



2022 ANNUAL REPORT
RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN CUBA

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Cover photo Legend:

On May 6, 2022, an explosion occurred in the Saratoga Hotel next to the historical temple of the Baptist Church "El Calvario" in Old Havana, Cuba, causing severe damage to the building. The causes of the explosion remain unclear, but the incident was caused by a chain of irresponsibility and negligence in the government system.

The Baptist Temple was a significant building for Cuban Baptists and historical Protestantism in Cuba, and it was also the headquarters of the Baptist Convention of Western Cuba and the Baptist Publishing House. The government promised to reconstruct the building without delay, but it has not fulfilled that promise to date. The explosion is the total responsibility of the Cuban Government, and rebuilding the temple should also be their responsibility.

The photo taken by Abel Pérez Hernández, a pastor of the Alcance Victoria church, shows the damage done to the structure, especially to the dome and its interiors.

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ACRONYMS

ACBCOcc - Baptist Convention Association of Western Cuba

ACDI - Cuban Association for the Dissemination of Islam

ADF - Alliance Defending Freedom

AIEC - Alliance of Cuban Evangelical Churches

CIC - Council of Churches of Cuba

IACHR - Inter-American Commission on Human Rights

CJS - Congress of Supernatural Youth

COCC - Conference of Catholic Bishops of Cuba

CRD - Civil Rights Defenders

CSW - Christian Solidarity Worldwide

ECLJ - European Center for Law & Justice

UPR - Universal Periodic Review

ICC - International Christian Concern

ICLEP - Cuban Institute for Freedom of Expression and Press

IRFA - International Religious Freedom Act

MCL - Christian Liberation Movement

PCLA - Pontifical Commission for Latin America of the Vatican

PCC - Communist Party of Cuba

ORA - Office of Religious Affairs

OAS - Organization of American States

UN - United Nations Organization

TMPG - Guantánamo Municipal People's Court

USCIRF - United States Commission on International Religious Freedom

USRAP - Refugee Admissions Program

VOM - Voice of the Martyrs

WEA - World Evangelical Alliance

I. PRESENTATION

The Patmos Institute is a Cuban civil society organization founded by leaders of various religions on February 2, 2013. The Institute was founded during the celebration of the 74th anniversary of the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Taguayabon, Cuba. Although not officially recognized as an institution by the Cuban Ministry of Justice, it was recognized by the European Citizen Action Service (ECAS) on July 24, 2013. The Institute has four fundamental goals:

- 1) The exercise of interreligious dialogue
- 2) Political Advocacy
- 3) Monitoring and defending religious freedoms
- 4) General education on Fundamental Human Rights enshrined in the thirty articles of the Universal Declaration.

In practice, the Patmos Institute works as an informal network that seeks to involve Cubans of all religions, along with atheists or humanists. The Institute also seeks to disseminate its ideas and joint efforts through publications such as *The Patmos Institute* blog and the *Cubano Confesante* radio program. The radio program is broadcasted in Cuba as part of *Radio República*'s program (managed by the Cuban Democratic Directorate).

Furthermore, the Patmos Institute frequently publishes reports and information regarding violations of religious freedom and beliefs in Cuba. It also supports the training of Cuban religious activists on human rights and religious liberties through workshops inside and outside the island.

Since 2014, the Institute has conferred an annual award dedicated to "Cuban believers consistent with their faith, like Juan de Patmos, on the island of Cuba". The Cubans were: Amador Blanco Hernández, 2014; Friar José Conrado Alegria, 2015; Dr. Oscar Elias Biscet, 2016; Dagoberto Valdés Hernández, 2017; Dr. Eduardo Cardet Concepcion, 2018; Roberto de Jesús Quiñones Haces, 2019; Martha Beatriz Roque Cabello, 2020; Ernesto Borges Perez, 2021; Pastor Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo, 2022.

II. BACKGROUND

"Thirty Questions on Religious Freedoms in Cuba," published in September 2013 on the *Cubano Confesante* blog, serves as an initial precursor of this report. Furthermore, reports published by international organizations on the situation of religious freedom in Cuba serve as precursors and are considered important sources for the Universal Periodic Review (UPR). In Geneva in May 2018, three organizations including the Patmos Institute, submitted their reports on Religious Freedom in Cuba to be evaluated by the Human Rights Council of the United Nations (UN). These were: Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), and Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF). Additionally, the European Center for Law & Justice (ECLJ) also showed its support.¹ The solidarity from organizations like these has not only challenged us as Cubans to prepare our reports directly but has also challenged us to try to raise our voices to an international organization such as the UN, especially its Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Mr. Ahmed Shaheed; as well as regional organizations such as the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) or the Organization of American States (OAS).

Of equal importance is the inclusion of Cuba in the Report on Religious Freedom published every year by the U.S. Department of States and the annual report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), which was created by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) of 1998 to monitor the universal right to religious freedom or freedom of worship outside worldwide.

Since 2020, the Patmos Institute has participated among external experts consulted by the *Open Doors* organization in their yearly research and publication of its World Watch List of fifty countries where Christians are the most persecuted. *Open Doors* and its World Watch List constitute additional motivation for the Patmos Institute to carry out the effort of developing this report.

¹ <https://eclj.org/religiousfreedom/hrc/cubans-still-living-under-the-oppressive-anti-religious-restrictions-of-the-communistregime?lng=en>

III. INTRODUCTION

In 2022, there was an increase in violations of religious freedom in Cuba. The Office of Religious Affairs (ORA), part of the Central Committee (CC) of the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC), was the highest authority responsible for these violations and monopoly over the religious sphere of Cubans through monitoring, blocking, distorting and obstructing their activities. All religious groups continued to be restricted from undertaking social actions, educational activities, or accessing mass media. One case, for example, includes Christians who have been prevented from sharing community resources due to their faith. Furthermore, any construction or renovation of church buildings, along with reclaiming of historic religious sites and places of worship previously confiscated from believers have been prohibited. Similar to previous years, bibles and other religious materials were confiscated in 2022.

Previous trends of preventing religious activists from traveling outside Cuba continued in 2022. This pushed believers in large swaths to flee the island amid an unprecedented migration crisis. Among the migrants, a group of Christian pastors, leaders, and journalists were forced by the Cuban government to leave the country due to their religious practices. Following the July 11, 2021 protests, the situation in Cuba worsened when several religious believers were taken to court and sentenced to several years in prison just for exercising their right to freedom of expression. This report also warns about the danger of increased persecution that churches or individual Christians may suffer in the future, following the implementation of the new Penal Code and the establishment of the new Family Code.

IV. DEVELOPMENTS

The year 2022 ranks amongst the years where the most justice has been accomplished worldwide regarding the dire situation of religious freedoms in Cuba. The year began with ranking Cuba as number 37 out of 50 for countries where Christians are persecuted the most, as reported by Open Doors' annual report. The list developed by the Christian NGO has a reputation for its objectivity and impartiality. It is based on "research and the contrast of opinions among experts", both within and outside the organization, as well as publicly available research documents. Back in 2012, Cuba was ranked number 41. In 2013, Cuba surprisingly disappeared from that list. This was pleasant for the Cuban government, yet unpleasant and disappointing for the victims of repression.

Reactions were reversed with the return of Cuba to the list in 2022, ranking even lower than it had in 2012 at 37.

Cuban organizations such as “*Cristianos Cubanos en Communion/Cuban Christians in Communion*,” the “*Alianza de Iglesias Cubanas No Registradas/Alliance of Unregistered Cuban Churches*” and the “Patmos Institute” were among the first to echo the news through their social media when the World Watch List was released on January 19, 2022. In the case of Cuba, the source of the repression can be classified as “Dictatorial Paranoia” and is closely related to the events that happened in 2021. This includes the trials on December 20 and 21 in 2021 of believers such as the evangelical pastor Lorenzo Rosales and the Catholic layman Angel Mesa, who was used as a lesson to all Cuban Protestants and Catholics on the island.

The 2022 World Watch List² is led by Afghanistan, as expected based on everything that happened globally in the previous year, and ends with Malaysia ranked fifty. In comparison to other Latin American countries, the list includes Colombia, ranked 30, and Mexico, ranked 43, both with the classification of persecution for “corruption and organized crime” reasons.

On December 2 of 2022, U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken made a press statement: “Today, I am announcing designations against Burma, the People’s Republic of China, Cuba, Eritrea, Iran, Nicaragua, the DPRK, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan as Countries of Particular Concern under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom.”³

The interaction of the Patmos Institute with all these organizations sought to contribute to making John Paul II's desire for Cuba to "open itself up to the world, and may the world open itself up to Cuba" come true, are motivations to prepare and share this report on the events related to the violations of religious freedom in Cuba.

² All the details of the list can be accessed at: <https://puertasabiertasal.org/.../lista.../perfil-de-paises>

³ <https://www.state.gov/religious-freedom-designations-2/>

A. Communist oppression

The reality is that the totalitarian paranoia of the Cuban government is above any ideology, including the communist one. Nevertheless, communism is the ideology that shows its face, given the need to have one, and consistent for more than six decades, where the maximum political power (even above the Constitution itself and also declared by it) lies in the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC). In the PCC's Central Committee lies the Office of Religious Affairs (*Oficina de Atención a los Asuntos Religiosos*), which tries to supervise and register everything related to religion. The Head of Office Caridad Diego Bello along with other officials such as Roberto Noa Frometa, Odalis Sabalo, Sonia Garcia, Maria de los Angeles Perez, and Mirian Garcia Merino, Head of the Registry of Associations of the Ministry of Justice, have full responsibility in all this.

For more than six decades, the ultimate goal of the political elite in Cuba has been to maintain power at all costs. As has been demonstrated after the protests that took place on July 11, 2021, they are willing to massacre people to maintain it. Hence the “combat order” given by Miguel Mario Diaz-Canel Bermudez, the First Secretary of the PCC, in response to the demonstrations. Totalitarian paranoia is expressed especially with the increase in the number of political prisoners who were arrested and have been held since July 11, 2021, along with other Cubans behind bars before that date. Another form of totalitarian paranoia was expressed by trying to quell demonstrations and protests of weary and unarmed people through force, specifically with weapons.

The pyramidal structure of the PCC throughout the country allows totalitarian paranoia to exercise total control and generate persecution against Christians at all levels (local, municipal, provincial, and national). In practice, this is exercised through the PCC's Office of Religious Affairs. Although at each level there is always a party official in charge of religious affairs. The structure is as follows: Miguel Mario Diaz-Canel Bermudez, President of the Republic and the First Secretary of the PCC, formally the highest person in charge for these policies, with the direct collaboration of General Alvaro Lopez Miera, Minister of the Interior and leader of the Cuban Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC); General Romarico Vidal Sotomayor Garcia, head of the Political Directorate of the Ministry of the Interior (MININT) of Cuba; or Colonel Pedro Orlando Martinez Fernandez, Head of the Political Directorate of the National Revolutionary Police (PNR); along

with these many other officials that can be included at the local, municipal, and provincial levels. Repressive groups such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR), the Ministry of the Interior (MININT), the National Revolutionary Police (PNR), and the Prevention Troops (TDP) of the Ministry of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Cuba (MINFAR) are also involved. All the names of individual persons and organizations mentioned here have their share of responsibility in the repression against religious groups in Cuba.

These structures also use paramilitary groups, as confirmed on July 11, 2021 and during the following weeks of the protests, functioning as if they were civilians with impunity granted by the dictatorship to beat pastors and believers with sticks and stones.

B. Internet restrictions

The Communist Party has control of the internet in Cuba. They control it with an intranet that has a central node and a “firewall” that applies censorship from the PCC. Cubans try to use VPNs; however, the reality is that since July 11, 2021, internet censorship has increased and intensified throughout 2022. Retaliation from the dictatorship went with censorship against those individuals who share information that the system deems sensitive or opinions openly critical of the situation in which people live. In August 2022, contacts within the island reported an intermittent connection, even with the Psiphon VPN.

C. Churches do not have access to the radio

Only 20 minutes per month is granted to the Council of Churches of Cuba (Consejo de Iglesias de Cuba) by the CMBF "Radio Musical Nacional" government station. The small amount of radio time is used to give the appearance that believers have access to the media, and the 20 minutes are used to praise the communist system. Reception of both the internet and the radio waves that come from abroad are blocked. Although Christian content is not the only one feared and attacked by the government, they are among the priority contents as targets of attack and censorship. The consumption of such content, for example, if an informant becomes aware of the use of a radio in a household, can be classified as “ideological diversions,” and the person becomes a target of threats and attacks.

D. Rights of the parents over their children

On the education system, all levels are administered and supervised entirely by the government and the children of Cuban Christians are subjected to anti-Christian teachings. In addition, the totalitarian government planned to take over the parental rights of Cuban children. On September 25, 2022, the National Assembly of People's Power reported that a Referendum would be held for the people of Cuba to express whether they agreed or not with the New Family Code. The “Referendum” was preceded by intense propaganda by the communist government. The controversy around what the Family Code contains led to the division of opinion among different Cuban civil society groups and households.

As part of this civil society, several evangelical churches and the Catholic Churches adopted a position contrary to that promoted by the regime which led to attacks of all kinds and harassment by State Security. Some believers who stood out in promoting their rejection of the Penal Code in social media were summoned for interrogation. One case was of the evangelical activist Sandy Cancino, who due to his opposition to the Code, was summoned for interrogation on more than one occasion and attempted to intimidate him through subtle threats against his family. As Cancino himself explained: “The introductory remarks made by the justice officer were similar to that of a State Security officer since the officer began by referring to my daughter's situation and her hospitalization caused by dengue fever. In other words, ‘we know about your family problems and more’”.

Unlike the regime that owns all the information and mass media used to carry out propaganda campaigns in favor of its interests, the churches that opposed the Family Code do not have access to any public space to express, defend, and position themselves regarding the different points they disagreed with the Code. Also, they could not respond to the attacks of the various groups that supported the penal code, who could do so without having any confrontation with the regime. Furthermore, the dictatorship intends to force its approval with a political objective, which intends to take over parental rights and is one of the aspects that churches emphasized the most. Taking parental rights away from parents over their children, and attributing this right or function to the state, makes it easier for the dictatorship to indoctrinate and control the youngest minds on the island and can even be used as a threat mechanism for both opposition activists and believers.

Despite the dictatorship's victory in the referendum on the Family Code, volunteers from the Cuban Platform for the Observation of Electoral Rights (Observacion de Derechos Electorales, ODE) confirmed irregularities in what they called an "electoral farce". In addition to the assessment of the numbers, even when it was certain that the numbers were manipulated. 53.33% of the electoral votes rejected the Family Code or did not participate in the final step for its approval. Without a doubt, this was the most unpopular state policy in the history of the dictatorship. According to the Methodist pastor, Carlos Macias, who has been harassed by State Security on multiple occasions: "The Cuban regime intends to indoctrinate children with propositions that respond to a Marxist ideology, putting into practice a new modality of totalitarianism".

The children of Cuban Christians are marked by their parents' faith from birth. They will be subjected to special treatment by totalitarian paranoia that will try, by all means, to oppose them to their parents. As part of this, they are harassed and discriminated against to create in them the possible idea that their parents are the cause of this arbitrariness.

E. Inability to share community resources due to their faith

The government's paranoia became even more zealous during 2022 about oversight of humanitarian aid or resources shared in the community, as this must always pass through the filter of government control. The government identifies community influence as political leverage that it does not want to share with anyone, regardless of whether the community suffers the consequences. For this reason, the government will prevent, at all costs churches or Christians from developing this type of social work. Or, as in the paradigmatic case of the U.S. "Pastors for Peace" group, the paranoid government will use, through the Cuban Council of Churches, all its mechanisms to use and exploit humanitarian aid in its favor. This includes mechanisms both inside Cuba and abroad since this group is a political lobby in its favor in Washington D.C.

The Cuba's constitution approved by a referendum plagued of fraud, declares the PCC as the highest body of power. The PCC is even above the Constitution itself, which is claimed to be at the feet of a party that has proven to be the most responsible for violating religious freedom in Cuba. This statement is enough to clarify that the current Cuban Constitution only serves to justify

the flagrant and constant violations of religious freedom. However, when comparing the rest of the text, this Constitution even represents a step backward compared to the texts of previous constitutions since it dissociates the principles of religious freedom and freedom of conscience that were linked before the approval of this new Constitution. In the current Constitution, unlike the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, not only are such concepts disassociated but “freedom of conscience” completely disappears from the text.

F. The new Penal Code and religious freedom

The National Assembly of People's Power approved the Penal Code Law on May 15, 2022, which further limits the exercise of religious freedoms. Ruben Remigio Ferro, President of the People's Supreme Court (*Tribunal Supremo Popular, TSP*), is among those mainly responsible for the approval of this new repressive instrument. This Penal Code replaces the earlier law that had been enacted in 1987. Furthermore, the magistrates, judges, prosecutors, specialists, members of the Ministry of the Interior, law professors, and Members of the National Assembly from different territories (among the latter, Member of the Assembly, Jose Luis Toledo Santander stood out) were complicit of this approval.

Due to the Penal Code, repression against Christians has further intensified. Other types of criminal offenses were added such as prosecuting believers for their “participation in subversive activities”. This means that any Christian activity can be classified as such by the government. Meanwhile, “attacks on information and communication technologies” are a criminal offense that legalizes the persecution of Christians for using social networks. The Penal Code also reinforces rigorous sanctions that aggravate current circumstances and adds new sanctions, which contemplate life imprisonment, deprivation of freedom of up to 30 years, and even applying the death penalty for 23 severe types of criminal offenses that Christians can be classified under.

This new Penal Code constitutes an escalation of the Cuban government's persecution against Christians since it sets in the law what they have done in practice for more than six decades, now providing them with the legal framework to carry out all kinds of abuses.

G. Travel ban for religious reasons and force exile

Systematic repression against religious believers in Cuba includes the prevention of travel. Sometimes believers are allowed to travel, however, on most occasions they are prohibited from doing so. When they are allowed to travel, it is almost certain that the person will not return to Cuba or even be forced into exile. In 2022, regulations or impediments to travel to events occurred when the Cuban regime denied the passport extension to Leonardo Rodriguez Alonso (coordinator of the Patmos Institute in the central region of Cuba), Jose Gabriel Barrenechea Chavez (recurring panelist in forums organized by the Patmos Institute), Mario Jorge Travieso Medina (leader of the *Viento Recio Movement*). These three individuals had already been prevented from traveling in previous years. Another case would be Pastor Alayn Toledano Valiente, leader of the "*Sendas de Justicia*" movement, who has been regulated since 2018 and in June 2022 was prevented from flying to Los Angeles, California, to participate at the IX Summit of the Americas for an event dedicated to the exercise of religious freedoms. After being denied, Pastor Alayn Toledano was warned that he would only be allowed to leave if he did so with his family on a trip with no return. Incidentally, he was threatened that if he did not do so before July 26, 2022, he would be prosecuted and would be subjected to years in prison. Ultimately, the pastor had no other choice than leaving Cuba with his family and traveling to the U.S.

Like Pastor Toledano, other pastors left in similar conditions in 2022. We can also state that forced exile or expatriation of Christian leaders has constituted a trend. Below is a list of those who had to go to exile:

1. Carlos Sebastian Hernandez Armas (General Secretary of the Baptist Convention of Western Cuba)
2. Jatniel Perez Feria (President of the Crecer Bible Institute)
3. Bernardo Perez Lopez (pastor and administrator of the Havana Baptist Theological Seminary) and Jose Luis Milian Sanchez (pastor of the Baptist Convention of Western Cuba in Sancti Spiritus)
4. Seryesky Montiel Estrada (pastor of the Getsemani Baptist Church, in Placetras, Villa Clara)
5. Julio Lazaro Espinosa Parrado (pastor of the Baptist Church of Dolores, Caibarien, Villa Clara)

6. Ezequiel Toledo Rodriguez (pastor of the Baptist Church in Reparto Virginia, Santa Clara, Villa Clara)
7. Enrique de Jesus Fundora Perez (pastor of a church without legal recognition in San Jose de las Lajas, in Mayabeque province).

This trend was already coming at the end of 2021 when relevant pastors such as Yilbert Durand Domínguez (Nuevitas, Camagüey), Yoel Demetrio Aspron Morales (Las Tunas), Cristina Maria Rodriguez Penton (Santa Clara), Dayixys Avila Herrera (Santa Clara), Adrian Pose Coizeau (Havana), and the Catholic priest Fernando Galvez (Camagüey) had to abandon their country.

In November 2022, the family of Olainis Tejeda Beltran, leaders of the Bnei Anusim Jewish community, emigrated to Germany due to the government's pressure on this community. The government threatened their community with “rescuing their children for the sake of the revolution and the social good.” The new family code includes sanctions for parents for not teaching “love for the motherland,” which implies unconditional loyalty to the system. This is how it is included in art. 134 (j, n): the duty to indoctrinate children, and the love for the country in art. 187: Causes for the deprivation of parental responsibility. This Jewish couple was summoned to appear before the Prosecutor's Office on December 19 to initiate “due process” for them, since a high official of the Nuevitas municipal education ministry had filed a lawsuit against the couple with the objective of “rescuing their children for the sake of the revolution and for the social good.” Fortunately, they managed to escape before, thanks to the solidarity of brothers in faith abroad.

H. The prohibition of the use of religious symbols and phrases

Any symbol not standing for the Communist Party is frowned upon and may be subject to censorship. Now, the slogan of the system: “Homeland or Death,” has been challenged by a popular slogan “Homeland and Life,“. This slogan is very much in tune with Christian ideals such as in John 8:38. Even though the slogan goes beyond the framework of the churches, they have also made it their own. However, it constitutes grounds for censorship, threats, and even imprisonment. For instance, the Christian groups without legal registrations (which are the ones with the highest growth trend) would use symbols to identify themselves, as this would constitute

identification of their group, and therefore be vulnerable to prosecutions of its members under the charge of "The Illicit Association".

There is full immunity for those who attack Christians. The Constitution, in force since 2019, already legalizes this by authorizing attacks against any city that is violating the principles of the Cuban Revolution. Also, documents of the PCC declare this, for example, in the Central Report to the VI Congress of the PCC, where General Raul Castro launches a death threat, and has been carried out during all these years⁴.

These two paragraphs are concerning:

In the current and foreseeable scenario, the strategic conception of the "War of All the People" stays fully valid and is constantly enriched and perfected. Its command and management system has been strengthened, increasing the capacity to react to the different exceptional situations that can be foreseen. The country's defensive scope acquired a higher qualitative and quantitative dimension. Starting from our own and available resources, the technical, maintenance, and conservation status of our weaponry was raised, and the effort in the production, especially the modernization of our military technique, was continued, taking into account its prohibitive prices in the world market. In this sphere, it is fair to recognize the contribution of dozens of civil and military institutions that demonstrated the enormous scientific, technological, and productive potential created by the Revolution.

The degree of preparation in the national territory, as a theater of military operations, has increased significantly. Essential weaponry is protected, as well as an important part of the troops, the leadership bodies, and the population.

But perhaps the most treacherous and twisted threat is found in the second to last paragraph where the General threatens:

⁴ <http://www.cubadebate.cu/congreso-del-partido-comunista-de-cuba/informe-central-al-vi-congreso-del-partido-comunista-de-cuba-v/>

“In this regard, it is necessary to clarify that what we will never do is deny the people the right to defend their Revolution, since the defense of independence, of the conquests of socialism, and of our squares and streets will continue to be the first duty of all the Cuban patriots”.

This document was released on April 16, 2011. On May 5th, in the Leoncio Vidal Park in Santa Clara, a police group ended the life of religious believer Juan Wilfredo Soto Garcia. From that point forward, the list of deaths continued to grow. That same year, on October 14, the suspicious death of the Catholic woman Laura Pollan occurred, and the order was given that she could not get out alive of the Calixto Garcia Hospital. Then on July 22, 2012, Catholic activists Oswaldo Paya and Harold Cepero died in a fabricated accident. The Human Rights Foundation (HRF) published a report exposing the evidence of the murder.

This type of extrajudicial execution is a widespread practice. Most of the time, the targets of the attack are eliminated without leaving any traces, according to the procedures learned from the Russian KGB or the German Stasi. In all cases, full immunity was granted to those who harm believers, including their murderers.

I. Christians have been deprived of equal treatment in court

In previous years, cases such as the lay Catholic Eduardo Cardet, leader of the Christian Liberation Movement, was arrested and put on trial without legal guarantees in 2016. Others that have been deprived of equal treatment, include evangelical pastors Ramon Rigal and Adya Exposito (in 2018), the lay Catholic Roberto de Jesus Quiñones Haces (in 2019), and 2021 Yeremi Blanco and Yarian Sierra, pastors of the BEREANA Mission Baptist Church in Matanzas; Yusniel Perez Montejo, Baptist pastor of the Songo-La Maya municipality, Santiago de Cuba; Pastor Ibrahim Figueredo, missionary of the Baptist Convention of Western Cuba in the town of El Gabriel, in Güira de Melena, Artemisa. Since July 11, 2021, and continuing into 2022, cases such as evangelical pastor Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo, the Catholic layman Angel Mesa, and the evangelical believer Maria Cristina Garrido were also victims of this type of abuse.

J. Challenges for international monitoring of the situation of religious freedom

In 2020, Dr. Ahmed Shaheed, Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief to the UN, requested permission from the Cuban government to visit and directly monitor the situation of religious freedom in Cuba. In addition, the government has tried at all costs to keep judicial processes in absolute silence and to go unnoticed. To do this, it orders its lawyers (all lawyers who practice in Cuba are employees of the system) to advise the victims' relatives not to report to international organizations under the threat that the sentences could be even higher. The Security of the Cuban State and the military also directly threaten families so that they do not report it and remain silent.

K. Monitoring, hindering, and distorting the activities of churches

Monitoring and hindrance of church activities have been ongoing for more than 6 decades. Since 2021 it was noticeable the attempt to financially asphyxiate churches, and this remained a trend in 2022. This was one of the unstated objectives of the so-called “reordering” (Tarea Ordenamiento) policy decreed by the President of the Council of State and of Ministers, and First Secretary of the PCC, Miguel Mario Diaz-Canel Bermudez. The biggest change was the monetary unification of the two currencies CUC and CUP, which legally authorized nationals and foreigners to carry out their economic and commercial transactions within Cuba in 2021.

As background, the CUC, or convertible Cuban peso, was created in 1994. Ten years after its creation, its value became more important for the population when the Cuban National Bank ended the internal circulation of the US dollar. Since then, Cubans have kept their accounts with the double currency: the historical peso (CUP) and the convertible peso (CUC), although the way to acquire them was completely different. This duality caused profound distortions in the economy, as different exchange rates coexisted, making it impossible to have a real indicator to measure the efficiency of the business economy.

Churches and other religious institutions then had no choice but to adapt to this state-based financial model, adjusting budgets to this dual currency. On one hand, offerings from followers inside Cuba were received in CUP, with a very limited purchasing value. Meanwhile, aid and monetary resources from abroad were transferred to CUC. This allowed them to carry out actions and acquire the most substantial and essential goods. Dollars, euros, and other hard currencies

were converted into CUC to operate internally. This somehow masked financial dependence, which was impossible to eradicate through the minimal entry of CUPs.

With the reforms undertaken as of January 1 of 2021, churches and other religious institutions collapsed due to financial asphyxiation. Although the population in general (the members of all the churches) continue to face the excessive rise in prices, they also continue to face persecution because they participated in the informal economy that made it possible for them to survive. Thus, the churches found themselves as outsiders within this so-called "ordering task" that did not develop appropriate mechanisms for an already dislocated architecture of the new Cuban economy's legal framework.

Institutionally, Churches are not part of the official sector of the economy, because in Cuba — despite everything— the separation between the Church and the State survives. Nevertheless, the churches are not “self-employed” either, a term coined to refer to non-state workers. Thus, when legislating and discussing economic activities that the population can carry out privately, the Church is left out. This condemned them to legal limbo. Religious associations must take on the impacts of the “ordering task” without specific provisions.

Counting only on the offerings of the congregations, we can logically expect that due to the high costs of living, the offerings became reduced. There is also an uncertain future of relying on aid from “partnership” Churches abroad:

1. Paying salaries and pensions, now at the minimums decreed by the State, which is a challenge for their small local budgets. There have been cases of many denominations that had no choice but to dismiss most of their employees (to the detriment of these people and their families, some of which were not only dependent on these incomes but also on religious institutions that will have to face the challenge of continuing to function despite the almost total dismantling of their structures). This has been the case with the Christian Reformed Church, which recently publicly announced the dismissal of several of its leaders in the National Offices and the social projects of this denomination.
2. Covering the costs of electricity, telephone, gas, and water for which a higher rate is applied than that imposed on state companies.

3. Facing the high costs of fuel and the technical check-up of their cars because most of them were assigned a state license plate when in reality, they are not State transport.

L. Prevention to improve places of worship owned by religious leaders

All construction or renovation of church buildings continues to be paralyzed. Historical religious sites and places of worship that were previously taken away have yet to be claimed. On the contrary, recovery processes that were underway regarding some sites that were about to be recovered were reversed. This has been the case with the Havana Baptist Cemetery which was confiscated by the system. However, the chapel at the *Vida Nueva* Baptist Church was meeting for some time and seemed to be a slow recovery process. In addition to the Office of Religious Affairs officials, Ms. Mirian Garcia Merino, the head of the Registry of Associations of the Ministry of Justice, played a leading role in prohibiting religious services in this church.

The case of El Calvario Baptist temple, a historic building in Old Havana and headquarters for the offices of the Baptist Convention of Western Cuba had suffered severe damage to its structure, especially to the dome and its interiors. This was due to the explosion at the Saratoga Hotel that adjoined the building. Yet the government promised that it would act without delay in its reconstruction, but it has not fulfilled the promise up until now. The explosion of the Saratoga Hotel is the full responsibility of the government, so rebuilding the temple of the El Calvario Church is the government's responsibility.

M. Monitoring of Christian preaching, teachings, and/or publications

The entire life of the church has been affected, including its publishing activities. Publishing costs have multiplied dramatically due to the “reordering” policy. This has significantly affected the churches since it was one of the most effective ways of evangelization that Cuban churches had before the pandemic, even though many of these publications were carried out in secret. Journals like *Heraldo Cristiano* or *Su Voz* (Examples of publications of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Cuba) that had managed to maintain their publication for decades are on the verge of disappearing. Many others have already disappeared or at least have not been published for years, such as “*La Voz Bautista*” of the Baptist Convention of Western Cuba, the “*Caminos*” journal of

the Martin Luther King Center or the “*Cuba Teologica*” Journal of the Evangelical Theology Seminary of Matanzas. This shows that, in addition to the censorship that explicitly forced the closing of publications such as “*Cuba Posible*,” has been achieved by financial asphyxiation.

N. Confiscation of Bibles and other religious materials

In 2022, raids also occurred; as in previous years, all materials were confiscated in most cases. We are even still investigating a confiscation of bibles coming from Canada that occurred in January 2020, and which were intended to be burned, but about which, except for a very confidential testimony, it has not been possible to document the details due to the secrecy that presumably is due to individuals and organizations being threatened. The burning of bible shipments that have reached Cuban customs and the subsequent secrecy already occurred during the more than six decades of the totalitarian system.

O. Christians detained due to religion

During 2022, arrests for religious reasons were denounced by:

1. Raul Capote
2. Ibissi Alfaro
3. Yordanys Diaz Arteaga
4. Alayn Toledano Valiente
5. Mario Jorge Travieso Medina
6. Adrian Martinez Cadiz
7. Velmis Adriana Mariño Gonzalez
8. Angel Mesa Rodriguez
9. Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo
10. Yeremi Blanco
11. Yarian Sierra
12. Yusniel Perez Montejo
13. Jatniel Perez Feria
14. Ana Santiesteban
15. Bernardo Perez
16. Yasser Caraballo
17. Pablo Enrique Delgado
18. Guillermo del Sol Perez
19. Esther Toledano
20. Maria Cristina Garrido Rodriguez

21. Angelica Garrido Rodriguez
22. Enrique de Jesus Fundora
23. Dagoberto Valdes Hernandez
24. Saily Navarro
25. Felix Navarro
26. Ysael Cajides
27. Many Catholic priests have been persecuted, but Catholic hierarchies do not allow them to speak out.
28. Many Pastors and believers are constant targets of police harassment and have led to the detention of religious leaders, who also fear speaking out against the regime.

The arrests in Cuba can also be classified as kidnappings since most of the time the victims are taken violently, and their relatives are not informed that they have been taken, nor where they have been taken.

Since 2021, Catholic layman Angel Mesa Rodriguez and pastor Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo have remained in prison under very worrying circumstances. Many other pastors and believers are also the constant targets of police summons, fines, raids, confiscations, threats, and coercion. Many cases related to short detentions have preferred not to make it public, fearing further repression.

It is a common practice that all those detained or kidnapped are physically or mentally abused (including beatings and death threats). Psychiatric abuse is being reported more and more frequently since inmates are sometimes admitted to psychiatric hospitals and subjected to treatments that they do not need, affecting them for the rest of their lives with drug addictions or weariness caused by electroshock. Although not all detainees have reached these extremes, in one way or another, the individuals in the list above were subjected to psychological or other types of abuses.

One notorious case was that of the Catholics Dagoberto Valdes Hernandez and Yoandi Izquierdo, the first is the director of the *Convivencia* Center. They were summoned on December 8, 2022, by Captain Ezel, from Cuban State Security, for an interrogation at the Immigration Procedures Office in Pinar del Rio. As reported by Valdes Hernandez on his social media, the interviews lasted 30 minutes each and were conducted by Lieutenant Colonel Raul and Captain Ezel, both from State Security. The topic of the interrogation was their travel abroad, in October 2022, and made

insinuations that State Security “was betting that they would not return to Cuba anymore.” Supposedly, it was a “routine interview” with all the people traveling, but both stated that after the interrogations, they continued to be harassed.

Another case was of Ysael Cajides, who was detained while trying to travel to the province of Las Tunas to take part in the creation of the Christian Alliance of Cuba. This was an event in which thirty leaders of various denominations met with the purpose of “working based on the Bible, with society, prisoners, care for people in need and to discuss the new family code.”

The situation of the Catholic journalist Adrian Martinez Cadiz was also notorious. In 2022, State Security summoned him to be interrogated more than once. He was fined on one occasion, at the *Revolucion* Square police station, with 3,000 Cuban pesos under decree-law 370. Martinez is a Havana correspondent for the Catholic Church news outlet EWTN.

P. Forced exile due to religious reasons

The Patmos Institute has been able to identify the following relevant cases of forced exile, due to their leadership (each family has an average of 4 people):

1. Pastor Alayn Toledano Valiente (leader of the *Sendas de Justicia* Movement and pastor of the Emmanuel Church in Santiago de Cuba) and his family.
2. Pastor Carlos Sebastian Hernandez Armas (General Secretary of the Baptist Convention of Western Cuba) and his family.
3. Pastor Jatniel Perez Feria (President of the *Crece* Bible Institute) and his family.
4. Pastor Bernardo Perez Lopez (pastor and administrator of the Havana Baptist Theological Seminary) and his family.
5. Pastor Jose Luis Milian Sanchez (Baptist Convention of Western Cuba in Sancti Spiritus) and his family.
6. Pastor Seryesky Montiel Estrada (pastor of the Getsemani Baptist Church, in Placetas, Villa Clara) and his family.
7. Pastor Julio Lazaro Espinosa Parrado (pastor of the Baptist Church of Dolores, Caibarien, Villa Clara) and his family.

8. Pastor Toledo Rodriguez (pastor of the Baptist Church in Reparto Virginia, Santa Clara, Villa Clara) and his family.
9. Pastor Enrique de Jesus Fundora Perez (pastor of a church without legal recognition in San Jose de las Lajas, in the Mayabeque province) and his family.
10. Pastor Yilbert Durand Dominguez (Nuevitas, Camaguey) and his family.
11. Pastor Yoel Demetrio Aspron Morales (Leader of the Missionary Church in Cuba, Las Tunas).
12. Pastor Cristina Maria Rodriguez Penton (Santa Clara, Founder, and leader of the "*Mi Viña*" Ministry).
13. Pastor Dayixys Avila Herrera (Pastor in the "*Mi Viña*" Ministry, Santa Clara).
14. Pastor Adrian Pose Coizeau (Havana) and his family.
15. Catholic priest Fernando Gálvez (Camaguey).
16. Pastor Raul Capote.
17. Evangelical journalist Yoel Suarez Fernandez.
18. Evangelical journalist Ricardo Fernandez Izaguirre.

In 2022, the government aimed to destroy what was left of the church using the new family code as its last justification to have a divided civil society over these issues and destroy it. In this way, the government has tried to find new allies in its war against Christians, finding those allies even in personalities or groups from its political opposition. Meanwhile, the system continues with its never-ending attack against pastors and churches, achieving expatriation and forced exile.

In 2022, the leading cause of the decrease of the church leadership and membership was the migratory stampede, with an estimate of 100,000 believers of different confessions of faith, out of 140,000 reported between October 2021 and May 2022 who emigrated, according to the U.S. Customs and Border Protection agency.

Hundreds of more Cubans can be added among those who die trying to escape from Cuba. This is also a tactic that the system takes advantage of to eliminate the opposition. This is done by making Cubans disappear at sea or in the Central American jungles. Among those exiled are Christians of many others that profess different confessions of faith.

The actual number needs to be determined, especially after July 11, 2021. Since then, hundreds of people have been detained and even disappeared, and the arrests have not stopped. Regarding religious leaders, we report the following cases that were widely denounced including Pastor Maday Gonzales Espinosa (Las Tunas), Catholic layman Angel Mesa Rodríguez (Guanajay, Artemisa), Catholic priest Castor Alvarez Devesa (Camagüey), Pastors Manuel Alberto Morejón Soler (Havana), Yasser Caraballo (Sancti Spiritus), Alayn Toledano Valiente (Santiago de Cuba), Marcos Antonio Perdomo Silva (Santiago de Cuba), Yoel Demetrio Aspron Morales (Las Tunas), Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo, and his son David Lorenzo Rosales Carballo, 17 years old (Palma Soriano, Santiago de Cuba). Yeremi Blanco (Matanzas), Yarian Sierra (Matanzas), Yusniel Perez Montejo (Songo-La Maya, Santiago de Cuba); Ibrahim Figueredo (El Gabriel, in Güira de Melena, Artemisa).

Although they are not Catholic pastors, priests, or laymen, hundreds of believers were arrested in the protests that took place on July 11, and they did so for their Christian convictions.

Q. Warning signs of increased persecution

Cuban Christians see an entire country collapsing due to a failed system and that they are the main target of government paranoia. This government itself becomes more dangerous precisely when its survival is compromised. Therefore, at least in the short term, only greater persecution can be expected while the system collapses. The exponential increase in the government's repression comes especially after Miguel Mario Diaz Canel Bermudez, President of the Council of State and Ministers and First Secretary of the PCC, officially announced on July 11, 2021, that "the order for combat has been given". This led to the number of cases of repression skyrocketing. Meanwhile, churches and believers are one of their main targets. Thus, it is logical that churches or individual Christians may suffer even more persecution in the future than at present.

Although it has been more visible for Protestant and Catholics, the persecution has been equal for all and unleashed by political and military power. This also concerns Jews (especially the Bnei Anusim communities of Sephardic Jews), it also concerns Afro-Cuban believers, such as the Yorubas; and concerns Islamic minorities such as the Cuban Association for the Dissemination of Islam. Similarly, against minorities that are considered Christian sects such as Jehovah's

Witnesses, outlawed since 1976. And other minorities such as Rastafarians and fraternal societies that the government treats as if they were religious groups.

R. Immigration laws on Muslims

On Monday, October 31, 2022, at the Office of the Directorate of Identification, Immigration and Foreigners of Cuba (National DIIE), in Havana, the president of the Cuban Association for the Dissemination of Islam, Abu Duyanah (Niovel Alexander Tamayo Formen) was “regulated” for “reasons of public interest,” without specifying for what reasons or what public interest. “Regulated” is a euphemism, one of the many used by the system in Cuba, and in this case, is to specify that leaving the country is arbitrarily prohibited. Abu Duyanah, like many others u has no legal impediments to boarding a plane and traveling outside of Cuba.

This is a specific case of a flagrant violation of religious freedoms, given that due to his leadership in the Cuban Association for the Dissemination of Islam, Duyanah planned to make a new pilgrimage to Mecca in the company of other brothers in faith. Duyanah (born in 1984) converted to Islam in 2010 and was the first Cuban to travel to Mecca in 2014, according to the Memory of Nations website. His current regulated status will prevent him from making a second pilgrimage. This measure deserves the repudiation not only of the Islamic world but also of all the organizations that check and defend religious freedom.

From 2013-2015 and then since 2018, Abu Duyanah has been the Imam of the Cuban Association for the Dissemination of Islam. In his work for the Muslim community, he has assisted low-income families with the coordination of trips to Mecca, studies, and the search and construction of places to pray (7 houses and a mosque). Unfortunately, the houses located in Sancti Spiritus and Santiago de Cuba are being confiscated by the regime. Imams who have preceded Abu Duyanah have also been harassed. Meanwhile, religious literature sent to them, such as a container from Egypt in 2014, was embargoed. The regime interferes in the relations of this community with different embassies, such as those of Pakistan, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. Also, as is the case of other religious or political opposition groups, they are victims of false rumors seeking to generate social and xenophobic prejudices against them. The Cuban Association for the Dissemination of

Islam is part of the Cuban religious map. They have the right to religious freedom and freedom of conscience.

V. CONCLUSIONS

1. The year 2022 ranks amongst the years where the most justice has been accomplished worldwide regarding the dire situation of religious freedoms in Cuba. Among the most relevant events is Open Door's ranking of Cuba in 37th place out of 50 countries where Christians are persecuted the most.
2. The Office of Religious Affairs of the Central Committee of the PCC continues to be the entity designated to supervise and register everything related to religion.
3. Churches do not have access to the radio. The Council of Churches of Cuba is the only one that offers 20 minutes per month by the CMBF "*Radio Musical Nacional*" government station.
4. The system indoctrinates and deprives parents of their rights over their children, fully supervises and administers education, and subjects the children of Cuban Christians to anti-Christian teachings. The totalitarian government planned to take over the parental rights of Cuban children through the provisions of the new Family Code.
5. The entry into force of the New Penal Code approved by the National Assembly of People's Power on May 15, 2022, further limits the exercise of religious freedoms, and the repression against Christians intensifies.
6. As in previous years, during 2022, there were also regulations or prohibitions to travel to events of a religious nature, which the regime imposed on several believers. In some cases, they have been forced to leave and never return.
7. The regime's censorship goes as far as prohibiting the use of symbols and phrases that do not represent the Communist Party or that the system sees as contrary to its interests. This significantly affects Christian groups to which the system does not want to grant legal recognition. If these groups were to identify themselves with any symbol, then it would imply giving themselves away to fight lawsuits or prosecutions of their members under the charge of "The Illicit Association."
8. Christians accused in court were deprived of their most basic rights and equal treatment by those who give the laws of the regime, several believers remain in prison after July 11, 2021.

9. One of the unstated objectives of the so-called “reordering” policy decreed by the President of the Council of State and of Ministers, and First Secretary of the PCC, Miguel Mario Diaz-Canel Bermudez, is to financially asphyxiate the churches.
10. During 2022, the construction or renovation of church buildings remained paralyzed, and historical religious sites and places of worship that were previously taken away were not claimed.
11. The government did not stop monitoring and hindering Christian preaching and teachings in churches, as well as published materials with religious content.
12. During 2022, raids took place and as in previous years, religious materials and Bibles were confiscated.
13. Many pastors and believers in general were constantly subjected to police summons, fines, searches, confiscations, threats and coercion. Since 2021, the Catholic layman Ángel Mesa Rodríguez and Pastor Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo have remained in prison under very worrying circumstances.
14. One of the most notorious cases of the prohibition to leave Cuba was that of Abu Duyanah (Niovel Alexander Tamayo Formen), the Imam of the Cuban Association for the Dissemination of Islam, who was prevented by the regime from leaving to visit Mecca.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. We recommend that Cuba continues to be included in the Open Doors list of the 50 countries where Christians are most persecuted.
2. We recommend the Secretary of State of the United States, Mr. Antony J. Blinken, to keep Cuba among the countries appointed as Country of particular concern under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom.
3. Due to the increase in harassment and repression of human rights activists after the widespread demonstrations on July 11, 2021, and the exponential increase in the number of political prisoners, we recommend the U.S. Government to consider the urgent reopening of the Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP), which was frozen after the U.S. Embassy in Havana was closed.

4. We recommend that the U.S. Government enforce the Global Magnitsky Act against those who violate religious freedom in Cuba. This includes Caridad Diego Bello, director of the ORA, and her staff.
5. We recommend to the U.S. Government to facilitate religious leaders within Cuba, by providing multiple entry visas to the United States so that they can strengthen their ties with churches or groups of the same denomination in the United States.
6. We recommend the U.S. Government continue seeking the most accurate ways to influence the Cuban regime to release the more than a thousand political prisoners, including those who practice any religion, who are currently imprisoned and deprived of their freedom.
7. We recommend that the international community thinks before investing in Cuba and realize that the Cuban regime uses the money to equip the repressive forces it launches against unarmed and defenseless people.
8. We recommend that American churches pay as much attention as possible to religious freedom in Cuba and take caution with the propaganda of the Cuban system that tries to confuse external organizations with their Cuban counterparts, such as the Council of Churches of Cuba (CIC); and to offer the maximum possible support in terms of bilateral relations with their peers in Cuba.
9. We recommended to the organizations that monitor the situation of Religious Freedom in the world, such as CSW, Open Doors, Freedom House, and others that they continue paying full attention to the Cuban case.