

Cuban Human Rights and Pro-democracy Movement

Background

- Cuba is a military dictatorship officially controlled by the Communist Party of Cuba for the last 65 years. The Castro family has ruled over the country for all but the last six years.
- The only legal political party in Cuba is the Communist Party.
- Cuba has a pattern of false reporting to benefit the regime
 - Student statistics, WSJ [article](#) by Stanford Professor
 - Center for a Free Cuba's [Summary](#) The Economist Report: Data on Cuba's COVID-19 excess deaths reveal health care is "in tatters." |
 - Bablulog's [article](#) by John Suarez (Cuba's Blaming WHO for not being able to export its vaccine)
- Many researchers and Cuba-watchers consider the current economic, economic, [energy](#), and social crisis to be the worst in post-revolutionary Cuban history, if not of all time. More than 10% of the population has fled since 2021, most through dangerous routes through Central America to the US's southern border.

Gas and electricity are rationed. Rolling blackouts are an almost daily problem for average Cubans, not those of the political and military elite, or the luxury hotels run by the military's corporations.

- Protests of varying sizes continue around the country. The regime continues its well-documented pattern of harassing, detaining, persecuting, assaulting, and imprisoning protestors. The persecution often includes protestor's families and friends.
- Cuba was one of the [most prosperous nations](#) in Latin America before the revolution, with high per capita income, life expectancy, hospital beds per capita, and developed infrastructure. The regime says its failures are due to the partial US embargo—which doesn't include medicine or medical products, or food and agricultural products—but [evidence](#) shows the real problem is the economic straitjacket the regime uses to keep average Cubans from enriching themselves, which would be "incompatible with the revolution."
- The military controls an estimated 60-75% of the economy, including tourism and other lucrative sectors.

- Cuba, thanks to Russian support, has one of the best equipped and largest [per capita military forces](#) in Latin America. It's military operations in foreign countries began in 1961 in Ghana and has included conflicts in Angola, Yemen, Algiers, the Yom Kippur War (supporting Syria), Ethiopia, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. The regime says it's current presence in Nicaragua and [Venezuela](#) is to provide humanitarian support, but many reports indicate otherwise. Maduro's closest bodyguards are reportedly Cuban, and tens of thousands of Cuban trainers, advisors, and spies embedded into the very core of the Venezuelan state," according to this [Atlantic](#) report.
- The 2019 [constitution](#) declared the socialist system "irrevocable" and calls on citizens to defend any threat to that system with weapons if necessary. It also identifies itself as a "democratic homeland."
- "Elections" are ratifications, only hand-picked candidates appear on ballots. Candidates cannot campaign. Citizens are pressured to vote and punished if they do not participate, yet the number of voters is in sharp decline, a sign of protest.

Human Rights Violations

- Doctors who have defected, as well as NGO reports, accuse Cuba of forced labor tactics in its foreign medical brigades, including forcing doctors to coerce votes in elections, withholding payment and only paying them a fraction of their salaries, preventing them from interacting freely with people in the host country, and taking their passports from them until they return to Cuba.
 - Reason Magazine [expose](#) & video
 - To Rig Election for Maduro in [Venezuela](#)
 - U.S. Congress: Combating Trafficking of Cuban Doctors [Act](#)
 - Prisoners Defenders [Report](#)
 - [NYT](#) series on topic.
- Anti-regime protests had been increasing since before the pandemic—as had [increased repression](#).
- To punish increasing dissent the government issued new restrictive decrees:
 - [Decree 370](#) (7/4/19)—makes online criticism of the state illegal and punishable by law
 - [Decree 349](#) (4/20/18)—requires artists who want to display/perform their work to obtain government approval and evaluation.
 - [Decree 35](#) (10/17/21) – broadens and intensifies D370, defines online critiques of the government as cyberterrorism.

- Beginning in the late fall of 2020, a series of artist-led protests failed to establish a dialogue with government officials. These included at least four news making events, including:
 - San Isidro Movement’s hunger strike on behalf of jailed member Denis Solís that ended in a [raid](#) by police dressed as medics assaulted hunger strikers.
 - A vigil on 27 November 2021 by artists protesting that raid. The group became known as [27N](#).
 - The arrest of a young man, [Luis Robles Elizastigui](#), who carried a cardboard sign that read “Libertad” and marched around a shopping area in central Havana. He too was advocating for rapper Denis Solís’s release from prison, although he was not affiliated with any protest group. He was sentenced to five years imprisonment for
 - A poetry-reading protest in front of the Ministry of Culture in January 2022, which ended when the minister, surrounded by bodyguards, confronted the protestors and slapped one in the face. The artists were beaten and thrown into busses for interrogations.
- [On July 11, 2021](#), with COVID-19 deaths overwhelming failing hospitals, tens of thousands of Cubans spontaneously took to the streets at least [50 cities and towns](#) shouting *Libertad* and calling for an end to the dictatorship. The demonstrations were overwhelmingly peaceful, but state media depicted them as violent and organized from outside the country. The protests are known in Cuba as [11J](#).
- Cuba’s appointed “president,” Miguel Diaz-Canel, addressed the nation on national TV. Rather than calling for calm, he exhorted all revolutionaries to [take to the streets](#) and defend the revolution. “The order to battle has been given...” he said. Videos taken by civilians show police shooting into fleeing crowds, beating people, and raiding homes using attack dogs.
- Thousands were [arrested](#), detained, or disappeared for participating in 11J. More than 1000 arrests of protestors were tracked—and continued to be tracked—by NGOs outside of Cuba like [Prisoners Defenders](#) and [Justicia 11J](#). Prisoners and their families reported sham trials, often with groups of defendants without legal representation. Charges of treason, sedition, assault, and contempt resulted in convictions and prison sentences of as much as 25 years in prison. Cuba denies it has any political prisoners at all to this day.

Political prisoners included a man who tore up a photo of Fidel Castro (faced 12 years) and many who had posted footage of the protests. Human Rights Watch and other groups confirmed and [condemned](#) the repression, describing the government’s actions as a... “brutal strategy of repression designed to instill fear and suppress dissent...”

As of mid-March 2025 NGOs tracking protestor detentions and imprisonment say approximately 1150 Cubans are behind bars for opposing the regime.

The regime promised to release 553 prisoners in honor of Pope Francis's Jubilee Year. Roughly 200 political prisoners have been released. At least 30 had already completed their sentences but were still being held. Rights groups have condemned the program for lack of transparency and strict conditions on releases, including house arrest, forced labor, and denial of free speech and movement rights.

- Following the government's crackdown after the July 2021 protests, a diverse group of activists formed a new coalition group, Archipiélago, and convoked a ["Civic March for Change"](#) for November 20th of 1921. Supporters in at least six of Cuba's 12 provinces delivered signed documents requesting permission for marches in their regions. Some reported harassment, including physical assault, and detention during the process.
- The Cuban government quickly announced a new holiday for November 20th, [National Day of Defense](#), which called for military exercises on the 18th, 19th and 20th. Organizers changed the date of the march to November 15th to lessen the risk of conflict.
- The government has officially denied protestors the right to demonstrate, citing it as "illegal" and a "provocation," and reminding them that the 2019 constitution states that Cuba's socialist system is "irrevocable." Protestors will face up to [25-year sentences](#).
- [Amnesty International](#) and other human rights watch groups denounced the denial by the government of Cubans' basic human rights and cites ongoing repression.
- Organizers planned to march [peacefully](#) in nine provinces and called on protestors to remain nonviolent and refrain from inciting conflict in their posters, actions, or words.
- The government called again on Cuba's "revolutionaries" to defend the country against the protestors. Work centers formed [Rapid Response Brigades](#) and required employees to publicly commit to defending the revolution. Employees who did not stand at the mic to declare loyalty feared reprisals. The groups ran drills to prepare for the 15th's protests and handed members weapons such as iron rods and four-foot long wooden stakes.
- The Committees for the Defense of the Revolution and other so-called "civic" groups also ran [drills](#) and armed their members. Images and film of the drills ran on state media for weeks, along with a nationally televised defamation campaign against key political activists.

- The government continues to blame the U.S. embargo for its economic problems and the U.S. government for sponsoring political opponents on the island. Many dissidents in Cuba and international Cuba watch groups [disagree](#), at least partially with that, saying instead that corruption throughout Cuba’s centrally planned and controlled economy, mismanagement of resources, and rigid limitations and high taxes on the few, permitted types of sole proprietorships are the real causes of Cuba’s economic hardship. Food and medicines are excluded from the embargo. For example, the [U.S. is one of the largest](#) suppliers of food to the island.

In recent years, US farmers have sold chicken to the Cuban government (the only permitted importer in the country) at about \$1 per pound. The government has been selling it to citizens at \$7 dollars a pound or higher.

- Internet, electricity, or phone service are [shut down](#) to punish activists and their family members. The regime also has shut down wide swaths of these networks when protests occur to prevent news from spreading.
- *Actos (or Mitines) de Repudio*—[Acts of Repudiation](#)—continue to target activists and their families in their homes, at school or at work. These are government sanctioned public shamings, where groups are bussed in (some from schools, work centers, or committees for the defense of the revolution) to shout insults and pro-government slogans in front of activists’ homes. Often, these include physical aggression and assault and damage to the activists’ property.
- A number of artist-activists and social media-based activists have been forcibly [exiled](#). Activists are sometimes held under house arrest for weeks and, in some cases, months. Others are continuously detained and brought to undisclosed prisons for “interviews.” State television regularly broadcasts photos of key activists as part of a long running [defamation](#) campaign.
- Many families of imprisoned demonstrators are [threatened](#) with worse outcomes for their loved ones if they report the case to human rights groups or comment on social media. As a result, the true number of imprisoned protestors is difficult to confirm.

Actions to Take

- Spread word, follow story, [demand more reporting from the media](#).
- Attend events in support for human rights in Cuba.
- Ask your organization to officially endorse the call for human rights in Cuba.
- Sign up with Amnesty International for Cuban prisoners of conscience letter writing.
- Donate to groups like:

- [CubaLex](#)—Miami-based legal aid group helping Cubans on the island who've been imprisoned
 - [14yMedio](#)—independent online news media in Cuba
 - [Prisoners Defenders](#)—Madrid-based human rights group focusing on Cuban political prisoners.
 - [Amnesty International](#), [Human Rights Watch](#) (mention CUBAN violations)
 - [Observatorio Cubano de Derechos Humanos](#).
- Contact your representatives the [House](#) and the [Senate](#).
 - Write to [President Trump](#) asking him to lead a coordinated response with other democratic countries.
 - Join [Amnesty International's](#) letter writing campaign for Cuban human rights.¹

Some media consistently reporting on the Cuban pro-democracy movement

(English & Spanish)

- [14yMedio](#)
- [Diario de Cuba](#)
- [Cubadecide](#)
- [Prisoners Defenders](#)
- [Center for a Free Cuba](#)
- [HavanaTimes](#)
- [Translating Cuba](#)
- [Babalublog](#)

(Spanish only)

- [ADN Cuba](#)
- [Observatorio de Derechos Humanos Cubanos](#)

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¹ Although this information is from a 2021 campaign, there are useful details and links if you are interested joining AI's campaigns.

"From: Nery Chavez at Amnesty International USA

<alerts@takeaction.amnestyusa.org>

Date: Nov 15, 2021 at 4:41:26 PM

Subject: Protect the Right to Organize & the Freedom of Expression (Cuba: 88.21 - Update)

To:



Civil society groups have called for peaceful protests across Cuba on November 15, 2021, to demand respect for human rights and the release of hundreds of people still imprisoned following the largest public protests seen in decades held this past July 11, 2021. Cuban authorities have historically criminalized dissent, making protesters at risk of arbitrary detention and other human rights violations.

TAKE ACTION:

- Please take action as-soon-as possible. This Urgent Action expires on **December 24, 2021**.
- Write a letter in your own words or using the sample below as a guide to one or both government officials listed. You can also email, fax, call or Tweet them.
- [Click here](#) to let us know the actions you took on **Urgent Action 88.21**. It's important to report because we share the total number with the officials we are trying to persuade and the people we are trying to help.

CONTACT INFORMATION

President Miguel Díaz Canel

Presidente de la República de Cuba

Hidalgo, esquina 6. Plaza de la Revolución

La Habana, CP 10400, Cuba

Email: despacho@presidencia.gob.cu

Twitter: [@DiazCanelB](https://twitter.com/DiazCanelB)