

Cuba

Population: 11,300,000

GNI/capita: \$2,900

Life Expectancy: 77

Religious Groups: Roman Catholic, Protestant, Afro-Cuban spiritualism

Ethnic Groups: Mulatto (51 percent), white (37 percent), black (11 percent), Chinese (1 percent)

Capital: Havana

Political Rights: 7

Civil Liberties: 7

Status: Not Free

Ratings Timeline (Political Rights, Civil Liberties, Status)

Year Under Review	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Rating	7,7,NF	7,7,NF	7,7,NF	7,7,NF	7,7,NF	7,7,NF	7,7,NF	7,7,NF	7,7,NF	7,7,NF

Overview:

Cuba's leader Fidel Castro marked his forty-sixth year in power in 2005, appearing to have recuperated from a public fall the previous year that had prompted serious questions about the 79-year-old leader's health. The Communist government continued to reassert its control over the economy, scaling back many of the market reform measures undertaken by the regime during the severe economic crisis that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. Tensions between Cuba and the United States remained at their highest level in several years, while the European Union (EU) moved to reopen dialogue with the Castro government that was broken off after the 2003 crackdown on opposition groups.

Cuba achieved independence from Spain in 1898 as a result of the Spanish-American War. The Republic of Cuba was established in 1902, but remained under U.S. tutelage as a result of the Platt Amendment until 1934. In 1959, the U.S.-supported dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista, who had ruled Cuba for 18 of the previous 25 years, was ousted by Castro's July 26th Movement. Castro declared his affiliation with communism shortly thereafter, and the island has been a one-party state ever since.

Following the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of some \$5 billion in annual Soviet subsidies, Castro opened some sectors of the island's economy to foreign direct investment. The legalization of the U.S. dollar in Cuba in 1993 created a new source of inequality, as access to dollars from remittances or through the tourist industry engendered a new moneyed class while the majority continued to live on peso wages averaging less than \$10 a month.

The Castro government remains highly repressive of political dissent. Although Cuba's cycle of repression has ebbed and flowed over the past decade, the desire to neutralize organized political dissent remains a regime priority. In February 1999, the government introduced tough legislation against sedition, with a maximum prison sentence of 20 years. It stipulated penalties for unauthorized contacts with the United States and the import or supply of "subversive"

materials, including texts on democracy and documents from news agencies and journalists. The Cuban government has recently undertaken a series of campaigns to undermine the reputations of leading opposition figures by portraying them as agents of the United States.

In 2002, the Varela Project, a referendum initiative seeking broad changes in the four-decades-old socialist system, won significant international recognition. Former U.S. president Jimmy Carter praised the project on Cuban television during his visit to the island, and its leader, Oswaldo Paya of the Christian Liberation Movement, later received the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought. In May, project organizers submitted more than 11,000 signatures to the National Assembly demanding that a referendum be held in which Cubans could vote for fundamental reforms such as freedom of expression, the right to own private businesses, and electoral reform. However, the proposal was rejected by the constitutional committee of the National Assembly, and the Cuban government instead held a counter-referendum in which 8.2 million people supposedly declared the socialist system to be "untouchable."

In March 2003, the government initiated a crackdown against the pro-democracy opposition. Seventy-five people, including 27 independent journalists, 10 independent librarians, and at least a dozen signature collectors for the Varela Project, were sentenced to an average of 20 years in prison following one-day trials held in April. (At the end of 2004, 61 of the activists who were arrested remained in prison; 14 won conditional release for health-related reasons, and two subsequently left Cuba.) In 2005, Cuba's "Ladies in White," a group of wives who have demonstrated for the release of their husbands imprisoned in 2003, won the Sakharov Prize, following in the footsteps of Paya.

In May 2004, U.S. president George W. Bush announced that the United States would intensify pressure on the Cuban regime by increasing broadcasts designed to break through the island's information blockade, by aiding dissidents, and by limiting the amount of money Cuban-Americans could take with them on family visits or send through remittances. In 2005, the U.S. State Department appointed a "transition coordinator" to oversee efforts to destabilize the Castro government and usher in democratic change.

By early 2005, total U.S. agricultural sales to Cuba, under new legislation passed in 2000, had exceeded \$1 billion, transforming Cuba into the twenty-fifth largest market for U.S. food exports. The Cuban government estimated 5 percent growth in 2004 and projected even better economic performance in 2005; the estimates prompted Castro to proclaim that the Cuban economy was "rising like a phoenix." Cuba projected that 2.5 million tourists would visit in 2005, the highest number on record. The Cuban government recentralized control over state-owned enterprises, reduced the number of licenses available for small-scale entrepreneurs, and scaled back foreign investment partnerships with European and Canadian companies. In 2004, Cuba's three largest trading partners were Venezuela, Spain, and China, which planned major investments in Cuba's nickel industry. Oil and gas companies from Spain, Norway, and India continued to explore for offshore energy deposits along the island's northern coast.

During the summer, energy shortages and frequent blackouts plagued the island and fueled citizen complaints about government incompetence. Embarrassed, Cuban authorities struggled to address the problem with energy-saving light bulbs, but failed to address the underlying problem of dilapidated electrical infrastructure. A Cuban agency issued a critical assessment of the island's housing crisis, reporting a deficit of 500,000 houses and describing 43 percent of existing dwellings as in mediocre or poor condition. By September, the U.S. Coast Guard had intercepted more than 2,000 Cuban migrants at sea, the highest number since 1994.

Independent opposition groups remained active. In May, more than 100 government opponents attended the Assembly to Promote Civil Society in Cuba, organized by opposition leader Marta Beatriz Roque. Paya boycotted the gathering due to a history of bad feelings between the two opposition leaders. Cuban authorities allowed the meeting to occur undisturbed with a number of foreign observers in attendance, but several visiting members of parliament from European countries were ejected from the island. Meanwhile, European embassies decided to cease the practice of inviting Cuban dissidents to official receptions, thus ending what had been known as the “cocktail party war.”

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Citizens of Cuba cannot change their government democratically. President Fidel Castro dominates the political system, having transformed the country into a one-party state with the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) controlling all governmental entities from the national to the local level. Communist structures were institutionalized by the 1976 constitution installed at the first congress of the PCC. The constitution provides for the National Assembly, which designates the Council of State. It is that body which in turn appoints the Council of Ministers in consultation with its president, who serves as head of state and chief of government. However, Castro is responsible for every appointment and controls every lever of power in Cuba in his various roles as president of the Council of Ministers, chairman of the Council of State, commander in chief of the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR), and first secretary of the PCC. The most recent PCC congress took place in 1997, and no date has been set for the next meeting.

In October 2002, some eight million Cubans voted in tightly controlled municipal elections. On January 19, 2003, an election was held for the Cuban National Assembly, with just 609 candidates—all supported by the regime—vying for 609 seats. All political organizing outside the PCC is illegal. Political dissent, spoken or written, is a punishable offense, and those so punished frequently receive years of imprisonment for seemingly minor infractions. Continuing a trend from 2003, in 2005 the Cuban government harassed dissidents, including using arbitrary sweeps and temporary detentions of suspected dissidents. The regime also called on its neighbor-watch groups, known as “Committees in Defense of the Revolution,” to strengthen vigilance against “anti-social behavior,” a government euphemism for opposition activity.

Official corruption remains a serious problem, with a “culture of illegality” shrouding the mixture of private and state-controlled economic activities allowed on the island. In late 2003, Juan Jose Vega, the president of Cubanacan, a state-run enterprise controlling more than \$600 million in foreign investment in Cuba’s tourism industry, was dismissed on charges of corruption. Cuba was ranked 59 out of 159 countries surveyed in the 2005 Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index.

The press in Cuba is the object of a targeted campaign of intimidation by the government, which uses Ministry of Interior agents to infiltrate and report on the independent media. Independent journalists, particularly those associated with five small news agencies established outside state control, have been subjected to continued repression, including jail terms of hard labor and assaults by state security agents while in prison. Foreign news agencies may only hire local reporters through government offices, limiting employment opportunities for independent journalists. In 2004, 22 independent journalists arrested in March 2003 remained imprisoned in degrading conditions, which included physical and psychological abuse; acts of harassment and

intimidation were also directed against their families. In April, two journalists held without trial since March 2002 were finally tried by a court in Ciego de Avila on charges of insulting Castro and the police and creating public disorder; one received a three-year prison sentence, and the other a sentence of three and a half years. Access to the Internet remained tightly controlled.

In 1991, Roman Catholics and other believers were granted permission to join the Communist Party, and the constitutional reference to official atheism was dropped the following year. In 1998, Pope John Paul II visited Cuba and called for greater religious freedom, which was followed by a gradual lessening of restrictions on religious worship. However, according to the U.S. State Department's 2005 International Religious Freedom Report, Cuba remains one of four countries that continues to employ authoritarian actions to control religious belief and expression. Security agents frequently spy on worshippers, the government continues to block construction of new churches, the number of new foreign priests is limited, and most new denominations are refused recognition. An estimated 70 percent of all Cubans on the island practice some form of Afro-Cuban religion.

The government restricts academic freedom. Teaching materials for courses such as mathematics or literature must have an ideological content. Affiliation with official Communist Party structures is generally needed to gain access to educational institutions, and students' report cards carry information regarding their parents' involvement with the Communist Party. In 2003, state security forces raided 22 independent libraries and sent 10 librarians to jail with terms of up to 26 years. Many of the targeted individuals were charged with working with the U.S. to subvert the Cuban government, thereby committing national security violations and aiding a foreign power.

Limited rights of assembly and association are permitted under the constitution; however, these are subject to the stipulation that they may not be "exercised against the existence and objectives of the Socialist State." The unauthorized assembly of more than three persons, including those for private religious services in private homes, is punishable by law by up to three months in prison and a fine. This prohibition is selectively enforced and is sometimes used as a legal pretext to imprison human rights advocates.

Workers do not have the right to bargain collectively or to strike. Members of independent labor unions, which the government considers illegal, are often harassed or dismissed from their jobs and subsequently barred from future employment. The Cuban government has also been reducing opportunities for private economic activity; by June 2005, an estimated 2,000 self-employment licenses had been revoked, purportedly because their owners had failed to comply with state regulations. Privately run farmers' markets also came under increased scrutiny, a further intensification of the trend towards increased state control over the economy.

The executive branch controls the judiciary. In practice, the Council of State, of which Castro is chairman, serves as a de facto judiciary and controls both the courts and the judicial process as a whole.

According to a domestic monitoring group, the Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation, there are 306 prisoners of conscience in Cuba, most held in cells with common criminals and many convicted on vague charges such as "disseminating enemy propaganda" or "dangerousness." Members of groups that exist apart from the state are labeled "counterrevolutionary criminals" and are subject to systematic repression, including arrest, beatings while in custody, and intimidation by uniformed or plainclothes state security agents. In mid-July, more than 20 people were arrested in Havana at a demonstration commemorating 42

Cubans who died trying to escape the island when their boat collided with a Cuban border control vessel and sank. Later that month, a comparable number of dissidents were detained for congregating in front of the French Embassy to protest their exclusion from Bastille Day festivities that were attended by Cuban officials.

Since 1991, the United Nations has voted annually to assign a special investigator on human rights to Cuba, but the Cuban government has refused to cooperate. Cuba also does not allow the International Red Cross or other humanitarian organizations access to its prisons. Cuba's prison population is disproportionately black.

Freedom of movement and the right to choose one's residence and place of employment are severely restricted. Attempting to leave the island without permission is a punishable offense. In the post-Soviet era, the rights of Cubans to own private property and to participate in joint ventures with foreigners have been recognized by law, and non-Cuban businesses have also been allowed. However, PCC membership is still required to obtain good jobs, serviceable housing, and real access to social services, including medical care and educational opportunities. In 2004, a Ministry of Labor decree halted the issuance of all new licenses for 40 categories of self-employment that were legalized in 1993. Roughly 150,000 Cubans are self-employed, approximately 2 percent of the workforce. The government systematically violates international salary standards, terms of contract, and other labor codes for workers employed on the island by foreign-owned firms.

Many Afro-Cubans have only limited access to the dollar-earning sectors of the economy, such as tourism and employment by joint-ventures. About 40 percent of all women work, and they are well represented in most professions. However, violence against women is a problem, as is child prostitution. According to the 2005 U.S. State Department Trafficking in Persons Report, Cuba is a country of internal trafficking for sexual exploitation and a destination for sex tourists, including foreigners searching for underage prostitutes.