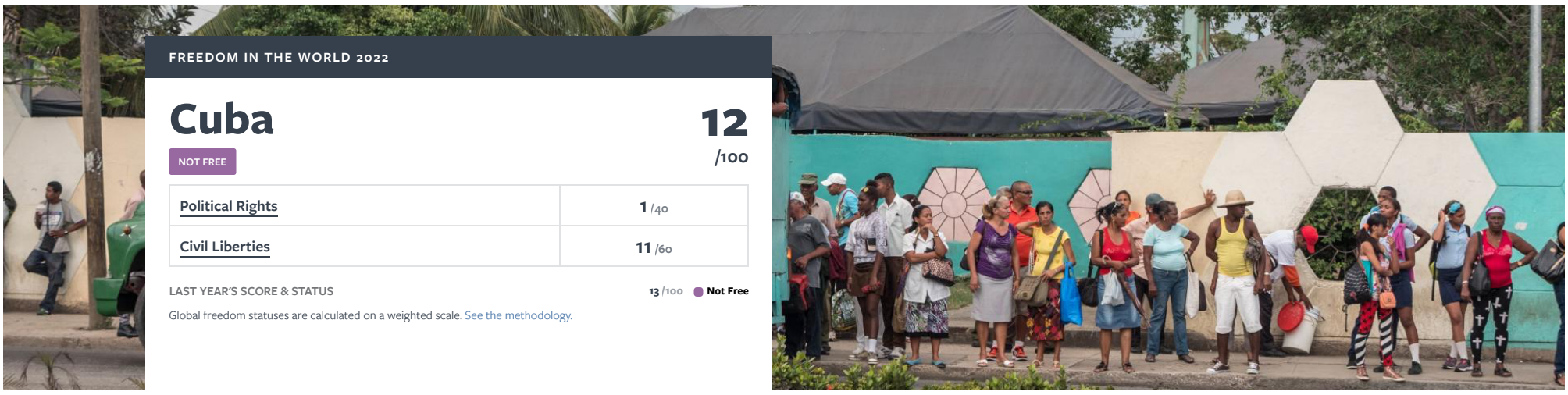

FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2022

Cuba

NOT FREE

12 /100

Political Rights	1 /40
Civil Liberties	11 /60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS 13 /100 Not Free

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. See the methodology.

Share

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 a generational transition in political leadership between 2018 and 2021 that included the introduction of a new constitution.

Key Developments in 2021

- Cuba saw the largest protests in over 20 years on July 11, as protesters nationwide rallied over goods shortages, economic difficulties, and the government's COVID-19 response. Security forces responded violently, using live ammunition, tear gas, and charging maneuvers against participants. Detainees faced torture and degrading treatment while in custody and suffered due process violations during subsequent trials.
- The government continued to target the dissident San Isidro Movement (MSI) and 27N artist collectives during the year. MSI member Luis Manuel Otero Alcántra was forced to a hospital in early May to end a hunger strike and was detained on July 11, while MSI cofounder Maykel Castillo Pérez was detained in mid-May. Otero and Castillo remained in custody at year's end.
- In August, the government gazetted Decree Laws 35 and 42, both of which target the dissemination of information deemed false or detrimental to "public order." The government also gazetted Resolution 105, which targets "false news," that month.
- Havana retired the convertible peso (CUC) in January, ending the country's dual currency system. The Cuban peso (CUP), the surviving domestic currency, lost value against the US dollar on the black market as the year progressed.

On Cuba

See all data, scores & information on this country or territory.

See More

Country Facts

Global Freedom Score

12 /100 Not Free

Internet Freedom Score

21 /100 Not Free

Other Years

2021

Political Rights

A. Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts	
Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?	0 /4

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 elected president of the republic under the new constitutional system in a nearly unanimous National Assembly vote in October 2019. That December, he named Manuel Marrero Cruz prime minister. National Assembly president Juan Esteban Lazo Hernández became president of the Council of State, Cuba's top executive office under the old constitution, in October 2019, succeeding Díaz-Canel.

Raúl Castro Ruz, who preceded Díaz-Canel as president of the Council of State, continued to wield considerable power as PCC first secretary. However, Castro retired from that post during the April 2021 party congress and was succeeded by Díaz-Canel. Castro maintains significant influence despite his retirement.

A2 0-4 pts	
Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?	0 /4

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. In the 2018 National Assembly elections, all 605 of the approved candidates were deemed elected.

A3 0-4 pts	
Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies?	0 /4

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 474 as of the 2023 elections.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 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** / 4

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 251 political prisoners were held by Cuban authorities as of September 2021.

B2 0-4 pts	
Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?	**0** / 4

The PCC has monopolized government and politics in Cuba since the mid-1960s, allowing no electoral competition and any alternative force from succeeding it through a democratic transfer of power. Dissident groups were blocked from fielding independent candidates in the 2017 municipal elections, while security forces suppressed opposition activity during both the February 2019 constitutional referendum and the October 2019 election of Díaz-Canel.

B3 0-4 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** / 4

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 0-4 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** / 4

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

Women hold more than half of the 605 National Assembly seats. 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.

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

C. Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts	
Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government?	**0** / 4

None of Cuba's nominally elected officials are chosen through free and fair contests, 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 0-4 pts	
Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?	**1** / 4

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, and the authorities do not tolerate civil society groups, independent journalists, or independent courts that might serve as external checks on government malfeasance.

C3 0-4 pts	
Does the government operate with openness and transparency?	**0** / 4

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.

Civil Liberties

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts	
Are there free and independent media?	**0** / 4

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. 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; in April 2021, television presenter Humberto López called for members of the MSI and 27N artist collectives to be charged with "treason against the homeland," a capital offense.

The government closely monitors and persecutes perceived dissidents within the artistic community, mainstream artists, and media figures who air independent or critical views. In May 2021, authorities forcefully entered the home of MSI member Luis Manuel Otero Alcántra—who began a hunger strike over the seizure and destruction of artwork in April—and sent him to a hospital. Otero was discharged at the end of May but was arrested on July 11, as protests were held nationwide. Otero held another hunger strike between late September and mid-October.

In mid-May 2021, MSI cofounder Maykel Castillo Pérez was detained by the authorities and was charged with crimes including "resistance" and "contempt." Castillo, who coproduced and performed the antigovernment song "Patria y Vida" ("Homeland and Life") along with Otero, began a hunger strike in late October while held at Pinar del Río prison. Both Otero and Castillo remained in detention at year's end.

Journalists and artists were exiled or were otherwise prohibited from returning to Cuba during 2021. In March, opposition journalist Karla Pérez González, who was traveling to the country from Costa Rica, was denied entry. Costa Rica granted Pérez refugee status in August. In June, artist and 27N member Hamlet Lavastida was arrested and accused of instigating a crime for communicating with other members of the collective. Lavastida and his partner, poet Katherine Bisquet, were both exiled from Cuba in September.

D2 0-4 pts	
Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private?	**3** / 4

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 public spaces and the ability to build new churches and distribute its own publications. Protestant and evangelical groups tend to face greater restrictions, though they too have experienced improved conditions in recent years.

D3 0-4 pts	
Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination?	**0** / 4

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. University students have been expelled for dissident behavior. 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 being dismissed from positions in reprisal for their political opinions or activities.

D4 0-4 pts	
Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution?	**1** / 4

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 authorities also monitor expressions of dissent on social media and through surveillance of electronic communications, punishing users with criminal charges or other forms of reprisal. Decree Law 370 of 2019 bans Cuban citizens from hosting their writings on foreign servers—including social media platforms like Facebook—and prohibits the circulation of "information contrary to the social interest, morals, good customs, and integrity of people." Under Decree Law 389 of 2019, authorities can engage in electronic surveillance without prior judicial approval and use the information gained in criminal cases.

Several laws and resolutions that restrict private discussion were gazetted in August 2021. That month, the government gazetted Decree Law 35, which allows the state-run Telecommunications Company of Cuba SA to terminate networks used to disseminate information considered false or detrimental to "public order." The government also gazetted Decree Law 42, which requires internet service providers to suspend or terminate the services of users who disseminate such content. Resolution 105, meanwhile, targets "the dissemination of false news."

Anonymity and encryption technologies are legally prohibited, but many Cubans with mobile internet access use encrypted services such as WhatsApp and Telegram to communicate privately among trusted friends.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts	
Is there freedom of assembly?	**0** / 4

Restrictions on freedom of assembly remain a key form of political control. Security forces and government-backed assailants routinely break up peaceful gatherings or protests by political dissidents and civic activists. The government also targets assemblies and gatherings using COVID-19 measures.

Authorities and officials disrupted and forcefully dispersed several protests during the year. 27N supporters held a protest in front of the Culture Ministry's headquarters in January, which ended after Culture Minister Alpidio Alonso Grau slapped a journalist.

On July 11, Cubans participated in the largest rallies in over 20 years, holding nationwide protests over shortages of basic goods, economic difficulties, and the government's COVID-19 response. President Díaz-Canel called on government supporters to oppose the protests, saying "the order to combat has been given" in televised remarks. 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, with over 700 remaining in detention as of late December.

Authorities also restricted the activities of Archipiélago, a group that sought to organize antigovernment rallies in November 2021 and called for the release of those detained in July. In October, the group's request to hold protests in November was denied. Later in October, prosecutors warned its leaders not to proceed with their plans. On November 15, security forces were deployed to prevent the planned protests from occurring, while organizers and prominent government opponents were detained. Playwright and Archipiélago leader Yunior García Aguilera fled Cuba for Spain several days later.

E2 0-4 pts	
Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work?	**0** / 4

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, political parties, and trade unions.

A number of NGOs suffered repression during 2021, with members facing arrest, detention, and exile. In addition to the MSI, the authorities also targeted 27N, Archipiélago, the Ladies in White, and the Patriotic Union of Cuba (UNPACU). UNPACU leader José Daniel Ferrer García was arrested when trying to join the July 11 protests. In August, the government revoked a home-detention order originating from a previous conviction, sending Ferrer to prison to serve a 4-year-14-day term. In November 2021, Ladies in White leader Berta Soler Fernández and UNPACU member Guillermo Fariñas were among those arrested and detained as authorities sought to disrupt that month's planned Archipiélago rallies.

E3 0-4 pts	
Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations?	**0** / 4

Cuban workers do not have the right to strike or bargain collectively, and independent labor unions are illegal.

F. Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts	
Is there an independent judiciary?	**0** / 4

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. Judges must enforce laws on vaguely defined offenses like "public disorder," "contempt," "disrespect for authority," and "precriminal dangerousness," which are used to prosecute the regime's political opponents.

F2 0-4 pts	
Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters?	**0** / 4

The regime's systematic violation of due process is regularly illustrated by trumped-up criminal cases against dissidents and independent journalists.

Those arrested on July 11, 2021 faced due process violations, with the judiciary holding summary trials against defendants. Courts issued convictions and sentences against 40 people by early August, with none of those individuals benefiting from legal representation. Another round of trials reportedly took place in December, with the US State Department noting that over 150 defendants received prison sentences during those proceedings; some defendants convicted in December received terms lasting as long as 30 years.

Cubans facing trial do not benefit from speedy proceedings. Luis Robles Elizástigui was arrested after holding a one-person protest in December 2020 but did not face proceedings over charges of "disobedience" and disseminating "enemy propaganda" until December 2021, with prosecutors requesting a six-year sentence.

F3 0-4 pts	
Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies?	**0** / 4

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.

Cubans faced violence at the hands of the authorities during and after the July 11, 2021 protests. 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. A teenage girl arrested on July 11 recounted that security officers ordered her to remove her clothing and intimated that she would be raped. Opposition journalist Orelvys Cabrera Sotolongo, who was arrested while covering the protests, was also forced to remove his clothing while under interrogation. University student Leonardo Romero Negrín, who was also detained on July 11, recounted that officers physically assaulted him after he was detained. The Military Prosecutor's Office declined to criminally pursue a subsequent complaint from Romero's father by September.

Score Change: The score declined from 1 to 0 due to credible reports of violent repression of peaceful demonstrators during the July 11 protests and the degrading treatment and torture of some of those detained in subsequent months.

F4 0-4 pts	
Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population?	**1** / 4

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 their 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. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), male labor force participation stood at 66.3 percent in 2019, while female labor force participation stood at 41 percent.

While racial discrimination has long been outlawed, Cubans of African descent have reported widespread discrimination and profiling by police. Many lack access to the dollar economy and receive fewer remittances from abroad than white Cubans.

Discrimination based on sexual orientation is illegal in areas such as employment and housing. Mariela Castro Espín, Raúl Castro's daughter and director of the National Center for Sex Education (CENESEX)—which seeks to control and direct LGBT+ advocacy—has advocated on behalf of LGBT+ people. However, the advocacy efforts of independent LGBT+ groups and activists are either ignored or suppressed.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts	
Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education?	**1** / 4

Freedom of movement and the right to change one's residence and place of employment are restricted. Cubans still face extremely high passport fees, and Cuban doctors, diplomats, and athletes who "defect" abroad are prohibited from visiting for eight years. Some dissidents and journalists are barred from foreign travel, despite a 2013 migration law that rescinded the exit-visa requirement. The number of these individuals, known as *regulados*, rose sharply during 2020, with estimates exceeding 200 that year.

G2 0-4 pts	
Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors?	**1** / 4

The 2019 constitution recognized private property as one form of ownership, though opportunities to obtain property and operate private enterprises remain restricted. In July 2020, in an effort to respond to the economic effects of its COVID-19 measures, the government announced plans for a series of economic reforms, including the legalization of small and medium-sized enterprises. In June 2021, the government announced that it would allow the formation of small and medium-sized enterprises but would limit their activities to sectors that are not deemed strategic. Restrictions on self-employed workers remained under the government's updated private-enterprise policy, however.

G3 0-4 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** / 4

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 does not contain language that defines marriage as a union between a man and a woman. The draft family code published in September 2021 would allow same-sex couples to marry but will require legislative approval and approval via a referendum before it enters force.

Abortion is legal in Cuba.

The country lacks specific legislation to address domestic violence, and police are reportedly unresponsive to complaints of such abuse. In January 2021, *Granma*, a PCC mouthpiece, reported that the draft family code would more explicitly address domestic violence.

G4 0-4 pts	
Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?	**1** / 4

Average official salaries remain extremely low. 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.

The national currency's historical weakness encouraged an exodus of trained personnel into the private and tourism sectors, where the CUC—pegged to the US dollar—was used. The CUC was retired from use in January 2021 and was fully phased out by June, leaving the CUP as the country's only domestically backed legal tender. Cubans using the CUP faced inflation as the year progressed, as the currency fell in value against the US dollar on the black market.

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