



# CUBAN OPPOSITION : WHY DOES DISCONTENT NOT LEAD TO REGIME CHANGE ?

## Key points

1. **Public discontent in the country is massive, but it does not lead to political change.** Cuba illustrates a classic dynamic of authoritarian regimes: a government can be widely rejected without that rejection turning into regime change. The ability to coordinate, endure, and survive repression proves crucial.
2. **Coercion combines the actions of local cadres, the police, State Security, and sometimes the military.** It aims to prevent coordination among dissident voices, but above all to identify and neutralize individuals likely to exercise leadership, and to prevent any organizational consolidation.
3. **The regime thus blocks any alternative through criminalization and censorship.** The law is used to create deterrent “examples,” while Internet shutdowns reduce coordination as well as the visibility of abuses. At the same time, the massive exodus since 2021 acts as a political safety valve, removing from the country part of the forces that could be mobilized.
4. **The main obstacle lies in the individual cost of engagement.** Concrete measures (legal support, material solidarity, protection of relatives, documentation of abuses) can reduce this cost, limit burnout, and make mobilization more sustainable.
5. **The diaspora can become a lever for continuity.** The exodus weakens internal mobilization, but it also creates external resources (visibility, media relays, financial support, expertise, protection). Structuring ties with the diaspora can strengthen organizational capacity, documentation of violence, and the survival of citizen networks.

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# CHRONOLOGY

**1 JANUARY 1959**

**Overthrow of the Batista regime** and establishment of power by the Castro-led movement.

**3 JANUARY 1961**

Severance of diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba.

**3 OCTOBER 1965**

**Creation of the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC);** de facto single party.

**24 FEBRUARY 1976**

**New constitution;** the PCC is enshrined as *“leading force”* of the state and society.

**11 JULY 2021**

**Nationwide protests;** repression and internet shutdowns.

**18 AUGUST 2021**

**Cybersecurity law;** tighter regulation of online expression.

## INTRODUCTION

Cuba is a borderline case that helps explain how a regime can endure despite a deep crisis and widespread social disavowal. The *Partido Comunista de Cuba* (PCC), founded in 1965, has concentrated power since that year within **a single-party system that reduces the possibilities for autonomous organisation and makes the electoral conversion of discontent impossible**. The country is currently led by Miguel Díaz-Canel, who serves both as president and as first secretary of the Communist Party, a central position in the Cuban power structure.

The island is experiencing multiple crises (shortages, rising prices, energy constraints, weakened public services) that weigh on the daily lives of Cubans. In early February 2026, the Cuban peso fell to 500 CUP for 1 USD on the informal market (compared with around 400 a few months earlier); with an average salary of about 7,000 CUP, this amounts to roughly 14 USD, while a carton of eggs can cost 3,000 CUP (1). At the same time, the fuel shortage has led to drastic restrictions (access via an application and purchases limited to 20 litres per visit) and cascading disruptions. In Havana, the impact on municipal services is visible: according to Reuters, only 44 refuse trucks out of 106 remain operational (2), encouraging the accumulation of waste. In this context, relations with Washington once again become a structuring factor: after the tightening of 2017–2021, **2026 has seen renewed pressure linked to oil flows and energy supply, which Havana presents as a tightening of the “blockade”**.

The Cuban case makes it possible to observe an authoritarian triptych: deterrent coercion, which increases the cost of participation and neutralises leaders; control of scarce resources (foreign currency, imports, energy, information); and a migratory safety valve that gradually drains the country of mobilisable forces. The aim here is to identify which levers could reduce the cost of participation, restore coordination, fragment the regime’s support base, and prevent exile from becoming the only means of political survival.



Map from the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office

## I. SOCIAL DISAVOWAL AND REAL CONTESTATION: WHY DISCONTENT IS NOT ENOUGH TO OVERTHROW THE REGIME

Cuba's recent evolution confirms a classic dynamic of authoritarian regimes: **a government may be widely contested, even massively disavowed, without that rejection mechanically translating into political change.** In such cases, the crucial factor is less the intensity of anger than the capacity of actors to coordinate, to endure over time, and to survive repression.

Cuba is not devoid of protest or dissent. But the shift from protest to a political force capable of imposing a balance of power remains hindered by **a social control apparatus specifically designed to prevent collective action.**

### A DIFFUSE AND MULTIFACETED PROTEST CYCLE

The events of 11 July 2021 marked a turning point: for the first time in decades, a locally initiated mobilisation quickly took on a national scale, both through social contagion and the circulation of images and testimonies on digital networks. That day, **tens of thousands of Cubans took to the streets to demand better living conditions,** reacting to restrictive measures adopted by the government during the Covid-19 pandemic and, more broadly, to the state's repressive policies. (3)

However, this mobilisation did not lead to the emergence of a structured and lasting opposition, as the coercive response combined several levers: **militarisation of public space, use of violence, arrests, internet shutdowns, and above all the political framing of the protest as a subversive operation orchestrated from abroad and described as a "soft" coup** (4). This strategy had a double effect: to justify repression and to delegitimise the mobilisation by shifting it from a social and civic register to one of "security threat".



Arrest of a protester during the 11 July 2021 demonstrations in Havana, Cuba.

The first half of 2025 confirms that protest in Cuba has not disappeared. On the contrary, it persists in various forms, often local and sporadic, and continues to be widespread across the country. **Cubalex, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) dedicated to the defence of human rights in Cuba, has recorded 159 protests across all provinces and on Isla de la Juventud** (5). Forms of protest include cacerolazos (clanging of pots and pans), anti-government slogans and placards, acts of symbolic sabotage, arson and vandalism.

## II. THE COERCIVE BACKBONE: PREVENTING COLLECTIVE ACTION THROUGH FEAR

### 1. THE ACTORS OF THE REPRESSIVE ARCHITECTURE

Cuban coercion relies on a system combining several institutional actors. **The police and the forces of the Ministry of the Interior constitute the visible tool for controlling public space. State Security, the domestic intelligence branch responsible for political surveillance,** counter-activism, and the neutralisation of dissent, plays a central role in targeted operations: identification of profiles, interrogations, psychological pressure, intimidation of families, and control of civic networks. This configuration shows that repression is not merely police-based. It reflects a mode of governance in which coercion is integrated into the political management of the territory.

The violence exercised by this architecture appears in the most serious data documented in recent years, notably deaths occurring in custody in Ministry of the Interior facilities and in police stations, which produce a lasting deterrent effect. (6)

### 2. REPRESSION AS A SYSTEMATIC APPARATUS

According to *Cubalex*, “repression in Cuba is not an isolated phenomenon, but a systematic social control apparatus operating according to predictable patterns. This structure, refined for more than six decades by the political group in power, manifests itself through widespread human rights violations.” The authorities do not merely seek to disperse protests; above all, they aim to prevent their consolidation.

One of the most effective mechanisms relies on “two-stage” repression. The first stage is immediate. In protest areas, deployed forces do not simply disperse crowds: they strike, threaten, and identify individuals likely to exercise leadership. At the same time, **this logic of targeted deterrence is reinforced by tactical measures such as local internet shutdowns.** These are used to prevent the circulation of images, neutralise information flows, and limit coordination. (7)

The second stage, more discreet, is often more deterrent. Reprisals continue in the following days through **delayed arrests, interrogations, periods of detention without family contact, followed by a sequence of summonses and threats** (“*actas de advertencia*”). This extension turns a one-off demonstration into a lasting risk and prevents protest from stabilising into networks. This logic is further reinforced by repression by association, which extends the cost of engagement beyond the targeted individual. Families, friends, colleagues, and supporters may face pressure, threats, and indirect sanctions, discouraging solidarity. Added to this is economic persecution aimed at undermining the material autonomy of civic actors: fines, administrative closures, confiscations, or professional pressure.

Student protests triggered by the increase in tariffs by ETECSA, the Cuban state telecommunications company holding a near-monopoly over internet access and mobile telephony, illustrate this logic. After the announcement on 30 May 2025 of a sudden price increase (now 3,360 pesos, more than half the average salary), students reported home visits by State Security officers (8). Academic authorities were involved in the coercive management of the movement, and **sanctions were deployed in disciplinary and ideological forms:** stigmatisation, threats, and expulsions. Repression was also extended to individuals who publicly expressed solidarity, aiming to **curb social contagion and prevent the formation of alliances.**

### 3. THE INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIAL COSTS OF ENGAGEMENT: MAKING MOBILISATION UNREASONABLE

The effectiveness of the Cuban repressive system also lies in the systematic increase in the costs of engagement, including for ordinary citizens. **In the first half of 2025 alone, *Cubalex* documented 1,566 violations (around nine per day) affecting at least 772 individuals.** One element is particularly revealing: nearly three-quarters of those affected were not affiliated with any political organisation (4). In other words, repression does not target only structured dissent; it also punishes ordinary forms of social contestation, **thereby widening the deterrent effect and reinforcing self-censorship.**

Arbitrary detentions constitute a central lever: **at least 203 cases were recorded in the first half of 2025, with associated practices such as short-term enforced disappearances, lack of information to families, and the impossibility of accessing effective legal defence.** Some reported conditions amount to cruel treatment, including prolonged confinement in closed patrol cars. *“The constant surveillance of homes, short-term arbitrary detentions and unjustified restrictions on movement are among the systematic authoritarian practices the Cuban state uses to punish and discourage even the slightest form of opposition,”* said Johanna Cilano, Caribbean specialist at *Amnesty International*. (7).



Liset Fonseca, mother of Roberto Pérez Fonseca, arrested for participating in the anti-government protests of 11 July 2021.

But the coercive apparatus also relies on a range of sanctions that make engagement politically and socially dangerous. Among the measures documented by *Cubalex* are fines, confiscation of work tools, repeated threats, psychiatric internment, wage seizures, and removal of child custody. Coercion also operates through **para-state violence (“matonismo”), in the form of assaults and stone-throwing, facilitated by police inaction.** Finally, the prison system functions as a signal of terror: between January and July 2025, 24 people died in prison and three others in police stations or Ministry of the Interior facilities. In the medium term, this pressure produces an exhaustion effect that hampers organisational capacity (5).

### III. CRIMINALISATION AND INFORMATION CONTROL: LOCKING THE SPACE FOR MOBILISATION

#### 1. THE LAW AS AN INSTRUMENT OF REPRESSION

The judicial system is deliberately mobilised to criminalise the exercise of rights and consolidate political control. **The use of criminal law is extended to behaviours related to political expression, social contestation, or the informal survival economy.**

The central mechanism consists of **broadening the scope of serious offences to acts previously treated as ordinary misdemeanours.** This shift allows for harsher penalties and introduces permanent legal uncertainty. This type of legal use also serves to create examples: emblematic cases are highlighted to signal to the population that contestation, whether direct or indirect, may be treated as a security threat.

#### 2. THE CASE OF “SABOTAGE”: RULING 475/2025

**Ruling 475/2025 of the People’s Supreme Court** illustrates this strategy particularly well. This text imposes the mandatory classification of “*sabotage*”, punishable by life imprisonment, or even the death penalty, for acts such as property damage or theft. Behaviours previously considered common offences are thus shifted into the category of the most serious crimes. (8)

A few weeks later, this classification was reused in a case of a very different nature. Prosecutors presented economic exchanges as an act of “*sabotage*”: operators were taking advantage of promotional offers from ETECSA to sell top-ups to customers abroad or on the island. The handling of the case was not strictly judicial. It was staged in state media, particularly on national television, in order to transform an economic and social dispute into a security threat.

This type of sequence makes it possible to criminalise peripheral economic practices that can support access to communications, resources, and networks.



Headquarters of the People's Supreme Court in Havana, Cuba.

### 3. PREVENTING COORDINATION BY CONTROLLING INFORMATION

Judicial lock-down is reinforced by tactical information control, particularly visible during periods of mobilisation. In protest areas or during repression operations (*“operativos”*), selective internet shutdowns are used to neutralise communication between citizens, limit the circulation of images, and prevent denunciations. This technique is not only a tool of technical control; it is also a tool of censorship, as **it reduces access to alternative information and prevents public visibility of abuses**. Since 2021, this control has been consolidated by Decree-Law 35, which criminalises *“social subversion”* in the digital space and allows critical posts to be treated as offences against national security. This framework legalises tighter control over communications via ETECSA and facilitates the combined use of judicial repression and technical restrictions. (9)

This strategy is part of a broader ecosystem: blocking of independent media websites and civic organisations, pressure on journalists and activists, and the central role of ETECSA in the rapid implementation of restrictions. **This opacity is reinforced by the authorities’ persistent refusal to allow independent international NGOs access to the country.** Despite repeated requests, Amnesty International has not been authorised to visit Cuba since 1988. (10) Finally, the regime seeks to limit access to solutions that could circumvent this control. A campaign of seizures and threats of fines targets the introduction and use of satellite equipment such as Starlink, which would provide more autonomous internet access. (11)

## IV. SILENCING, LOCK-DOWN AND EXILE: OBEDIENCE OR EXIT

### 1. SILENCING THE OPPOSITION AND PREVENTING A CREDIBLE ALTERNATIVE

The silencing of the opposition first relies on a **strategy of neutralising key support points**. Repression primarily targets visible figures. Thus, in 2025, the arrest of long-standing dissidents such as Félix Navarro illustrates this logic of neutralising well-known faces of the opposition. In the cultural sphere, the regime has also targeted personalities who had become symbols of contestation. The artist Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara, associated with the **San Isidro Movement** (a group of activist artists formed in September 2018 in response to a Cuban law requiring prior authorisation from the Ministry of Culture for any artistic activity), was sentenced in 2022 to five years in prison, while the rapper Maykel *“Osorbo”* Castillo Pérez received a nine-year sentence. (12)

In the more structured opposition field, organisations such as the Patriotic Union of Cuba (UNPACU), considered one of the island’s most dissident groups, have continued to exist despite repression, often at the cost of repeated arrests, pressure on relatives, and the gradual displacement of their leadership into exile. José Daniel Ferrer García, founder of UNPACU, for example, was imprisoned multiple times since the 2000s for his pro-democracy activities, before being forced into exile in the United States in 2025 following a new arrest and repeated pressure from the regime.

## 2. EXODUS AS A MECHANISM OF POLITICAL DECOMPRESSION

In a context where public expression becomes risky, leaving may appear to be the least costly option. **This dynamic fits well within the exit/voice framework theorised by Albert O. Hirschman**, according to which, when contestation (“voice”) is made costly or dangerous by repression, departure (“exit”) tends to function as a political safety valve, mechanically reducing internal conflict.

In Cuba, this logic translates into the massive emigration of the most mobilisable profiles (often young people capable of structuring networks) to the outside world, while families remaining on the island refocus on daily survival. **Between 2021 and mid-2024, more than 860,000 Cubans arrived in the United States**, mainly via land and maritime routes. This movement contributed to a significant decline in Cuba’s population (below 10 million in 2024) and to a strongly negative migration balance, particularly among those aged 15–59, depriving the island of many people of working age. (13)

The money sent by these emigrants supports part of the population and cushions certain economic shocks, which can help limit internal social pressure without altering political lock-ins. This logic is nonetheless ambivalent: while the exodus removes potential actors of internal mobilisation, **it may also shift part of the contestation abroad through the diaspora, which finances, documents, and publicises abuses from outside, offering a form of externalised voice.** (14)

The Cuban historian Rafael Rojas proposes a complementary framework - “obedience, opposition, exodus” - to understand this dynamic: the state makes obedience less costly, sharply increases the cost of opposition (repression, criminalisation), and turns exodus into a rational option when voice becomes too dangerous. (15)



Cubans queue outside the United States embassy in Havana to submit immigration visa applications.

## V. US PRESSURE AND CUBA'S EXTERNAL ISOLATION

Since early 2026, **US pressure on energy supplies has constituted the main external influence on the Cuban regime.** Threats by Donald Trump to impose sanctions or trade measures against countries delivering oil to the island reflect a strategy aimed at strangling Cuba through fuel. This dynamic unfolds within a US political context in which the most hardline approach is associated with Secretary of State Marco Rubio, himself the son of Cuban emigrants, and where the Cuban issue is once again mobilised as an electoral topic in a “*midterms*” year. This pressure is all the more destabilising as Cuba now has very few partners capable or willing to compensate. Venezuela, presented as the last major supplier, is also prevented by the United States from ensuring regular deliveries; traditional allies such as Mexico limit themselves to humanitarian aid (food, hygiene) without supplying oil, in order to avoid potential US retaliation. **This scarcity of alternatives forces the regime to ration its reserves, with immediate effects on administration, transport, tourism, etc.**



Power outage in Havana, October 2025.

External pressure ultimately reinforces mechanisms of authoritarian resilience. In addition to increasing grievances, fuel shortages strengthen the regime's central pillar: control over scarce resources, which becomes an instrument of social discipline. Moreover, these pressures have a major strategic consequence: they reactivate the migratory dimension, once again reinforcing the idea that exile becomes the least costly option for the Cuban population.

Ultimately, although Cuba does not represent the same economic stakes as Venezuela, *Radio France Internationale* (RFI) notes that “*the island retains significant geostrategic importance, as emphasised by the Monroe Doctrine so dear to Donald Trump.*” According to Christophe Ventura, research director at the Institute for *International and Strategic Relations* (IRIS): “*It is indeed the gateway to Latin America for the United States, with a ‘watchtower’ role. One can also imagine what Trump might gain if he succeeded in bringing down the Cuban regime, on which no fewer than eleven US presidents have failed since John Fitzgerald Kennedy.*” (16)

## VI. OPERATIONAL LESSONS

### Reducing the individual cost of participation

**In Cuba, repression deliberately targets ordinary citizens in order to make engagement too costly.** Any mobilisation strategy must therefore create concrete protection mechanisms: rapid legal assistance, discreet solidarity funds, support for families, medical support networks, and systematic documentation of abuses. Without protection mechanisms, protest remains possible, but it does not become sustainable.

### Circumventing “two-stage” repression

**The regime does not only repress in the streets: it follows up with delayed arrests, summonses, intimidation, and surveillance.** Mobilisation must therefore be planned beyond the day itself: post-demonstration security protocols, role rotation, reduced visibility of organisers, and collective preparation for home visits, interrogations and/or disciplinary sanctions, particularly against students.

### Protecting organisational capacity rather than exposed figures

**Targeting leaders lies at the heart of the repressive strategy.** Rather than relying on easily neutralised figures, the opposition benefits from favouring distributed structures: rotating leadership, autonomous local cells, multiple spokespersons, and organisations capable of surviving the loss of an individual. The priority is not to produce a hero, but to preserve an infrastructure.

### Neutralising the judicial weapon and its “examples”

**The extension of extreme legal classifications (such as “sabotage”) shows that the law is used to produce deterrent cases.** An operational response is to anticipate criminal reclassification by systematically ensuring traceability (evidence, timelines, testimonies), and to disseminate these files in a structured manner through credible intermediaries (NGOs, international mechanisms, media), in order to reduce the effectiveness of showcase trials.

### Making informational coordination resilient

**Local internet shutdowns, website blocking, pressure on media, and crackdowns on alternative solutions are not merely censorship: they are anti-coordination tools.** A durable opposition must invest in channel redundancy (offline methods, secure messaging, territorial relays) and communication methods that survive outages (distribution of leaflets).

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