</sup> and WWR staff.

CUBA <sup>4</sup>		
World Watch List	Score	Rank
WWL 2018	49	56
WWL 2017	-	-
WWL 2016	-	-
WWL 2015	-	-
WWL 2014	-	-

<sup>1</sup> See: <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/>

<sup>2</sup> WCD website: <http://www.brill.com/publications/online-resources/world-christian-database>

<sup>3</sup> See: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/>

<sup>4</sup> Cuba was last in the 'Top 50' in WWL 2012.

# WWL 2018: Keys to understanding CUBA

## Link for general background information:

BBC country profile: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-19583447>

## Recent country history

In May 2002, a petition with 11,000 signatures from a dissident movement known as the Varela Project was submitted to the National Assembly of Popular Power, calling for a referendum on basic civil and political liberties and a new electoral law. The government responded by declaring that the socialist system was “untouchable,” permanent, and “irrevocable”.

Fidel Castro stood down in 2008 due to health issues and handed over power to his brother Raul Castro, who ruled Cuba until 2013 when was re-elected to a second five-year term. During a speech on national TV, 85 year old Castro announced that he will step down in 2018 when his term is over. Fidel Castro died in Havana in November 2016.

The relationship between Cuba and the US government has been improving in recent years: In May 2015, the USA officially removed Cuba from its list of countries that sponsor terrorism, and in July 2015, full diplomatic relations were re-established after 54 years. In 2016, the US Treasury Department announced a further loosening of restrictions, which included allowing US travelers to engage in individual educational tours of Cuba and resuming the postal service, nearly five decades after it had been halted. In the same year, US President Barack Obama arrived in Cuba on a historic two-day visit that included meetings with Cuban President Raul Castro and anti-government dissidents. Obama’s successor, President Donald Trump, has not continued this warming of relations. (See below under “The political landscape”.)

## The religious landscape

The [Santeria](#) religion is particularly prevalent in Cuba and sometimes influences Christianity. Santeria developed as a result of the integration and cultural continuity of ethnic and religious elements of the African and Roman Catholic Spanish population. To follow the Santeria culture and become a *santero* or *santera*, considerable investment is usually required for acquiring the special religious articles.

Another factor to take into account is the growing presence of the LGBTI community, also protected by the Cuban government. In [May 2017](#), this community carried out a Catholic celebration of mass led by three transgender women in the city of Matanzas. This was the first mass of its kind held by professing “trans-priests” and was felt by many Christians worldwide to be a mockery of the Catholic faith.

## The political landscape

Despite the progress made by former President Barack Obama to improve the relationship between the USA and Cuba, President Donald Trump announced a series of measures in 2017 that represent a great setback. Among other things, he signed a memorandum prohibiting direct transactions with companies controlled by the Cuban army and expressed his desire to even prohibit Americans visiting Cuba in certain cases. However, diplomatic relationships will continue and the respective embassies in Washington and Havana will remain open, despite the tense relationships due to the expulsion of officials from the Cuban embassy in the US, and in spite of the denunciations of "sonic attacks" or "specific attacks" by officials of the US embassy in Cuba. Cuba, for its part, has responded by pointing out that although the US president justified this policy with supposed concerns about the human rights situation in the country, any strategy aimed at changing the political, economic and social system in Cuba will be doomed to failure.

## The socio-economic landscape

The new measures adopted by US President Trump will greatly affect the Cuban economy, especially after "Hurricane Irma" battered the northern coast of the Island in September 2017. This caused a fall of almost 50% in tourism, due to damage to the infrastructure of the seafront hotel zone and to the country's capital. This has affected not only families dependent on small tourist businesses, but also the Cuban population throughout the country.

Restrictions on the freedom of expression are still a serious problem. The Human Rights World Report 2017<sup>5</sup> has noted a large number of arbitrary detentions and short-term imprisonment of critics of the regime, independent activists and journalists, artists and political opponents during January-August 2016. There are also travel restrictions preventing citizens from leaving the island on the grounds of "defense and national security" or "other reasons of public interest".

Cuba is also a fierce promoter of gender ideology, thanks to Mariela Castro (Raul Castro's daughter) being this movement's major advocate. The implementation of a non-discrimination program to support the LGBTI community and a corresponding program of sexual education in the country's schools are the movement's main goals. These measures, as has happened in other countries of the region, will affect parents' rights to educate their children according to their own beliefs.

## Concluding remarks

Cuba, like any socialist country, exerts totalitarian control over its citizens and their individual rights. While it is true that there have been some positive developments, the control over the opposition and the lack of recognition of fundamental human rights are in practice the same.

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<sup>5</sup> Human Rights Watch, World Report 2017. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/cuba>, last accessed 18 July 2017.

And indeed, Cuba's unconditional support for Venezuela at the local<sup>6</sup> and regional<sup>7</sup> level is a sure sign that the regime, true to its Socialist-Communist doctrine, is continuing to isolate itself from the continental bloc.

In this scenario, many Cubans seek to leave the island in order to find a better future elsewhere, and this drain of manpower weakens society, helping manipulation and totalitarianism retain the upper hand in the country. Christians seek opportunities for strengthening an already weakened society, even though their work cannot be overtly political due to possible reprisals.

## WWL 2018: Church History and Facts

### How many Christians?

Pop 2017	Christians	Chr%
11,390,000	7,013,000	61.6

Source: WCD, May 2017

### How did Christians get there?

Christianity became established in Cuba in 1512 through Roman Catholic priests of the Dominican order; this was a consequence of the Spanish colonization. The earliest Protestant activity dates back to 1741 when Cuba was under British occupation. Through the massive influx of slaves from Africa a syncretistic cult called [Santeria](#) developed around 1800 mixing elements of Roman Catholic faith with Yoruba customs.

After gaining independence from Spain in 1898, Cuba's dependency on the United States facilitated the establishment of many Protestant churches and movements including Methodists, Adventists, Presbyterians, Quakers, Baptists and Lutherans. [Spiritism](#) was also introduced at that time.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> See: Reuters, Under siege at home, Maduro gets support from regional allies in Cuba. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cuba-venezuela/under-siege-at-home-maduro-gets-support-from-regional-allies-in-cuba-idUSKBN17D0AJ>, last accessed 23 February 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Global Research, Cuba and Nicaragua confirm support for Venezuela at UN. Available at: <https://www.globalresearch.ca/cuba-and-nicaragua-confirm-support-for-venezuela-at-un/5595698>, last accessed 15 August 2017

<sup>8</sup> Catholic Church and State in Cuba: Past and present relationships, available at: <http://revistas.usal.es/index.php/1130-2887/article/viewFile/9941/10309>, last accessed 18 July 2017.

## What church networks exist today? <sup>9</sup>

Orthodox	Catholic	Protestant	Independent	Unaffiliated	Double-aff	Evangelical	Renewalist
52,900	6,092,000	498,000	409,000	170,000	-209,000	371,000	1,126,000

Source: WCD, May 2017

The Roman Catholic Church dominates the Christian scene in Cuba and the Cuban government maintains diplomatic relations with the Vatican in Rome. Protestants, Pentecostals, Orthodox and independent Christian groups are also in existence and a government-recognized Cuban Council of Churches (CCC) attempts to channel relationships between the various churches.<sup>10</sup>

Today, Christians can attend church services more freely than in previous decades and this has encouraged a strong increase in the number of Protestant churches in Cuba. However, religious freedom is not recognized fully; it is rather the case that citizens are allowed to have religious beliefs. Since this right has been granted by the government, it can prohibit this right at will, especially when individuals or a group question the regime. This means that the harassment of Christian leaders, church members and their families by the Cuban authorities is still a serious problem. They quickly become victims of strict surveillance and hidden persecution, or they lose influence within their communities through the spreading of negative opinions about them.

<sup>9</sup> **Orthodox:** Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Believers who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelicals:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Renewalists:** Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal movements.

<sup>10</sup> According to the World Council of Churches, the Cuban Council of Churches has the following members: Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ, Christian Reformed Church, Church of Christ, Church of God in Cuba, Church of the Friends (Quakers), Church of the Nazarene, Congregational Pentecostal Church, Episcopal Church (Anglican), Evangelical Church Gethsemane, Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession, Fraternity of Baptist Churches of Cuba, Free Baptist Convention, Free Evangelical Church, Global Mission Church, Light of God Pentecostal Church, Methodist Church, Missionary Church of God, Pentecostal Holiness Church, Presbyterian-Reformed Church, Rural Brotherhood Church, Salvation Army. Member ecumenical groups and centers: Coordination of the Cuban Baptist Student Worker, Christian Centre for Reflection and Dialogue, Christian Peace Conference, Evangelical Theological Seminary, Information and Study Centre "Augusto Cotto" Interdenominational Fellowship of Evangelical Ministers and Pastors of Cuba, Koinonia Movement, Latin-American Ecumenical Social Action (ASEL), Memorial Centre Dr Martin Luther King, Student Christian Movement, Study Commission on the History of the Church in Latin America (CEHILA), Union of Latin-American Ecumenical Youth (ULAJE). Available at <https://www.oikoumene.org/es/member-churches/caribbean/cuba/cic>, last accessed 18 July 2017.

## Religious context (selection)

Christian	Muslim	Hindu	Buddhist	Ethno-religionist	Jewish	Bahai	Atheist & others <sup>11</sup>
7,013,000	9,300	23,600	6,200	-	830	1,200	2,371,820

Also note: Spiritist: 1,943,000; Chinese folk: 21,700 *Source: WCD, May 2017*

Minority religious groups in Cuba are dominated by the Spiritist community, but larger still are the numbers of those identifying as agnostic or atheist. In practical terms, the Cuban people are not eminently Catholic or Protestant.

## Notes on the current situation

- Christians still suffer significant restrictions concerning the purchase of property for building churches.
- As a counterpart to the regime's harassment of the Church, it is worth noting how the same regime openly supports the LGBTI agenda, thanks to the daughter of Raul Castro championing this cause.
- Some observers consider the Pope's visit in 2015 and 2016 with his warm reception by Raul Castro and the general public together with the (not entirely smooth) new relationship developing with the United States to be signals of Cuba's reintegration into Western, democratic society. However, the nation is still far from abandoning its socialist form of government.

## WWL 2018: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

**Reporting period:** 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

**WWL 2018 Points: 49 / Position: 56**

WWL 2017 Points: - / Position: -

WWL 2016 Points: - / Position: -

## Where persecution comes from

Cuba has in practice become a Communist dictatorship. Raul Castro's government and the ruling Communist Party of Cuba is trying to control the private and public life of all Cubans. Any indication of opposition to the regime by Christians or others will be investigated and dealt with harshly, especially if they are dissidents.

## How Christians are suffering

All churches are affected by government control. Compared to WWL 2017, there were more arrests of Christians attending unregistered meetings and of Christians expressing

<sup>11</sup> This category includes Atheists, Agnostics and New religionists.



disagreement with the regime in the WWL 2018 reporting period. Some Christians considered to be opponents of the regime have been removed from their jobs. In addition, secular ideology has become more influential through the imposition of LGBTI content in the educational field.

## Examples

- On 20 February 2017, police once more detained over 50 "Ladies in White" as they were on their way to attend a church service. "Ladies in White" are a peaceful opposition movement in Cuba founded in 2003 by female relatives of 75 jailed dissidents. The women protest against the imprisonments by attending Catholic Mass each Sunday wearing white clothes (the color symbolizing peace) and silently marching through the streets in a group afterwards.
- On 20 March 2017, the leader of the Christian Liberation Movement (MCL), was sentenced to three years in prison after publicly criticizing Fidel Castro, shortly after the latter's death.
- On 27 April 2017, a 20 year old Cuban student returning from the United States was arrested by the police at the airport, accused of terrorism, and later expelled from the university. He belonged to a Christian-based academic society and had submitted a report on religious freedom violations in Cuba to the United States International Religious Freedom Commission (USCIRF).
- In May 2017, Mariela Castro (daughter of the president) led a campaign to promote LGBTI content within the school curriculum. In the same month, and as a way of reinforcing the power of the regime over the Church, a special LGBTI-"Catholic communion service" was authorized, celebrated by three transgender women.

# WWL 2018: Persecution Dynamics

**Reporting period:** 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

**WWL 2018 Points: 49 / Position: 56**

WWL 2017 Points: - / Position: -

WWL 2016 Points: - / Position: -

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## Position on World Watch List (WWL)

In the WWL 2018 reporting period, Cuba reached a score of 49 points and thus remained in the group of Persecution Watch Countries, as in WWL 2017. Overall, the score has increased by 2 points, despite the score for violence decreasing. The main increase is to be seen in the *Community and National spheres of life* as a result of the worsening government hostility and repression aimed at Christians, in attempts to silence their claims for justice and freedom.

## Persecution engines

Persecution engines in Cuba <sup>12</sup>	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	Not at all
Religious nationalism	Not at all
Ethnic antagonism	Not at all
Denominational protectionism	Very weak
Communist and post-Communist oppression	Strong
Secular intolerance	Medium
Dictatorial paranoia	Very strong
Organized corruption and crime	Medium

<sup>12</sup> The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines and Drivers in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong.

**Dictatorial paranoia (Very strong):**

This is the strongest persecution engine in the country. The Communist Party was established in 1959 as a result of the successful Cuban revolution, and since then is the only constitutionally recognized party. Fidel Castro held power for a long time in the country thanks to state repression and the ensuing fear instilled. This desire for total control has continued in the appointment of his brother, Raul Castro, as his successor, who joined the army and the Communist Party in order to share power and extend the dictatorship. The desire to maintain a system of total monitoring has resulted in excessive repression and the infringement of citizens' rights. Anyone contradicting or questioning the leaders and their power - whether for reasons of faith or otherwise - suffers relentless harassment, is eventually classed as an enemy of the regime and is targeted by the State. This yearning for supreme power has also made the regime a figurehead for anti-imperialism; the government makes every effort to resist the policies of the United States or any other "interventionist" country. Many citizens have chosen to emigrate, including leaders and members of church groups, human rights activists and young people. This has led to a cultural impoverishment and makes any possible transition to a democratic regime even more difficult.

**Communist and post-Communist oppression (Strong):**

After the Cuban revolution, the country was structured as a Communist state, with a radical ideology, following the principles of Socialism as the only way to overcome underdevelopment and neo-colonial domination. Thanks to the recent and progressive opening to the world market, the main socialist aspects of the regime have gradually decreased, which has meant a major move away from the State's original policies. Nonetheless, since the country is still ruled according to Communist postulates, the idea of a paternalistic state run according to a socialist economic model remains. This model provides no possibility for private enterprise and means the continued censorship of all media and restrictions on most civil and social rights in general.

**Secular Intolerance (Medium):**

It is still common for the government to repress religious groups in particular and those who seek the defense of human rights. Since the aim of central power is to be the source of all norms and values, anyone not adhering to their dominant values is seen as a threat or enemy of the regime and is therefore to be persecuted. Additionally, the government is launching a strong LGBTI agenda through social reforms and registered "churches". The latter are members of the Cuban Council of Churches who have a liberal theology and accept LGBTI policies.

**Organized corruption and crime (Medium):**

In general, due to the strict application of the law and the severe penalties imposed, there are no large criminal networks and related issues on the island. However, regarding the problem of corruption, the Corruption Perception [Index 2016](#) ranks Cuba in the 60th position of 176, with a 47/100 score (0 responds to highly corrupt and 100 to very clean). This should not be a surprise since corruption has become a part of daily life at every level. Not only is the management of the high-level official's accounts - among other perks - totally free of any regulatory system, but most citizens are forced to "find solutions" with whatever they have at hand. In a country which lacks many commodities, virtually anything can become valuable

merchandise. Accessing the black market and bribing officials is very often the only way to get things done. Everyone, including Christians, cannot avoid taking part in this in order to survive. So when the government wants to build a case against Christians, they can easily accuse them of buying on the black market.

## Drivers of persecution

Drivers of persecution in Cuba	Level of influence
Government officials at any level from local to national	Very strong
Ethnic group leaders	Not at all
Non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Very weak
Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Weak
Violent religious groups	Not at all
Ideological pressure groups	Medium
Normal citizens (people from the general public), including mobs	Weak
Own (extended) family	Very weak
Political parties at any level from local to national	Very strong
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Not at all
Organized crime cartels or networks	Not at all
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN) and embassies	Weak

### Drivers of Dictatorial Paranoia:

The Cuban government pushes for exclusive power at all levels. The authorities attempt to control both the Cuban citizen's public and private life, which naturally affects Christians too. Through the Office of Religious Affairs (ORA), the government seeks to control every activity on the island, including church activities. This includes the strict monitoring and censorship of all church sermons in case they contain criticism of the State or statements contrary to the interests of the regime. There are a few cases in which persecution may come from the extended family, when they accuse and betray a "dissident" relative to avoid State reprisals. It is the task of Communist Party sympathizers to inform the authorities if they become aware of citizens acting "against the postulates of the regime".

### Drivers of Communist and post-Communist oppression:

Both government officials and members of the Communist Party represent a single force aiming to maintain Communist values in the country. The Castro regime seeks to remain in power through the indoctrination of children and youth and through the repression of any kind of expression contrary to the interests of the regime. This particularly affects those sectors of the Church that oppose such radical measures. As a result they are labelled "traitors", "dissidents" or "opponents". Education is still regarded as the best method to win future supporters and is the reason why state education is mandatory. No other kind of education is possible in the country.

**Drivers of Secular intolerance:**

In the repressive context of the country, secularist ideology is driven mainly by the government, the Communist Party and ideological pressure groups such as the LGBTI community. Together they seek to influence society by distorting the content of Christian faith and try to show how Christian values are outdated and increasingly insignificant for individuals, family and society in general. A new (anti-Christian) system of values is thus becoming widely accepted in Cuban society, probably due to the sense of autonomy and freedom it gives in a country otherwise filled to the brim with repression and excessive state control of private life.

**Drivers of Organized corruption and crime:**

Although there is no great presence of criminal networks on the island, the level of corruption among government officials and members of the Communist Party represent a risk for all citizens, since this is the main cause of legal uncertainty. This is especially the case for Christians when they do not collaborate with the regime or express faith-based opinions against the Party. They are then often threatened, beaten and imprisoned, with perpetrators enjoying impunity.

In addition, as a result of the economic crisis, most citizens, including Christians, are forced to resort to illegal means to obtain basic services and commodities to survive, sacrificing their religious principles. When this happens, it is easy for the authorities to accuse and prosecute them.

## Context

Cuba is one of the few remaining Communist regimes in the world. In 2006, Fidel Castro, the country's leader (who died in 2016) was replaced by his brother Raul as leader of the government, but the regime stayed essentially the same, and any groups hoping for change were disappointed. It continues to isolate itself from the rest of the world and to function through totalitarian control. However, despite the progress made by former US-President Barack Obama in improving the relationship between the USA and Cuba, US-President Donald Trump announced a series of measures in 2017 that represented a great setback. Cuba, for its part, responded by stating that even though the US-president had justified the change of policy due to human rights concerns, any strategy aimed at changing the political, economic and social system in Cuba would be doomed to failure. Unfortunately, the new measures adopted by President Trump will greatly affect the Cuban economy, especially families dependent on small tourist businesses.

Restrictions on freedom of expression are still a serious problem in Cuba, not to mention the arbitrary detentions and unjust measures taken against critics of the regime: activists, journalists, artists, political opponents and Christian groups.

Due to the limits on church activities and the impossibility of making Christian teaching public, religious superstition is widespread, particularly influenced by Santeria. This, in addition to the growing imposition of the LGBTI agenda in the country, threatens to further alienate the Cuban community from basic Christian values in their daily lives.

In general, intolerance and repression affect anyone who is considered an opponent or a possible threat to the regime. Besides Christianity, other religious groups are also harassed and subjected to government control, especially if they are groups which have only recently emerged in the country.

## Christian communities and how they are affected

### Communities of expatriate Christians:

This category does not exist in Cuba.

### Historical Christian communities:

These are mainly Roman Catholic churches, but there is a small Orthodox and a growing Protestant community too. These religious communities are monitored and suffer State persecution wherever the values preached by them oppose Communist ideology.

### Communities of converts to Christianity:

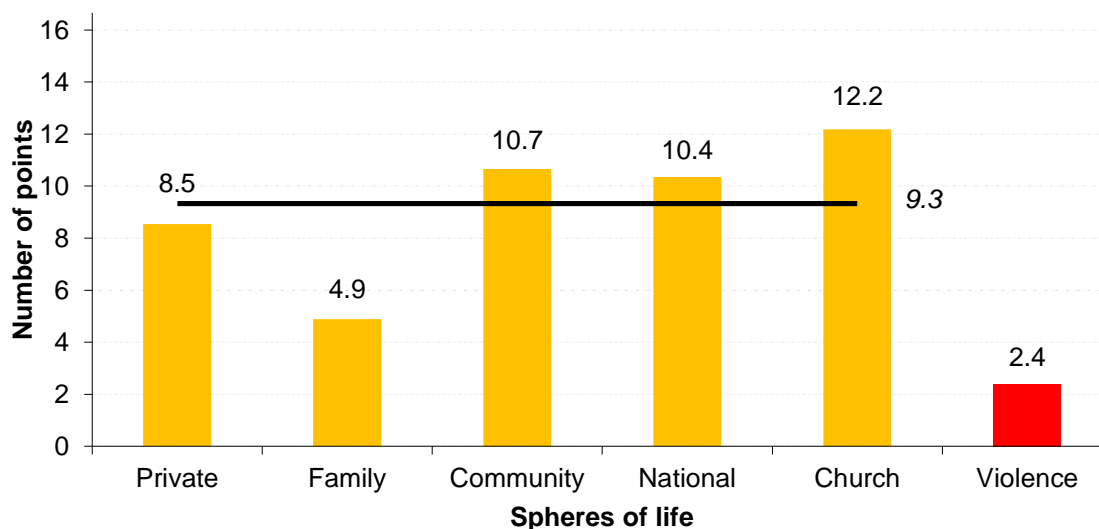
These are converts from Santeria and the Communist Party. Converts are also persecuted and rejected by members of society, who may denounce them so that the State (or the regime's own sympathizers) may retaliate.

### Non-traditional Christian communities:

This category is made up of Pentecostal and Evangelical groups. They represent a minority and have very little protection from State interference.

## Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence

WWL 2018 Persecution Pattern for Cuba



(The maximum score for each block is 16.7)

The WWL 2018 Persecution pattern for Cuba shows:

- The average pressure on Christians in Cuba is 9.3, an increase from 8.7 in WWL 2017. This rise is due in part to more information being available in the WWL 2018 reporting period.
- Pressure is strongest in the Church sphere (very high: 12.2), Community sphere (high: 10.7) and National sphere (high: 10.4) due to the constant and intense mechanisms of repression set up by the Cuban government and its supporters to control the Church and those Christians who could represent a threat to the regime.
- The score for violence in WWL 2018 is 2.4, decreasing from 3.5 in WWL 2017. This decrease is due to the government targeting specific “problematic” Christians (i.e. those considered as opponents of the regime) instead of focusing on Christians in general.

#### **Private sphere:**

Conversion, private worship and using religious materials is permitted when this is not aimed at proselytism or when talking about Christian faith does not include denouncing the injustices of the regime. It is worth mentioning that, although Christians can attend church services more freely than in previous decades (and this has encouraged a strong increase in the number of Protestant churches in Cuba), in general the adherence to any religion is still discouraged by authorities.

#### **Family sphere:**

One of the main threats to Christian life in the home is the indoctrination of children at the state schools, which provides a Communist and atheistic education, with no possibility of parental home-schooling or extra-curricular catechism. If this does take place, parents are imprisoned and separated from their children<sup>13</sup>. Additionally, it is possible that members of the family who support the regime may distance themselves from those relatives who do not. This is because government oppression affects not only dissidents but also the entire family. Those who stand up for victims of political imprisonment (e.g. The Ladies in White group) will also be harassed by the government if they denounce the mistreatment and unjust imprisonment of a family member. In such cases, spouses are separated from each other and from their children. They are also sometimes repressed, censored and in some cases beaten.

#### **Community sphere:**

Cuban Christians cannot express their religious beliefs freely because they run the risk of being discriminated against and threatened by neighborhood committees, who report anything that may seem “subversive” to the authorities. Also, in academic and journalistic fields of work, it is possible that a Christian can be pressured into renouncing his/her faith and be accused or even fired for anti-Communist conversation. As already stated above, poverty and the lack of access to basic goods provoke behavior within the community where people – including Christians –

<sup>13</sup> Regarding education, the Penal Code lists punishment for anyone who “leads a child to leave home, to absent himself from school, to reject the educational work inherent in the national education system” which means that parents cannot teach their children according to their faith without government action being taken against them.

are forced to buy food or medicine on the black market, for instance. Such unlawful acts are then used by the authorities for prosecuting Christians.

**National sphere:**

According to the Constitution, “the state recognizes, respects, and guarantees freedom of religion”, and states: “different beliefs and religions enjoy the same considerations under the law”. Thus the Constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion; however, this does not happen in practice. The government and the Communist Party monitor religious groups through the Office of Religious Affairs (ORA) and control most aspects of religious life. Groups that fail to register may face penalties ranging from fines to closure of their organizations. On the other hand, small businesses are allowed to exist but face many restrictions, especially on their growth. Christians running small businesses must stay under the radar and business loans from outside Cuba (e.g. from missionary organizations) are not welcomed by the government.

Among the oppressive measures taken by the regime against Christians are the limiting of exit visas, the need for all publications to be registered, the limiting of foreign Christian workers entering the country, the restricting of bank accounts to one per denomination or association and extreme bureaucracy regarding the authorization of permits etc. It is important to point out that these measures also apply to human rights defenders, activists, journalists, students, teachers, politicians, Christian leaders and anyone who tries to question or disagree with the regime’s ideals or practices. And if that was not enough, none of this is publicly reported since there is no freedom of press on the island.

The government also restricts Christian ministry by denying access to information and the internet, not to mention the constant surveillance of all communications. What the government does promote is the [LGBTI agenda](#)<sup>14</sup>. The daughter of the Cuban President Raul Castro is a keen advocate of both the regime and the LGBTI community. This government support allows LGBTI groups to carry out various activities such as the highly publicized celebration of Holy Communion officiated by a transgender pastor – an act of total [disrespect](#)<sup>15</sup> towards the religious sensitivity of Cuban Christians.

The Islamic community is growing and actively recruiting and converting Cubans from other religions with the government’s endorsement. Such support is not shown towards Christians.

**Church sphere:**

Although officially an independent organ, the Cuban Council of Churches adheres in practice to all government decisions. At times the regime intervenes in the designation of denominational leaders. Since the Council is thus not completely autonomous, many Christian groups do not feel represented by them. In general, church activities are limited by the many restrictions such as the short supply of Christian materials, the prohibition of attending the funeral of a dissident, the total control of the media (which means no Christian teaching can be broadcast),

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<sup>14</sup> See: <http://www.elnuevodiario.com.ni/actualidad/426579-cuba-lanza-campana-acoso-homofobico-transfobico-es/>, last accessed 19 September 2017.

<sup>15</sup> See: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-cuba-lgbt-church/communist-ruled-cuba-hosts-first-transgender-mass-idUSKBN1830EZ>, last accessed 19 September 2017.



the pressure against pastors and other Christians to stop evangelizing, the difficulties of printing Christian literature locally and of operating websites without censorship. However, the Roman Catholic Church has continued to publish periodicals and hold regular forums at the Varela Center that sometimes criticized official social and economic policies.

Many Christian groups use private homes as house-churches in response to restrictions on constructing new buildings. Permission for street evangelism and processions - although occasionally granted - is the exception rather than the rule. Also, the preaching and ministry of churches and Christian leaders are under constant surveillance. There are restrictions regarding the right to assembly and the right of freedom of speech, which means it is a risk for Christian groups to meet, especially if they wish to discuss the current social or political situation. Attempts at training church leaders in social issues and human rights - especially if this involves young people - cannot happen publicly because it could result in government reprisals. Such reprisals may consist of denying permits, dismantling buildings used for Christian ministry, or other measures that could limit the growth of the groups, not to mention the threats against their family and friends.

Despite such serious limitations, the Catholic Church does not remain indifferent to current issues. The Cuban Catholic leaders maintain a prudent attitude towards government policies in order to safeguard institutional dialogue and act as a mediator. This has provoked criticism from broad sectors of internal and external dissidence, which accuse it of collusion with the regime and of not using its capacity to influence a change of government.

### Violence:

There have been incidents of physical violence and of psychological and economical measures against Christians and dissidents. The regime is relentless in attempting to control people's hearts and minds. An example of this from the WWL 2018 reporting period can be seen in the [frequent attacks](#)<sup>16</sup> against members of the "Ladies in White", who even [asked](#)<sup>17</sup> for the intercession of the Pope in their desperation. There has also been the [prosecution](#)<sup>18</sup> of a Cuban pastor for not sending his children to school, the [dismissal](#)<sup>19</sup> of a student for being a member of an illegal organization and for using social media to oppose the values of the Cuban Revolution, and the [harassment](#)<sup>20</sup> of a PhD student by State authorities for being the daughter of a member of the Patmos Institute (an organization that defends religious rights in Cuba) and for being in contact with a pastor.

<sup>16</sup> See: <http://translatingcuba.com/dissident-group-denounces-at-least-9940-arbitrary-arrests-in-cuba-in-2016-efe14ymedio/>, last accessed 19 September 2017.

<sup>17</sup> See: <https://www.cubanet.org/noticias/damas-de-blanco-piden-mediacion-del-papa-para-poder-ir-misa-en-cuba/>, last accessed 19 September 2017.

<sup>18</sup> See: <https://www.cibercuba.com/noticias/2017-03-01-u129488-e129488-cuba-juicio-familia-cristiana-negarse-sus-hijos-asistan-escuela>, last accessed 19 September 2017.

<sup>19</sup> See: <http://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-39647951>, last accessed 19 September 2017.

<sup>20</sup> See: <https://www.martinoticias.com/a/padre-denuncia-acoso-contra-hija-profesora-universidad-central-las-villas-cuba-villa-clara-142725.html>, last accessed 19 September 2017.

## Gender profile of persecution

### Female:

The regime has targeted women who denounce government practices (e.g. Ladies in White), but there is no information available about measures aimed specifically at Christian women.

### Male:

National service is compulsory for men. Although alternative forms of service are theoretically possible, in practice permission is rarely granted. The sons of dissident parents are the ones who suffer the most harassment and bullying during their two years of military service.

## Future outlook

Churches and Christian activities will continue to be monitored as long as the Communist party holds power. Although freedom for the exercise of religion has improved in some respects in recent years (e.g. conversion is no longer prohibited, the circulation of religious materials is permitted under special circumstances and, despite threats, the confiscation of church buildings has not been carried out), this does not mean that the situation for Christians is steadily improving. The Communist government's control is firmly rooted and its values have influenced the culture of Cuban society. Christian education is out of the question. This will continue to be a particularly difficult challenge for Christian families since they will have to find ways of passing on their faith and values to their children without being imprisoned or separated from them.

Authoritarianism, state corruption and poverty are likely to increase as the current US administration has chosen to close its doors on Cuba. In this scenario, ordinary citizens will suffer the most, especially those considered dissidents or enemies of the regime. Combined with the media censorship, this will make it even harder for violations of human rights on the island to be made public. However, Christian leaders and communities will continue their Christian ministry as they have done in the past, despite all hurdles.

It is worth mentioning the critical humanitarian situation caused by Hurricane Irma which hit the northern and central provinces of Cuba in September 2017. This natural disaster worsened the already vulnerable position of the Cuban population throughout the country. The selfless assistance offered by churches was an opportunity for Christians to show themselves as an ally and not as a threat to the Cuban government.

Finally, many expect that the elections due in 2018 may bring real change. It is hoped that the new mandate will lead to greater openness and a progressive abandonment of Communist policies and, above all, that the desire for total control and repression be set aside to allow the flourishing of Christian faith on the island. It is hoped that any new government will seek to benefit the citizens, not the regime, and this will require a greater openness inside and outside Cuba's borders. Such a vision would allow international exchange and cooperation, in which the requirement of human rights and freedom are not regarded as a reason for punishment. For the persecuted Church, such a scenario would give an opportunity to cooperate freely with the authorities, to work together without fear or oppression for the country's well-being.

## Policy considerations

- As a sign of openness and international cooperation, the State must be encouraged to ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. This will entail the obligation and accountability at international level for the promotion and guarantee of the social and political rights of its inhabitants, including religious freedom.
- As a sign of openness and international cooperation, the Cuban government should also permit the visit of a United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief. This visit is especially important given that the regime is currently unwilling to provide accurate information on the status quo of its citizens' human rights - including the right to religious freedom. Fresh and objective insights from an independent third party should be an urgent priority.
- The international community should ensure a common effort to engage in direct negotiation with the leaders of the Cuban government - at all levels – with the goal of making it possible for Christians to carry out their activities in the country without being harassed, threatened or imprisoned. This will have repercussions on the free exercise of the right to religious freedom since, as is well known, the fear of these reprisals by the government is a latent obstacle to this right. These measures will encourage real protection and seek to guarantee freedom of worship on the Island.
- The international community must work with neighboring countries to facilitate the return of those displaced for religious reasons, as well as for the effective restoration of their rights and those of their families. This should include allowing parents to educate their children according to their beliefs and prevent them from being imprisoned or separated from their families.
- The international community should exert pressure on the US-government to end its restrictive new policies, especially those on trade and travel since they directly affect the general population instead of those holding power. This would benefit the activities of the churches on the island: Not only would it increase the sending of donations and materials for worship, for instance, but would also make exchange visits by Christian leaders possible, thus enriching the Christian community.
- The international community should seek opportunities for dialogue with current government representatives to recommend and implement - as far as possible - all the necessary mechanisms for a transparent election in 2018. A transparent electoral process will encourage the election of leaders who respond to the true needs of the people, especially the vulnerable, including Christian groups and political prisoners.

## WWR in-depth reports

In-depth reports are available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/> (password: freedom).

- Latin America – Challenges to religious freedom – 2015  
September 2015  
12 page report offering an in-depth discussion of the specific vulnerability of Latin American Christians in suffering human rights abuses. A section on Cuba is included.

## Open Doors article(s) from the region

There are currently no Open Doors articles on Cuba available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/articles/> (password freedom).

## World Watch Monitor news articles

Up-to-date articles are available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/cuba/>

- Cuba's new leader 'not a reformer'  
19 April 2018  
Miguel Díaz-Canel takes on an historic leadership role by becoming the first president outside the Castro clan to lead the government.
- Cuban Christmas: Silent night – because walls have ears  
31 December 2017  
Christmas in communist Cuba is a quiet affair; you won't hear carols in the streets or on television, except for during one concert involving the Churches that is broadcast on Christmas Day.
- 'Castro's death won't end repression of Cuban Church'  
1 December 2016  
The death of Cuba's revolutionary leader Fidel Castro will not reduce the harassment and surveillance to which the Church is already subjected, an analyst at the charity Open Doors has warned.

## Recent country developments

Up-to-date articles are available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=cuba> (password: freedom).

- [Cuba: Brand new president, same old pressure](#)  
17 May 2018  
There have been numerous arrests of members of the activist group, Ladies in White. The arrests in May took place as the women were on their way to a church service.
- [Cuba/Venezuela: Church leaders face harassment](#)  
25 April 2018  
The continued growth of Protestant churches in Cuba has caused the government irritation and led to an increase in the number of arrests of church leaders in recent months.
- [Cuba: Christians highlight lack of freedom](#)  
16 March 2018  
Three Catholic priests have written an open letter addressed to Raul Castro in which they point out the lack of freedom for Cubans, the difficult economic situation and the need to guarantee Cubans their political and religious rights.
- [Cuba: Activists arrested in wake of Hurricane Irma](#)  
16 October 2017  
At least 40 “Ladies in White” have been arrested in La Havana, Matanzas, Guantanamo and Palma Soriano and prevented from attending church services.
- [Cuba: Government harassment of opposition voices continues](#)  
26 September 2017  
Leticia Ramos, member of the “Ladies in White” protest group, was charged with disrespecting an official of the state security.
- [Cuba: House-arrest for home-schooling](#)  
2 September 2017  
Pastor Ramon Rigal was sentenced in April 2017 to one-year imprisonment, then put instead under house arrest and banned from serving as a church leader because he and his wife had begun home-schooling their children to avoid the anti-Christian ideology pervasive in state schools.
- [Cuba: Ladies in White seek Pope’s help](#)  
5 August 2017  
The “Ladies in White” movement has sent a petition to Pope Francis in Rome asking that he request the Cuban government to respect their wish to attend Sunday church services.

- [Cuba: Paying the price for defending religious rights](#)  
5 July 2017  
The Cuban Ministry of Higher Education has ratified the expulsion of Professor Dalila Rodriguez from the University of Las Villas, thus revoking her status as teacher. This measure is the result of continued harassment she has experienced because of her father's involvement in running the Patmos Institute, an independent organization defending religious rights in Cuba.
- [Cuba: Imprisoned Christian under pressure from security agents](#)  
15 June 2017  
Eduardo Cardet Concepcion, leader of the Christian Liberation Movement (MCL), was sentenced on 20 March 2017 to three years in prison, "charged with attacking an official of the state" after publicly criticizing Fidel Castro shortly after his death.
- [Cuba: Transgender women proudly lead church service](#)  
28 May 2017  
Cuba has made history by being the first country in which a Catholic Communion service was led by 3 transgender women.
- [Cuba: How the state deals with opposition voices](#)  
27 May 2017  
In Cuba there are currently 140 prison inmates convicted for political reasons.
- [Cuba: Campaign to promote LGBTI issues in schools](#)  
21 May 2017  
The National Sexual Education Center of Cuba is to begin a campaign against homophobic and transphobic bullying in schools in cooperation with civil society organizations and the Ministry of Education.
- [Cuba: State authorities remove opposition from universities](#)  
3 May 2017  
A first-year student of journalism has been thrown out of university for being a member of an illegal organization and for using social media to oppose the values of the Cuban Revolution.
- [Cuba: Christian trial and interrogations](#)  
27 March 2017  
A Cuban pastor and his wife are due to be prosecuted for not sending their children to school. Pastor Rigal argues that they do not want an atheist education for their children.
- [Cuba: 'Ladies in White' arrested again](#)  
14 March 2017  
Police detained more than 50 "Ladies in White" as they were on their way to attend a church service. "Ladies in White" are an opposition movement in Cuba founded in 2003 by female relatives of 75 jailed dissidents.

- Cuba: Religious freedom for Iranian Shiite missionaries, but not for Christians  
7 November 2016  
Cuba is the most recent and unlikely addition to Iran’s growing network of missionary centers.

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