

Youth, Power and Social Media in Cuba

Patterns of State repression against the rights to freedom of association and peaceful assembly of young people

Report presented on the occasion of the 81st session of the United Nations General Assembly

New York, September 2026

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About Ciudadanía y Libertad

About this report

This report has been prepared by Ciudadanía y Libertad, the Guy Pérez Cisneros Centre for the Promotion of Human Rights, a Cuban civil society organization founded in April 2022 to defend the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and political participation in Cuba and across the hemisphere. It is presented during the High-Level Week of the 81st session of the United Nations General Assembly, at a side event held on 23 September 2026 with the participation of the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association.

The document is based on two consultations facilitated by Ciudadanía y Libertad for the Special Rapporteur — the first, on 28 April 2026, with young activists living inside Cuba; the second, on 9 June 2026, with young Cubans forced into exile — and on educational work, interviews and meetings with youth collectives inside the island. All testimonial sources have been anonymized. Quotations are attributed by code (I-01 to I-08 for the consultation with young people on the island; E-01 to E-05 for the consultation with young exiles), with profiles described in Annex I. Names, places and circumstances that would allow the identification of participants, their relatives or third parties who remain in Cuba have been removed or generalized.

The quantitative data accompanying the testimonies are drawn from publicly verifiable sources — bodies of the United Nations system, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), Cuba's National Office of Statistics and Information (ONEI), the Office of the Attorney General of the Republic of Cuba and independent documentation organizations — and are referenced in footnotes.

Executive summary

Cuba is at once the country with the longest-standing single-party system in the Western Hemisphere and the fastest-ageing country in Latin America and the Caribbean. These two realities are not independent. This report argues that the relationship between the Cuban State and its youngest generations — defined by the structural prohibition of independent association, the criminalization of protest, the mass imprisonment of young people after 11 July 2021 and the administration of banishment as a penalty — is one of the direct causes of the demographic hollowing-out that official and international projections anticipate for the coming decades.

The testimonies gathered for the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association describe a coherent repressive architecture that operates as a circuit of linked stages: legal association is prohibited; association migrates to the digital space; the State pursues the digital space through its monopoly over telecommunications; persecution is judicialized through vaguely defined criminal offences and courts without independence; sentences frequently end in a choice between prison and leaving the country; and banishment feeds an exodus that in turn accelerates the ageing of the population. Each link produces the next.

The verifiable data framing these testimonies are unequivocal. At the end of August 2026, human rights monitoring organizations documented up to 1,339 political prisoners in Cuba, the highest figure in decades, of whom 38 were detained as minors and 155 are women; since July 2021, 2,167 people have

appeared on that list.¹ The Attorney General's Office itself acknowledged in 2022 the prosecution of 790 people for the protests of 11 July, 55 of them aged between 16 and 18.² At the end of 2025, Cuba's resident population stood at 9,434,593, 313,414 fewer than a year earlier, with a net migration balance of –245,264 in a single year and a fertility rate of 1.29 children per woman, the lowest since 1958; 26.7 per cent of the population is aged 60 or over and the median age is 43.³ ECLAC projections place Cuba in 2050 as the most aged country in Latin America and the Caribbean, with 30.2 per cent of its population aged 65 or over,⁴ and ONEI estimates that by then more than 35 per cent of Cubans will be aged 60 or over.⁵

The report identifies twelve patterns of violation of the rights to freedom of association and peaceful assembly that affect young people in a differentiated way: the structural prohibition of any independent form of association; the persecution of the digital space as a de facto associative space; surveillance from adolescence and the criminalization of expression, including religious expression; the use of summonses and "interviews" as intelligence interrogations and as a mechanism for recruiting informants; the fabrication of criminal cases and the obstruction of access to justice; arbitrary detention, torture and degrading conditions of imprisonment, including sexual violence against political prisoners; the confinement of minors in the adult penal system; punishment by association against relatives; exclusion from employment and education; covert banishment and migratory "regulation"; transnational repression; and the deliberate engineering of distrust as a technology of social atomization.

The report also examines the two-way relationship between Cuba's Generation Z and power: how young people perceive a State that describes itself, in article 5 of its Constitution, as "the superior leading political force of society and the State", and how that State perceives young people as a suspect subject, as a risk of contagion and, increasingly, as a surplus population whose departure from the country serves the stability of the regime. The conclusion is that the Cuban State has turned the expulsion of its youth into policy, and that this policy carries a demographic cost that official statistics can no longer conceal.

The report closes with recommendations addressed to the Cuban State, to the Member States of the United Nations, to the Human Rights Council and its special procedures, to States receiving Cuban exiles, to technology platforms and to the donor community.

¹Prisoners Defenders, monthly list of political prisoners in Cuba as at the end of August 2026, published 10 September 2026 (<https://lista.prisonersdefenders.org>). Figures: 1,339 political prisoners (807 convicted prisoners of conscience, 495 condemned prisoners of conscience, 37 other political prisoners); 155 women; 38 people detained as minors, 14 of them still minors; 281 new cases between September 2025 and August 2026; 2,167 people included on the list since July 2021; 463 with serious medical conditions.

²Office of the Attorney General of the Republic of Cuba, information note of 25 January 2022 on the criminal proceedings arising from the events of 11 July 2021: 790 people prosecuted, 55 of them aged between 16 and 18; 10 children under 16 sent to "conduct schools" and 17 placed under "individualized attention".

³National Office of Statistics and Information (ONEI), *Indicadores Demográficos de Cuba y sus Territorios 2025*, Havana, July 2026: resident population at end-2025 of 9,434,593; decrease of 313,414 from 2024; net migration of –245,264; 68,064 births and 136,214 deaths; total fertility rate of 1.29; 26.7 per cent of the population aged 60 or over; median age of 43; loss of 1,259,894 people of working age in five years. Population at end-2017: 11,239,224. Independent estimate of the cumulative decline (close to 24 per cent): Juan Carlos Albizu-Campos, Centre for Demographic Studies, University of Havana, 2024–2025.

⁴ECLAC, population projections for Latin America and the Caribbean (base: 2024 revision of the United Nations World Population Prospects), as reported in the regional press in September 2026: in 2050 Cuba will have 30.2 per cent of its population aged 65 or over, the highest share in the region, followed by Chile (26.7 per cent) and Costa Rica (25.3 per cent); the regional population aged 65 and over will rise from 68 million (10.5 per cent) in 2025 to 138 million (18.9 per cent) in 2050.

⁵ONEI population projections cited by the Centre for Demographic Studies of the University of Havana: 3,343,520 people aged 60 and over in 2050, 35.9 per cent of the population.

1. Introduction: why Cuban youth is today a matter of international human rights concern

More than half of Cubans now under 35 were born after the collapse of the Soviet bloc. They are the first generation whose political formation owes nothing to the founding narrative of the regime established in 1959, the generation that led the most extensive protests in six decades — those of 11 July 2021 — the generation that has received the longest sentences for exercising the right of peaceful assembly, and the generation now driving the largest migratory exodus in Cuban history.

This report is presented at a moment when Cuba's term as a member of the Human Rights Council for the period 2024–2026 ends on 31 December 2026, and the General Assembly will elect in October the members for 2027–2029. Almost three years have passed since the fourth cycle of Cuba's Universal Periodic Review (November 2023) without implementation of the recommendations concerning the freedoms of peaceful assembly, association and expression. Five years have passed since the protests of 11 July 2021, many of whose young defendants remain deprived of liberty, while release conditional on leaving the country has become consolidated State practice. And the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association presents to this General Assembly her thematic report on youth activism and Generation Z,⁶ for which the consultations underpinning this document were organized.

The report's objective is, first, to document, with the rigour required by international protection mechanisms, the concrete methods by which the Cuban State prevents its young people from associating and assembling peacefully, inside and outside the national territory. Second, to reconstruct the relationship between Cuba's Generation Z and totalitarian power: how young people perceive it and how it perceives them. Third, to place that relationship in its demographic context — that of a country expelling its young while ageing faster than any other in the region — and to draw consequences for the action of Member States.

2. Methodology and safeguards

2.1 Testimonial sources

The report is based on two consultations organized by Ciudadanía y Libertad for the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, within the consultation process for her global report on youth activism and Generation Z:

- **Consultation I (28 April 2026).** A virtual session of one hour and forty-five minutes with twelve participants connected from inside Cuba: content creators, students, human rights activists, a former political prisoner of 11 July 2021 and the wife of a political prisoner. Eight of them gave testimony.

⁶Generation Z: refers to the cohort of young people born approximately between the mid-1990s and the early 2010s, who have undergone much of their socialization in a context marked by the expansion of the Internet, digital technologies and social media. In this report the expression is used as an analytical category, not as a homogeneous identity, to examine the experiences of a generation whose social participation, expression, forms of association and exercise of rights unfold especially in digital spaces. The use of this category makes it possible to analyse how restrictions on the freedoms of expression, association and peaceful assembly, as well as practices of surveillance, harassment and reprisal, particularly affect young people who use digital platforms as spaces of communication, interaction and civic participation.

- **Consultation II (9 June 2026).** A virtual session of one hour and forty minutes with five participants forced into exile, all of whom gave testimony: a communicator, two independent journalists, an 11 July protester who left Cuba as a minor and a mother who was held for twenty-three days after the protests of 11 July 2021.

Both sessions were complemented by follow-up interviews and meetings with youth collectives inside and outside the island, and by a review of the documentation provided by participants themselves (summonses, rulings, threatening messages, records of service cut-offs).

2.2 Anonymization

Both consultations were conducted under safe-space rules. This report anonymizes all testimonial sources without exception, including those whose cases are publicly known, in view of the repressive context in which those who remain in Cuba and their relatives live. Each testimony is identified by a code (I-01 to I-08; E-01 to E-05) whose generic profile appears in Annex I. Proper names, names of collectives, provinces and municipalities, places of study or work, exact dates of detention and any other data that, alone or combined, would allow identification have been removed. Where an episode is inherently identifiable, it has been described at the level of generality needed to preserve the pattern without exposing the person. Quotations reproduce participants' words with the minimal adjustments proper to oral transcription.

2.3 Verification criteria

A pattern is included in this report only where (a) it was described independently by at least two participants, (b) it is consistent with the documentation provided, and (c) it corresponds to practices recorded by international human rights mechanisms or independent documentation organizations. Quantitative data are taken from public sources — United Nations bodies, ECLAC, ONEI, the Attorney General's Office and documentation organizations — and are cited in footnotes. Where official and independent figures diverge, both are given.

2.4 Limitations

The consultations do not constitute a statistical sample of Cuban youth. Their value is qualitative: they describe, in the first person and in operational detail, the methods the State uses against young people who exercise their rights. Percentages offered by participants themselves regarding the age composition of the prison population or the trajectories of their generation are presented as perceptions and are checked, where possible, against documented data.

3. Context: the hemisphere's longest-standing dictatorship and its youngest generations

3.1 The political and institutional framework

The 2019 Constitution enshrines the Communist Party of Cuba as the "superior leading political force of society and the State" (article 5) and establishes the irrevocable character of the socialist system (article 4). At the same time, the constitutional text proclaims that magistrates and judges are independent in the

exercise of their functions and owe obedience only to the law. This formal guarantee, however, stands in tension with the constitutional architecture itself: by conferring on a single party a superior leading position over society and the State, the legal order places the judiciary within a political structure that materially limits its autonomy. Judicial independence is thus compromised not only by practices of political interference but also by a normative and institutional framework that hinders its effective exercise. The contradiction lies, therefore, between a judicial independence that is formally proclaimed and a constitutional design that concentrates the political direction of the State in the Communist Party.

There is no law on associations later than Law 54 of 1985, which requires every association to have a State "liaison body" and empowers the Ministry of Justice to refuse registration to any entity whose aims coincide with those of an existing one; in practice, no independent civil society organization — let alone a youth or student organization independent of the State — is known to have been registered under that regime. Although articles 54 and 56 of the Constitution formally recognize the freedoms of expression, association, assembly and demonstration, their exercise was made subject to implementing legislation that has never been adopted: the norm on the right of demonstration, initially scheduled for 2020, disappeared from the legislative calendar after the 2021 protests and does not appear in the current calendar for 2025–2027.⁷ It is nonetheless important to clarify that, from a legal standpoint, no implementing legislation could be considered progress while the current legal scaffolding and the 2019 Constitution, governed by its articles 4 and 5, remain in place.

The Penal Code (Law 151/2022, in force since 1 December 2022), the Law on the Courts of Justice (Law 140/2021) and Decree-Law 35/2021 on telecommunications complete the normative scaffolding that turns dissent into a criminal offence: figures such as contempt (*desacato*), public disorder, propaganda against the constitutional order, "illicit financing" of activities against the State, "dangerousness" and offences against honour are systematically applied to peaceful expression, while Decree-Law 35 authorizes the suspension of telecommunications services in response to content that the authorities deem contrary to "public order".

For young people, this framework means that the only permitted form of youth association is the one the State organizes. The José Martí Pioneers Organization in primary school, the Federation of Secondary School Students, the Federation of University Students and the Union of Young Communists constitute a circuit of *de facto* compulsory affiliation that accompanies every Cuban from the age of six into adulthood and that — as the testimonies document — functions simultaneously as a space of indoctrination, an instrument of peer surveillance and a mechanism of academic sanction.

3.2 11 July 2021 and the criminalization of a generation

The protests of 11 July 2021 were the most extensive in Cuba since 1959 and were led mainly by young people. The State's response was the largest wave of politically motivated criminal prosecutions in decades. In January 2022, the Attorney General's Office acknowledged the prosecution of 790 people, 55 of them aged between 16 and 18, and reported that other minors under 16 had been sent to "conduct schools" or placed under "individualized attention";⁸ in June 2022 it announced 381 final convictions, 16

⁷Law 54 of 27 December 1985, Law on Associations, and its Regulations (Ministry of Justice Resolution 53/1986). Constitution of the Republic of Cuba (2019), articles 4, 5, 54 and 56. Legislative calendar adopted by the National Assembly of People's Power in December 2019 (norm on the right of demonstration scheduled for 2020) and subsequent calendars; the norm does not appear in the 2025–2027 legislative calendar (see Memoria Cívica, "Ley de manifestación: otra norma extraviada", 31 January 2025).

⁸See note 2.

of them of minors sentenced to imprisonment, and sentences of between five and twenty-five years for sedition for 36 people.⁹

Five years on, the politically motivated prison population has not stopped growing. At the end of August 2026, Prisoners Defenders documented 1,339 political prisoners — 807 convicted prisoners of conscience, 495 condemned prisoners of conscience and 37 other political prisoners — with 281 new cases in the preceding twelve months, more than 23 a month; 155 women, the highest figure in decades; 38 people detained as minors, 14 of whom still are; and 463 people with serious medical conditions.¹⁰ Since July 2021, 2,167 people have appeared on that list.¹¹ The testimonies gathered for this report estimate that the overwhelming majority of political prisoners are aged between 20 and 40; the documentation organization cited confirms that the 11 July prisoners are mostly young and that the longest sentences fell on them.

3.3 The exodus

Between 2021 and 2025 Cuba experienced the largest migratory movement in its history. According to ONEI itself, the resident population at the end of 2025 was 9,434,593, 313,414 fewer than at the end of 2024, with a net migration balance of -245,264 in a single year — some 672 departures a day — and a loss of 1,259,894 people of working age in five years.¹² Against the 11,239,224 inhabitants recorded at the end of 2017, the cumulative fall exceeds 16 per cent; independent demographic estimates, which correct the official underestimation of emigration, put it close to 24 per cent.¹³ ECLAC calculates that more than one million people have emigrated from Cuba since 2021.¹⁴

Recent Cuban emigration is overwhelmingly young. The testimonies underpinning this report describe leaving the country not as a life project but as the only exit available in the face of the absence of a future, of persecution, or of the choice imposed by State Security between prison and exile.

3.4 The fastest-ageing country in the region

Cuba was the first country in Latin America and the Caribbean in which the share of people under 15 equalled the share aged 60 and over — in 2011, when each group represented around 18 per cent of the population — and is today in the "very advanced" stage of ageing under ECLAC's classification.¹⁵ Its fertility has been below replacement level for almost fifty years, one of the earliest transitions in the region.¹⁶

⁹Office of the Attorney General of the Republic of Cuba, information note of 13 June 2022: 381 people with final sentences in 76 proceedings; 16 minors under 18 sentenced to imprisonment and 15 to alternative sanctions; 36 people convicted of sedition and sentenced to between 5 and 25 years.

¹⁰See note 1.

¹¹See note 1.

¹²See note 3.

¹³See note 3.

¹⁴ECLAC/CELADE, statements by its director, Simone Cecchini, reported by Bloomberg Línea, "Cuba enfrenta casi cinco décadas de baja fecundidad y avanza a un acelerado envejecimiento, advierte Cepal", 30 July 2026: fertility below replacement level for almost fifty years; more than one million people emigrated since 2021; negative population growth since 2012.

¹⁵ECLAC, *Panorama del envejecimiento y tendencias demográficas en América Latina y el Caribe* (2022–2023): Cuba was the first country in the region in which the share of people under 15 equalled the share aged 60 and over (2011); "very advanced" stage of ageing (more than 21 per cent of the population aged 60 or over).

¹⁶See note 9.

Official indicators for 2025 show the acceleration of the process: 68,064 births against 136,214 deaths, almost twice as many, which represents a negative natural growth rate of approximately 7.2 per thousand inhabitants independent of emigration, a total fertility rate of 1.29 children per woman, the lowest since 1958, 26.7 per cent of the population aged 60 or over and a median age of 43.¹⁷ In 2024 a quarter of the population was aged 60 or over, with 71,000 births, the lowest figure in decades; the authorities expect the 60-and-over group to approach 30 per cent of the population by 2030.¹⁸

The projections converge. According to ECLAC, in 2050 Cuba will be the most aged country in Latin America and the Caribbean, with 30.2 per cent of its population aged 65 or over, ahead of Chile (26.7 per cent) and Costa Rica (25.3 per cent), in a region where that group will rise from 10.5 to 18.9 per cent.¹⁹ ECLAC likewise identifies Cuba and Chile as the countries with the highest median age in Latin America in both 2024 and 2050, on the basis of the 2024 revision of the United Nations World Population Prospects.²⁰ ONEI, for its part, projects that in 2050 people aged 60 and over will number 3,343,520, or 35.9 per cent of the population,²¹ a figure its own officials had earlier put at 36.2 per cent.²² Over the 2050–2060 horizon, ECLAC anticipates that older persons will represent close to 30 per cent of the regional population;²³ Cuba will have crossed that threshold a decade earlier and, if the fertility and youth-emigration trends shown in the official series persist, will continue to lead regional ageing through the second half of the century.

None of these projections fully incorporates the emigration of the last five years, which is selectively young. The effect is twofold: the departure of the young reduces the base of future births and, at the same time, mechanically raises the share of older persons. The repression of youth and the ageing of the country are, in that sense, two faces of the same process.

Cuba in figures (2025–2026)

Resident population at end-2025: 9,434,593 (–313,414 in one year). Net migration 2025: –245,264. Births: 68,064; deaths: 136,214. Fertility: 1.29 children per woman. Population aged 60 and over: 26.7 per cent. Median age: 43. Working-age population lost in five years: 1,259,894 (ONEI, July 2026). ECLAC projection 2050: 30.2 per cent of the population aged 65 or over, the highest in Latin America and the Caribbean. ONEI projection 2050: 35.9 per cent of the population aged 60 or over. Political prisoners (August 2026): 1,339, of whom 155 women and 38 detained as minors (Prisoners Defenders).

¹⁷See note 3.

¹⁸ONEI, *El Envejecimiento de la Población. Cuba y sus Territorios 2024*, and official statements reported by IPS, "Envejecimiento demográfico ensombrece el futuro de Cuba", May 2025: 9,748,532 inhabitants at end-2024; 71,000 births; a quarter of the population aged 60 or over; official projection of close to 30 per cent by 2030.

¹⁹See note 4.

²⁰ECLAC/CELADE, *Perspectivas poblacionales y cambios demográficos acelerados en el primer cuarto del siglo XXI en América Latina y el Caribe* (Demographic Observatory 2024), based on the 2024 revision of the World Population Prospects: "Countries with the highest median age in Latin America in 2024 and 2050: Cuba and Chile".

²¹See note 5.

²²Statements by Juan Carlos Alfonso Fraga, deputy director of ONEI, to the newspaper Granma, February 2019: 36.2 per cent of the population aged 60 or over in 2050.

²³ECLAC, regional report on ageing (2023), as cited in the regional press: in 2050 one in four people in the region will be aged 60 or over; by 2060, close to 30 per cent, some 220 million people, 2.5 times more than in 2022.

4. Applicable international legal framework

The facts documented in this report must be assessed in the light of the Cuban State's international obligations and the standards of the universal human rights protection system.

- **Universal Declaration of Human Rights.** Articles 13 (freedom of movement, including the right to return to one's country), 18 (freedom of thought, conscience and religion), 19 (freedom of opinion and expression), 20 (freedom of peaceful assembly and association) and 21 (participation in the government of one's country). Its core provisions form part of customary international law.
- **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).** Cuba signed the Covenant on 28 February 2008 and has not ratified it. Under article 18 of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, it is obliged to refrain from acts that would defeat its object and purpose. Articles 9 (liberty and security of person), 10 (humane treatment of persons deprived of liberty), 12(4) (right to enter one's own country), 14 (fair trial guarantees), 17 (privacy), 18, 19, 21, 22 and 25 are relevant. The absence of ratification, sustained for more than eighteen years and maintained while the country sits on the Human Rights Council, is in itself a relevant fact for Member States. The ongoing drafting of the Human Rights Committee's General Comment No. 38 on article 22 offers a particularly timely normative framework for the patterns described here.
- **Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.** Ratified by Cuba in 1995. The methods documented in State Security facilities and in prisons — isolation, sensory and temporal disorientation, manipulation of temperature and of feeding and sleep cycles, humiliating body searches, beatings and tolerated or induced sexual violence — correspond to forms of torture and of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment prohibited by its articles 1 and 16.
- **Convention on the Rights of the Child.** Ratified by Cuba in 1991. Directly applicable to the prosecution and imprisonment of 16- and 17-year-olds after 11 July 2021 — acknowledged by the Cuban authorities themselves — to the confinement of minors in adult prisons, to the surveillance of adolescents for their online content and to educational reprisals against younger siblings of persecuted youths. Articles 2 (non-discrimination, including on the basis of the activities or opinions of family members), 13, 15, 28, 37 and 40 are relevant.
- **United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (Nelson Mandela Rules) and Bangkok Rules.** Applicable to the conditions of detention described in section 5.6.
- **Declaration on Human Rights Defenders (1998).** Recognizes the right of everyone to promote and strive for the protection of human rights, individually or in association with others, and obliges States to protect them against reprisals. The persons who testify in this report are defenders within the meaning of the Declaration.
- **Resolutions and standards of the universal system on the digital space.** Human Rights Council resolution 24/5 reaffirms that the rights of peaceful assembly and association are exercised online as well; the mandate's report A/HRC/41/41 develops their exercise in the digital age. The Special Rapporteur has addressed in reports A/80/219 and A/HRC/59/44 the effects of securitization and stigmatization on these rights, and has presented to the Human Rights Council in 2026 a thematic report on digital surveillance in which the Cuban case is a reference.
- **Transnational repression.** Extraterritorial persecution — surveillance, coordinated defamation, threats, induced expulsions and assaults in third countries, as well as reprisals against relatives on

the island — is receiving growing attention from the special procedures, engages the responsibility of States that cooperate with it and triggers the protection and non-refoulement obligations of receiving States.

At the regional level, although Cuba does not participate in the inter-American system, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights retains competence over the Cuban State under the American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man and has consistently documented the situation of political prisoners and of young people in Cuba.

5. Findings: patterns of repression against the association and assembly of young people

Cross-analysis of the two consultations and the follow-up interviews yields twelve patterns. Each was described independently by several participants, inside and outside the island, and corresponds to practices recorded by international mechanisms. Their concurrence reveals not isolated excesses but a deliberate repressive procedure, heir to the control models of the security services of the former Soviet bloc and administered today with techniques adapted to the digital environment.

5.1 Structural prohibition of independent association

The starting point of every testimony is the legal impossibility of associating. None of the participants has seriously considered registering a collective, a student group or a youth organization, because they know the avenue does not exist. The only recognized youth organizations — the Union of Young Communists and the Federation of University Students — do not represent youth interests but channel participation within the parameters of the single party.

There are youth organizations here, but they don't respect a truly young mentality. It's a theatre of democracy; it isn't real democracy or real participation.

— I-02, man, 20, content creator

All those student and youth organizations respond specifically to the interests of the dictatorship. There is no room for a different view or any innovative proposal. Most of the young people who belong to them don't think the way the organization dictates, but they stay for the benefits.

— I-01, woman, 21, content creator

The blocking mechanism does not require an express refusal. A university student who tried to create a debate space in her faculty — an initiative with no explicit political content — was referred successively to the leaders of the student organization and of the party youth, without any body ever deciding anything:

They always sent me from one place to another and nothing ever came of it, nothing was ever resolved. They accepted it and left it there: "let's see, it looks like a project that already exists." It never went anywhere. They keep putting obstacles in your way until you give up yourself.

— I-03, woman, university student

Participants also recalled the precedent that defines the relationship between the State and youth participation: when in 2002 a citizens' project collected the signatures then required by the Constitution to

promote a legislative initiative, the State used the official youth organizations themselves to back the reform declaring the socialist system irrevocable. Young people's signatures, gathered in places of study under administrative pretexts, continue to be used as an instrument of legitimation:

They go to the university and tell you it's for attendance, to see which students showed up, and so you sign. And later you find out that signature was for something else.

— I-02

PATTERN 1. PROHIBITION OF ASSOCIATION BY LEGAL DESIGN

The Cuban legal order offers no avenue for independent youth association. The State's student and youth organizations function as structures of enrolment, surveillance and legitimation, not of representation. Autonomous initiative, even when apolitical, is neutralized through administrative attrition until the person gives up.

5.2 The digital space as a de facto associative space and its persecution

With association prohibited in the space of organized civil society and in the community space, youth association has migrated to the digital space. In a country where all media are State-owned, social networks are for young people the only platform and, in practice, the only way to gather.

In Cuba all the media belong to the dictatorship and we have no other space to express ourselves. The press, television, radio — it all belongs to them.

— I-01

I want to say something to the Rapporteur: for the moment — I say for the moment because that will change — social networks are our only platform. There is no other platform.

— I-05, man, former political prisoner of 11 July 2021

Content-creator collectives describe their work as a "cultural battle": to counter decades of indoctrination and get "the young Cuban to stop being a spectator of his own reality". A collective formed before the consultation, inspired by another audiovisual project whose members are now in prison, had already suffered line interception, attempts to access its accounts and summonses to relatives.

The State pursues that space through an infrastructure it controls completely. Cuba has a single, State-owned telecommunications operator, which turns the network into a device of surveillance and direct reprisal. Participants described with technical precision the mechanism for seizing messaging accounts: the operator duplicates the activist's phone line, connects it to another device, requests the application's verification code and thereby closes the account holder's session.

Since they can duplicate the line, they connect it to a device and request the WhatsApp code to that number; it no longer reaches us and our device is logged out.

— I-01

They have intercepted our lines, they have tried to get into our WhatsApp. That's weekly now: they have a shift just for that.

— I-03

The documented repertoire includes cancellation of phone service in reprisal for posts; line duplication and theft of messaging accounts; attempts to access Instagram and Facebook accounts by impersonating the user before platform support services; selective, individualized internet cut-offs during periods of activism; surveillance of communications as a source of intelligence; and — as a silent counterpart — whole days of incommunication for relatives owing to the deliberately administered precariousness of the infrastructure.

The testimony of a protester now in exile provides one of the most precise descriptions of the operational link between the telecommunications monopoly and the denial of the right of assembly: when she posted a call for some twenty people to accompany her to enquire about an artist on hunger strike under police siege, the response was instantaneous.

I couldn't make calls or send messages of any kind, much less connect to the internet. The central point of repression when it comes to associating in Cuba is the internet connection. As long as the Cuban government keeps the telecommunications monopoly, there can be no free association, no free assembly in Cuba.

— E-04, woman, protester of 11 July 2021, in exile

Selective disconnection is not a subsequent sanction: it is a preventive intervention that aborts the assembly at the exact moment it begins to form.

PATTERN 2. DISCONNECTION OF THE COMMUNICATIONS NETWORK

The State telecommunications monopoly functions as repressive infrastructure: it makes it possible to monitor expression, identify associative intent and suppress it in real time through individualized cut-offs, line duplication and account seizure. Freedom of assembly and association is technically impossible while internet access depends on an operator subordinated to the political police.

5.3 Surveillance from adolescence and the criminalization of expression

None of the participants was persecuted for violent acts. The threshold of persecution is expression: posting, sharing content, connecting with young audiences. Surveillance begins in adolescence. A communicator who began producing religious content at 15 was warned — through his mother, and in connection with a student protest in which he did not even take part — that the Office of Religious Affairs of the Party's Central Committee was "following" him; he was later interrogated by military counter-intelligence during compulsory military service.

When you manage, inside Cuba, to get young people to listen to you, to share your content, that is extremely dangerous for them. Simply expressing yourself on social networks: I wasn't calling people to the streets, I wasn't even sitting in a classroom explaining democratic concepts.

— E-01, man, 22, communicator, in exile

When faith mobilizes a people, that frightens them. A message that only says we should heal, we should be good, we should not steal, is a slap in the face to the dictatorship without hands. In repressive systems, that is subversion.

— E-03, man, 21, protester of 11 July 2021 at the age of 16, in exile

A content creator summed up the logic: seven months of videos about the country's daily reality were enough to trigger service cut-offs, interception of her line, summonses to her mother, her sister, her aunts and her best friend, and a criminal case. Another exiled participant described the paradox that governs the digital life of young Cubans: public visibility is at once the only shield against the State and a sword of Damocles, because in Cuba a single post can get you detained.

PATTERN 3. CRIMINALIZATION OF FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION ON SOCIAL MEDIA

The State treats the peaceful online expression of young people — including religious expression — as subversive activity. Surveillance begins in adolescence, without any call to action, organization or explicit political content, and is managed by specialized organs of the party and the intelligence services. The criminalization of speech is the first link in the chain that ends in prison or exile.

5.4 Summonses, "interviews" and the recruitment of informants

The State uses formal summonses — euphemistically called "interviews" — as an instrument of intimidation. Participants identified their features: they are delivered without complying with the established rules, they identify neither the reason nor the official, they are in reality intelligence interrogations, their explicit purpose is to recruit informants in the activist's circle or induce self-censorship, and their results go directly to State Security.

It was simply an "interview" — which is really an interrogation — where the aim was for her to collaborate with them and silence me: to spy on me and work with State Security against me.

— I-01, on the summons of a friend

On the same day her friend was summoned, agents came to the young woman's home to summon her mother. During the interrogation, in the presence of an official from State Security headquarters, the mother was humiliated and threatened with death "with my life and with our family's", and was ordered to influence her daughter "so that she shuts up".

The logic of recruitment was described from the experience of prison:

They try to find those contacts in your life, people who can be influenced by them so that they then collaborate towards their objective, which is that you stop giving your opinion, stop speaking. They go step by step, building a profile of every person who has a public opinion against the regime.

— I-05

PATTERN 4. THE INTERROGATION PRESENTED AS AN "INTERVIEW"

Summonses and "interviews" are intelligence interrogations without guarantees, aimed at recruiting informants in the young person's intimate circle — friends, mothers, siblings — and at producing self-censorship through the people they love most. The formal illegality of the summonses is irrelevant in a system where there is no body before which to complain.

5.5 Fabricated prosecutions and obstruction of access to justice

The penal system is used as an instrument for criminalizing expression. The testimonies illustrate how offences of neutral appearance are applied to conduct whose only substance is peaceful criticism, and how the procedural system lacks any independent body.

The case of a content creator who, for filming the agents who came to her house without identifying themselves — an act of self-protection — and posting the video, was charged together with her mother with an "offence against honour" (article 393 of the Penal Code), placed under a precautionary measure of house arrest and banned from leaving the country. The case was eventually processed by the Prosecutor's Office and is pending trial; the summons to sign the dismissal was used, according to the young woman, as "bait" for a further interrogation.

The regime constantly says there are no political prisoners in Cuba, only people who commit crimes. And those crimes are classified under international law precisely as political offences: enemy propaganda, the alleged violations of the constitutional order, the criminalization of associative funding and of academic collaboration.

— I-04, man, historian, protester of 11 July 2021, banned from leaving the country

When it is the dictatorship that makes its own laws, and for its own benefit, it is impossible for there to be any justice for those who try to contradict it. They'll pull out from somewhere some super-ambiguous law to stop you doing whatever you're doing. We will always be found guilty.

— I-03

The obstruction of access to justice extends even to the remedies Cuban law recognizes. An activist filed a habeas corpus petition on behalf of two young men detained over an audiovisual project of social criticism. The petition was admitted and a hearing was scheduled; on the appointed day, State Security set up a police cordon at the only exit from her street and twice prevented her from going to court, while her phone lost all coverage. The hearing was held without her, the young men were sent to prison and, hours later, she herself was threatened with a charge of disobedience for failing to appear.

They accept the petition, the hearing is scheduled and they stop me getting there. Twice I try to leave, twice they make me go back home. They hold the hearing, they take the boys to prison, and immediately they call me: you have to report because we are going to charge you with disobedience for not attending the habeas corpus hearing that you yourself filed. Only a dictatorship does this.

— I-08, woman, human rights activist

The channels of "participation" that the State invokes before international mechanisms function as identification traps. The citizens' attention office of each municipal government requires complaints to be filed in writing, with identity number, address and telephone; that document goes straight to the counter-intelligence office operating in the same building, and the person who complained — about water, about electricity — becomes the object of surveillance and emotional blackmail. When, after the 2021 protests, groups of citizens submitted to provincial governments signed lists requesting authorization to demonstrate peacefully through the channels the State itself establishes, the response was repression, detentions and house confinement. Even the individual exercise of a constitutional right — walking to the

seat of the National Assembly to hand in a request for amnesty — ended, in February 2026, at a police station.

PATTERN 5. THE USE OF LAW AS A WEAPON AGAINST RIGHTS

Criminal law is applied post hoc to justify detentions already decided; the defence and the formally available remedies are neutralized through physical blockade, disconnection and threat. The channels of participation and complaint that the State displays to the international community operate as mechanisms for identifying and tracking those who use them.

5.6 Arbitrary detention, torture and conditions of imprisonment

The testimonies on deprivation of liberty come from a former political prisoner who served in full a four-year sentence for taking part, under the age of twenty, in the demonstrations of 11 July 2021; from a journalist held incommunicado for a week at State Security headquarters; from an activist detained for 21 days at the same facility who maintains regular communication with the prisons; and from relatives of prisoners.

Procedural guarantees. From the moment of admission the right to a phone call is denied; interrogations take place in the early hours, in cold rooms and without a lawyer; the court screens only the prosecution's material and omits the exculpatory videos submitted by the defence.

I was beaten during my arrest: I raised my hands peacefully and I was beaten. I told them not to hit me, that I was already surrendering. The video documentation handed by my family to the lawyer and by the lawyer to the court was not used. They showed the videos it suited the State to show.

— I-05

Psychological torture at State Security headquarters. The journalist held incommunicado for a week described a repertoire of recognizable pedigree: a cell of total isolation, permanent light, suppression of every time reference, manipulation of feeding cycles and of the temperature of the interrogation room.

When you go in you don't know if it's day or night. You don't know what time it is. They'd say "breakfast" and a little later "lunch". In the interrogations, a small room where they turned the air conditioning down to the minimum, and when they saw me cold they switched it off; when they saw me sweating, the cold started again.

— E-05, man, journalist and former university lecturer, banished de facto

They take your clothes off, they make you squat, "turn around", in front of five or six men.

— I-07, man, activist, detained 21 days at the same facility

Degrading conditions of imprisonment. The mattress is removed during the day and handed back at night urinated on by the guards; water comes from a tank that is never cleaned; strip searches are repeated at will — five times in three days before a release; the right to a call within 24 hours of a transfer is denied to those the prison system classifies as "persons of interest"; a prisoner who declares himself in protest is dragged in handcuffs by the guards.

Sexual violence as an instrument. A participant in regular contact with the prisons documented the practice of sexual violence against young political prisoners in a penitentiary in the province of Artemisa, committed by common prisoners serving long sentences in exchange for prison benefits — conjugal visits, a pavilion — and stated that it was at least the fourth assault of this kind against political prisoners, men and women, of which he was aware. The same pattern was described with respect to women prisoners. Victims, given the nature of the harm, rarely make it public.

Those are benefits the dictatorship gives to those convicts who have been in prison for 35 years — a conjugal visit, a pavilion — so that they physically abuse the political prisoners. There are facts that are not known on social networks.

— I-07

The family as leverage from inside the prison. Interrogators warn the prisoner that if his family keeps the sign on the door of the house or keeps denouncing, his life in prison will get worse. The wife of a prisoner was ordered to stop posting "because it would affect the prisoner"; the two members of an audiovisual project were pressured to record a retraction video in exchange for benefits. The same family suffered a dawn house search, the confiscation of all their production equipment — camera, lamp, headphones, tripod, router, laptop — and six days without any communication with the detainee, whose lawyers provided neither documents nor information.

In the interrogations they tell you: if your family keeps up the sign, or keeps supporting you, they'll keep making your life inside prison worse. The only proven method is to keep telling the family not to give in.

— I-05

PATTERN 6. PRISON AS AN INSTRUMENT OF BREAKING AND PUNISHMENT

The conditions described are not the deficiencies of a precarious prison system: they are the calculated instrument of a system designed to destroy the prisoner's resistance and terrorize those around him. Psychological torture in State Security facilities and tolerated or induced sexual violence against young political prisoners are the most extreme expression of this pattern and engage the State's responsibility under the Convention against Torture.

5.7 Minors in the adult penal system

The Cuban authorities themselves acknowledged the prosecution of 55 people aged between 16 and 18 for the 2021 protests, 16 of them sentenced to imprisonment.²⁴ Five years later, 38 of the documented political prisoners were detained as minors and 14 still are.²⁵ Participants documented the existence of sixteen-year-olds held in adult prisons, exposed to the conditions and violence described in the previous section. An exiled participant who was 16 when he took part in the protests lived in hiding while agents repeatedly visited and summoned his mother to locate him, and left the country on the very day on which — according to information received by his family — a search warrant was to be issued against him.

²⁴See note 2.

²⁵See note 1.

Putting a 16-year-old boy in an adult prison. With people like that there is no possible dialogue.

— I-02

PATTERN 7. PROSECUTION AND IMPRISONMENT OF MINORS ON POLITICAL GROUNDS

The age of criminal responsibility of 16, the prosecution of adolescents for sedition and public disorder and their confinement in adult facilities contravene articles 37 and 40 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The persecution of minors who took part in peaceful protests drives entire families into hiding and exile.

5.8 Punishment by association: the family as hostage

One of the most consistent patterns across all testimonies is the deliberate extension of reprisals to the young person's family and social circle. The aim is to produce the emotional pressure that leads to self-censorship and, when the young person is beyond the State's reach — in prison or in exile — to punish him through those who remain.

Declaring yourself an opponent means you will constantly be the target of threats and surveillance, and not only you but your first circle, which is your family, and then the circle of your family's contacts. It's a constant siege.

— I-05

They frighten your mother, they tell her they're going to put you in prison, and she comes crying and says: "son, please, stop all this. I know you're right, but you won't achieve anything." That is the mentality they have implanted in us from the beginning.

— I-02

The documented repertoire includes summonses to mothers, sisters, aunts, in-laws and friends; pressure on State employers to force relatives to resign; acts of repudiation in the street; harassment by neighbours; stones thrown at the home of an exiled journalist's mother during blackouts and attempted night-time break-ins; the exclusion of a younger brother from art school despite his teachers' favourable assessment; the detention of friends "for having a coffee" with an activist; and precision psychological warfare: a summons delivered on a birthday, minutes after the young man arrived to embrace his mother.

That is the first repression they inflict on all of us: separating us from our families. Often we don't hear from them for days, because they have no internet, no electricity, no way to communicate.

— E-04

For six years I have not been able to hug anyone in my family.

— E-02, man, independent journalist, in exile

Young people's economic dependence on their families amplifies the effectiveness of this mechanism: when the State pressures the parents, it pressures the young person with leverage that does not exist against economically autonomous adults.

PATTERN 8. USE OF THE FAMILY AS A FORM OF COERCION

Mothers, younger siblings, partners and friends are subjected to harassment, summonses, acts of repudiation, exclusion from education and employment and surveillance, as vicarious punishment for the young person's activism and as leverage to bend them. Reprisals against third parties violate the prohibition of collective punishment and, where children are affected, the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

5.9 Exclusion from employment and education

The immediate consequence of visibility is expulsion from the labour market and from educational institutions. Neither the State sector nor the emerging private sector — which depends on State licences — employs young people identified as activists; universities expel students and lecturers for their ideas; student organizations strip responsibilities from those who refuse to take part in acts of repudiation.

In my last job, the first thing they said to me was: "you belong to a rights organization or something like that." Neither private nor, still less, State employers want anything to do with that. We have to depend on charity or on our families, and even then they force our families to leave their jobs.

— I-02

One participant was removed from his position as a student leader at his pre-university school for refusing to take part in a public act of discredit against an artist and for defending, before his teachers, that artist's right to demonstrate peacefully; he was told he "did not represent the revolution". A university lecturer was dismissed from his chair, with express notice that the sanction was for his political ideas; among the charges was having shared on social media the complaint of another young man then being expelled from a third country.

They have turned the flag into a symbol of obedience. And when you, a Cuban, take up your flag, they criminalize you: you are a traitor to the homeland. Why, if the flag belongs to all of us?

— E-03

PATTERN 9. SCHOOL AND WORK AS APPARATUS OF CONTROL

Student organizations with de facto compulsory membership recruit minors for acts of repudiation, sanction dissent with the loss of academic rights and normalize peer surveillance. Exclusion from employment closes the circuit: the young person who speaks out is condemned to economic dependence on a family that is, in turn, pressured.

5.10 Covert banishment and migratory "regulation"

None of the exiled participants left Cuba of their own free will. The testimonies document three modalities of a single covert banishment. The first is the explicit choice: State Security formally offered an 11 July protester, the mother of two children, the choice between leaving the country or being prosecuted on the charges arising from the protest. The second is staged expulsion: a university lecturer was first dismissed from his chair, then imprisoned and tortured, and finally told that the alternative to

leaving was prison; he said goodbye to his mother and younger brother in secret, at a bus terminal, for thirty seconds. The third is the threat against third parties: the facilitator of the consultations was herself told, in her time, that if she did not leave the country other people would be prosecuted.

We didn't leave Cuba because we wanted to. We were doing journalistic work from Cuba. The dictatorship left us no other choice.

— E-05

Nobody in Cuba wants to end up in prison. People with families decide at some point to leave, because we want a life where we are well and we also want to do something for Cuba. And sometimes that means leaving Cuba.

— E-01

The reverse of banishment is "regulation": the administrative ban on leaving the country imposed on those the State prefers to keep. Several participants on the island are "regulated", among them a historian and a young content creator during her precautionary measure. The State thus decides, at its discretion, who may leave and who may not; in both cases the right to leave one's own country and to return to it — recognized in article 13 of the Universal Declaration and article 12 of the ICCPR — is left in the hands of the political police. The release of political prisoners conditional on immediate departure from the country, applied systematically since 2021, is the institutional version of this practice.

PATTERN 10. COVERT BANISHMENT

Leaving the country is administered as a penalty — through the formal choice between prison and exile, the staged suffocation of any possibility of life and the threat against third parties — and staying as a punishment — through "regulation". Banishment and arbitrary deprivation of the right to enter one's own country are prohibited under international law; their systematic use against young people amounts to a policy of generational expulsion.

5.11 Transnational repression

Exile does not interrupt persecution. The testimonies document episodes of transnational repression in at least five countries, with the direct or induced participation of Cuban State agents and, in some cases, with the active cooperation of allied governments.

- **Induced expulsion.** A journalist with legal residence in a South American country received an expulsion order days after a regional summit held in Havana attended by that country's then head of State; he was interrogated by immigration officials with methods he recognized as those of Cuban State Security and expelled despite lodging appeals. The precedent disciplined the rest of the resident Cuban community: "who else is going to speak after this?"
- **Surveillance and defamation.** In a second host country, the same journalist was followed and photographed in the public places where he worked; the images were later posted online with warnings — "we know where you are here, be very careful" — and defamation campaigns about intimate aspects of his life.
- **Coordinated denial of entry and physical assault.** A banished journalist was refused entry to a Central American country allied with Havana; in a transit country he suffered an attempt on his life

— he was rammed by a motorcycle — and constant surveillance at his lodgings. To reach a country where he could rebuild his life he crossed more than ten countries overland, including the Darién jungle, where he nearly drowned.

- **Death threats.** Once in his country of residence, he received death threats by text message from local numbers, warnings of beatings to make him "shut his mouth" and manoeuvres to obtain his address through third parties, simultaneous with an escalation of reprisals against his mother and brother in Cuba.
- **Harassment in Europe.** Participants based in Europe described a more covert but persistent persecution: intimidating messages to private numbers, online harassment and smear campaigns. The family of a young man who left as a minor did not make his departure public while he was in transit through a country allied with the regime: "the dictatorship is everywhere and can finish you off."

Participants underlined a revealing asymmetry: a State that claims to lack fuel for the generators of its hospitals funds agents and surveillance operations in every country where it has an embassy. Transnational repression is, moreover, deliberately arbitrary — some families are punished and others not, without discernible parameter — which multiplies its intimidating effect and sows division within the exile community.

PATTERN 11. TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION

The Cuban State extends persecution beyond its borders through physical and digital surveillance, coordinated defamation, death threats, diplomatic manoeuvres to induce expulsions and denials of entry, and attacks on physical integrity. The cooperation of allied governments turns third States into instruments of repression and empties of content the protection that exile should offer.

5.12 The engineering of distrust

Several testimonies converge in describing a transversal technique: the deliberate production of distrust. On the island, the infiltration of collaborators into friendship circles, the detention of acquaintances and intermittent surveillance — "sometimes they were there, sometimes they weren't, sometimes they were there and you couldn't see them" — induce a state of hypervigilance whose aim is to deter all association. Outside the island, the machinery continues: rumours to distance the exile from those who remain inside, campaigns to destroy the credibility of testimony, and selective punishment of some families and not others to fracture solidarity.

They induce that state of paranoia so that you don't join other people on your same wavelength, so that you don't do bigger things, because nobody achieves anything alone. They know that when we unite, that is the only way we are going to defeat them.

— E-04

Defamation is not collateral damage of repression: it is its precision instrument against the right of association. Its purpose, in the words of one participant, is not to protect any security but to "destroy the social perception of the activist", to make others "lose the value" of their testimony.

PATTERN 12. THE ENGINEERING OF DISTRUST

Social atomization is a repressive objective in itself: infiltration, intermittent surveillance, defamation and selective punishment produce the isolation of the young person inside and outside the country. The ultimate target is not the individual but the bond: preventing youth from associating is preventing it from acting.

5.13 The complete circuit

The twelve patterns do not operate in isolation. Read in sequence, they describe a closed circuit that every testimony travels, in whole or in part:

Legal association is prohibited (1) → association migrates to the digital space (2) → the State monitors and pursues the digital space from adolescence (3) → persecution is administered through summonses and interrogations that recruit the young person's circle (4) → it is judicialized through vaguely defined offences and without real access to justice (5) → the sentence is served in conditions of torture and degrading treatment, including for minors (6, 7) → the family is punished and used as leverage (8) → the young person is expelled from work and school (9) → leaving the country is imposed as a penalty or denied as a punishment (10) → persecution continues in exile (11) → and induced distrust prevents youth, inside or outside, from reorganizing (12).

Each link produces the next. Understanding the complete circuit — and not each method separately — is the condition for designing effective international responses.

6. Generation Z and power: a two-way relationship

The research does not confine itself to documenting repression. Its central contribution is to reconstruct the relationship between Cuban youth and power in both directions: how young people perceive the structures of power — the Party, the State, State Security, the mass organizations and the revolutionary narrative itself — and how power perceives young people.

6.1 How young people perceive power

A State without limits. The defining feature of power, in young people's description, is not law but the absence of limits. Article 5 of the Constitution was read aloud to the Special Rapporteur as proof of that absolute character:

"The Communist Party of Cuba is the superior leading political force of society and the State." In other words: if they want to change Cuba's name, they can. They are above everything; they own this country as if it were their private estate.

— I-02

We Cubans are defenceless before a system in which all institutions belong to a single entity. They dictate the laws and break their own laws, and even so nobody can say anything to them, because there is nowhere to turn.

— I-02

They cannot stand dissenting voices. They want the State to be a new god, with everyone obeying the State.

— I-02

A chain of command, not a system of justice. From the experience of prison, power is described as an "intelligence machine" in which court, prosecutor and lawyers answer to a single line of command:

It's an intelligence machine. A court is governed by a chain of command, and the chain of command is not justice, it's not a prosecutor: it answers to the party and to the intelligence organ. Each and every worker, collaborator, member of the regime is governed by a party.

— I-05

An exhausted narrative. For this generation, revolutionary language is a foreign tongue. Content-creator collectives speak of "uprooting the mental parasites" planted by "67 years of indoctrination" and of a "cultural battle" whose aim is for the young person to "stop being a spectator of his own reality". The flag — turned by the State into "a symbol of obedience" — is reclaimed as their own. Religious faith, with its message of elementary values, is perceived as a silent challenge to the system.

The impossibility of dialogue. Several participants expressly rejected the idea that the United Nations or Member States can engage productively with the Cuban State, to which they attribute a single language: coercion. What they ask of the international community is not mediation but visibility — "stop thinking Cuba is the socialist paradise" — and concerted pressure, "not just the United States, but all countries".

Life on pause. The category that most recurrently structures young people's interventions is not repression but the absence of a future. This is not abstract hopelessness: it is the awareness that personal, professional and life fulfilment requires leaving the country or a change of regime.

Our life is on pause. Hopelessness has made young people believe that our life hasn't started until we go to another country or until this changes. If I go to another country at 26, that's where my life begins. It's as if these first years I never lived them.

— I-02

If I studied medicine, I end up working in a café, because I earn more serving coffee than operating on people. That is the situation of young Cubans today. The lack of opportunities is what has marked youth most.

— I-02

Many choose to take drugs, to alienate themselves from life. Those who are a bit more focused want to work at whatever they can find so that, as soon as they get some money, they can leave. It's the only achievable goal for becoming someone.

— I-03

A generation stopped in time. The most precise reflection on the specificity of Cuba's Generation Z came from the youngest participant: young Cubans do not resemble their international peers because the State has denied them the material and technological conditions that define that generation elsewhere in the world.

We, who are Generation Z, are more like the millennials of other countries, because we have been stuck in time. I wasn't born with the internet and I didn't have it until very recently. I'm

more like people from the nineties in other countries than like the kids born in my year. It's like a pause in time.

— I-02, born in 2005

Solidarity as a lesson. Against the engineering of distrust, young people identify in solidarity — virtual and physical — the only asset that power cannot destroy and the one it fears most:

What they cannot destroy is something we are going to win on social media: solidarity among each and every activist. Every time they detain someone, the virtual and physical presence of the others at every house or every police station matters, because they are very afraid of solidarity.

— I-05

6.2 How power perceives young people

The testimonies make it possible to reconstruct, in negative, how the State looks at its youth.

As a suspect subject. Surveillance begins before any act: at 15 for religious content, at pre-university for refusing an act of repudiation, at university for proposing a debate space. The system classifies young people with public opinions as "persons of interest" — the expression that, according to a former prisoner, the prison services use — and assigns them a psychological "profile" that interrogators exploit.

As a risk of contagion. What the State pursues is not the individual act but the capacity to convene. "When you manage to get young people to listen to you, to share your content, that is extremely dangerous for them." A collective that started posting three months ago has "already" been intercepted; another project served as a "catalyst" for young people who "think the same but don't dare" to take the step, and its members are in prison. The comparison young people draw is telling: "for them a murderer is less dangerous than a person who simply has a different opinion."

As a surplus population. The most disturbing observation to emerge from the testimonies is that power has learned to prefer departure to prison. Young people put it plainly: the pressure on families, exclusion from employment and the choice between prison and exile do not reflect any wish not to imprison, but the calculation that expulsion carries a lower international cost than prison and produces the same result. "It's not because they're good and don't want to jail you; it's because they don't want the bad international image. What they do is coerce your family so that they are the ones who persuade you." The conditional banishment of political prisoners, selective "regulation" and the administration of connectivity are, from this perspective, tools of a single policy: managing youth as a surplus whose departure serves the stability of the system.

As an uncomfortable mirror. The report further observes that the same logic of digital exposure and consumption that the State pursues in dissenting youth reaches sectors of the governing elite — including descendants of the regime's founding family — whose life on social media displays a privilege that contrasts openly with the precariousness facing the rest of their generation. That fracture of legitimacy, which the platforms make visible and the State cannot contain, is part of the "cultural battle" youth collectives are waging: the young person who films the bread queue and the young person who films the yacht belong to the same generation, and the comparison is, in itself, a political act.

6.3 The demographic equation: expelling the young in the fastest-ageing country

The relationship between power and youth carries a cost that official statistics can no longer conceal. A State whose population is shrinking by more than 300,000 people a year, whose fertility is the lowest since 1958 and whose median age is 43²⁶ has turned into policy the expulsion of precisely the group on which its demographic future depends. Young people themselves describe it as an induced "flight of human capital":

They have caused the flight of human capital in its most extreme form. They make every young person with potential want to leave this country, because here they can't be employed in what they studied. And those without potential, since they don't like their reality, take drugs. Fifty per cent of young people leave, and only two per cent really take action.

— I-02

The figures young people offer are perceptions, but the sense of the perception is borne out by the data: a net migration balance of a quarter of a million people in a single year; more than one million emigrants since 2021 according to ECLAC; 1.26 million people of working age lost in five years; and a convergent official and international projection that places Cuba, in 2050, as the most aged country in Latin America and the Caribbean.²⁷²⁸²⁹³⁰

The conclusion is twofold. First, the repression of youth is not only a matter of civil and political rights: it is a causal factor in demographic collapse, and as such it should feature in any assessment of the country's situation by Member States and by the bodies of the United Nations system. Second, a State that expels its young is not solving a stability problem but postponing it: the generation leaving today — which maintains, as the next section documents, living networks of articulation with the island — is the same one that any future transition will have to reckon with.

7. Resilience: emerging forms of youth association

Asked by the Rapporteur's office about experiences of articulation between exiled youth and those who remain on the island, the testimonies documented concrete practices showing that repression has not deactivated associative activity but reconfigured it in transnational form.

- **Networks of students and journalists in training.** University students inside Cuba maintain permanent links with exiled journalists, to whom they send complaints and texts for publication. Groups of journalism students have signed, anonymously, joint statements breaking with official propaganda and are planning their own platforms inside the island. Pre-university students run clandestine workshops analysing texts from the independent press.
- **Circulation of censored literature.** The digital distribution inside Cuba of inaccessible academic literature — facilitated by its own authors — has reached students in most of the country's universities, breaking the information cordon of higher education.

²⁶See note 3.

²⁷See note 3.

²⁸See note 4.

²⁹See note 5.

³⁰See note 9.

- **Youth protocols of mutual protection.** Young people on the island with precarious connectivity maintain permanent links with trusted persons abroad, able to report a detention immediately, publish material the activist cannot release at a critical moment and raise the alarm over prolonged silences. The accompaniment also has a deliberate emotional dimension: sustaining the morale of those who resist inside.
- **Digital self-protection.** The collectives themselves circulate among their peers basic measures — two-step verification, accounts linked to e-mail addresses with no associated phone number — to reduce the effectiveness of line duplication and impersonation.
- **Community action.** Community projects founded by exiles continue to operate inside Cuba, sustained by volunteers aged 15 to 20 who assist marginalized populations without receiving anything in return, belying the stereotype of a depoliticized youth.
- **Joint campaigns for pluralism.** The campaign for a plural Cuba promoted by Ciudadanía y Libertad brings together young people inside and outside the island in demanding political pluralism and freedom of association.
- **Solidarity between prisoners and families.** The communication network among political prisoners, their families and activists at liberty — which makes it possible to document assaults, denounce transfers and support families — is itself a form of association that the prison system tries to break by denying calls and punishing those who "keep up the sign".

These practices constitute the effective exercise of the right of association in extreme conditions and deserve international recognition and protection as such. They also confirm the central thesis of this report: repression has not dissolved the fabric of Cuban youth association; it has forced it to operate between two shores.

8. Conclusions

1. **Cuban youth exercises its rights of association and assembly in the only conditions the State leaves it: outside the law and, for the most part, online.** The Cuban legal order offers no avenue for independent youth association, and the official organizations function as structures of enrolment and surveillance. The digital space has become the de facto associative space of a generation, and for that very reason the main target of repression.
2. **The State telecommunications monopoly is the material infrastructure of the denial of the right of assembly and association.** Line duplication, account seizure and individualized disconnection at the exact moment of a call to gather demonstrate an operational integration between the State operator and the political police that must be treated as a central finding by the mechanisms examining digital surveillance.
3. **The repressive chain is staged, predictable and affects young people in a differentiated way:** surveillance from adolescence; summonses and interrogations that recruit their circle; fabricated cases and obstructed access to justice; prison in conditions of torture and degrading treatment, including for minors; punishment of the family; exclusion from work and education; banishment or "regulation"; persecution in exile; and induced distrust. Each link violates specific international obligations of the Cuban State.
4. **An age of criminal responsibility of 16, the interruption of education and departure from the country without resources amount to aggravated harm by reason of age,** which must be

recognized as such in the international assessment of these violations and in the reception policies of host States.

5. **The Cuban State perceives its youth as a suspect subject, a risk of contagion and a surplus population**, and has turned their expulsion — through the choice between prison and exile, release conditional on departure and the suffocation of any possibility of life — into a policy that carries a lower international cost than prison and produces the same silencing effect.
6. **The policy of banishment has a documented demographic cost.** With a population shrinking by more than 300,000 a year, the lowest fertility since 1958, 26.7 per cent of the population aged 60 or over and a convergent projection placing Cuba as the most aged country in the region by 2050, the repression of youth and demographic hollowing-out are two faces of the same process. The international community must read them together.
7. **Transnational repression is documented in at least five countries** and includes surveillance, defamation, death threats, expulsions induced through diplomatic pressure and attacks on physical integrity, with episodes of active cooperation by third States. Exile does not today guarantee Cuban youth the safe exercise of the rights whose defence prompted their departure.
8. **Cuban youth is not a passive victim.** It keeps associative activity alive in the form of transnational networks of protection, information and civic action, and has identified in solidarity the asset that power cannot destroy. The international community faces human rights defenders who require protection, recognition and support — and the generation with which any future transition will have to reckon.

9. Recommendations

To the Member States of the United Nations

1. Take into account, in electing members of the Human Rights Council for 2027–2029, Cuba's record on freedom of association and assembly, its failure to ratify the ICCPR for more than eighteen years and its non-implementation of the recommendations of the fourth UPR cycle.
2. Raise, in the General Debate and in interactive dialogues with the special procedures, the situation of young political prisoners in Cuba, including those detained as minors, and request information on their number, whereabouts and conditions of detention.
3. Recognize selective connectivity cut-offs and account seizure by State operators as forms of suppression of the right of assembly and association, and promote their treatment as such in resolutions on human rights on the internet.
4. Integrate the demographic dimension into the assessment of the Cuban situation: treat the systematic expulsion of youth as a causal factor in the country's demographic collapse and not merely as a migratory phenomenon.
5. Make any framework of dialogue or cooperation with the Cuban State conditional on verifiable progress on freedom of association, assembly, demonstration and participation, the release of political prisoners, and the end of banishment and politically motivated repression.

To the Human Rights Council and its special procedures

1. Incorporate the patterns of transnational repression against young Cubans into the thematic report on exile and transnational repression announced by the Rapporteur, and consider joint communications with the mandates on human rights defenders, torture, freedom of expression, freedom of religion and the independence of judges and lawyers, and with the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention.
2. Transmit to the Human Rights Committee, in the context of the drafting of General Comment No. 38 on article 22 of the ICCPR, the evidence of the Cuban case as a paradigm of the comprehensive denial of freedom of association, including its digital and transnational dimensions.
3. Request the Committee on the Rights of the Child to examine, in its next dialogue with Cuba, the prosecution and imprisonment of adolescents for peaceful protest, their confinement in adult prisons and educational reprisals against younger siblings of persecuted youths.
4. Promote the protection and recognition of transnational youth networks of information and mutual protection as legitimate forms of exercise of the right of association by human rights defenders.

To States receiving Cuban exiles

1. Recognize Cuban transnational repression as a threat to the security of refugees and to State sovereignty itself; investigate diligently threats, surveillance and assaults against exiles in their territory, and establish accessible and safe reporting channels.
2. Guarantee effective access to international protection procedures for persecuted young people, with criteria that recognize covert banishment, persecution for digital expression and religious persecution as valid grounds, and strictly observe the principle of non-refoulement.
3. Refrain from any migratory, police or diplomatic cooperation that serves as a vehicle for transnational repression, including expulsions of legal residents under pressure from third States, and establish accountability where it has occurred.
4. Incorporate the age dimension into reception programmes: specialized psychosocial support for trauma from political persecution, educational continuity, recognition of studies and swift regularization pathways for young people and minors.

To technology platforms

1. Establish reinforced verification channels for the recovery of accounts of human rights defenders in countries with monopolistic telecommunications operators subordinated to the State, so that possession of the phone line is not sufficient to seize an account.
2. Treat account-closure requests and mass reporting originating in Cuba with the scrutiny appropriate to a State that uses impersonation before support services as a repressive technique.

To the international community and donors

1. Provide financial and political support to Cuban civil society organizations, inside and outside the island, that document violations and bring youth together, including resources for digital protection, psychosocial care, educational continuity and international litigation.

2. Support independent demographic research on Cuba, in particular the measurement of youth emigration and its effects, as a basis for the action of Member States.

Annex I. Testimony codes

All testimonial sources have been anonymized. The following profiles are described at the level of generality needed to preserve the safety of participants and their relatives.

Code	Profile	Consultation
I-01	Woman, 21, creator of content on the country's daily reality. Line intercepted and cancelled; criminal case for "offence against honour" (art. 393) together with her mother; house arrest and travel ban; summonses to relatives and friends.	I (28 April 2026)
I-02	Man, 20, born in 2005, content creator with an educational and political focus. Lines intercepted; exclusion from employment; workplace reprisals against in-laws.	I
I-03	Woman, university student. Attempts to access messaging accounts; blocking of a debate initiative at her faculty.	I
I-04	Man, historian and anthropologist, protester of 11 July 2021. Detentions, summonses, surveillance and ban on leaving the country; criminalization of academic collaboration.	I
I-05	Man, former political prisoner of 11 July 2021, detained under the age of 20 and sentenced to imprisonment, served in full; released some months before the consultation.	I
I-06	Woman, wife of a political prisoner. Summonses, account closures, service cut-offs, house search.	I
I-07	Man, activist with political-prisoner organizations, living with a chronic illness; detained 21 days at State Security headquarters; maintains regular communication with the prisons.	I
I-08	Woman, human rights activist and mother; threatened with a charge of disobedience.	I
E-01	Man, 22, communicator; monitored and interrogated by State Security and military counter-intelligence without ever having published political content; recently exiled in Europe.	II (9 June 2026)
E-02	Man, independent journalist; left Cuba in 2019; second forced displacement.	II
E-03	Man, 21; took part at 16 in the protests of 11 July 2021; left Cuba as a minor, shortly before a search warrant was to be issued against him; applicant for international protection in Europe.	II
E-04	Woman, protester of 11 July 2021; held for 23 days, charged with sabotage; mother of two children; forced to choose between prison and leaving the country.	II
E-05	Man, journalist and former university lecturer, dismissed from his chair in 2022 for his political ideas; one week incommunicado at State Security headquarters; banished de facto at the end of 2024; crossed more than ten countries, including the Darién jungle; continues to receive threats in his country of residence.	II

Annex II. Reference chronology (2019–2026)

Date	Event
April 2019	The Constitution enshrining the Communist Party as the "superior leading political force" (art. 5) enters into force; it recognizes, without implementing legislation, the freedoms of expression and demonstration (arts. 54 and 56).
11 July 2021	Mass protests in dozens of localities across the country; the largest wave of political prosecutions in decades begins.
August 2021	Decree-Law 35/2021 on telecommunications authorizes suspension of services for content contrary to "public order".
January 2022	The Attorney General's Office acknowledges 790 people prosecuted over 11 July, 55 of them aged 16 to 18.
June 2022	The Attorney General's Office announces 381 final convictions, 16 of minors sentenced to imprisonment, and sentences of 5 to 25 years for sedition.
December 2022	The Penal Code (Law 151/2022) enters into force.
November 2023	Fourth cycle of Cuba's Universal Periodic Review.
January 2024	Cuba begins its term as a member of the Human Rights Council (2024–2026).
December 2024	De facto banishment of one of the participants (E-05).
July 2026	ONEI publishes the 2025 demographic indicators: 9,434,593 inhabitants, net migration of –245,264, fertility of 1.29.
July 2026	An artist sentenced to five years over the 2021 protests completes his sentence in full and is released on condition that he leave the country.
April and June 2026	Consultations of the Special Rapporteur with young people inside Cuba and in exile, facilitated by Ciudadanía y Libertad.
September 2026	Prisoners Defenders documents 1,339 political prisoners, a record figure. Presentation of this report during the High-Level Week of UNGA 81.

Annex III. Sources and references

- [1] Prisoners Defenders, monthly list of political prisoners in Cuba as at the end of August 2026, published 10 September 2026 (<https://lista.prisonersdefenders.org>). Figures: 1,339 political prisoners (807 convicted prisoners of conscience, 495 condemned prisoners of conscience, 37 other political prisoners); 155 women; 38 people detained as minors, 14 of them still minors; 281 new cases between September 2025 and August 2026; 2,167 people included on the list since July 2021; 463 with serious medical conditions.
- [2] Office of the Attorney General of the Republic of Cuba, information note of 25 January 2022 on the criminal proceedings arising from the events of 11 July 2021: 790 people prosecuted, 55 of them aged between 16 and 18; 10 children under 16 sent to "conduct schools" and 17 placed under "individualized attention".
- [3] National Office of Statistics and Information (ONEI), *Indicadores Demográficos de Cuba y sus Territorios 2025*, Havana, July 2026: resident population at end-2025 of 9,434,593; decrease of 313,414 from 2024; net migration of –245,264; 68,064 births and 136,214 deaths; total fertility rate of 1.29; 26.7 per cent of the population aged 60 or over; median age of 43; loss of 1,259,894 people of working age in five years. Population at end-2017: 11,239,224. Independent estimate of the

cumulative decline (close to 24 per cent): Juan Carlos Albizu-Campos, Centre for Demographic Studies, University of Havana, 2024–2025.

- [4] ECLAC, population projections for Latin America and the Caribbean (base: 2024 revision of the United Nations World Population Prospects), as reported in the regional press in September 2026: in 2050 Cuba will have 30.2 per cent of its population aged 65 or over, the highest share in the region, followed by Chile (26.7 per cent) and Costa Rica (25.3 per cent); the regional population aged 65 and over will rise from 68 million (10.5 per cent) in 2025 to 138 million (18.9 per cent) in 2050.
- [5] ONEI population projections cited by the Centre for Demographic Studies of the University of Havana: 3,343,520 people aged 60 and over in 2050, 35.9 per cent of the population.
- [6] Generation Z: refers to the cohort of young people born approximately between the mid-1990s and the early 2010s, who have undergone much of their socialization in a context marked by the expansion of the Internet, digital technologies and social media. In this report the expression is used as an analytical category, not as a homogeneous identity, to examine the experiences of a generation whose social participation, expression, forms of association and exercise of rights unfold especially in digital spaces. The use of this category makes it possible to analyse how restrictions on the freedoms of expression, association and peaceful assembly, as well as practices of surveillance, harassment and reprisal, particularly affect young people who use digital platforms as spaces of communication, interaction and civic participation.
- [7] Law 54 of 27 December 1985, Law on Associations, and its Regulations (Ministry of Justice Resolution 53/1986). Constitution of the Republic of Cuba (2019), articles 4, 5, 54 and 56. Legislative calendar adopted by the National Assembly of People's Power in December 2019 (norm on the right of demonstration scheduled for 2020) and subsequent calendars; the norm does not appear in the 2025–2027 legislative calendar (see Memoria Cívica, "Ley de manifestación: otra norma extraviada", 31 January 2025).
- [8] Office of the Attorney General of the Republic of Cuba, information note of 13 June 2022: 381 people with final sentences in 76 proceedings; 16 minors under 18 sentenced to imprisonment and 15 to alternative sanctions; 36 people convicted of sedition and sentenced to between 5 and 25 years.
- [9] ECLAC/CELADE, statements by its director, Simone Cecchini, reported by Bloomberg Línea, "Cuba enfrenta casi cinco décadas de baja fecundidad y avanza a un acelerado envejecimiento, advierte Cepal", 30 July 2026: fertility below replacement level for almost fifty years; more than one million people emigrated since 2021; negative population growth since 2012.
- [10] ECLAC, *Panorama del envejecimiento y tendencias demográficas en América Latina y el Caribe* (2022–2023): Cuba was the first country in the region in which the share of people under 15 equalled the share aged 60 and over (2011); "very advanced" stage of ageing (more than 21 per cent of the population aged 60 or over).
- [11] ONEI, *El Envejecimiento de la Población. Cuba y sus Territorios 2024*, and official statements reported by IPS, "Envejecimiento demográfico ensombrece el futuro de Cuba", May 2025: 9,748,532 inhabitants at end-2024; 71,000 births; a quarter of the population aged 60 or over; official projection of close to 30 per cent by 2030.
- [12] ECLAC/CELADE, *Perspectivas poblacionales y cambios demográficos acelerados en el primer cuarto del siglo XXI en América Latina y el Caribe* (Demographic Observatory 2024), based on the 2024 revision of the World Population Prospects: "Countries with the highest median age in Latin America in 2024 and 2050: Cuba and Chile".
- [13] Statements by Juan Carlos Alfonso Fraga, deputy director of ONEI, to the newspaper Granma, February 2019: 36.2 per cent of the population aged 60 or over in 2050.
- [14] ECLAC, regional report on ageing (2023), as cited in the regional press: in 2050 one in four people in the region will be aged 60 or over; by 2060, close to 30 per cent, some 220 million people, 2.5 times more than in 2022.

International instruments and documents cited. Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948); International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966; signed by Cuba on 28 February 2008, not ratified); Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (ratified by Cuba in 1995); Convention on the Rights of the Child (ratified by Cuba in 1991); Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, article 18; Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (1998); Nelson Mandela Rules (2015) and Bangkok Rules (2010); Human Rights Council resolution 24/5; reports of the mandate on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association A/HRC/41/41, A/80/219 and A/HRC/59/44; report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review, Cuba, fourth cycle (November 2023).

Primary sources of this report. Transcript of the consultation with young activists inside Cuba held with the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, 28 April 2026 (1 h 45 min; Ciudadanía y Libertad archive, restricted access). Consultation with young Cubans in exile held with the same mandate, 9 June 2026 (1 h 40 min; not recorded for dissemination). Follow-up interviews and meetings with youth collectives inside and outside Cuba, April–September 2026.

CIUDADANÍA Y LIBERTAD

Guy Pérez Cisneros Centre for the Promotion of Human Rights

Ciudadanía y Libertad, the Guy Pérez Cisneros Centre for the Promotion of Human Rights, is a Cuban civil society organization founded in April 2022 to defend the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and political participation in Cuba and across the hemisphere. It conducts research, documentation and advocacy before international human rights protection mechanisms, brings together groups inside and outside the island and promotes the campaign for a plural Cuba.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report documents the methods by which the Cuban State prevents its young people from associating and assembling peacefully, inside and outside the island, drawing on two consultations facilitated for the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association with young activists in Cuba and in exile. It identifies twelve patterns of repression, examines the relationship between Cuba's Generation Z and power, and places that relationship in the context of the fastest-ageing country in Latin America and the Caribbean. All testimonial sources have been anonymized.

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