



Freedom in the World - Cuba (2011)

Capital: Havana

Population:
11,225,000

Political Rights Score: 7 *

Civil Liberties Score: 6 *

Status: Not Free

Overview

After prolonged negotiations with the Roman Catholic Church and the Spanish government, Cuban authorities in 2010 began releasing the 52 remaining political prisoners from a 2003 crackdown on independent journalists and dissidents. In September, the government announced that it would lay off 500,000 employees, about 10 percent of the country's labor force, and opened 178 activities and professions for self-employment and private cooperatives. In November, President Raúl Castro announced that the long-delayed sixth congress of the Cuban Communist Party would be held in April 2011.

Cuba achieved independence from Spain in 1898 as a result of the Spanish-American War. The Republic of Cuba was established in 1902 but remained under U.S. tutelage until 1934. In 1959, the U.S.-supported dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista, who had ruled Cuba for 18 of the previous 25 years, was overthrown by Fidel Castro's July 26th Movement. Castro declared his affiliation with communism shortly thereafter, and the island has been governed by a one-party state ever since.

Following the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of roughly \$5 billion in annual Soviet subsidies, Castro opened some sectors of the economy to direct foreign investment. The legalization of the U.S. dollar in 1993 created a new source of inequality, as access to dollars from remittances or through the tourist industry enriched some, while the majority continued to live on peso wages averaging less than \$10 a month. Meanwhile, the authorities remained highly intolerant of political dissent, enacting harsh new sedition legislation in 1999 and mounting a series of campaigns to undermine the reputations of leading opposition figures by portraying them as agents of the United States.

In 2002, the Varela Project, a referendum initiative seeking broad changes in the socialist system, won significant international recognition. However, the referendum proposal was rejected by the constitutional committee of the National Assembly, and the government instead held a counter-referendum in which 8.2 million people supposedly declared the socialist system to be "untouchable." The government initiated a crackdown on the prodemocracy opposition in March 2003. Seventy-five people, including 27 independent journalists, 14 independent librarians, and dozens of signature collectors for the Varela Project, were sentenced to an average of 20 years in prison following one-day trials held in April.

On July 31, 2006, Fidel Castro passed power on a provisional basis to his younger brother, defense minister and first vice president Raúl Castro, after internal bleeding forced him to undergo surgery and begin a slow convalescence. The 81-year-old Fidel resigned as president in February 2008, and Raúl, 76, formally replaced him. Though officially retired, Fidel continued to write provocative newspaper columns and remained in the public eye through the release of carefully selected photographs and video clips.

The government approved a series of economic reforms in March 2008. These included allowing ordinary Cubans to buy consumer electronic goods and stay in the country's top tourist hotels. After introducing a plan in April that permitted thousands of Cubans to receive titles to their homes, the government eliminated salary caps and raised pensions for the country's more than two million retirees. The state also began granting farmers a larger role in decisions about land use. In late August and early September, however, Cuba was struck by two hurricanes, and a global

economic downturn began shortly thereafter, sending the Cuban economy into a crisis that halted the tentative reform process.

In 2009, the government began to distribute land leases to agricultural workers, but other key aspects of the reform agenda remained stalled. Cuba's heavy dependence on imports led to a shortage of foreign exchange, forcing layoffs and closures at many state enterprises, and the threat of blackouts led to electricity rationing during the summer.

Raúl Castro continued a series of significant cabinet shuffles in 2010, removing the minister of basic industries in September. The changes, which had begun in 2008, included the appointment of an unprecedented number of military officers to lead key economic ministries responsible for transport, the sugar industry, and CIMEX, the largest state-owned corporation in Cuba.

The authorities also pressed forward with economic reforms during the year. In August the government approved an initiative that allowed foreign investors to obtain 99-year property leases. In a September interview with a U.S. magazine, Fidel Castro declared that the "Cuban economic model doesn't even work for us anymore," a statement that was widely interpreted as a show of support for his brother's reform efforts. A few days later it was announced that more than half a million workers, or 10 percent of the country's labor force, would be laid off from public-sector jobs, while 178 economic activities would be opened up to self-employment and private-sector participation. In October the government began issuing licenses for self-employment (*cuentapropistas*). It also stated that entrepreneurs would be levied a 35 percent income tax, among other taxes, and that rural and other cooperatives would receive further incentives. Officials announced in November that the long-delayed sixth congress of the Cuban Communist Party would be held in April 2011, with the stated aim of discussing the direction and content of the ongoing economic restructuring.

Cuba continued to deny political and civil liberties to regime opponents in 2010. However, harassment and short-term detentions replaced long prison terms as the preferred form of repression, and some dissidents won reprieves from the government. In February, imprisoned dissident Orlando Zapata Tamayo died after a hunger strike he had begun in December. Other political prisoners began their own hunger strikes amid international outrage over the death. Negotiations between the Cuban government, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Spanish government subsequently resulted in a July agreement to release the remaining 52 of the 75 political prisoners jailed in 2003.

U.S. government contractor Alan Gross, who had been arrested in December 2009 for distributing communications equipment to religious organizations, remained behind bars in 2010 without formal charges being filed. Meanwhile, despite ongoing bilateral negotiations, the U.S. government took no concrete steps to remove travel and other restrictions on the island.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Cuba is not an electoral democracy. Longtime president Fidel Castro and his brother, current president Raúl Castro, dominate the one-party political system, in which the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC) controls all government entities. The 1976 constitution provides for a National Assembly, which designates the Council of State. That body in turn appoints the Council of Ministers in consultation with its president, who serves as chief of state and head of government. Raúl Castro is now president of the Council of Ministers and the Council of State, and commander in chief of the armed forces. As of 2010, Fidel was presumed to remain first secretary of the PCC. The most recent PCC congress was held in 1997; in November 2010, the next congress was scheduled for April 2011.

In the January 2008 National Assembly elections, as in previous elections, voters were asked to either support or reject a single candidate for each of the 614 seats. All candidates received the requisite 50 percent approval, with Raúl Castro winning support from over 99 percent of voters. In April 2010, Cuba held elections for the approximately 15,000 delegates to the country's 169 Popular Municipal Assemblies, or municipal councils, which are elected every two and a half years.

All political organizing outside the PCC is illegal. Political dissent, whether spoken or written, is a

punishable offense, and dissidents frequently receive years of imprisonment for seemingly minor infractions. The regime has also called on its neighbor-watch groups, known as Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, to strengthen vigilance against "antisocial behavior," a euphemism for opposition activity. Dissident leaders have reported intimidation and harassment by state-sponsored groups. The absolute number of political prisoners in Cuba decreased from 201 in 2009 to 167 in July 2010. The government agreed in July to release the remaining 52 people arrested in the March 2003 crackdown on independent journalists, librarians, and other activists. Those released went into exile in Spain, but the government missed a November 7 deadline for all 52 to be released, as a final group of 13 prisoners refused to agree to leave Cuba. As of December 2010, the November deadline still had not been met. The Damas de Blanco, a group of female relatives of the 2003 political prisoners, continued their protests during the year despite repeated episodes of harassment from authorities and regime supporters. Meanwhile, 12 "prisoners of conscience" remained in Cuba under "extra-penal" license, a form of parole granted to prisoners facing health or other problems that may have arisen during their incarceration.

Official corruption remains a serious problem, with a culture of illegality shrouding the mixture of private and state-controlled economic activities that are allowed on the island. The Raúl Castro government has made the fight against corruption an important priority. In July 2010, Chilean businessman and former Castro associate Max Marambio was summoned to Havana to testify in an investigation of alleged fraud in a joint Cuban-Chilean agribusiness enterprise after his representative in Havana was found dead in his apartment in April; Marambio never appeared to testify in Havana. Chilean authorities declined to carry out an interrogation, citing irregularities in the process. Cuba was ranked 69 out of 178 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2010 Corruption Perceptions Index.

The news media are controlled by the state and the PCC. The government considers the independent press to be illegal and uses Ministry of Interior agents to infiltrate and report on the outlets in question. Independent journalists, particularly those associated with the dozen small news agencies that have been established outside state control, are subjected to terms of hard labor and assaults by state security agents. Foreign news agencies may only hire local reporters through government offices, limiting employment opportunities for independent journalists. Nevertheless, some state media, such as the newspaper *Juventud Rebelde*, have begun to cover previously taboo topics, such as corruption in the health and education sectors.

Access to the internet remains tightly controlled, and it is difficult for most Cubans to connect from their homes. Websites are closely monitored, and while there are state-owned internet cafes in major cities, the costs are prohibitive for most residents. Only select state employees have workplace access to e-mail and restricted access to websites deemed inappropriate by the Ministry of Communications. There are an estimated 25 independent, journalistic bloggers working on the island. Although they have faced some episodes of harassment, they have avoided close links to dissidents and are not subject to the same type of systematic persecution as other independent journalists. Blogger Yoani Sánchez has emerged as a worldwide celebrity, though few within Cuba can access the ironic and critical musings about life in Cuba on her popular blog, *Generation Y*.

In 1991, Roman Catholics and other believers were granted permission to join the PCC, and the constitutional reference to official atheism was dropped the following year. The Catholic Church has been playing an increasingly important civil society role, mediating in the case of the 2003 political prisoners, enabling discussion of topics of public concern, and offering material assistance to the population, especially in the countryside. In November 2010, the Church inaugurated its first seminary in the country since the 1959 revolution. However, official obstacles to religious freedom remain substantial. Churches are not allowed to conduct ordinary educational activities, and many church-based publications are subject to censorship by the Office of Religious Affairs. While Roman Catholicism is the traditionally dominant faith, an estimated 70 percent of the population practices some form of Afro-Cuban religion. And as in the rest of Latin America, Protestantism is making rapid gains in Cuba.

The government restricts academic freedom. Teaching materials for subjects including mathematics and literature must contain ideological content. Affiliation with PCC structures is generally needed to gain access to educational institutions, and students' report cards carry information regarding

their parents' involvement with the party.

Limited rights of assembly and association are permitted under the constitution. However, as with other constitutional rights, they may not be "exercised against the existence and objectives of the Socialist State." The unauthorized assembly of more than three people, even for religious services in private homes, is punishable with up to three months in prison and a fine. This rule is selectively enforced and is often used to imprison human rights advocates. Workers do not have the right to strike or bargain collectively. Members of independent labor unions, which the government considers illegal, are often harassed, dismissed from their jobs, and barred from future employment.

The Council of State, led by Raúl Castro, controls both the courts and the judicial process as a whole. Beginning in 1991, the United Nations voted annually to assign a special investigator on human rights to Cuba, which consistently denied the appointee a visa. In 2007, the UN Human Rights Council ended the investigator position for Cuba. However, Raúl Castro authorized Cuban representatives to sign two UN human rights treaties in February 2008. Cuba does not grant international humanitarian organizations access to its prisons.

Afro-Cubans have frequently complained about widespread discrimination by government and law enforcement officials. Many Afro-Cubans have only limited access to the dollar-earning sectors of the economy, such as tourism and joint ventures with foreign companies.

Freedom of movement and the right to choose one's residence and place of employment are severely restricted. Attempting to leave the island without permission is a punishable offense. Intercity migration or relocation requires permission from the local Committee for the Defense of the Revolution and other authorities. Recent economic reforms offering a variety of incentives for rural production hint at a possible attempt to stem the historical tide of migration from the countryside to Havana.

Only state enterprises can enter into economic agreements with foreigners as minority partners; ordinary citizens cannot participate. PCC membership is still required to obtain good jobs, suitable housing, and real access to social services, including medical care and educational opportunities.

Cuba positioned itself at the forefront of the gay rights movement in Latin America in 2008, due in part to the advocacy of Mariela Castro, Raúl Castro's daughter. The government helped to sponsor an International Day Against Homophobia that featured shows, lectures, panel discussions, and book presentations, while the Ministry of Public Health authorized government-provided sex-change surgeries for transsexuals. By 2009, officials were debating the possible approval of artificial insemination for lesbians who wished to bear children. Cuba had already been considered the best performer in Latin America in terms of gender equality. About 40 percent of all women work in the official labor force, and they are well represented in most professions.

**Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom. Click [here](#) for a full explanation of Freedom in the World methodology.*