

Title	Freedom in the World 2009 - Cuba
Publisher	Freedom House
Country	Cuba
Publication Date	16 July 2009
Cite as	Freedom House, <i>Freedom in the World 2009 - Cuba</i> , 16 July 2009, available at: http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4a6452c02d.html [accessed 6 July 2011]
Disclaimer	This is not a UNHCR publication. UNHCR is not responsible for, nor does it endorse, its content. Any views expressed are solely those of the author or publisher.

Freedom in the World 2009 - Cuba

Capital: Havana

Population: 11,200,000

Political Rights Score: 7

Civil Liberties Score: 6

Status: Not Free

Ratings Change

Cuba's civil liberties rating improved from 7 to 6 due to new rules allowing greater access to consumer goods, the implementation of economic reforms, and approval of social freedoms for homosexuals and transsexuals.

Overview

In 2008, Raul Castro was elevated to the presidency following the announced retirement of his brother Fidel. He quickly passed a series of measures to improve Cubans' access to consumer goods and raise pensions and wages, but the initial movement toward economic reform was halted when the island was struck by two major hurricanes in August and September. While dissidents remained tightly controlled during the year, the government encouraged greater debate about economic reform through formal channels, and sponsored a campaign against homophobia that positioned the island at the forefront of the gay rights movement in Latin America.

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 ousted by Fidel Castro's July 26th Movement. Castro declared his affiliation with communism shortly thereafter, and the island's government has been 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 government remained highly repressive of political dissent. Although the degree of repression ebbed and flowed over the years, the neutralization of organized political dissent endured as a regime priority. In February 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 transfer of authority, which occurred shortly before Fidel's 80th birthday on August 13, marked the first time he had relinquished control since the 1959 revolution. Fidel Castro resigned as president in February 2008, and the 76-year-old Raul was elevated to formally replace him. While younger officials, such as economic czar Carlos Lage and Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque, remained in prominent roles, Raul appointed 77-year-old Jose Ramon Machado, a top Communist 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 about international affairs in the Cuban newspaper *Granma*; he never appeared in public, but he remained in the public eye through the release of a small number of carefully selected photographs and video clips.

Popular disaffection with the Castro government came to the fore in January 2008 following the release of a videotape that showed computer science student Eliecer Avila sharply questioning government policies in an encounter with the National Assembly president, Ricardo Alarcon, at a town-hall forum. Avila later was shuttled to Havana where he appeared on the television program Cuba Debate, explaining that his questions had intended to "build a better socialism, not destroy it," but appeared to suffer no further repercussions. In August, Cuban punk rocker Gorki Aguila was arrested for the crime of "social dangerousness," sparking an outcry among the country's youth. Separately, 20 of the 75 prisoners from the 2003 crackdown had been released by the fifth anniversary of the arrests. However, many subsequently left Cuba, and those who remained were subject to rearrest at any time.

During his inauguration speech, Raul hinted that the government would embrace a limited path of economic reform under the banner of the Communist Party, and in March 2008 the government approved a series of new economic measures. These included allowing ordinary Cubans to buy consumer electronic goods, such as DVD players and cellular telephones, and dropping another stricture that prevented Cubans from staying in the country's top tourist hotels. After introducing a plan in April that allowed 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 to allow market forces to take root in the agricultural sector by permitting farmers to select crops and play a larger role in making decisions about land use. In late August and early September, however, Cuba was struck in rapid succession by the major hurricanes Gustav and Ike; more than 100,000 homes were damaged, and 30 percent of the country's crops were destroyed. The government estimated that the cost of the

storm damage would exceed \$5 billion and forecast an extended period of food crisis and economic downturn. As a result, Cuba was unlikely to match the 7.5 percent growth rate achieved in 2007, and the pace of economic reform dropped off. In addition, Cuba's government imposed a ban on street vending following the hurricanes, with those caught violating the ban subject to one to three years in prison.

U.S.-Cuban relations remained frozen throughout 2008, as reflected in the two countries' inability to agree on the terms of hurricane relief following the onslaught of Gustav and Ike. U.S. authorities offered Cuba \$5 million in emergency aid, but the Cuban government rebuffed the offer and instead called for the lifting of the U.S. embargo. The outcome of the U.S. presidential election in November raised the prospect of a significant shift in U.S. policy toward Cuba, however. The victor, Democratic candidate Barack Obama, had called for increased dialogue with the Cuban government and favored lifting restrictions on the ability of Cuban Americans to visit and send money to relatives on the island.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Cuba is not an electoral democracy. Longtime president Fidel Castro and, more recently, his brother and successor Raul Castro dominate the political system. The country is a one-party state, with the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC) controlling all government entities from the national to the local level. 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. However, the Castro brothers control every lever of power. Raul serves as president of the Council of Ministers and the Council of State, and as commander in chief of the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR), while Fidel remains in place as first secretary of the PCC. The most recent PCC congress was held in 1997, and the next was scheduled for late 2009.

In October 2002, some eight million Cubans voted in tightly controlled municipal elections. An election was held for the National Assembly in 2003, with just 609 candidates – all supported by the regime – vying for 609 seats. The body serves five-year terms, and it grew in size to 614 seats as of the January 2008 elections. In January 2008, just over 8 million Cubans voted to fill the 614-seat National Assembly. As in the 2003 elections, each constituency has only one candidate and voters were asked to either support or reject each candidate. All candidates received the requisite fifty percent approval, with Raul Castro winning support from over 99 percent of voters. Following their election, the National Assembly appointed the 31 members of the Council of State, with Raul Castro as president; Ricardo Alarcon was reelected as the National Assembly's president.

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 government has continued to harass dissidents, often using arbitrary sweeps and temporary detentions of suspects. 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. However, the absolute number of political prisoners in Cuba dipped slightly, from 234 to 205, during 2008.

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 65 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2008 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Freedom of the press is sharply curtailed, and the 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 media 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 official state media, such as the newspaper *Juventud Rebelde*, began 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 to the internet in their homes. There are state-owned internet cafes in major cities, but websites are closely monitored, and costs put access beyond the reach of most Cubans. Only select state employees are provided with workplace access to e-mail and to an intranet system that blocks websites deemed inappropriate. Despite these serious limitations on internet access, Cuban blogger Yoani Sanchez gained worldwide attention in 2008 with 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. In 1998, Pope John Paul II visited Cuba and called for greater religious freedom; his visit was followed by a temporary easing of restrictions on religious practice. However, according to the Cuban Conference on Catholic Bishops, official obstacles to religious freedom remain as restrictive as before the pope's visit. Cuba continues to employ authoritarian measures to control religious belief and expression. Churches are not allowed to conduct educational activities, and church-based publications are subject to control and 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 official 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 2003, security forces raided 22 independent libraries and sent 14 librarians to jail with terms of up to 26 years. Many of the detainees were charged with working with the United States to subvert the Cuban government. In 2007, at least two independent journalists were arrested and temporarily detained. In February 2008, the government released an additional four political prisoners to exile in Spain, including Pedro Pablo Alvarez, a close ally of Oswaldo Paya.

Limited rights of assembly and association are permitted under the constitution. However, as with all 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 by law with up to three months in prison and a fine. This prohibition is selectively enforced and is often used to imprison human rights advocates.

Workers do not have the right to bargain collectively or to strike. Members of independent labor unions, which the government considers illegal, are often harassed, dismissed from their jobs, and barred from future employment. In 2008, following years of measures to reduce opportunities for private economic activity, the government shifted course and lifted a nine-year ban on private taxi drivers. The government also 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 at stores, rather than rely solely on state provisions, for the first time since the 1960s.

The executive branch controls the judiciary. The Council of State, presided over by Raul Castro, serves as a de facto judiciary and controls both the courts and the judicial

process as a whole.

Since 1991, the United Nations has voted annually to assign a special investigator on human rights to Cuba who was routinely denied a visa. In 2007, the UN Human Rights Council ended the investigator position for Cuba. In February 2008, Raul Castro authorized Cuban representatives to sign two UN human rights treaties, despite strong objections from Fidel Castro. Cuba does not grant the International Committee of the Red Cross or other humanitarian organizations access to its prisons.

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 is also restricted and 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 dropped wage caps and said that it would begin moving away from state-enforced egalitarianism and toward a system in which pay was more closely linked with productivity. Also in April, the government announced that it would work to remove the backlog of applications for private housing, and in July, the government began accepting applications for private farmland.

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, on behalf of equality for homosexuals and transsexuals. In May, the government helped to sponsor an International Day Against Homophobia that featured shows, lectures, panel discussions, and book presentations. The program included a center that offered blood tests for sexually transmitted diseases, and a screening of the gay-themed U.S. film *Brokeback Mountain*, which is still banned in most of the Caribbean, on state television. In June, the Ministry of Public Health authorized government-provided sex-change surgeries for transsexuals, a move that provoked a strong protest from the Catholic Church. Cuba had already ranked well on gender equality; about 40 percent of all women work, and they are well represented in most professions.

Copyright notice: © Freedom House, Inc. · All Rights Reserved
