

Annual Report - Cuba 2017/2018

Arbitrary detentions, discriminatory dismissals from state jobs, and harassment in self-employment continued to be used to silence criticism. Advances in education were undermined by ongoing online and offline censorship. Cuba remained mostly closed to independent human rights monitors.

Background

Lifting of travel restrictions on Cubans in 2013, removal of limits on receiving remittances, and the draw of visa-free countries continued to be important push factors for emigration. Cubans continued to leave in large numbers, despite the country's changing international diplomacy, pushed by exceptionally low salaries and a tight web of control on freedom of expression.

In June, the administration of US President Donald Trump made an almost complete reversal of the USA's political rhetoric towards Cuba. This reduced the chance of US Congress passing legislation to lift the economic embargo on Cuba, which continued to undermine economic, social and cultural rights.

At least 12 lawyers from the human rights organization Cubalex received asylum in the USA after being harassed, intimidated and threatened with imprisonment for their peaceful human rights work.

Cuba had not ratified the ICCPR or the ICESCR, both of which it signed in February 2008, nor the Rome Statute of the ICC.

In December the government announced that President Raúl Castro would step down in April 2018.

Arbitrary arrests and detentions

Human rights and political activists continued to be harassed, intimidated and arbitrarily detained in high numbers. The Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation, a Cuban NGO not officially recognized by the state, recorded 5,155 arbitrary detentions in 2017, compared to 9,940 in 2016.

The Ladies in White, a group of female relatives of prisoners detained on politically motivated grounds, remained one of the primary targets of repression by the authorities. During detention, the women were often beaten by law enforcement officials and state security agents dressed as civilians.

In January, Danilo Maldonado Machado, known as El Sexto, was released from a maximum security prison. He had been arrested in November 2016, hours after the announcement of Fidel Castro's death, for having written *Se fue* ("He's gone") on a wall in the capital, Havana.¹

In August, Yulier Perez, a graffiti artist known for painting dilapidated walls in Havana, was arbitrarily detained after months of intimidation and harassment from the authorities for freely expressing himself through his art.²

Prisoners of conscience

The leader of the pro-democracy Christian Liberation Movement, Dr Eduardo Cardet Concepción, remained in prison having been handed a three-year sentence in March for publicly criticizing Fidel Castro.³

A family of four human rights defenders were detained in Holguín, southeast Cuba, for allegedly leaving their house during the period of state mourning for Fidel Castro in 2016. The three siblings were given one-year prison sentences for “defamation of institutions, organizations and heroes and martyrs of the Republic of Cuba” and “public disorder”.⁴ Their mother was sentenced to house arrest. On 2 April, after a prolonged hunger strike, the three siblings were freed under conditional release, but they continued to be intimidated by the authorities.

Jorge Cervantes, a member of the political opposition group Patriotic Union of Cuba (UNPACU), was detained for approximately three months between May and August. Weeks before, UNPACU had published on its YouTube channel a video called “Horrors in jail” in which Jorge Cervantes interviewed a man who had allegedly been ill-treated in a Cuban prison, and a series of videos which alleged corruption by public officials.⁵

The authorities continued to present trumped-up charges for common crimes as a way to harass and detain political opponents, meaning there were likely many more prisoners of conscience than documented.

Workers’ rights

The state continued to use its control – as the biggest employer in the country, and as a regulator of the private sector – as a way to stifle even the most subtle criticism of the government.⁶ Politically motivated and discriminatory dismissals continued to be used against those who criticized the government’s economic or political model. Workers pushed out of employment in the public sector for freely expressing themselves were often further harassed after entering the emerging but highly regulated self-employment sector.

The de facto prohibition on independent trade unions limited workers’ ability to independently organize and appeal against discriminatory dismissals. The executive’s strong influence over the judiciary and lawyers limited effective recourse through the courts.

Right to education

Undue restrictions in access to information and freedom of expression online followed decades of offline censorship, undermining Cuba’s advances in education.

Between May and mid-June, the Open Observatory of Network Interference conducted testing on a sample of websites in Cuba and found 41 sites blocked by the authorities. All the blocked sites expressed criticism of the Cuban government, reported on human rights issues, or discussed techniques to bypass censorship.

While the government continued to expand access to the internet, it prioritized access to the highly censored, government-curated national intranet. Access to the global internet remained prohibitively expensive for most Cubans.⁷

International scrutiny

In April, the UN Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons conducted a visit to Cuba, and in July the country received the UN independent expert on human rights and international solidarity.

Most independent human rights organizations continued to be denied access to the country and to its prisons. Cuba remained the only country in the Americas region to deny access to Amnesty International.

1. Cuban graffiti artist released ([AMR 25/5545/2017](#))
2. Urban artist at risk in Cuba ([AMR 25/7000/2017](#))
3. Cuba: Activist sentenced to three years in jail after criticizing Fidel Castro ([News story](#), 21 March)
4. Cuba: Prisoners of conscience on hunger strike ([AMR 25/6001/2017](#))
5. Cuba: Opposition activist in maximum security prison ([AMR 25/6671/2017](#))
6. Cuba: “Your mind is in prison” – Cuba’s web of control over free expression and its chilling effect on everyday life ([AMR 25/7299/2017](#))
7. Cuba’s internet paradox: How controlled and censored internet risks Cuba’s achievements in education ([News story](#), 29 August)