

Freedom in the World 2024



header1 Overview

Cuba's one-party communist state outlaws political pluralism, bans independent media, suppresses dissent, and severely restricts basic civil liberties. The government continues to dominate the economy despite recent reforms that permit some private-sector activity. The regime's undemocratic character has not changed despite the generational transition in political leadership that started in 2018 and included the introduction of a new constitution and the gradual passage of complementary new legislation.

header2 Key Developments 2023

- Parliamentary elections were held in March, garnering the lowest voter turnout since 1993. Incumbent president Miguel Díaz-Canel Bermúdez was reelected the following month in a nearly unanimous National Assembly vote.
- The country's economic crisis deepened during the year, with growing inflation and poverty rates, fuel and food shortages, and frequent power cuts. The ongoing crisis triggered occasional protests and contributed to Cuba's high emigration rates.
- In May, the National Assembly approved a new social communication law that limits speech and press freedoms by heavily restricting nonstate media and establishing vague regulations governing online content.

PR Political Rights

A Electoral Process

A1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?

0.000
4.004

Under the 2019 constitution, the president and vice president of the republic are chosen to serve up to two five-year terms by the National Assembly. The prime minister and the Council of Ministers are designated by the National Assembly upon the president's recommendation. In practice, these processes ratify candidates who have been preselected by the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC).

Miguel Díaz-Canel Bermúdez was reelected president in April 2023 in a nearly unanimous National Assembly vote. The legislature also reelected Salvador Valdés Mesa as vice president and Juan Esteban Lazo Hernández as president of both the National Assembly and the Council of State. That month, the National Assembly also reappointed Manuel Marrero Cruz as prime minister at the recommendation of President Díaz-Canel.

Former president Raúl Castro Ruz retired as PCC first secretary during the April 2021 party congress and was succeeded by Díaz-Canel. Castro maintains significant influence despite his retirement.

A2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?

0.000
4.004

The unicameral National Assembly is directly elected to serve five-year terms, but a PCC-controlled commission designates all candidates, presenting voters with a single candidate for each seat. Those who receive more than 50 percent of the valid votes cast are deemed elected. The National Assembly in turn selects members of the Council of State, a body that exercises legislative power between the assembly's two brief annual sessions.

All 470 of the approved candidates for the March 2023 National Assembly elections were deemed elected. However, the 2023 general election featured the lowest voter turnout since 1993 at approximately 76 percent.

A3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies?

0.000
4.004

The only Cuban elections that offer a choice of more than one candidate per office are those for municipal assemblies, but no campaigning is allowed. This did not change under the electoral law unanimously approved in 2019 following ratification of the new constitution, which retained the system of PCC-controlled electoral and candidacy commissions. However, the new law eliminated provincial assemblies, calling instead for municipal assemblies to approve provincial governors proposed by the president, and cut the number of National Assembly delegates to 470 as of the 2023 elections.

B Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?

0.000
4.004

The constitution identifies the PCC as the “superior driving force of society and the state.” All other political parties are illegal. Political dissent is a punishable offense, and dissidents are systematically harassed, detained, physically assaulted, and imprisoned for minor infractions. Supposedly spontaneous mob attacks, known as “acts of repudiation,” are often used to silence political dissidents. Madrid-based nongovernmental organization (NGO) Prisoners Defenders reported that 1,063 political prisoners were being held by Cuban authorities as of the end of 2023. That number far exceeds the figures of other allied and similar regimes in Latin America, including Nicaragua and Venezuela.

B2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?	0.000
	4.004

The PCC has monopolized government and politics in Cuba since the mid-1960s, allowing no electoral competition and preventing any alternative force from succeeding it through a democratic transfer of power. No opposition candidates contested the 2023 national elections.

B3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are the people’s political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means?	0.000
	4.004

The authoritarian one-party system in Cuba excludes the public from any genuine, autonomous political participation. Intelligence agencies play an important role in suppressing dissent and wield deep influence over virtually every aspect of the state. Members of dissident groups and even independent actors in the arts, journalism, and other fields are systematically surveilled and periodically interrogated in order to silence them or turn them into informants.

State employees who express political dissent or disagreement with the authorities often face harassment or summary dismissal. Professionals dismissed from their jobs in the state sector have difficulty continuing their careers.

B4 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities?	0.000
	4.004

The PCC leadership has exhibited greater gender and racial diversity in recent years. However, since political rights are denied in practice to all Cuban citizens, women, Afro-Cubans, migrants, and members of other demographic groups are unable to choose their representatives or organize independently to assert their political interests.

Women continue to hold more than half of the 470 National Assembly seats following the 2023 parliamentary elections. However, women held only 3 seats in the 12-seat Political Bureau of the PCC Central Committee during the April 2021 party congress. Cubans of African and mixed-race descent are well represented in the legislature. Lazo, an Afro-Cuban PCC stalwart, simultaneously holds the powerful positions of National Assembly president and head of the Council of State, and Afro-Cuban Salvador Valdés Mesa holds the position of vice president.

The political interests of LGBT+ people are not well represented. Some public advocacy is permitted, but only with the permission of the PCC and under persistent police harassment.

C Functioning of Government

C1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government?	0.000
	4.004

None of Cuba's nominally elected officials are chosen through free and fair elections, and major policy decisions are reserved for the PCC leadership in practice. The National Assembly, which the constitution describes as the "supreme organ of state power," has little independent influence, meets for brief sessions twice a year, and votes unanimously on nearly all matters before it.

C2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?	1.001	4.004
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Corruption remains a serious problem in Cuba, with widespread illegality permeating everyday life. The state enjoys a monopoly on most large business transactions, and there are no independent mechanisms to hold officials accountable for wrongdoing.

The government has at times pursued anticorruption campaigns, and long prison sentences have been imposed on high-level Cuban officials and foreign businessmen found guilty of corruption-related charges. However, internal reforms that would make the system more transparent and less prone to abuse have been rejected. The authorities do not tolerate civil society groups, independent journalists, or independent courts that might serve as external checks on government malfeasance.

C3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency?	0.000	4.004
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Article 53 of the constitution recognizes that all people have the right to solicit and obtain information from the government. However, Cuba lacks effective laws that provide for freedom of information and access to official records. Decree Law 6 of 2020 allows individuals to request data from the national statistics office; in practice, however, officials can decline such requests. A new social communication law, approved by the legislature in May 2023, states that public information is only accessible through state media.

CL Civil Liberties

D Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media?	0.000	4.004
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Cuba has one of the most restrictive media environments in the world. The formal media sector is owned and controlled by the state, and the constitution prohibits privately owned media. The country's independent press operates outside the law, its publications are considered "enemy propaganda," and its journalists are routinely harassed, detained, interrogated, threatened, defamed in the official press, and prohibited from traveling abroad or reentering the country. Government agents regularly accuse them of being mercenaries and even terrorists, and many face charges of "usurpation of legal capacity," "diffusion of false news," or other vaguely defined offenses. Journalists at state-owned outlets engage in similar discourse when discussing dissidents.

The work of independent media and journalists has been further impeded by the passage of the new penal code in May 2022 and the new social communication law in May 2023. The former criminalizes the receipt of funds used to promote acts that the government considers contrary to state security. Several rights organizations, including the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), condemned the new penal code as part of an “intricate and perverse legal regime of censorship” by the government intended to further suppress the country’s independent media. The 2023 social communication law expanded censorship and severely restricts press freedom, which the both the Organization of American States (OAS) and Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) noted especially affects independent media outlets and journalists.

D2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private?	3.003
	4.004

While Cubans do enjoy religious freedom, official obstacles make it difficult for churches to operate without interference. Certain church groups have struggled to obtain registration, and association with an unregistered group is a criminal offense. The Roman Catholic Church has enjoyed an expansion of its pastoral rights, including periodic access to state media and the ability to build new churches. Protestant and evangelical groups tend to face greater restrictions, though they too have experienced improved conditions in recent years.

D3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination?	0.000
	4.004

Academic freedom is restricted in Cuba. Private schools and universities have been banned since the early 1960s, teaching materials often contain ideological content, and educators commonly require PCC affiliation for career advancement. Despite the elimination of exit visas in 2013, university faculty must still obtain permission to travel to academic conferences abroad, and officials often prevent dissident intellectuals from attending such events. Officials also deny entry to prominent intellectuals who have been critical of the regime. Recent years have featured numerous cases of academics and students being dismissed from universities in reprisal for their political opinions or activities.

D4 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution?	1.001
	4.004

Cubans often engage in private discussions regarding everyday issues like the economy, food prices, foreign travel, and internet access, but tend to avoid discussing more sensitive political issues. Neighborhood-level “Committees for the Defense of the Revolution” assist security agencies by monitoring, reporting, and suppressing dissent.

The government closely monitors and criminalizes perceived dissidents within the artistic community, mainstream artists and intellectuals, and media figures who air independent or critical views. The new penal code adopted in December 2022 increased the minimum penalties applicable for crimes of “contempt” and “public disorder,” which the government routinely uses to suppress opponents. In November 2023, government critic Alina Bárbara López Hernández was found guilty of the crime of “contempt” after she refused to attend a summons following a peaceful protest.

The 2022 penal legislation also designates the use of social media to incite crimes or spread disinformation—as defined by the government—as an “aggravating circumstance,” allowing for higher penalties. International human rights groups condemned the penal code as severely limiting individuals’ right to freedom of expression. The social communication law approved in May 2023

has also raised concern among civil society groups, who say the law curtails free expression by restricting the creation and distribution of online and offline content unless it meets arbitrary and ambiguous conditions and aligns with the “purposes of socialist society.”

E Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly?	0.000 4.004
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Restrictions on freedom of assembly remain a key form of political control. Security forces and government-backed assailants routinely interrupt peaceful gatherings or protests by political dissidents and civic activists.

On July 11, 2021, Cubans participated in the largest rallies in over 20 years, holding nationwide protests over shortages of basic goods, economic difficulties, the government’s COVID-19 response, and a lack of fundamental freedoms. Authorities acted violently in order to disperse the protests; security officers used live ammunition, tear gas, and pepper spray, and were also seen charging protesters. One person was killed and as many as 1,300 people were arrested. Hundreds of people have since been sentenced on charges related to their participation in the 2021 protests.

Antigovernment demonstrations, including local protests over frequent power cuts, fuel, water, and food shortages, continued during 2023, though not to the scale seen in 2021. In 2023, police arrested a number of protesters and used violence to disperse protests; in one case in May, while attempting to dispel an antigovernment protest in Caimanera, police physically assaulted protesters. Protests approved by the government, including large pro-Palestinian demonstrations, and were allowed to proceed during the year.

E2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work?	0.000 4.004
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Citing the 1985 Law on Associations, the government refuses to register any new organization that is not state supervised. Nearly all politically motivated short-term detentions in recent years have targeted members of independent associations, think tanks, human rights groups, and trade unions.

During 2023, state repression of activist movements and human rights organizations that had supported the protests of 2021 and 2022 severely limited their ability to engage in their work, with members facing arrest, detention, and exile. The authorities targeted activist groups including the Ladies in White, the Patriotic Union of Cuba (UNPACU), and the Opposition Movement for a New Republic (MONR).

E3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations?	0.000 4.004
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Cuban workers do not have the right to strike or bargain collectively, and independent labor unions are illegal.

F Rule of Law

F1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary? | 0.000 4.004

According to the constitution, the National Assembly controls judicial appointments and suspensions, and the Council of State exercises these powers when the assembly is not in session. The Council of State is also empowered to issue “instructions of a general character” to the courts, whose rulings typically conform to the interests of the PCC.

In May 2022, the independent Cuban press published a video from 2018 of a meeting between the president of the Supreme Court, Rubén Remigio Ferro, and various individuals, including prosecutors and officials from the Ministry of the Interior. In the video, Remigio expressly recognized that the judiciary is controlled by the PCC and that, in practice, judges are required to issue rulings in line with PCC policies.

F2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? | 0.000 4.004

The regime’s systematic violation of due process is regularly illustrated by trumped-up criminal cases against protesters, dissidents, artists, and independent journalists. Cubans facing trial do not benefit from speedy and public proceedings.

Those arrested on July 11, 2021 faced due process violations during summary trials. The criminalization of nonviolent protest and dissent under the new 2022 penal code has also resulted in violations of due process rights, including the lengthy and arbitrary pretrial detentions of several activists.

F3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? | 0.000 4.004

Although violent crime rates are believed to be relatively low, physical security for the population is undermined by government-backed violence. Opposition activists, human rights defenders, and other perceived enemies of the regime are routinely subjected to public assaults, excessive use of force by police during raids and arrests, and abuse in custody. The government has repeatedly refused to allow international monitoring of its prisons. Prison conditions are poor, featuring overcrowding, forced labor, inadequate sanitation and medical care, and physical abuse.

Following the surge in popular protests seen in 2021 and 2022, explicit violence against demonstrators at the hands of the authorities reportedly increased in frequency. In July 2021, security forces used live ammunition against protesters and subsequently engaged in violent and degrading treatment—including torture, sleep deprivation, and threats of reprisal—against those taken into custody. In 2023, law enforcement continued to violently repress protests and perceived dissidents across the country, with many individuals subjected to physical assaults and arbitrary arrests.

F4 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? | 1.001 4.004

Article 42 of the 2019 constitution extended protection from discrimination to a wider array of vulnerable groups, explicitly adding categories such as ethnic origin, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, and disability to the existing safeguards regarding race, sex, national origin, and religion. PCC control of the government and justice system limits the ability to enforce such

guarantees impartially or effectively, and independent calls for equal treatment can draw state reprisals.

Women enjoy legal equality and are well represented in most professions, though their labor force participation rate lags well behind that of men, suggesting persistent economic disparities and cultural double standards.

Discrimination based on sexual orientation was criminalized in the new penal code of 2022. Also, in a national referendum in September 2022, a new family code that recognizes same-sex marriage and the right of same-sex couples to adopt or be beneficiaries of assisted reproduction techniques was approved with 67 percent of the vote. However, the advocacy efforts of independent LGBT+ groups and activists have continued to be either ignored or suppressed.

G Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education?

1.001
4.004

Freedom of movement and the right to change one's residence are restricted. In July 2023, the Cuban government instituted a new policy that significantly reduced passport fees and extended the passport validity period to ten years. However, Cuban doctors, diplomats, and athletes who "defect" abroad are still prohibited from visiting for several years. Dissidents and journalists are regularly barred from foreign travel or prevented from reentering Cuba.

The number of people leaving Cuba has risen sharply since the July 2021 protests. In January 2023, the US government announced a new humanitarian parole process for Cuban migrants; by the end of November, more than 60,000 Cubans had arrived to the United States under this new procedure. Though this new procedure reduced the number of Cubans arriving via irregular migration compared to the previous year, the total number of border encounters reported by US officials remained strikingly high, climbing above 153,000 in 2023.

G2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors?

1.001
4.004

The 2019 constitution recognized private property as one form of ownership, though opportunities to obtain property and operate private enterprises remain restricted. Since 2021, the government has allowed the creation of small and medium-sized enterprises in sectors that are not deemed strategic. Restrictions on self-employed workers remained under the government's 2021 private-enterprise policy, however.

In May 2023, a new law—known as the forced expropriation law—which allows the government to seize private property for "public utility" or "social interest" came into force. Although the law requires the state to offer compensation to those whose property has been expropriated, critics have expressed doubt that adequate compensation will be offered in practice. Some analysts say the law appears to serve as a tool for the Cuban government to expand its tourism sector.

G3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance?

3.003
4.004

Individuals enjoy broad freedom in their interpersonal, romantic, and sexual relationships. While divorce is common, men and women have equal rights to marital goods and child custody. The 2019 constitution recognizes women’s sexual and reproductive rights and the family code adopted in 2022 recognizes same-sex marriage and grants same-sex couples the right to adopt or be beneficiaries of assisted reproduction techniques.

Abortion is legal in Cuba.

Gender-based violence is a problem. The government launched a new Gender Equality Observatory in June 2023, which was intended to provide official statistics on women in Cuba; however, independent women’s rights organizations and activists have criticized this official observatory for underreporting femicide cases. Independent NGOs recorded at least 89 femicides during 2023, more than double the total number recorded in 2022. Legislation passed in 2022 codified penalties for those convicted of domestic violence–related offenses and established a number of preventative and compensatory mechanisms for victims of domestic and gender-based violence.

G4 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?	1.001
	4.004

Average salaries remain extremely low and the country faces high inflation. In 2023, Cuba’s economy shrank between 1 and 2 percent, and the percentage of people living in extreme poverty increased. Cubans employed by foreign firms are often much better remunerated than their fellow citizens, even though most are contracted through a state employment agency that siphons off the bulk of their wages and uses political criteria in screening applicants.