



Freedom in the World - Cuba (2010)

Capital:
Havana

Population:
11,225,000

Political Rights Score: 7 *

Civil Liberties Score: 6 *

Status: Not Free

Overview

In March 2009, President Raul Castro fired several prominent cabinet ministers amid a worsening economic crisis. Also during the year, former leader Fidel Castro appeared to regain his health and wrote frequent essays in the state press, sparking speculation that his renewed influence could slow Cuba's reform process. In November, noted blogger Yoani Sanchez reported being beaten and intimidated by suspected government agents. Cuban authorities in December arrested a U.S. contractor for distributing communications equipment to religious groups, although he remained in detention without being formally charged.

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 some \$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.

The authorities remained highly intolerant of political dissent. In 1999, the government introduced harsh sedition legislation, with a maximum prison sentence of 20 years. It stipulated penalties for unauthorized contacts with the United States and the import or distribution of "subversive" materials, including texts on democracy and material from news agencies and journalists. The government also undertook 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

decades-old 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 counterreferendum 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 Raul Castro, after serious internal bleeding forced him to undergo emergency surgery and begin a slow convalescence. The 81-year-old Fidel resigned as president in February 2008, and Raul, 76, formally replaced him. The new president appointed 77-year-old Jose Ramon Machado, a top Communist Party apparatchik, as the new first vice president and named 72-year-old Julio Casas as the new defense minister. Though officially retired, Fidel continued to write provocative columns in the newspaper *Granma*, and he remained in the public eye through the release of a small number 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 in rapid succession by hurricanes Gustav and Ike; more than 100,000 homes were damaged, and 30 percent of the country's crops were destroyed. Combined with the global economic downturn that began shortly thereafter, the storms sent the Cuban economy into a dire 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.

In March, Raul Castro dismissed Vice President Carlos Lage and Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque as part of a major cabinet shakeup. Fidel Castro later accused the two figures of being seduced by “the honey of power.” In all, 10 cabinet officials were replaced, and the president subsequently postponed the long-overdue Sixth Party Congress, a major leadership conference that had been scheduled for the second half of 2009. Fidel's health and influence seemed to improve during the year, casting further doubts on Raul's initial policies.

Cuba continued to deny political and civil liberties to regime opponents in 2009. According to the Cuban Commission on Human Rights, a nongovernmental group, the number of political prisoners grew slightly to 208 by mid-2009, but had declined to 201 by year's end. Harassment and short-term detentions replaced long prison terms as the preferred form of repression, although some dissidents won reprieves from the government. In June, prominent dissident and neurosurgeon Hilda Molina was granted a long-sought exit visa so that she could join family members in Argentina; the move, which came just before elections in Argentina, indicated a political compromise between Argentine and Cuban leaders. In October, political prisoners Nelson Alberto Aguiar Ramirez and Omelio Lazaro Angulo Borrero, who had been arrested in the 2003 crackdown, were released following an intercession on their behalf by the visiting Spanish foreign minister. Several dissident groups praised the government's decision to allow Colombian pop singer Juanes to organize a major Havana concert promoting "Peace Without Borders," which took place in September with more than one million Cubans in attendance.

In April, the administration of newly elected U.S. president Barack Obama repealed all restrictions on the ability of Cuban Americans to visit Cuba or send money to their Cuban relatives. In June, the United States joined in the repeal of a 1962 resolution that had suspended Cuba's membership in the Organization of American States, but the Castro government rejected any interest in rejoining the group. Nevertheless, diplomatic contacts between the United States and Cuba increased during the year, including the resumption of stalled bilateral migration talks and negotiations on the restoration of direct postal service. The tentative thaw in U.S.-Cuban relations was threatened in December, when Cuban authorities arrested U.S. contractor Alan Gross, reportedly for distributing communications equipment to religious nongovernmental organizations. While Cuban officials publicly claimed that Gross was a "spy," he remained in detention without being formally charged.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Cuba is not an electoral democracy. Longtime president Fidel Castro and his brother, current president Raul 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. Raul Castro is now president of the Council of Ministers and the Council of State, and commander in chief of the armed forces, while Fidel remains first secretary of the PCC. The most recent PCC congress was held in 1997; the next one, which is more than six years overdue, has been indefinitely postponed.

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 Raul Castro winning support from over 99 percent of voters.

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. Several dissident leaders have reported intimidation and harassment by state-sponsored groups. The absolute number of political prisoners in Cuba decreased slightly from 205 to 201 during 2009. By year's end, 53 of the 75 people arrested in the March 2003 crackdown on independent journalists, librarians, and other activists remained behind bars. In November, former political prisoner Marta Beatriz Roque led a small group of dissidents on an eight-day hunger strike that ended amid serious health concerns.

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. Cuba was ranked 61 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2009 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 ongoing repression, including 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. Nearly two dozen of the independent journalists arrested in March 2003 remain imprisoned in degrading conditions, including physical and psychological abuse; acts of harassment and intimidation have also been directed against their families. 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. Cuban blogger Yoani Sanchez has emerged as a worldwide celebrity, though few on the island can access the ironic and critical musings about life in Cuba on her popular blog, Generation Y. In 2009, the Cuban government denied her a visa to receive Columbia University's prestigious Maria Moors Cabot Prize for Latin American journalism in New York, and in November Sanchez reported that she and another opposition blogger, Orlando Luis Pardo Lazo, were forced into a car, beaten, and denounced as "counterrevolutionaries" by three men they assumed to be government agents.

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. However, official obstacles to religious freedom remain substantial. Churches are not allowed to conduct educational activities, and 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.

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. In the March 2003 crackdown, security forces raided 22 independent libraries and sent 14 librarians to prison with terms of up to 26 years. Many were charged with working with the United States to subvert the Cuban government.

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 Raul 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, Raul Castro authorized Cuban representatives to sign two UN human rights treaties in February 2008. Cuba does not grant the International Committee of the Red Cross or other humanitarian organizations access to its prisons.

Afro-Cubans have frequently complained about widespread discrimination against them 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.

In the post-Soviet era, 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. In April 2008, the government eliminated wage caps and said it would begin moving toward a system in which pay was more closely linked with productivity. Also that year, it lifted a nine-year ban on privately operated taxis, and opened up unused land to private farmers and cooperatives, giving producers greater freedom to manage their lands and set their own prices. Farmers are now able to buy their own basic supplies, rather than rely on state provisions, for the first time since the 1960s. In July 2009, the government began to implement a massive land distribution program that resulted in the approval of 78,113 leases.

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, Raul Castro's daughter. In May, the government helped to sponsor an International Day Against Homophobia that featured shows, lectures, panel discussions, and book presentations. The Ministry of Public Health in June authorized government-provided sex-change surgeries for transsexuals, a move that provoked a strong protest from the Catholic Church. By 2009, 19 individuals had been identified as meeting the requirements for the surgery, and officials were debating the possible approval of artificial insemination for lesbians who wished to bear children. Cuba had already ranked well on gender equality; about 40 percent of all women work, 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.*